



## A Literacy of Armed Love: Confrontation and Desire in Aesthetic and Critical Projects

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**ABSTRACT** *The article argues that creative confrontations with damaging discourses as part of a critical literacy curriculum can be viewed as acts of love, for self and community. Using data from a multi-sited critical ethnography, the study considers the literacy productions of two focal students in diverse schools, a charter middle school and a large urban high school. Mediated discourse analysis of their work explores their aesthetic and critical literacy productions as refusals of oppressive discourses pressing against marginalized identities, and as expressions of desire for imagined, better realities. This research views such performances of multimodal creative resistance as an audacious literacy of desire, valuable as standards-meeting persuasive compositions, but also immeasurably valuable because of the emotional experience of the student producers, who were powerfully affected through the twin pleasures of resisting and imagining. This study illustrates how literacy projects might both inhabit and move forward Freire's concept of armed love.*

**KEYWORDS** critical pedagogy; mediated discourse analysis; critical ethnography; multimodality; affect; emotion

It is indeed necessary, however, that this love be an 'armed love,' the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce.

(Freire, 2005, p. 74)

If we take Freire's suggestion that education involves acts of love that demonstrate a "commitment to ... the cause of liberation" (1996, p. 70), what do they look like, and how might they emerge in the everyday moments of a language arts classroom? Specifically, how might Freire's idea of "armed love" be part of what teachers do, and importantly, what students do, in the course of a typical day? Seeking to recognize Freire's "fighting love ... to

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*denounce, and to announce*” (2005, p. 74, italics added) as part of critical literacy learning, this study uses love as the key conceptual structure to explore social justice education as an enactment of love.

While there are many philosophical and theoretical definitions of love, this work more narrowly considers how teachers and students operate out of a radical love for a more just society (Dewey, 2011; Freire, 1996; hooks, 2006; Orellana, 2015) and a desire for better futures for themselves and others (Garrison, 2010; Greene, 1995). Love’s significance to critical classrooms has been explored in some empirical studies (e.g., Duncan, 2002; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015), but there is a need for more research on what this might look like. In the next section, I define radical love before looking carefully at the literacy productions and learning experiences of two students who created and performed what appeared to be a fighting kind of love for self and for community. In addition, I am informed not only by theorizations of radical love, but also by the wealth of recent scholarship on the affective experience of learning (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Thrift, 2004; Wetherell, 2013), often referred to as the “affective turn” in education research, which finds that affect – with the related concepts of feelings, emotions, and passions – is productively linked to curriculum and learning in tangible classroom moments.

For students who have been historically marginalized, made to feel separate, or described in sedimented ways in dominant public discourses (raced, classed, gendered, queered, etc.), thinking of literacy learning as not only critical reading and production, but as possible expressions of love honors both their lived experiences and underscores the meaning of their work. The critical “*denouncing*” and the creative “*announcing*” from Freire’s idea considers links between love and aesthetic productions, between the affective present and imagined, more socially just, future.

## **Theoretical Perspectives Toward Armed Love**

### *Love and Critical Pedagogy*

Anti-oppressive teaching and learning require not only planning for an inquiry-based (problem-posing) curriculum, but, if we are to believe Freire and other critical pedagogues, a radical, revolutionary love. From the poet de Melo, Freire took the image of “armed love” (2005, p. 74) for educators to forcefully reject or “denounce” the status quo, to overturn whatever continues to lock oppressive systems and practices in place. Freire reminded us that oppressions are difficult to budge, and they take a multitude of guises. Armed love, according to Freire, was not about kindness or the warmth of a nurturing relationship, although these are important. Rather, the martial fierceness of armed love communicated Freire’s urgency about what it takes to be a critical educator, and the inherent risk in challenging oppression, because it almost certainly threatens people who have something (comfort,

security, feelings of merit) to lose. In this study, it's clear that the students themselves functioned as critical educators, sometimes with and sometimes against their peers and teachers, embodying an armed love, not a "liberal, romanticized, or merely feel-good notion of love that is so often is mistakenly attributed to this term, nor the long-suffering and self-effacing variety associated with traditional religious formation" (Darder, 2002, p. 34). In a similar vein, Sandoval (2000) suggests that love is a method of resistance for "citizen warriors," who work in coalition to fight oppressions. Armed love fights dominance constructed and reinforced along lines of race, economics, language, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, and religion; it is committed to a radical, inclusive democracy (Orellana, 2015) with an aim to build a better world.

### *Black Feminism: Self-Love and Community Love as Resistance*

Many Black feminist theorists (e.g., Collins, Davis, Jordan, Lorde, Walker) have made arguments, in different ways, for self-love as a political project of resistance, and a way toward transformation. In her discussion of early and later waves of Black feminist thought, including hip-hop philosophies, Nash (2013) argued that Black feminism put forth a theory of justice that could be described as a "love politics," with love as the vehicle for social change (2013, p. 3). Pointing out that such change must begin with self-love as a "practice of freedom," Nash highlighted the idea that self-love, and love for the racialized identity of Blackness amounts to an act of revolutionary praxis. In an orientation to the future that is creative, coalitional, and of a kind with Freire's armed love, self-love fights (denounces) and then imagines (announces) what might *become* for the self and community. In this conceptualization, love – as desire – functions as a mediating technology between the current, actual situation and envisions an inclusive and non-oppressive future.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Aesthetic Experiences**

