EM BOWEN AND CAROL BROCHIN

Relational Practices of Queer Literacy Educators in the US/Mexico Borderlands

Two teacher educators collectively map and explore sites of difference as relational opportunities for queer resistance within English and Spanish language arts classrooms.

As educators situated geographically within the US/Mexico borderlands and socially as queer, our worldviews and pedagogies are informed by liminality. Across various scholarly disciplines, *liminality* has come to refer to in-betweenness: sometimes in space, sometimes in process, sometimes in identity (Currah & Stryker, 2015; Gutiérrez, 2008; Turner et al., 1969). As K–12 ELA (English language arts) and SLA (Spanish language arts) teachers and preservice teacher educators who specialize in literacy instruction, we contend that the writing and linguistic processes we frequently engage within our classrooms are also liminal, often crossing multiple borders. Put another way, these processes are nonlinear and mutable undertakings that potentially open teachers up to new ways of being and thinking (Freire, 1985; Helton, 2020).

We are interested in how contending with relational differences opens space for radical potentiality in our pedagogical practices, especially in terms of countering anti-LGBTQIA+ policies and laws (Kader, 1993). We highlight four ELA- and SLA-related narratives about our own classroom experiences in both K–12 and preservice teacher education. We give specific attention to moments when differences between our embodied and identity-based experiences offered opportunities to consider our work in new ways, specifically regarding anti-LGBTQIA+ contexts and policies. We identify and explore ELA and SLA classrooms and the pedagogical practices embedded in our narratives: *reading and writing the room, space to struggle,* and *caring for one another.*

CHOQUES AS RELATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Even as we are both queer individuals, how we experience our queerness is mitigated by several factors, including our ethnicity, professional experience, age, gender identity and expression, and cis/transness. Anzaldúa (1987) uses the concept of *choques,* or "cultural collisions," to describe the ways multicultural individuals navigate seemingly conflicting aspects of their identities, including but not limited to gender, sexuality, and language. We examine and interact with the choques happening along relational lines rather than within our individual selves (Chang et al., 2013). We are thinking in terms of our multiple relationships to one another—as colleagues, as mentor and mentee, as community members involved in education-based mutual aid and activism in the borderlands, and as friends. For our purposes, we think about relational choques as points of difference between the two of us that function less as collisions, per Anzaldúa, and more as *relational opportunities.* These relational opportunities shape our pedagogical practices as ELA and SLA teacher educators.

This paper begins with an overview of the geographical and sociopolitical context we both live and teach in, as well as some context on who we are. Next, we braid together first-person narratives related

to our own experiences as both K–12 ELA/SLA educators and preservice teacher educators. Finally, we discuss possible practices that ELA and SLA teachers might take up based on thinking through our narratives as relational opportunities.

TEACHING QUEERLY IN ARIZONA

We live and teach on the ancestral lands of the Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui peoples, just 60 miles north of the physical US/Mexico border wall and official immigration checkpoints. Thus, our relationship to the land here informs how we understand and make meaning of our "self-consistent but habitually incomparable frames of reference" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 85). Southern Arizona itself has a long and complicated history of resistance. There are many close-knit queer and trans community organizations, migrant support organizations, and education resistance movements that successfully overturned the state's historic ethnic studies ban in 2017 (Harris, 2017). From a sociopolitical perspective, we are in a historical moment here in Arizona when educators' professional autonomy is being threatened, bilingual education is once again under open attack, teacher education is being undermined, and school contexts continue to be hostile spaces for LGBTQIA+ students, staff, and teachers (Arizona State Legislature, 2022b; Gonzalez, 2023; Human Rights Campaign, 2023). The attacks on LGBTQIA+ youth are connected to issues across intersections and differences, which makes it critical that advocates for queer and trans youth build intersectional coalitions (Brochin, 2018; Brochin et al., 2023).

We cannot separate our experiences and understandings of literacy from our social and relational realities.

