

Beyond the Dark Closet: Reconsidering Literacy Narratives as Performative Artifacts

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ABSTRACT: Pedagogical theories celebrate and romanticize literacy narratives as emancipatory to the lives of students and teachers. In the particular context of basic writing, such discussions warrant critique. The author argues that perceptions of literacy narratives as transformative to writers and readers often reinforce a “model minority” belief along with “storyteller-subject” and “pedagogue-master” asymmetries, even when intending to challenge these dynamics. Furthermore, these perceptions enable and sustain a problematic trajectory that polarizes darkness and enlightenment. Through an examination of coming out narrative conventions that align with and depart from literacy narratives, this article explores key debates about closetedness that can reframe storytellers as making performative choices rather than being characterized as passive objects of study.

KEYWORDS: literacy narratives; coming out narratives; basic writing; underrepresentation; storytelling; performance

When creating a personal narrative, you also co-create the group/cultural story. You examine the description handed to you of the world, picking holes in the paradigms currently constructing reality. You doubt that traditional Western science is the best knowledge system, the only true, impartial arbiter of reality. You turn the established narrative on its head, seeing through, resisting, and subverting its assumptions.

Anzaldúa (“Beyond” 103)

For over two decades, compositionists have analyzed the pedagogical benefits of assigning literacy narratives to students in writing courses. Research on literacy narratives took rise during the 1990s when this genre began to circulate in English and more specifically composition and rhetorical studies. This work emerged from the field’s desire to address greater “diversity,” respond to “multiculturalism,” and reflect upon the marginalization of multilingual writers (Clark and Medina; Karls). To advance this pursuit, Wendy Bishop lists seven goals the literacy narrative can accomplish, including that it “encourages you to explore cultural and racial diversity,”

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“provides a place where you can look at and critique your schooling and challenge your education,” and enables the study of “writing processes and growth as a writer and reader” (67). These goals subsequently shape the ways in which students’ literacy narratives are read, analyzed, and discussed from a theoretical standpoint.

As with much of the research done in composition, scholarship on literacy narratives has tended to be a discussion *between* pedagogues *about* (and in the absence of) students, often through analyses of the texts students compose. Generally speaking, the analysis of student writing functions as a valuable research practice in the field, for, to say the least, this work transgresses traditional perspectives on what counts as a text worthy of analysis. Literacy narratives are taken up through a kind of meta-analysis in which pedagogue-readers calculate and assess learning outcomes (Bishop; Dunbar-Odom). These discussions of students’ sample narratives have struck a familiar and sometimes unsettling chord; I am reminded of the critical debates surrounding “coming out” narratives as a strategy for self-actualization versus so-called “mainstream assimilation” (Sycamore). Coming out narratives occupy a broader social discourse that measures “progress” and living in one’s “truth” in a way that is limiting if not singularizing and prescriptive.

I have observed the ways in which both literacy and coming out narratives often examine and celebrate growth and self-awareness as the embodiment of a “once was lost, now am found” trajectory. Literacy narratives produced in the context of basic writing classrooms become further complicated by the institutional politicization of underrepresented, “minority,” and “remedial” status. The expectation is not that one can transgress these labels but rather, that material conditions can (and should) change for “the better” as a reward for the labor of acquiring privileged forms of literacy. To be certain, these theoretical discussions emerge from a desire to encourage or centralize narratives that are otherwise dismissed, discredited, and silenced, but as Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen argue, “Romance and literacy are often intimately connected genres” (531). They caution that literacy is a site from which “both liberal and conservative agendas make the same claim,” that literacy enables meaningful participation in society (516). My efforts lie in analyzing discussions that, similar to broader commentaries on coming out narratives, fuel, foster, and reside within the agendas Eldred and Mortensen identify. I put forward these observations for consideration:

Firstly, within discussions of literacy narratives, dichotomizing tropes of darkness and enlightenment become markers for how the storyteller-

subject moves forward in pursuit of language acquisition. I explore some of the ways in which these tropes take hold, specifically in relation to basic writers already positioned as underrepresented (and sometimes minority) communities on an institutional level. This exploration calls into question the (inadvertent) formation of “model minorities” in which specific dark to light trajectories are privileged, praised, and celebrated as conventions central to the narrative itself. One consequence of this formation is that a pedagogical reversal takes place wherein the “subject” (storyteller/practitioner) is positioned to teach the “master” (reader/pedagogue) about the challenges of underrepresentation and marginalization. This reversal twists the script where an already asymmetrical power dynamic exists, but rather than challenging the asymmetry, a new falsely emancipatory dynamic takes shape in which the sufferer’s “truth” is sanctioned by a savior-witness in order for the latter to be absolved and the former to be released from subjugation.

Secondly, discussions of coming out narratives also rely on a dark-to-light trajectory in terms of how closetedness and coming out are said to release storyteller-subjects from the strictures of secrecy. Stories about coming out are popularized as narratives in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer (LGBTQ) individuals “come out of the closet,” thus disclosing significant moments in the process of naming, understanding, accepting, and revealing sexuality and/or gender. Coming out functions at the local level of storytelling in ways that reflect a macro social narrative, one with important implications for literacy narrative research. Some of the theoretical discussions surrounding coming out narratives investigate the closet as a more nuanced concept than an in versus out binary could realistically allow. Describing debates that have emerged, I argue that the closet, taken *not* as a site of unawareness, can redirect the ways in which darkness in literacy narratives is depicted.