Since this article makes the case that students can act as citizen warriors (Sandoval, 2000) who fight oppressions and imagine new futures through the creation and performance of aesthetic and critical projects, I must describe my understanding of aesthetic experiences in a literacy classroom. Aesthetics are not strictly related to art or the arts. Instead, I draw on Dewey's description of art as a *quality* that permeates an experience, emotionally and bodily, an immersive state of being fully engrossed in activity or work (Dewey, 2005, p. 339). By this reasoning, even the most humdrum actions can become artistic through what the participants bring to them, infusing them with life, or a "heightened vitality" (Dewey, 2005, p. 18). In the

aesthetic experience, the acts of taking in, responding, and producing “interpenetrate” each other, while the participant persists in a state of “happy absorption” (p. 18). I interpret this happiness as the experience of being absorbed in itself, rather than a demand for pleasant feelings. It’s satisfying to be emotionally, intellectually, and artistically immersed as critical spectator and producer/designer; such immersion has the potential to become transformative when coupled with activist goals of effecting social change out of a commitment and love for self and community.

Absorption aside, aesthetic/artistic work has implications beyond the self. Both Dewey and Greene viewed artistic participation and production as positions and actions that could lead to social change, since change first emerges in the “climate of the imagination” (Dewey, 2005, p. 360). We must be able to imagine significant change in order to enact it, thus, imagination paves the way, predicting and desiring something that is *possible*, rather than actual. The struggle to sort through and make meaning of what “authoritative others are offering as objectively ‘real’” (Greene, 1995, p. 380) is in itself a critical, imaginative, *aesthetic* response to an overwhelming barrage of defining messages and circumstances. In the classrooms in this study, aesthetic and the critical responses were not binaries. The ability to read and produce texts aesthetically – in the Rosenblattian sense – *and* critically (e.g., Lewis, 2000) was crucial to listening and being moved enough by another perspective to desire and enact change. This sense of aesthetics is important to understanding the youth activism highlighted in this article, in which immersive experiences of production, performance, and redesign (Janks, 2000) expressed demands for change toward a more socially just world.

Much has been written about what is afforded through intersections of critical multimodal production, identity, and social action (e.g., Haddix, Everson, & Hodge, 2015; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010), but here it is the professed and implied love for self and community coupled with the production that defines a literacy of armed love. To summarize, theories of critical love as well as conceptualizations of aesthetic literacy events in these critical classrooms frame the way I look at the data in this study. Most of the discussion in this article will highlight the critical and aesthetic productions of two students I focused on as revelatory case studies. Their work expressed specific love for both self and community, demanding and performing a more just vision of the future. I am curious about why and how the literacy acts that effectively denounced and announced were intellectually as well as emotionally/affectively significant to the student-producers.

## Research Design

### *Multi-Sited Ethnographic Research*

For this study, I relied on critical ethnographic methods (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Madison, 2005; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) in racially, economically, ethnically, and linguistically diverse secondary English classrooms in order to see the multiplicity of experience, rather than as a means of comparison, to see if “being there ... and there” (Hannerz, 2003) would demonstrate ways that love mobilized actions in all kinds of situations, with all kinds of people, that it was not dependent on a certain bounded locality. While the sites were separate, they were linked by design through some commonalities: both occurred in critical literacy-oriented classrooms in the same Midwestern metropolitan area in dual-credit English-Social Studies courses with critical curricula and pedagogies. This critical context was significant to both sites in the study. Both teachers had explicit activist goals for their students, challenging themselves and their students to link learning with the disruption of the status quo. Illustrated in this article, there was an intentional progression of activist inquiry in the high school classroom that moved from micro to macro digital explorations of social problems, from self to world. At the middle school level, the critical inquiry tended to remain more closely linked to self and nearby community, although the response to and production of multimodal texts and ensuing discussions on any given day asked students to respond to and act against injustices near and far.

In addition to critical classrooms, I used critical methods to conduct the research. Leaning on Foley and Valenzuela’s (2005) self-description as a “cultural critic in search of collaborative methods” (p. 222), this study involved intentional dialogicality in relationships with participants/members of the classroom groups through almost daily conversations with teachers that were often directly related to our common stands “*against* Othering, *for* social justice” (Fine, 1994, p. 81, italics in original). My own standpoint as a former critical English teacher includes affiliations with both students and teachers; a lived experience with the day-to-day challenges of working within and often against both large school systems and small charter schools informs my approach to research as one who is “of” the dilemmas of schooling, instead of hovering outside or above it. Both teachers invited me to participate fully in the lives of their classrooms. I did this by getting to know the students over many days, weeks, and months, assisting them in their work, offering critical feedback, joking around, asking questions, listening, and generally trying to support their learning experience without being intrusive.

The 42 student participants at the high school were all seniors and the 18 students at the middle school were in grades 7 and 8. They had diverse backgrounds and identities (racially, ethnically, linguistically, spiritually, economically, in their gender expression, and in their histories with

schooling). In these sites, I was certainly aware of my own racial identity (white) and gender expression (cis-female) and make no claim for an emic perspective with the youth participants; however, in research and teaching I have spent years with secondary and post-secondary students from these same urban communities and I am invested in their stories and lives. In informal conversations and planned interviews, I clarified their opinions, offered my own thoughts and experiences when solicited, and shared my interests and emerging ideas about my project with them.