We write from a unique clash of perspectives and experiences; Carol is an associate professor, bilingual teacher educator, and community literary mediator, and Em is a doctoral candidate, bilingual graduate assistant, and current middle school ELA teacher. We both grew up and attended public schools within an hour of the US/Mexico border in Texas and California/Arizona, respectively. Both of us are Spanish speakers—Carol is a native speaker and Em is a Spanish learner. We are at different points in our careers and our lives, experiencing our queerness in different ways. Carol is a queer, cisgender person, a stereotypically straight-appearing light-skinned Chicana, and a parent of two teens (one cis and one trans femme), and Em is a white, transgender, and stereotypically male-appearing person.

Our work together began over 8 years ago outside of higher education, in a community setting where we worked with trans youth and their families in Southern Arizona. At the time, Carol was an assistant professor and bilingual teacher educator, whereas Em was a middle school ELA and Spanish teacher at a local area private school, only 5 years into their teaching career. As educators who center trans and queer youth in our teaching practices and work to counter the increasingly hostile national and state-level policies toward these youth, we have developed a practice of candidly sharing narratives of our experiences both in and out of the classroom. We've taken special care to also examine and name the differences in our lived experiences that mitigate how we experience classroom and community spaces. Currently, we teach the same cohort of preservice teachers and build on each other's pedagogical practices across our content area courses.

WRITING AND THE RELATIONAL

As two ELA/SLA educators who are queer and trans, respectively, we find that we cannot separate our experiences and understandings of literacy from our social and relational realities. We define literacy using a Freirean perspective; thus, literacy is connected not only to the skills of reading and writing but also to how we interpret or "read" the world, and each other, as social beings (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Thus, we find ourselves in agreement with Helton (2020), who writes, "English class is, after all, precisely the space where there are no clear answers, where language is both only ever an approximation and also a lifeline in terms of how we come to understand and express ourselves as social beings" (p. 30).

Helton (2020) is speaking toward the possibilities of a trans* critical pedagogy in secondary

classrooms—a pedagogy that Keenan (2017) understands as built from one's own queer/trans* life. While critical pedagogy asks how our subjectivities interact with our pedagogy, Helton (2020) asserts that "a critical trans* pedagogy asks us to specifically attend to the ways in which our particular bodies can be, and are, read as texts" (p. 29). The concept of the body as a text has a rich history in the work of many trans and queer scholars of color and speaks to how many historically marginalized communities "rewrite" themselves into the world (Cruz, 2001; Galarte, 2014).

We recognize there is an intimate uncertainty that comes with "no clear answers" in ELA and SLA classrooms (Helton, 2020, p. 29). We contend that relationships, much like literacies, can be spaces where we write and revise our own beliefs. Thus, we often engage with LGBTQIA+ texts in both English and Spanish to invite preservice teachers to learn and unlearn, write, and rewrite deep beliefs, not only about race and ethnicity, but also about gender and sexuality. Awareness of ourselves as a text and consciousness around the texts we present to our students, whether preservice teachers or K–12 students, are deeply connected to our pedagogical practices.

A COLLISION OF NARRATIVES

In the following section, we present four alternating narratives to foreground a discussion on potential practices that emanate from where these narratives cross borders and collide. We sought out moments where our experiences as queer ELA and SLA educators relationally diverged. We narrowed our narrative focus further by homing in on those moments in our work that *felt* most charged for us. In that, we practiced a form of *queer embodied listening*, or tuning in to our own emotions and embodied experiences as researchers (Guschke, 2023). We sought to consider how these experiences informed particular relational practices we used in our teaching within our ELA and SLA classrooms. We see the relational as not just something to notice, but something to engage with as a tool and practice in the ELA and SLA classroom and beyond.

Rather than present our narratives collectively, we alternate between points of view. By "braiding" our narratives, we hope to invite readers to "inhabit multiple subjectivities and negotiate the space between them" (Bancroft, 2018, p. 274). Each narrative emphasizes experiences that, in terms of our identities and positionalities, are unique from one another.

AN EMAIL FROM PARENTS (EM)

In the spring of 2018, while teaching middle school ELA and grades 1–8 Spanish, I was forwarded an email the school's administration had received from two parents. The parents complained about how they felt that I was using the classroom as a "soapbox for identity politics." What I was actually guilty of was teaching while queer. My presence, pronouns, and outward queerness were certainly central players in the impetus for the email. Until recently, I've always looked queer—an "unauthorized copy" of masculinity where people read me as both female-bodied and masculine (J. Westhale, personal communication, December 2023). I added to this outward, visual experience by using *they/them/their* pronouns openly in the classroom.