The section that follows draws upon analyses of closetedness to further explore subject-master relationships. It examines why and how discussions of literacy narratives at times slip into framing the storyteller-subject as the object of study. This framing has to do with the ways in which life events are characterized as inseparable from the subject. As a way to reroute discussions from a voyeuristic, exoticizing kind of objectification, and in the process, identify critical moments for teacher self-reflection, I propose reading storytellers’ choices as performative acts: to make a rhetorical shift away from perceptions that these stories contain innate or “authentic” displays of selfhood.

Literacy Narratives Through the Dark, Toward the Light

Scholarship in composition recounts the ways in which asking students to read and write about language acquisition can rouse dynamic opportunities for reflection, critique, and creative engagement. (Eldred and Mortensen; Daniell; Soliday; Bishop; Dunbar-Odom; Scott). This research considers what students and teachers can learn from analyzing schooling and reading or writing practices. For Donna Dunbar-Odom, “The thrust of the literacy narrative is how literacy—usually characterized as a love of fiction—changes the writer’s life” (26). It is worth ruminating on how and why these texts are said to enlighten or change individuals; from and to what states of awareness might these changes be taking place? Many of these broader discussions in composition research claim that stories about language acquisition can offer and reveal useful critiques of the belief systems that “romanticize” literacy. If, indeed, “we have romanticized the power of education, have internalized the fantasy that a flower girl can become a duchess through education” (a reference Eldred and Mortensen make in their discussion of *Pygmalion*), then literacy narratives, it is hoped, can complicate this trajectory (515). But upon closer examination, what are these broader discussions trying to remedy or address? I question if, perhaps, there is an exoticizing, “orientalist” quality present when analyzing students’ engagement with these texts about so-called language acquisition.

I was introduced to literacy narrative assignments over a decade ago when teaching in a basic writing program for the first time. The sequence of basic writing courses I taught, not dissimilar to those in basic writing programs nationwide, was comprised mainly of students historically labeled (and marginalized as) minority, first-generation, sometimes “at risk,” and “remedial” writers. In some instances, students had carried these labels for years, only to see them further sanctioned upon admission to college. While the labels basic and remedial have themselves been scrutinized in the field, and debates about the appropriate term to use continue today, they shape and galvanize the ways in which literacy narratives function in composition curricula.

Undoubtedly, my students at this time were underrepresented within the scope of our academic institution in part because of their racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, and regional identities and backgrounds. Thus, as a strategy to include engaging and relevant texts in the basic writing course, I was encouraged to teach works by writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Richard Rodriguez who explicitly describe the struggles, rewards, assimilationist/

revolutionary politics, and tacit values associated with language acquisition. My students had mixed responses to these texts; some viewed them favorably and made connections between the authors' experiences to their own, while others did not, and many students shifted and revised their positions throughout the conversation. Through our class discussions, it was made clear that in spite of the classifications that placed students into our shared learning space, heterogeneity was inevitable; this was not a surprising discovery, but it did confirm that basic writing and underrepresented students read, respond, and write back to literacy narratives in a variety of ways for reasons that may be unknowable to instructors and often to each other. In other words, the motives behind their interpretations and written responses were just as varied as the contributions they made to the class discussion.

This experience contrasts the broader historical discussions of literacy narratives that, at times, seek to define generic conventions. According to Dunbar-Odom, "literacy narratives reveal that a desire to read and write is not as easily extinguished as we might imagine" (106). This desire to read and write has become, I would argue, another romanticized convention of literacy narratives—one that influences writers and readers and the ways in which these texts are assigned or taught. For as I observed in conversations with my students, desire to read and write was multifaceted if not illusory at times. Desire, for many of these students, veiled or was veiled by a spectrum of competing concerns ranging from basic survival or social acceptability to an uncertainty of what else could be done and mechanical compliance with what's expected within the parameters of the course.

Interpretations of a desire to read and write may be additionally loaded in the context of a program or course that encourages mostly underrepresented students to read published literacy narratives written by mostly underrepresented authors. Underrepresentation plays out in ways that can obscure access to and accounts of whose desires are articulated, valued, and met. As Morris Young suggests, the literacy narrative offers "minority" writers a chance to participate in the "common cultural script of American individualism and achievement." These writers are told they can participate by way of "hard work and education." But Young also points out that the literacy narrative gives minority writers an opportunity to "[subvert] this story through their use of minority discourse" (53). Furthermore, "the racialized subject reconfigures the literacy narrative as a strategy for resisting appropriation by a dominant American culture," perhaps by using the narrative as a tool for critique, an opportunity to write against a glossy romanticization of literacy that (unwittingly) advances assimilationist goals. According to

Young, American culture “imagines a unifying narrative of citizenship,” through the use of “naturalized discourse of Standard English.” The “racialized subject” then resists this notion by composing literacy narratives in which they are “*denaturalizing* Standard English [emphasis in the original]” (35). Within this configuration, minorities can use the literacy narrative as a powerful tool of resistance and reappropriation.