### *Data Sources*

Aside from interviews, all data were collected as part of the everyday goings-on of the classes, including literacy production and performance, ethnographic fieldnotes from over 125 hours at each site, audio and video data, and selected transcribed observations. Data featuring student work included: (1) print productions (e.g., poetry, ‘zine articles, reflections, visual artwork), (2) photographic data, (3) audio (e.g., podcast unit, audio recordings of whole class and small group discussions), and (4) documentary films, recordings of student presentations, whole class and small group interactions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with focal students and teachers toward the end of the semester and school year at each site as a way of checking my understanding and emerging interpretations. Focal students from the high school were also interviewed in their first year at a community college as a way to member check my interpretations over time. I wanted to learn about what was important, moving, and meaningful to the participants, and follow themes from key moments of text creation and sharing, and person-to-person interaction.

### *Mediated Discourse Analysis*

The two classrooms in the study were viewed as sites of engagement, in which both group and individual histories of participation and possible trajectories converged in specific “social occasion[s]” that were “spatially and temporally bounded” (Norris & Jones, 2005, p. 144, 157). Patterns, codes, and themes emerged from the student projects, as well as from the way students reflected on their work and the experience of creating and sharing it. While all members of the full participant group were included in the analysis from both sites, here I elected to look closely at the experiences and productions of one participant from the middle school (Casey), and one from the high school (Alexander). In focusing on the experience of these two students, I refer to their histories in school, as well as their histories in the class from the study. I looked at their interactions with other students and

their teachers, their production and performances of texts of resistance, and their reflections on these relationships and texts as conveyed through interviews. The highlighted voices of these case studies were interesting and powerful but also fairly typical; thus, selection of data from these participants was purposeful, but their aesthetic work and experience was consistent with that of the entire roster of students for both of the sites. While their literacy productions were typical of the student work in both settings, their interaction style was more revelatory than representative (Yin, 2009). Both Casey and Alexander routinely made themselves available to their peers, their teachers, and to me. They each had an ease in sharing opinions and did this already in somewhat public ways. This externalizing of their experience made my questions feel (rightly or wrongly) less intrusive than they might with those youth who tended to keep their ideas and stories more private. Casey and Alexander conveyed not only willingness, but pleasure in talking with me both informally and in formal interviews over a period of many months and, in Alexander's case, over a year later.

After coding the data, I followed methods from mediated discourse analysis, particularly nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004); I drew, as well, on the significance of timescales, the histories and futures of social actors, and multimodal texts (Norris & Jones, 2005). I found it most useful to think about what students were building or designing with their compositions and performances, how their work was oriented in time, and how they reflected on the significance of the work, both the creation and the performing of it.

In addition, my analysis relied on an understanding of affect as an embodied, felt experience that may not be labeled or even named, while emotion is a more cultural and social effort to make sense of feelings in some way (Wetherell, 2013). Research on affect (Massumi, 2015; Sedgwick, 2003; Thrift, 2004) notes that intense moments can unsettle and exceed what might be a norm in traditional learning situations, and that in general, embodied experiences, including affective ones, are significant to and inextricable from learning and understanding (e.g., Enriquez, Johnson, Kontovourki, & Mallozzi, 2016). Beyond the body, research on affect explores how affect and emotion attach to an object, text, or, "stuff" (Ahmed, 2004; Burnett, Merchant, Pahl, & Rowsell, 2014), so much so that an object becomes sticky and "saturated with affect, [becoming a] site of personal and social tension" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 8). In this article, emotion and affect are not conflated, but they are taken as data in similar ways and often together, such as when a student used words to describe and reflect on an affective, somewhat or wholly embodied experience. In both everyday ways and more startling moments of aesthetic provocation, the two classrooms in the study seemed to expect and allow for a broad range of emotional and affective expressions.

### **Critical Inquiry Across Sites**

In their goals of disrupting the status quo through developing aesthetic and critical projects, students at both sites followed variations on a theme of inclusion and acceptance for a community that was not understood and not cared for in mainstream (e.g., white, straight) society. Students created texts that would educate and move their audiences to see their chosen problem (e.g., unfair treatment, harm, lack of acceptance, lack of opportunity for marginalized identities) and to provoke these viewers or listeners enough that they would want to do something about it, to get them to care, and to enlist them in action. At both sites, students performed their work for wider audiences. For one activist project at the middle school, students distributed their 'zines at a coffeeshop and on the campus of a nearby college, even making soapbox-style speeches to garner interest in their problem to insist that their audiences listen and learn. At the high school, documentary films had a life outside the classroom, beginning with a screening at a local movie theater for a large audience of school, community, and families. Films were also placed on a YouTube channel and some were highlighted on a local web-only news site, generating comments from an even broader audience. Students expressed wonder about the impact of sharing their activist work, about sparking discussion and awareness. As one student remarked: "People are noticing it, arguing about it. It's out there in the world." Another student told me excitedly that the following year one of their films was shown in a local college class to offer a short and clear explanation about bias in standardized testing.