A meeting with the parents was arranged. When the time came for the meeting, only one of the two parents showed up, and she seemed embarrassed and more nervous than I was. The parent brought in an example of a letter-to-parents another nonbinary teacher had written, explaining who they were, what pronouns they used, and other information unrelated to transness or queerness—something the parent had found online. She expressed that it would have been helpful for her to receive a similar letter. I remember internally eye-rolling in the moment, but also realizing that she probably felt scared, uncomfortable, and uninformed or unprepared.

The truth is, this interaction, as inappropriate and uncaring as it was, shifted my relational practices. I now write letters to parents introducing myself, and I recommend the practice to preservice teachers in my writing methods courses. I adopted this practice because I recognize, for better or for worse, that I exist in relation with not only my students, but their parents and caregivers too. Even as I exist as an "unauthorized copy" of masculinity in

certain spaces, or what Cruz (2001) would call a "messy text," I am also simultaneously read as white and able (Cruz, 2001, p. 659; J. Westhale, personal communication, December 2023). My relationship and experience with multiplicity over the years have improved my ability to hold multiple opposing truths in my mind and also to understand how that multiplicity functions in terms of power and safety. From a pedagogical perspective, this has enabled me to more consciously engage multiplicity with my students, both in their writing and in literature-based discussion.

HOMOPHOBIA IN TEACHER EDUCATION (CAROL)

As a teacher educator, I always include culturally relevant books in my classrooms and consider how culture is more nuanced than just ethnicity and race. I make sure to include books that span youth cultures, linguistic landscapes, and gender expressions. When preparing teachers to engage with students in the borderlands, I try to contextualize multiple complexities, including issues of citizenship, detention, class, migration, gender, sexuality, and language. This is a pedagogical practice I engage with as an ELA and SLA teacher educator and one I model for the graduate student instructors I supervise.

One semester several years ago, I faced the most severe homophobia from a future teacher that I had ever encountered. I don't share this narrative to demonize a student, but rather to consider the ways that as a queer person, I had to grapple with relational tensions. As part of a unit, I assigned small sections of Rigoberto González's (2006) *Butterfly Boy*. I received an extremely troubling and homophobic email from a student in response to the reading. One evening, right before class, I happened to run into the student in the hallway. They yelled, raised their arms, and told me that they were disgusted by me. The student then refused to attend class for several weeks in protest and sent me dozens of emails expressing their rage.

While this incident was troubling for me, it also reminds me of the various types of discrimination and violence that queer and trans teachers face. It makes me ask, how might we *really* prepare teachers and educators who have deep homophobic and transphobic beliefs to become teachers without shaming them? While teachers and school staff have the right to hold any beliefs (including those informed by homo/transphobia), they do not have the right to bring those discriminatory practices into public school classrooms. As a pedagogical practice, I have developed lessons that ask bilingual preservice teachers to examine their biases toward all their future students and families. I also model explicitly how teachers need to be prepared for religion to come up in their classroom and in communications from parents. I often remind them that families can opt out of lessons, but as teachers, our role is to create classroom spaces where all students, including trans and queer youth, feel a sense of belonging.

LIVING IN TWO WORLDS (EM)

As a graduate assistant, I teach both English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual preservice teacher cohorts. ESL cohorts are taught entirely in English, while the bilingual cohorts receive classroom instruction and assignments in both Spanish and English. Both the writing and social studies methods courses have a heavy emphasis on including and integrating ELA standards.

In the 11 courses I've taught in the last 4 years, I've tracked a broad anecdotal difference in general attitudes between my ESL and bilingual students. My bilingual preservice teachers ask harder questions. When the current climate of teaching in Arizona comes up, they know what is at stake. They are concerned about having hard conversations and navigating the precarious balance of nurturing each student's whole self while contending with the reality of restrictive linguistic and anti-LGBTQIA+ policies that make doing so difficult at best and illegal at worst.