The prevalence of texts written by historically underrepresented writers with heightened, conflicting attitudes and experiences toward English literacies follows a certain logic; could there even be a narrative arc if acquisition of language takes place without conflict or remains unfettered by a challenging situation? This would be difficult to imagine, particularly if one pedagogical goal is to encourage audience engagement with these texts. Likewise, it would seem counterproductive, if not disingenuous and unlikely, to encounter narratives in which there is only conflict and strife without reconciliation of some kind. Perhaps it is the narratives that strike a strategic balance of these features that get valued and popularized. This is certainly the case with Rodriguez’s essay, “Public and Private Language,” in which he describes personal struggles and successes in acquiring English literacy. Still the circulation of literacy narratives by underrepresented writers raises questions about characterizations of Otherness, especially when the analyses of these narratives then rely on trajectories of darkness to enlightenment.

According to Bishop, “we tell stories in order to share—but that sharing can include self-learning, self-defining, and self-shaping as well as entertaining, beguiling, and performing. We make and remake, calibrate and recreate, we move from one understanding to a new, more enlightened understanding” (70). The responsibility of sharing is complex; the minority as pedagogue can appear—albeit deceptively—to reverse or disrupt top-down models of instruction and institutional power dynamics. But this can also conjure a familiar scenario in which “subjects” must teach “masters” what they have had to endure in order to arrive at this moment, this dialogue. On one hand, it may seem as though the subject poised as teacher creates an opportunity for equalizing agency and power. Citing Clark and Medina, Caleb Corkery states: “Narratives by women and people of color enable readers to understand their struggle; they are a means to negotiate the process of literacy and development of identity” (52). These narratives may, however, set up an archetypal relationship in which the subject imparts knowledge unto a well-meaning master, perhaps to raise consciousness or, in some cases, to absolve responsibility for a legacy of injustice. A counter scenario to the subject as agent and actor is one in which the (well-intentioned) master is

advantaged by acquiescing to this role reversal; the master appears altruistic for disrupting a regressive power dynamic, and is, thus, deserving of absolution from guilt.

This reversed relationship is reflected in Mary Soliday's claim that, "students' stories of everyday life enhance their personal success as writers in the university; these stories can also deepen their teachers' understanding of difference and shape their responses to today's competing versions of multiculturalism" (522-3). But to what extent is a student responsible for or inadvertently poised to shed light on difference to their teacher-audience? When underrepresented individuals tell and retell a literacy-equals-success story, it establishes and confirms perceptions of the "model minority." The narrative upholds a minority experience that is palatable to a status quo ideology—one that may be more desirable for unproblematized public consumption. Model minority narratives fit an evangelical script in which the savior uplifts the savage, where the untamed Other moves from darkness to enlightenment. The scenario of practitioner as pedagogue, however, adds a twist to the script but only to say that the minority can occupy one of two positions: subjugated in darkness or enlightened on a pedestal.

An enriching response to this duality of darkness and enlightenment can be found in critical theories about closetedness. Darkness, traditionally characterized as "savage" ignorance, is substandard and antithetical to enlightenment, but oversimplifying an individual's experience to one of two positions eliminates the possibility of occupying, holding, and moving between so-called darkness and enlightenment at once. Polarization of this sort can oversimplify the multiple states of consciousness one might possess, making it impossible to account for savvy acts of intervention based in self-awareness and cognizance of the broader material and circumstantial realities at play. This duality plays a significant role, also, in coming out narratives, which offer strategies to rethink the oversimplification of the dark (lost) to light (found) trajectory.

Coming Out Narratives and Complexities of "The Dark Closet"

Coming out narratives exemplify, more heavy-handedly, the master narrative of darkness to enlightenment. They often share features of personal growth and the kind of personal journeying present in coming of age stories, although the focal point of coming out tends to be sexuality and gender. This genre has radically changed the political landscape for LGBTQ individuals and allies, giving voice to communities often barred from public

involvement and cultural production. This genre has also been critiqued for sanctioning a unidirectional journey from closetedness to liberation—for producing a trajectory carrying cultural biases that permeate and shape larger scripts for social action and participation. Closetedness is stigmatized in ways that bolster the moral imperative of coming out as the most courageous, self-loving, self-actualizing, authentic, and sincere way to live. By way of comparison, literacy and coming out narratives are frequently characterized as autobiographical or personal stories based in lived experience that are carried out and presented within a public sphere. Both narrative forms are also discussed more broadly as pedagogically valuable to the authors and readers alike (Bishop; Adams).