In practice, even at the high school level, not all students came to class with an awareness of a problem that was significant to them, nor did they possess a burning desire to change the status quo. Certainly, some students lived with intense social problems every single day, such as a student of color living in a racist society. Some students had relationships to their topic but didn't highlight their own experiences in their texts. Students created podcasts and films that denounced domestic violence, programming in city schools versus wealthier suburban districts, violence against Native American women, cultural bias in standardized testing, and that announced immigrant experiences, fights against gentrification, and the experience of African American young men in schools; one denounced efforts to control Muslim women's choices about wearing the hijab while playing sports, and announced local fashion designs for young Muslim female athletes.

At the middle school level, critical projects were most often directly linked to students' lives. Topics included denouncing research and reflection on being an introvert in a society that favors extroverts, being gay in a heterosexist world, being female in a patriarchal society, being in an abusive foster care setting, being an African American girl who has been suspended and expelled for behavior "violations" since 1st grade. These students researched something that affected them in their daily lives, at the micro



level, and then extended their vistas to describe bigger, more macro, stories through announcements in the form of manifestos, demands, revisions of their own histories, and ultimately, imaginations of how the named problems might be addressed.

In the next section, I offer a description of selected productions and performances of critical and aesthetic texts from Casey (8<sup>th</sup> grade) and Alexander (12<sup>th</sup> grade) followed by analysis and discussion using the ideas related to armed love introduced earlier.

### **Casey**

Casey identified herself as white, gay (preferring this description to others), and female. She was the source of ongoing disruptive bursts of laughter, exclamations, and complaints during class, although there were days when she said nothing whatsoever. She often came in late, or left in the middle, again, usually emphatically, accompanied by loud cursing. Although she was definitely vocal, Casey wasn't alone in telegraphing her status – good days, rotten days, and in-between days – in this space. Many students in this class routinely expressed their moods, thoughts, and desires in a full-throated public performance.

Casey had a history of mobility in schools and home. Prior to her 8<sup>th</sup> grade year (the time of this study), she had attended six different schools; in her words, she had “a really bad history of schools.” She also had a difficult history with her primary caregivers and housing, having lived in five different households, all of them family: her mom, two grandmothers, an uncle, and her dad. Casey was currently living with her dad, who worked as a leather tanner. She attended this school for both her 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade years, and, while quick to point out some things that made her mad about it, she spoke highly of it overall. The English-Social Studies class was identified as her favorite, because of the teachers and the content. The ease and comfort Casey displayed in her relationship with Ms. Kay was noticeable. She often called her “mom,” demanded individual attention from her during work time, and praised her openly, shouting out to her mid-interview: “We were just saying how great you are. We're not even being sarcastic.” She also liked the class because she had a sense of herself as a writer and enjoyed having other people hear her words, although she professed to dislike standing up to share her work and typically had a teacher read with or for her when she was asked to be at the front of the room.

... I'm a writer. I love writing, and, I don't really show, I don't really, I mean, I love writing, like that's my favorite thing, I just don't like presenting it. I'm pretty sure you caught on to that. ((softly)) [I'm most proud of] my writing . . . ((louder)) But I hate my writing.

The expressed ambivalence here can be taken at face value, but it was more likely the case that Casey didn't want to assert her writer identity too forcefully, so after averring that it was important to her, she pulled back for protection, and cover. This simultaneous embrace and rejection of herself was a characteristic of Casey's writing about her gay identity, as well.

### *Acceptance and Love for Gay Identity*

Casey appreciated Ms. Kay because she was a queer teacher who was fully out at school. As noted, a number of teachers and students at the school identified as lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. For Ms. Kay to share her sexual orientation as one of many joyful aspects of her identity was undoubtedly powerful for a student like Casey, who had "liked girls [her] whole life" until she officially came out in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. While she was out in this setting, as well as at home, she desired acceptance and love for her gay identity from her extended family (especially her grandmother), church community, and seemingly, herself.

Texts related to Casey's emancipatory project included (a) a presentation on gay acceptance through her own experience of coming out, developed as a series of haiku poems against a backdrop of the gay pride flag, and (b) a piece based on Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" (1978) that she titled "This is Expectation." Also included were (c) a poem written on her own, called "Looking Forward," and (d) a 'zine article on the problem of GLBTQ suicide and efforts to fight it, presented to an audience that included school, parent, and neighborhood communities.

### **Casey's Aesthetic Productions: Announcing Self-Love**

Casey's coming out presentation was a response to the prompt: "We have connections to many cultural groups. Tell us about one of your cultural groups. What do you want people to know about it? How might you represent it? Where do you fit in?" Casey prepared for this project by researching and painstakingly creating a paper version of the rainbow gay pride flag, for her a relatively new "sticky object" (Ahmed, 2004) offering tangible evidence of shelter and joy through association with the larger gay community. She then wrote a series of short conversations about coming out to the people in her family, both remembered, and imagined as future events, in the form of haikus. The short poems circled a central coming-out haiku called "My Story," with coming-out conversations or stories involving her dad, church, sister, grandma, mom, and future children.

**My Story**

It was a process  
Everyone had opinions  
I am who I am.

This central haiku (“My Story”) was hardly a story, containing little in the way of explanation: “It” referred to coming out; “everyone” was her family and community members. Despite the lack of explanation, the meaning is pretty clear. Centering her story and calling it a “process” made coming out something she did without changing her position, without capitulating to anyone else’s needs or desires about her identity, although “everyone had” opinions, or expectations about Casey as a queer 13-year old girl in what mostly felt like a straight world.