Often, my bilingual preservice educators are less familiar or comfortable with LGBTQIA+ issues. However, it doesn't affect their willingness to engage them. The same can be said for many of the white students in my bilingual classes who come from non-Hispanic backgrounds in terms of engaging with

ethnic and racial topics. There is hesitance, uncertainty, and fear, but there's also pause. They lean in, even in discomfort. The marked difference in the space, I think, might stem from how bilingual students experience their own multiplicity. Each student in the bilingual cohort has traversed the discomfort of a middle space—linguistic, cultural, racial, ethnic, gendered—once or twice in their life. In a way, the social justice frameworks in bilingual education have prepared them to think deeper and shift toward understanding that their emphasis on linguistic rights serves as a foundation for the rights of queer and trans youth.

STRAIGHT PASSING AND BILINGUAL ED (CAROL)

I usually come out as queer to my students on the first day of class. I do this as a way to share about myself and model ways of building community. A few semesters ago, I did not come out on day 1 and instead planned to share more about myself during an LGBTQIA+ lesson. While I had the bilingual preservice teachers browse books, one preservice teacher shared that they were not comfortable talking about gender and sexuality in class, and then another preservice teacher agreed. I was surprised, because I had often found that issues of social justice and language set the groundwork for inclusion across differences in these classes. As a queer educator, I found the conversation troubling, and I found myself completely shut down and unable to even continue with the lesson. Instead of sharing about myself, I told the class I was not feeling well and ended class early. I shared this experience with a colleague who was teaching the science methods course to the same cohort. She immediately went into action and planned a lesson the following week about gender as it relates to animals (Brochin, 2019). Here, the pedagogical practice of teaching a cohort and leaning on another instructor became paramount. Modeling for students various ways of leaning on their peers and other teachers is critical and helps reinforce the idea that teaching does not happen in isolation. Regardless of the content, preservice teachers and practicing teachers must lean on each other during difficult encounters.

ON THE PAGE AND IN PRACTICE

By alternating our narratives, we find a few choques rub immediately, sounding out like crickets in a dark field. The fact of these immediate choques is not new information to us—our work together is marked by a consciousness toward our differences. As ELA and SLA teachers and teacher educators, we recognize how difficult it is to be up against anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments and policies, especially when so many of us are under-resourced in multiple and systemic ways. These choques, for us, serve as relational opportunities for countering anti-LGBTQIA+ policies. Tending to our relationships is not effortless by any stretch of the imagination, yet it is one way we can begin to undermine oppressive contexts. In the following section, we discuss possible strategies and practices that emerge from this deeper consideration and that one may employ in an ELA or SLA classroom, with special attention to social dynamics in the classroom, community, and writing.

READING AND WRITING THE ROOM

One relational opportunity we noted in both our narratives was the importance of multiplicity, specifically in terms of the multiple experiences queer and trans folks can have in terms of how they are *read* in the classroom space (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Both feminist scholars and queer scholars of color have extensively considered multiplicity and its implications, highlighting the ways in which folks with multiple historically marginalized identities must navigate the world (Anzaldúa, 1987; Combahee River Collective, 1978/2012; Crenshaw, 1991). Carol engages her multiplicity when she talks about her conscious choice to come out in classroom spaces since she is often read as straight, while alternatively, Em refers to themselves as an "unauthorized copy of masculinity" and is often read as queer. While our narratives point to how this is true in a specific classroom and moment, if who is in the class changes or we are no longer in the class, then how we are read changes, too. However cumbersome our multiplicity in this one regard might seem, this is something we are both relatively well-versed at navigating as queer and trans individuals.

Multiplicity and dexterity are central to both the writing process and linguistic practices, such as

translanguaging (García & Wei, 2013), that happen in literacy classrooms. As teacher-writers, we know that strong writing is the product of multiple drafts, multiple decisions, and the consideration of multiple possibilities. Revision itself is a process of writing and rewriting. By helping writers—whether they be K–12 students or preservice educators—understand the writing process as an actual *process*, one that includes different ways to get words on the page, we emphasize "*yes, and"* thinking and center the ability to hold multiple truths at once. If writers have space and, ideally, time to engage multiplicity in their linguistic practices and writing process, we think this, too, might help support their understanding of themselves and their peers as multiple, layered beings whose beingness shifts depending on context and what other multiple, layered beings are present in the room.