Examining what counts as valuable, pedagogically and beyond, can reveal how certain acts of revelation become prescriptive. Coming out “moments” are commonly characterized as liberating in some way and, indeed, conflicting in others. The broader script encountered in public discourses, media sites, and certainly celebrity representations is that coming out is a necessary step toward self-acceptance and pride, which are fundamental aspects of healthy and meaningful social participation. As part of an internet-based video series called “Moral Courage,” one woman, Sabrina, tells her story of coming out to extended family members who do not support her because of their cultural and religious beliefs. In the video, Sabrina reads the letter she wrote to them:

Hello Everyone! I'm writing to tell you some great news that may surprise you. I got married this past summer to an amazing woman named Shauna. I know your initial reactions may fear [*sic*] that something “went wrong” or I've “chosen” a bad path . . . I promise you that I've been gay since I've been Bina. I would be happy to answer any questions about it. All of my love and best wishes for the holidays . . . Yours, Bina. (Jalees)

As this narrative demonstrates, the very idea of coming out hinges upon language acquisition (self-identifying) and language sharing (identifying oneself before a public body). Some writers have identified the presence of languages that offer no direct translation for coming out, and so for some individuals, the act of coming out itself becomes enmeshed in dominant practices and ethnocentric cultural values. In “A Lecture on Woman-woman Love and Sexuality in the Arabo-Islamic Middle East,” Samar Habib describes the contested nature of similar claims about the cultural specificity of coming out: “I also know that some Arab lesbians see coming out as a Western strategy and we don't have to come out in order to be free because our com-

munities differ from those in the West,” and she adds, “I cannot say I agree with this strategy of duality” (13). The subtext of Habib’s observation may be that coming out is not a holistically desired or singularly identifiable concept but has been packaged and branded in dogmatic ways.

Lies Xhonneux agrees that coming out narratives make a significant contribution “to the construction of non-heterosexual identities.” She argues that writers such as Audre Lorde, who “shows the limits of privileging visibility” (98), demonstrate, also, that one can “use non-linear structures that play around with chronology” (99) in their autobiographical narratives. Xhonneux analyzes diverse and nuanced ways in which coming out can take shape, and points to instances in which these narratives go beyond merely reporting on one’s already formed sexual identity (96). I would argue for the likely existence of adjacent or counter-coming out narratives in which the writer’s messages may defamiliarize the act of disclosure: *You can’t know the space of my closet. You don’t see it and you are not invited to see it, and thus, you can’t know what ‘closet’ means to me.* Because classic versions of coming out stories are affirmed as the default script for self-love and validation, they displace other possibilities from a more public gaze. But research that investigates the abstract space of the closet as a site of active rather than passive occurrences offers insight into the literacy narratives that circulate in our field.

While literacy narratives are often said to provide writers with opportunities for self-exploration and discovery, I have pointed to instances in which they may take a pedagogical twist in that they (problematically) enable the teacher-audience to explore and discover facets of “difference” and Otherness. In a parallel manner, coming out narratives are commonly described as a site from which storytellers explain or articulate what they have explored and discovered before an audience. Prior to reading her letter in the video, Sabrina describes the order in which she comes out to her immediate family, telling her mother first because she is concerned that her father may not be as accepting. Sabrina then explains the sadness she feels while keeping her sexuality a secret from extended family members. After the letter is sent, she describes responses from relatives expressing displeasure and rejection, but at the end of the video, Sabrina recounts the story of one cousin who apologizes for having reacted so adversely. It turns out that this cousin is later able to support a friend who has also come out, and Sabrina has “taught him something that no one else in the family could have taught him” (Jalees).

There is a moral imperative in this video; by coming out, Sabrina fulfills (or performs fulfillment of) a social responsibility, which positively affects

the lives of her cousin and his friend. Within broader discussions, the topic of coming out to oneself does exist, but this is typically regarded as a step taken toward coming out more publicly, that is, coming out to others as a way to complete the task more meaningfully. Bishop's research promotes literacy narratives as opportunities for writers to engage in critique, exploration, understanding, and self-reflective study, which may serve an end goal. Writers can work toward this goal, accomplish it, and set it to rest. In contrast, Tony E. Adams explains that, "If coming out of the closet is predicated on disclosing . . . attraction and/or . . . identity, then a person who does not know what this attraction is or what these identities are cannot come out [emphasis in the original]" (44). To clarify, Adams adds: "A person must thus be aware of and have the ability to describe attraction . . . and, consequently, to understand what the closet and coming out might mean" (44).¹ This is not to say that authors of coming out narratives are not making personal discoveries as they write. It is the extension of this idea, that coming out invariably makes a social impact, that is worth examining, for it positions the audience or consumer as an important consideration to the storyteller. There is a pedagogical twist implicitly taking place here, too, which in and of itself might not be problematic. The question lies in how the act of coming out becomes singularized and prescribed as a moral imperative within a broader social context.

Coming out stories also raise questions about consent, disclosure, and revelation. In his book, *Narrating the Closet*, Adams explains that "in order to 'come out' one must first somehow 'go in'" (21). He brings attention to the temporality of this movement or transaction, and as Eve Sedgwick points out, the closet, or more specifically, the perceived silence of the closet is worth examining: "'Closetedness' itself is a performance" and it exists in "a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts" (3). Closetedness functions in contrast to the cacophony around it, and thus, is an active space where a complex set of choices and reflections might be taking place. These choices include whether or when to come out, stay in, or examine how one arrived there to begin with. For Steven Seidman, the closet is not a space in which "passive victims" are created, but instead, "closeted individuals remain active, deliberate agents" who "make decisions about their lives" and "forge meaningful social ties," among other things (30-31). The closet often conjures a symbolic space of silence and darkness, but activity can take place in dark silence, even if it is indiscernible to an outside spectator or audience. A fundamental question I would add here is who determines and defines darkness/silence. Seidman suggests that "it

is perhaps more correct to speak of multiple closets” considering that the experience of closetedness “may vary considerably depending on factors such as age, class, gender, race, ability, region, religion, and nationality” (31). Referring to the closet as a singular object reifies an already limited view of what it means to come out. The closet is not merely some “neutral” vessel from and to which bodies move, for as Sedgwick explains, “in the vicinity of the closet, even what *counts* as a speech act is problematized on a perfectly routine basis” (3).