**Coming out to my dad**

“Casey are you gay?”  
I froze, scared no one else knew  
“If you are...okay”

**Coming out to my sister**

I knew she’d be cool.  
“You always flirted with girls.”  
She came out for me.

**Coming out to my church**

Gay isn’t okay  
Bible shunned and shamed people  
It wasn’t God’s words

**Coming out to my grandma**

“You will go to hell.  
I will not be a great-grandma”  
She won’t accept me.

**Coming out to my mom**

“What’s going on?”  
“Casey’s girlfriend is coming over”  
“Time for dinner now”

**My kids coming out to me**

“Who’s that girl you’re with?”  
“Aye Mom, got a crush on her”  
“All right. I got ya”

And, while the reactions of her grandmother and her church were both negative, these were off-center, orbiting around Casey’s story but not defining or defeating it. In voicing conversations that had already happened, and imagining others, even projecting herself into the future to reassure her own child, Casey enacted a desire for a different, better future, one in which an adult version of herself responded with love to an imaginary gay child (or alternately, in a rewriting of her own history of coming out, what the adult should have said to her, a sort of “do over”). In this revision, the adult tells the child: “I got ya,” instead of “You will go to hell.”

On the first day of presentations, the room was set up to create a special performance-space feeling, with dimmed lights, and couches, chairs, and desks arranged in a horseshoe around the speaker's spot. Casey wanted to be first to share her project with the class, shouting out this preference ("I call going first"), and then taping up her poster and moving to claim the stool in front of the class as Ms. Kay was making opening announcements. While she displayed enthusiasm about going first, the transcription from a video recording of the presentation (below) shows Casey's self-consciousness in introducing this project in front of the audience of her peers. She opened with a big statement about her sexual orientation, and then became tongue-tied, evidenced by some starts and stops, with a bid for support from Ms. Kay to get through the awkwardness of trying to publicly articulate the significance of the experience of coming out to the people in her life.

This is about me being gay. I'm a lesbian, if you didn't know. It's important to me, but a lot of them get discriminated against and I don't like it.  
It shaped me ((stops, pauses)) ((looks at Ms. Kay))  
I reacted ((stops, pauses again)) ((looks again at Ms. Kay))  
((groans loudly))  
Blah blah blah blah ((laughs))  
It impacted me.  
((deep breath))  
[Being gay] impacted me in a negative and positive way. Negative because of discrimination and positive because I like being gay. I like it.

Despite the quickly shifting moods of these statements, and the difficulty of moving smoothly forward with the presentation, there was no doubt that Casey felt accepted enough at school to share her pride in her gay identity, repeating: "I like it." As noted, Casey was emotionally expressive during class, regardless of the topic of conversation, or the kinds of texts or projects she was working on. She appeared to take pleasure in both the denouncing and the announcing, and these two gestures often emerged at the same time. At the time of her haiku project, Casey expressed mostly delight in resisting heteronormative expectations; saying "I like it," and "I am who I am," engaging in a display of "affective ... resistance" (Bae & Ivashkevich, 2012, p. 5) in the face of discrimination. In writing and speech, Casey performed this affective resistance to the cultural norm that says that middle school girls should look, act, and be straight, and somehow convey apologies for being gay.

Such strength stands in contrast to an earlier demonstration of affective resistance, from a poem Casey had written the previous year, titled "Looking Forward." She shared this poem with me during an interview as something significant to her, an expression of herself, and as an accomplishment ("it's *really* long"). The 880-word free verse poem contains the word "want" 65 times. It's hard to ignore the sense of plaintive desire, an incantation of want, culminating in the final lines:

I want to be able to smile for real and not fake it.  
 I want to be in love with myself.  
 I want more in life than [sic] I've been saying.

In this conclusion, Casey expressed an intense desire to put sorrow in the past and replace it with self-love and joy. This wanting might be read as a conversation with herself, rather than one with her grandma or other family members. It is an unrelenting litany of loss, of yearning, and as such, it appears as an aesthetic experience that was wrenching to write, perhaps, but also satisfying in its raw emotionality. Both Casey's poetry and her haiku presentation occupy the gap between the present time and what she *wanted*, both right now and in some misty future. In her coming out presentation the tension was under her artistic control. For instance, in the visual lay-out of the haiku series, she chose to place words like "shun," "shame," "frozen," "scared" in less powerful positions, orbiting around the more intractable statement at the center: "I am who I am."

Casey set up a similar juxtaposition of anguish and stubborn refusal in "This is Expectation," a story/prose poem inspired by Kincaid's "Girl" (1978), which is an often-anthologized dramatic dialogue between mother and daughter about how to be a "good" girl. Casey's version (printed below as it was written, with a few usage errors) features imagined or remembered dialogue between Casey and her disapproving grandma, voices she returned to in her subsequent haiku project.

	<b>This is expectation</b>
	You are to listen to what your told; [...]
((Margin says	This is how you don't be "gay"
"Grandma"	This is where your going to go if your "gay"
and points to	This is how you act if you're a young woman;
text at right))	This is how you dress as a girl; [...]
	Your going to go to hell;
	You're a sinner;
	Don't you believe in god. Yes?
	Then obey him;
	Gay isn't okay;
((Margin says	Why can't I be gay;
"me" and	If god don't love me then why did he make me;
points to text	If I'm going to hell;
at right))	I'm already there;
	I'm happy being gay.

As with the haiku series, Casey positioned her pain (in hell) next to an unyielding "I'm happy being gay." In other words, she got to write the last word, putting her grandma on the wrong side of this argument, highlighting her illogical adherence to the anti-gay ideology of the church ("if god don't love me ...why did he make me"). In repeating her grandmother's words, Casey created a stark portrait of heteronormative expectations about how to

be a girl, specifically, how to be a straight, gender-conforming girl. Rather than “listen[ing] to what your [sic] told” and “obey[ing] him,” Casey tried out a script for herself, creating a voiced, and therefore somewhat embodied, rejection of rejection, a girl writing a performance of resistance in the form of love for herself.

### *Anticipatory Discourses*

Casey’s texts centered quite literally on her own life experiences. She drew on key people and conversations to make her case for gay rights, bringing out illustrative and often painful episodes from the past as springboards toward a better present and future. While she denounced oppressive experiences from the past, and desired a better present, Casey’s productions were continually oriented to the future; they announced her desire for a future of unshakeable self-love, as well as the love and acceptance she sought from her grandmother and church, eventually extending outward from herself to include her frustration with discrimination against all gay people, as voiced in her introduction.

This future orientation may be viewed as an “anticipatory discourse” that actively engages in making something happen, calling it into existence (de Saint-George, 2005, expanding on Scollon & Scollon, 2004). In addition to the fact that Casey’s poem was called “Looking Forward,” the 65 “wants” exert a force toward achieving her desire, as if the act of announcing (returning to Freire’s armed love) or performing a desire might accomplish it. Her haiku series also exhibited this future orientation, although in this case it was clearly linked with the past, since all but one of the haikus were short autobiographical sketches of things that had already happened in her life. The imagined future haiku creates an adult Casey offering calm, assured support and care for her child. Toward the end of her presentation, Ms. Kay suggested that she read that particular haiku out loud. This became a bit fraught, since Casey felt that the poem, as written, wouldn’t be understandable to anyone else.

Ms. Kay: Can you read the one about your child?

Casey: No-ho-ho-ho!

((regrouping)) Okay, I said, um, it’s like, I was like role playing as if my child was coming out to me. That like I ask if they.... I don’t know how to read it. It’s weird!

((uses a different voice)) “Who’s that girl you’re with?”

((hands stretched out, opening in gesture)) I can’t read it! I want to describe it.

Ms. Kay: Just read exactly the words on the page.

Casey: ((turns to read)) “Aye Mom, got a crush on her”

((very quietly, almost inaudible)) “All right. I got ya”

((returning to regular speaking volume)) It doesn't even make sense! You probably don't even know what the fuck it means!

Ms. Kay: It does make sense. And it's "fudge"

Ms. Kay urged Casey to step into this future imagination of herself, perhaps because it offered a view of transformation in how to be a caregiver. Casey explained to the group: "If my kids come out to me, I'm gonna teach them that it's okay. That they don't have to be scared." Her words suggest that this might be the kind of unconditional love she desired upon coming out. While she did receive this assurance from her sister and dad, it's clear that the rejections were losses that needed redress. In this way, her future orientation holds hands with an orientation to the past, since Casey created an imagined projection in which she got to redo a past experience that had been seemingly botched by key adults in her life.

Casey's affective performances of resistance built a revised past, a changed present, and a future of acceptance that she *wanted* (65 times) and sometimes demanded. Over a period of several months, she returned to her topic repeatedly in different ways, in multiple genres (research for the 'zine, poetry and prose) that embodied a confrontation with the actual, and then rehearsed and performed the possible. Casey's armed love was protective of herself, but hopeful for different and better realities of acceptance and love.

## **Alexander**

Alexander identified himself as Black and male. Both of his parents moved to the United States to go to college: his father was from West Africa, and his mother came from northern Europe. He speaks some of his father's first language, and more of his mother's language because as a child he spent some summers with his maternal grandparents. Although his parents were college-educated, Alexander made frequent remarks about his own lack of means to attend college. In the first two years following graduation, he attended a local community college, with an intention of focusing on math.

In the English-Social Studies class, Alexander was confident and outspoken. He was a frequent contributor to whole-class discussions that piqued his interest, especially those that were either shared inquiry-style, or those that were meant to offer feedback and constructive criticism to his peers. He seemed generally comfortable with, if unmotivated by, his relationships with peers and teachers, although he was well liked, and joked around with both:

It's funny, I joined [the class] as a backup. . . and I was like "I'll see how it is, and if I don't like it I'll just drop it," cuz I have enough credits to graduate, so I joined and I liked it right away. I liked the teachers, the kids. I've known them since freshman year, we're cool, so I stuck with it . . .

Alexander had a small number of close male friends in the room, but he didn't limit his interactions to these students. With a charismatic presence, he commanded the attention of the room quite easily; his self-assurance was palpable, and he was often, but not always, generous in paying attention to students who weren't his friends. After listening to the podcast about sex trafficking created by two classmates, for instance, Alexander shared his experience of being moved by their work:

You always think it's happening off somewhere else, out there ((quieter)) So, you guys really brought it home ((pause)) Punch to the gut.

Locating a response in his body was high praise from Alexander, both as an audience member, and as a creator of his own critical texts.