More literally, the closet can be a site of storage for artifacts intended to costume or cloak one’s body, which can further disrupt perceptions of closetedness and disclosure as singular or universal experiences. Cloaking, masquerade, silence, and darkness have vexed feminist debates on the practices of veiling and cloistering, debates that have also hinged upon colonial images of dark, oppressed subjects and enlightened, liberated saviors. These images have been contested within postcolonial feminist theories, and not unlike the closet, veiling (and cloistering) practices require a close consideration about issues of agency and choice. Homa Hoodfar’s work describes the veil’s dual resistance for Iranian women: When it was outlawed “many women...put on the veil and symbolically rejected the state-sponsored gender ideology,” but later under Islamic law “compulsory veiling” was met with “stiff resistance from women (including some veiled women) on the grounds that such a law compromised their democratic rights” (265). Hoodfar’s analysis underscores tendencies to dichotomize agency and victimization. Along similar lines, Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, “if the act of unveiling has a liberating potential, so does the act of veiling” (216). These points can be applied to images of the dark closet, and perhaps more pointedly, to broad-stroke discussions of literacy acquisition, coming out, and coming *to* a place of reflection, retrospection, and critical consciousness.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that any version of closetedness is preferable to any version of coming out. I am, firstly, arguing that multiple versions of both closetedness and coming out do exist, and secondly, cautioning against privileging certain practices at the expense or exclusion of others. Coming out stories also contain layered narratives that are worth analyzing. According to Pamela Caughie’s work from over a decade ago: “Coming out is only the latest in a series of metaphors for the disclosure of the self. Getting personal, breaking silence, speaking up, coming out—these are the moral imperatives of our postmodern age” (246). Literacy narratives, then, share with coming out stories a sense of movement or progression from darkness and silence toward enlightenment and insight, but they can

also work to dismantle the notion that this brand or version of movement is the *only* marker of progress.

The Storyteller-Subject as Object

The “progression” from darkness to enlightenment and closeted to out manifests in the broader discussions of literacy and coming out narratives, and I argue that this concept of progression is not necessarily germane to storyteller-subjects’ experiences. It is a construction that is imposed upon and internalized by the subject, but in the broader discussions of these texts, the process of internalization can become distorted by projections of life events as distinct objects of study. Popularized ideas of what makes or marks iconic life events often overwrite and obscure how these events are actually being experienced, which enables inaccurate determinations about progress. Indeed, perceiving literacy narratives as holistically transformative and emancipatory to the lives of students (as well as teachers) is markedly different from critically considering what students can learn and transfer from working with these texts. The trouble lies in holding unexamined and predetermined images of life-altering events, situations, and circumstances then either expecting or explicitly demanding that these images shape the narrative structure in question. Such expectations and demands can be observed whenever prominent public figures come out but also within assignments that ask students to compose their own literacy narratives.

Some research paints a detailed and calculated picture of how students can and do meet the objectives of literacy narrative assignments. The objectives are spelled out, giving readers a clearer sense of what is being measured, how, and why. This research posits literacy narratives as artifacts that reveal complex, nuanced sub-narratives while telling a seemingly unidirectional story about the processes involved in acquiring language. Beth Daniell identifies these nuances as “little narratives” that exist within the larger scope of the text, and Kara Poe Alexander categorizes and names more specific little narratives in her qualitative analysis of student writing.

Daniell’s work distinguishes between what she calls the “grand” and “little” narratives of literacy. Grand narratives reflect the overarching parables that tell us reading and writing are good, important skills that lead to personal betterment. There is an expectation (both tacit and explicit) that the grand narrative will construct a happy ending, a feel good lesson about the transformative power of literacy. What has shifted in our research over time is a willingness to acknowledge (and even endorse) little narratives that

complicate this feel-good lesson. According to Daniell, little narratives are useful for examining the specific ways in which literacy plays out: “Taken as a whole, the little narratives argue . . . that the relationship between literacy and oppression or freedom is rarely as simple as we have thought” (403). Daniell’s point is exemplified in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. The slave’s reading lessons posed a profound threat to Mr. Auld, who upon discovering what was taking place “forbade” further instruction on the premises stating “that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read” (28-9). This moment in Douglass’ account can be read as a little narrative within a much larger arc, and it is a rich site of exploration, revealing an arduous, conflicted, even painful journey toward the acquisition of reading and writing practices.