### *End of White Supremacy*

Alexander identified the problem he wanted to address early in the school year, perhaps on the second day of class. The group was discussing an excerpt from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996), and the talk had turned to a critique of their own experience in school as less about thinking and more about performing for grades. After a white student remarked: "You don't have to be smart to be good at school," Alexander pointed out that because the system favors white students, students of color have the burden of performing in a white structure, and that perhaps a different standard should be in place until white supremacy is eradicated. Alexander's drive was for an end to white supremacy, his desired reality was for this, and for a valuing of Blackness.

Compositions that Alexander created to address the problems of white supremacy and the desire for an ascendant Black power included (a) his "This I Believe" speech and slide show, (b) a photo series that replicated some of the images created by a Black Lives Matter documentary photographer, (c) a podcast on gentrification in an African American neighborhood, and somewhat related, (d) a documentary film about a school program for students who had only recently arrived in the U.S. The focus for this article is Alexander's *This I Believe* speech and the photographs for his slide show.

### **Alexander's Productions: Denouncing and Announcing**

For the *This I Believe* (TIB) presentations students had to get up in front of a combined group of 42 students, plus invited school administrators, teachers, and friends. There was a great deal of nervousness about the public speaking event as students took turns in the spotlight illuminating the stage of an otherwise dark performance space. Further, the teachers actively sought a



larger audience for this project, as they did for all projects; students were asked to share their work with family and friends, and with the world via email, YouTube, Sound Cloud, and other amplifying platforms. Ms. Dee was also the toughest and most consistent audience proxy; she urged, cajoled, and otherwise tried to make students nervous enough (at times) to produce their best work.

Alexander's *This I Believe* speech was called "I Believe in Black Power." His production enacted a discourse of resistance, which he expressed as a powerful self and collective love. Here it is worth remembering that the repetition of Black love and strength is itself a revolutionary act (Collins, 2004). Such self-love was the cornerstone of Alexander's speech:

When you see me with this pick in my hair, you should know that the pick, my pick, is not just there because it doesn't fit in my pocket, which, it doesn't fit in my pocket very well, and it would make a hole in my pants and my mom wouldn't like that, but it says Black love, Black unity. It says self-love because it's about natural Black hair, Black beauty. And the fist is for Black liberation, Black resilience. You know, Black people have been shat on for thousands of years and we are still here, we're still cool.

His words offered a joyful resistance, and they were perfectly suited to the requirements of the assignment and the goals of the class. Students were pointedly asked to disrupt the status quo through their critical compositions. As Ms. Dee said: "There is something different where you become a creator of media, so you can talk back, you can find your own way to make the world. Not just to consume the world." Alexander "talked back" in photos and words for his TIB presentation. Each of his images contained his Black power hair pick (Figure 1), photographed in positions around the neighborhood as if in conversation with local landmarks and symbols. The pick mediates (Norris & Jones, 2005) between Alexander and his world, quite self-consciously speaking for him from the deep well of the fist's cultural meaning. Alexander's project announced self-love and demanded Black liberation, while denouncing white supremacy in a clear instantiation of Freire's "armed love." The pick might even be read as a literal reference to Freire's *arms*, a tiny representation of an arm with a Black power fist at the end of it.

Alexander's photos for the project, he told me, were inspired by photographer Ai Wei Wei's images of flipping off iconic landmarks such as the Forbidden City, the Eiffel Tower, and the White House. Ai Wei Wei's resistance at the macro/global level was taken up by Alexander, resisting in his own local contexts. The Black power hair pick appeared in front of the American flag (Figure 2), the police station, his school, a local Central American-themed mural he liked, and a liquor store. Each image provoked or engaged in dialogue with Alexander's idea of Black power, since the pick is legible mostly as a NO, a challenge that denounced institutions associated with white authority. For instance, rather than saluting the flag with hand on

heart, the pick “saluted” the flag (citing Ai Wei Wei) by being held upside-down in front of it, subverting the usual reverence or even the respect communicated through a defiant raised hand or fist. Alexander’s image is both serious and tongue-in-cheek; the tines of the hair pick appear huge in the foreground, and the flag is miniaturized between the fierce teeth of the comb, almost as if put behind bars. The scale of hair pick makes the gesture at once defiant and deflated; it’s a protest coupled with a dismissal as the juxtaposition of the hair pick against this symbol that has not represented freedom or protection for Black bodies brings the “high” flag low.



*Figure 1.* Alexander and the hair pick.



*Figure 2.* The pick against the American flag.

### *Non-Human Actant*

Significantly, there is an absence of human figures in Alexander's images, aside from the back of his head and his hand. The pick is a non-human actant, a semiotic artifact that stands in for and extends or exceeds the boundaries of his body, holding within it the "meaning stream" (Appadurai, 1996) of the Black Power movement, of resistance to white supremacy. The fist/pick is a "sticky object" (Ahmed, 2004) used as a nonverbal sign evoking the multiple meanings of the Black Power movement. Raised in silent protest, it was witness, and warning. When placed in front of non-oppressive structures, such as the Central American mural, the fist signified solidarity. All of these associations connected the symbol of the fist with the stories of people and actions resisting white supremacy across time and space.

*Traversal of Time and Space*

The placement of the pick allowed for multiple meanings as it moved around the city in what Lemke (2005) called a *traversal*. Alexander put his hair pick in symbolic spaces (abstract), such as the flag, or the police precinct station (Figure 3) which was most certainly a recognizable local and specific place (Lemke, 2005, p. 115). Changes in space and place meant that Alexander, with the pick as semiotic artifact, staged a one-person protest, disrupting representations of power.