What Daniell’s separation of grand and little narratives demonstrates is that by focusing primarily on the overarching benefits of literacy, readers risk overlooking or silencing underlying stories that are also important. I believe this has created a heightened consideration within discussions of literacy narratives especially in the basic writing context, one that allows and advocates closer attention to what students, who are underrepresented and already politicized as basic writers in the classroom space, might be complicating or resisting in their work. The presence of little narratives poses a challenge (within both assigned student writing and published texts) at two access points: First, that momentous, life-changing instances are recognizable, and second, that recognizable instances are the only or most important markers of the story being told. These little narratives can also make critical interventions in basic writing as a classification and basic writers as an institutionally sanctioned label.

More recently, Kara Poe Alexander’s qualitative study presented a coded analysis of the more artful, critical, and nuanced little narratives students produce: the Success, Hero, Child Prodigy, Literacy Winner, Victim, Outsider, and Rebel narratives (608). Alexander confirms that the “literacy-equals-success” story operates as a common master (or grand) narrative, but these complex little narratives play an unmistakably important role within this larger framework. This is not to say that little narratives always or inherently complicate the glossy, romantic ideals of grand narratives, but literacy narratives can and are being read “for” a more complicated set of end goals within the scope of our broader discussions. Eldred and Mortensen originally propose “reading for” literacy narratives as a means of “studying the ways they interact and compete with other generic forms” (530). It is possible to examine a text that does not focus primarily on a character’s experiences

with literacy, schooling, and language acquisition and “read for” the literacy narrative threads woven into the fabric of the larger story. “Reading for” literacy narratives enables audiences to see how these threads form a subplot of their own. Eldred and Mortensen posit “reading for” as a useful strategy given the ubiquitous presence of literacy narratives within other kinds of texts: “For example, literacy narratives play an important part in coming of age fictions that chronicle, among other things, a character’s movement into multiple literacies” (530).

I would argue that this practice of “reading for” has (inadvertently) been applied to the assessment of literacy narratives in the context of basic writing. For instance, after carefully considering and reading for the applications and outcomes of literacy narrative assignments in their basic writing program, Anne-Marie Hall and Christopher Minnix test, with successful outcomes, a revised pedagogical approach to using literacy narratives that emphasizes attention to sequence, recursivity, and continuity throughout the duration of the course. They conclude that this revised approach is helpful to students in “bridging the gap between the different rhetorical contexts,” “enhancing transfer” and “meta-awareness” of the writing practices they have undertaken throughout the semester (74-76). Hall and Minnix advocate and model using these assignments to achieve clear goals that promote recursive and reflective writing; they read their students’ writing samples *for* the ways in which they meet these broader course and programmatic objectives.

Discussions of literacy narratives that emphasize reflection on iconic life events as the primary object of study raise questions about agency, consent, and the extent to which a storyteller-subject’s life becomes objectified by readers. These questions are manifested in direct or indirect references to home and culture. For example, Corkery, citing Clark and Medina, writes: “Reading a text as a literacy narrative, the reader engages in the character’s process of developing an identity and becoming literate” (52). I question if and how discussions of literacy narratives might unintentionally “read for” clues about the storyteller-subject’s identity, in ways that enable generalizations about home and its relationship to school. According to Corkery, “Narrative genres in general offer students channels by which to import the meanings of their home cultures into the classroom” (50). The question lies in how home is being read and discussed; can readers be too cautious of exoticizing underrepresented students or their constructions of life experiences in public and private spheres? I would argue that there are unknowable performances taking place, which may muddy the goals

storyteller-subjects appear to have internalized, but within theoretical discussions, the values expressed in the narratives can become conflated with those the storytellers hold.

This conflated perception of storyteller as object drives discussions of coming out narratives, and we bear witness to it whenever celebrities' stories circulate in the media. The agency within a public coming out is presented as the storyteller's although it seems to lie with the audience. This is to say that when a celebrity discusses a detail about their life that identifies them on an LGBTQ spectrum, the detail or moment gets constructed as a public coming out, even if they were not *in* to begin with. In other words, it is possible that the individual has not been harboring an identity in secret, but through a casual remark, the public becomes suddenly privy to this aspect of the subject's life and marks it as a coming out act. What often ensues is an oversimplified discussion that typifies the individual as ambassador for pride, living "in truth," an example-setter for those who are living in the closet. The in versus out binary, as I have already pointed out, is in many cases more complex than a set of two states of being. One can occupy and move between *inness* and *outness*, for these are not rigid, fixed or innately dichotomous experiences. It often takes effort to depolarize these terms given the ubiquitous desire to pathologize the former and celebrate the latter. Nevertheless, it is possible to hold multiple positions at once, as a response to material, circumstantial realities or to satisfy other pressures, demands, conveniences, and rebellious or even pleasurable yearnings. Thus, the broader discussions about public coming out narratives can afford to reflect these complexities rather than overgeneralizing them, particularly in terms of how these acts of coming out become affixed as moral declarations.