Alexander's images were timely, in the climate of a post-Ferguson America, with several local cases of police violence, but they were also asynchronous dialogues with authority, initiating and documenting a wordless protest. Further, while the demand for justice was happening right now, in the present, the orientation was for the future. Like Casey, then, Alexander's was a literacy that contained the past, but was steadily reaching toward, and oriented to a different reality, using the juxtaposed symbol of resistance to demand a desired yet-to-come social world.



*Figure 3.* The pick at the police station.

*Pleasure of Armed Love: The Feeling of Critical Resistance*

When Alexander looked back on his own projects – TIB speech and photographs, podcast, and film – he described a visceral, embodied connection to the production process and the final compositions, saying they were “something I made, with my hands, and I’m not gonna forget that.” He went on to imagine the biggest project, the documentary film, as emerging from his body (as in, laying an egg), an exertion that he recalled with intense pleasure:

You gotta crunch it and grind it all out, and then when it’s done, you’ve got this final product, you know, this golden egg, and it feels super good, you feel super good about yourself. (Interview)

The work he produced for this class was emotionally and intellectually significant to him, something that he stated repeatedly in written and oral reflections. His stance as an activist meant that he was interested in accepting educational experiences that were meaningful, a desire for meaning that was inextricably linked to social transformation on a grand scale. In this regard, Alexander might be viewed as an “exile” (Bauman, 2005) in the whitestream institution of public schooling, someone who “refus[ed] to be integrated” and who was willing and even enjoyed taking an “autonomous stand” against systems of oppression (Bauman, 2005, p. 1093).

### **Implications of Armed Love in the Classroom**

An immersive state of being engrossed – emotionally, critically, politically – infused the work of Casey and Alexander, and their peers, with a “heightened vitality” (Dewey, 2005, p. 18). The emotional and affective qualities of their literacy experiences were inseparable from their activist productions and performance of resistances. These performances of radical, “armed” love for self and community were not accidental occurrences; they were baked into the dialogic critical literacy curriculum at both sites, resulting in powerful literacy learning as students articulated, across multiple modes, their desires for better futures or alternate presents. Students in the middle school seemed to find the most satisfaction in the projects that were directly linked to their own lives; this was evident in the research, writing, and public performance of the ‘zine articles, in the chance to talk back in the “Girl” poem, and, as an extension of these compositions, in the final cultural sharing presentation. The quality of the projects varied, but all demonstrated creativity, expression, and engagement in a larger political dialogue about social transformation. Students were asked to produce, revise, and perform what was most certainly describable as emotional and persuasive multimodal work. Similarly, students in the high school class expressed high levels of satisfaction with their

photography, speeches, podcasts, and films. They were very clear about the difficulty and the pressure of performance, but all felt that they could, in the end, deliver, and by both qualitative and quantitative metrics, the success rate for the class was almost 100%. They had the sense that their work *mattered* to them and to their audiences. Thus, affective and emotional involvement in the learning experience, or vitality, even when it might be uncomfortable for the creator and others in the room, hold enormous potential for identity transformation toward creative, collaborative, problem-solving, productive citizens, possibly “citizen warriors” (Sandoval, 2000), armed with love for themselves, their communities, and the larger social world. This literacy of confrontation and desire is expressed not as students, but as citizens, in a sort of radical love-fueled collective activism.

Opportunities to dream and create alternate present realities and desired possible futures are arguably necessary for survival. Rejecting damaging narratives and structures, and creating equitable ones reminds us that artists have been and continue to be “forerunners” at the front of resistance movements in many struggles for freedom: dissident artists in music, visual arts, and film in the United States are daily responding to police brutality, or inequities in the criminal justice system, rights for immigrants, and rights for queer and transgender people, to name a few. Activists use their art to suggest what is to come: “Art is a mode of prediction not found in charts and statistics” (Dewey, 2005, p. 363).

In this study, citizen-students composed artistic, digital and multimodal texts to advance inclusive values of radical democracy, however out of reach they might appear. Through confronting the status quo and imagining different social futures, their aesthetic activism enacted a literacy of armed love as desire for change, and as love for self and community. Their artistry and force compelled an audience to listen. The implications for education are clear: if art is the “language children speak” (Delpit, 2015), rather than silencing this language through not listening, talking over, and focusing on other voices, we must be willing to be persuaded by their desires. Students in these critical classrooms had multiple experiences of profoundly affecting and being affected by others (Spinoza, 2002) in literacies of resistance that unsettled and inspired a larger audience. Their digital and multimodal composing was achievable, meaningful, and emotional. The work allowed students to act as though things could be otherwise (Greene, 1995), that they could make a difference in a forceful and recognizable way, and that they had a right to create an expressive object. Further, it suggested that they had a duty to be “wide awake” (Greene, 1995) in a public and accessible (digital, multimodal) dialogue, even those previously excluded from this dialogue. The literacy of armed love, for citizen-warriors (Sandoval, 2000) “convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce” (Freire, 2005, p. 74) in these classrooms was built of multiple communicative modes, informed by critical resistance, and performed as love of self in relation to others. This embodied literacy delivered a “punch to the gut” and a “golden

egg,” or said differently, it offered an experience of activism fueled by radical love.

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