The pressure to make declarative statements (moral or otherwise) in the context of literacy narratives may result, in part, from the conventions assigned in narrative-composing exercises. For instance, the *Norton Field Guide to Writing* offers a list of instructions that circulates online: "You need to make clear the ways in which any event you are writing about is significant for you now . . . How did it change or otherwise affect you?" ("Writing a Literacy Narrative"). Images of a transformative literacy that gets attached to specific life events can reflect a context in which literacy alters or affixes itself to one's identity; a person *becomes* literate or *is* literate. Literacy is constructed as an aspect of one's very being.

The *Norton Field Guide's* emphasis on change and effects may exemplify what Eldred and Mortensen have cautioned with regards to "the cultural literacy movement": That it "is a conspiracy to co-opt the students for the

purpose of training them to reproduce efficiently and unquestioningly the dominant ideology” (516). Encouraging students to identify pivotal life events may not be the problem itself, but holding predetermined ideas of what counts as pivotal or iconic, then affixing these images to the writer closes down unanticipated possibilities and erases a lived diversity of experience. In place of these practices, I argue that a rhetorical shift toward reading literacy narratives as or “for” texts in which the subject-storyteller *performs* little narratives (such as prodigy, hero, victim and the like) may lead to enriching responses to grand or master narratives.

Reading Performance to Rethink Perspective

Alexander’s study illustrates that students are equipped with various sets of choices as they write. The extent to which students are conscious of these choices may be unknowable to readers, but that there *are* various possibilities is itself significant. I propose that these unknowable choices form “uncodable” narratives, little narratives that might operate within or beyond the category, “Other,” included in Alexander’s coding schema (608). There may be an important link between what is uncodable and the performative functions of literacy narratives.

Discussions that endorse literacy narratives as pedagogically transformative tend to imagine the classroom as a space in which underrepresented students are invited and encouraged to tell their stories (Soliday, Bishop Dunbar-Odom). It is, of course, possible that for some students, writing a literacy narrative may be an act of insurrection or a chance to control their own story, perhaps to dispel assumptions or to join an academic conversation and participate in a meaningful way. Pedagogues can and have certainly read students’ narratives in this way, particularly in basic writing courses where students are institutionally positioned in the margins of such academic conversations. So, perhaps, these interpretations can open to additional possibilities in which, for example, students perform uncodable choices.

One such performance might involve students taking literacy narratives as an opportunity to invoke sympathy, an exercise in crafting pathos in which they are pleased to have a captive audience of peers and instructors. In this instance, what is taking place is a “consensual outing” of sorts, where students consider their audience and make strategic choices about what to say and how to say it to readers who are poised to listen. For Corkery, “assigning literacy narratives requires revealing only those aspects of their students’ lives that are relevant to the course” (50). Students perform consent; thus,

reading personal “revelations” as a performance might more easily elicit a scenario in which the performance (rather than the storyteller) becomes the object of study.

Readers may also invite a slightly more nuanced approach, one in which some students use the narrative as an occasion to downplay so-called difference. The goal here would be to disrupt assumptions that underrepresented students inevitably struggle with language acquisition. Students may seize the narrative an opportunity for savvy intervention, performing a literacy-equals-success story that assimilates their experience into more dominant images of schooling and education. They might employ master narratives of darkness to enlightenment as a performative strategy in order to coast under the radar or “pass” as upholding a belief in the romance of literacy.

Additionally, students with complex understandings of how marginalized status operates may appropriate tropes of darkness to enlightenment as a cunning, satirical act. In class discussions, my students sometimes admit to accomplishing versions of this: A former student once confessed to having written an assignment for a previous class in which he talked elaborately of his experiences in prison. These experiences were fictional, and he justified passing them off as “true” by explaining he knew the professor assumed Black men were criminals, so “why not give him the story he would expect—something he could tell his wife over dinner behind locked doors.” The student was not only aware of his audience in this situation but was able to respond with what he took to be subtle ridicule directed at a racist insult. He expressed a sense of reprisal, and what made his action even sweeter was that this intervention could go unnoticed and therefore unpunished if it were to be (unfairly) ill-perceived.

The choice this student made functions as a rhetorical *masquerade*; it demonstrates a critical awareness of status quo attitudes and perceptions.² When students perform satire like this, they consent to a sometimes farcical, absurd, fictional, perhaps even humiliating account. After all, the joke is theoretically on the audience not the author. On the other hand, some students feel that it is insincere to approach writing with satire so they choose not to employ this tactic themselves. But to consider these behind-the-scenes narrative choices as performative acts can redirect broader discussions that characterize the storyteller-subject as object of analysis and place greater emphasis on the performance itself.

What I am describing is merely an abbreviated list of choices students have at their disposal when writing. The pedagogical goal is neither to con-

struct students as hapless victims nor fetishize their sense of agency. Nor do I think it is productive to engage in a guessing game, for we cannot know what we do not know about students' behind-the-scenes intentions, particularly since a common outcome of literacy narratives is to "treat the acquisition of school literacy as a goal, if not a triumph" (Corkery 60). We are working within an educational framework that inevitably sets certain parameters around student agency, so a literacy narrative writing assignment may not be as emancipatory or even as enlightening as is often discussed. But one useful approach might be to acknowledge, more deliberately, the uncodable choices that shape the text as a whole and address pedagogical expectations. Pedagogues can use students' sample narratives to gain insight into the ways in which the assignment guidelines are composed and presented.

Performance in a Basic Writing Context

Reconsidering the usefulness of literacy narrative assignments in basic writing curricula can redefine perceptions of student agency. More precisely, emphasis on performance, whether through costuming, masquerade, or any calculated expression, can bolster students' choices. Basic writing students composing literacy narratives might seize the opportunity to perform a response to the grand and little narratives often expected from them as well as predetermined attitudes and perceptions of basic writing status itself. This may sound more ambitious than it actually is, for students are already making strategic calculations as they write. According to Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, student writers may rely on "popular wisdom and generalizations" not necessarily from a place of insincerity but rather as a way to craft an argument that will be convincing to their audience. In this pursuit, student writers "are likely to be more concerned with affirming their readers' beliefs than with presenting their own" (49). Playing to an audience's desires can be a profoundly useful skill. And without doubt, a student's ability to do this may be their key to success in a system where they are earning a grade.

Reflection is not only a private or closeted matter. For instance, Sommers identifies the ways in which reflection is a "public act," that there is a chance students are communicating what they think the instructor would "want to hear" (100 and 117). Sommers acknowledges this as a reality that can still enable productive engagement in composition practices. Considering writing decisions as performative acts might offer insights into the imperatives of assignment guidelines and, in particular, how these guidelines intersect and shape the student writing we read, assess, and discuss.

It is important to note that performance does not imply artifice or dishonesty, but it allows for both as strategic tools. I would argue that literacy narratives (like other forms of autobiographical writing) can emerge as or create a fiction. Dorothy Allison describes the production of autobiographical fiction stating, “I’m a storyteller. I’ll work to make you believe me . . . I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth” (3). The “harder truth” has at least two implications: It invites and challenges writers to embroider life events as a narrative craft, but just as importantly, it challenges readers to (re)consider any impulse to conflate, and then make essentialist determinations about, the story as it is performed and the reality as it is lived. A productive goal might be to reconsider distinctions between truth and fiction and examine how literacy narratives occupy a space where such distinctions are indeed blurred. Challenging truth versus fiction binaries and considering how one crafts or performs fictions might intervene in discussions that characterize storytellers as objects of study by demanding attention on the narrative itself. At present, there is little if any theory that regards and analyzes the literacy narratives students produce as a kind of fiction. But if students are being given narrative prompts and parameters, such as those listed in the *Norton Field Guide*, then it would be a valuable practice to interrogate the ways in which writers can and will bend, adjust, and manipulate stories to fill the narrative mold.

It might also be valuable to pair the literacy narrative assignments we give students (be it analyzing published texts or requiring students to write their own) with a theoretical framework for understanding performance. One possible starting point might be Judith Butler’s work on performativity, in which she claims that

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (173, emphasis in the original)

This work may be useful for untangling what students writers choose to (re)present in their narratives from a perceived “core” identity or “authentic” experience. By emphasizing and interrogating narratives as performative acts, students and teachers can consider the conditions under which writers choose to (re)present certain experiences over others. It provides more

opportunities to reflect upon the impulse to read these (re)presentations as enmeshed with one's "essence"; it demands that we get more comfortable with fictions and the unknowable circumstances basic writers may face.

Conclusion

There are several implications for placing literacy narratives and coming out narratives in conversation: First, this work illuminates how audience expectations, desires, and demands drive perceptions of literacy narratives as transformative texts. It also reveals the ways in which these perceptions rely on dichotomizing tropes. Identifying these tropes helps us call into question the function and purpose of assigning literacy narratives, asking more specifically, whether (and which) teachers and students truly benefit in learning about "difference," Otherness, and experiences of underrepresented individuals. The value in interrogating beliefs about what these narratives can do invites opportunities to reflect on the influence audiences have on the genre itself: The sometimes problematic, exoticizing, and unidirectional ways in which literacy narratives are read. Such interrogation is necessary. It clarifies that literacy narratives are not divorced from social, ideological, and epistemological realities. It also encourages audiences to engage with these texts while sustaining self-reflective awareness of the parameter and molds through which we read.

Likewise, a close examination of disclosure and coming out magnifies a collective impulse to prescribe and privilege familiar demonstrations of progress over other possibilities. Analyzing the arcs that dominate coming out stories poses a challenge to storytellers and audiences; it necessitates considerations of the unfamiliar, uncodable, little but equally important narratives being shared. By considering the performative functions of literacy narratives, students and teachers have additional choices for how to read and write these texts. Students may feel more adept at *playing* to pressures of convention if and when they make direct choices about how to intervene, resist, satisfy, satirize, or evade such demands. Of equal importance, performance becomes a tool for leveling or renegotiating an uneven playing field – one in which readers cannot gloss over the multiple or intersecting identities present on the pages of a narrative and in the unknowable, uncodable, behind-the-scenes space.

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Notes

1. The ideas presented in this book are focused on the terms “same-sex attraction” and “LGBQ” identity, an acronym that appears to exclude discussions of transgender and gender-nonconforming experiences and identities.
2. This point is also raised in Pratt’s “Arts of the Contact Zone”; autoethnography offers a way to respond critically to constructions of oneself in mainstream culture.

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