SPACE TO STRUGGLE

Space to struggle means a practice space. It means space to get it wrong and ask questions. We can understand how these sorts of spaces are essential to learning and unlearning, and yet, we also understand how they require guidelines, agreements, and ultimately trust to function in a way that cares for all involved. Moreover, for queer and trans ELA and SLA teachers, the decision to create spaces to struggle, especially around LGBTQIA+ topics, is a very personal one. Historically marginalized communities are not here to solve the issue of their marginalization—they are here on this earth to live good lives (Love, 2019a). Yet we also understand that our communities and relationships are complex; sometimes we are able and willing to educate.

Leaning into our own care webs can offer us relational tools to rupture, work around, and reimagine oppressive state policies.

Em's experience with upset parents led them to understand how a letter to parents might be a practice space for some families to be able to sit with and maybe even be necessarily unnerved by an educator's queerness. Their practice of writing regular parent letters now is not rooted in a sense of fear or obligation toward parents of students, but is instead deeply connected to their own desire to be involved in a complex and relationally well community. As a writer themselves, their ability to navigate written language is a powerful tool to connect and challenge.

Another possible strategy to create spaces for struggle in ELA and SLA classrooms is the use of low-stakes or no-stakes assignments that allow for questions, process, and struggle. Such assignments may include the use of writer's journals to collect various types of short daily writing, in-class group activities that emphasize engagement over credit, or *exit tickets*—short reflective prompts submitted in the final moments of class time. Often, these assignments are short yet deep and personally reflective, and are held in confidence between the student and the teacher. We understand that these sorts of practice spaces might open up teachers to harmful conversations. We also believe that even as parts of our identity can render us unsafe in schooling settings, other aspects of ourselves can simultaneously make us safer. Being both able *and* willing to "put something on the line for somebody," as educational abolitionist scholar Love (2019b) suggests, is to lean into a relational opportunity.

CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER

Though it's not explicitly related to writing or literacy, we often think about the theoretically simple work of caring for each other as colleagues. While *care* is defined and applied differently across scholarship, our thinking is specifically aligned with Piepzna-Samarasinha's (2018) disability justice–informed understanding of care functioning within a *care web.* Care webs acknowledge that different folks have different strengths, abilities, and resources to contribute to community and peers at different moments. Care webs also meet needs not met by institutions. Carol tapped into her care web when she communicated her disappointment with her students' conversation around gender and sexuality to her colleague who taught the science methods course, who subsequently intervened to support Carol. In our ELA and SLA classrooms, legislative and political bodies may attempt to regulate LGBTQIA+ books and topics (and may currently succeed), but leaning into our own care webs can offer us

relational tools to rupture, work around, and reimagine oppressive state policies.

CENTERING QUEER AND TRANS RELATIONS

It's hard to feel hopeful in the face of the blatant attacks on LGBTQIA+ students through policy and laws in educational contexts across the country and the globe. As ELA and SLA educators, especially in states like Arizona, Texas, and Florida, where restrictive and damaging curriculum bans either have narrowly been struck down or are now in full effect, it's challenging to know how to proceed when the foundational tools we use, like literature, are increasingly difficult to navigate (Arizona State Legislature, 2022a; Committee on Oversight and Accountability, 2023). Our piece here is intended to be the very beginning of exploring what it really means to be in an honest, difficult, and multifaceted relationship with one another as colleagues, as students and teachers, and as community members. As educators of future ELA and SLA teachers, we understand our classroom practices as opportunities to model how to be in community and relationship with our students. We aim to put forth the potentiality that our relationships might function both as sites of subversive refusal of current anti-LGBTQIA+ policies and laws, and sites to think through new ways of engaging in our classrooms. EJ

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In response to the recent legislative onslaught targeting LGBTQIA+ communities, and to federal inaction, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Executive Council convened an LGBTQIA+ Task Force focusing on methods for supporting LGBTQIA+ people in our professional spaces. Read more in this "Statement on Support for Gender Diversity/Trans, Two-Spirit, and Nonbinary Students, Staff, and Faculty." https://ncte.org/statement/statement-on-support-for-gender-diversity-trans-two-spirit-and-nonbinary-students-staff-and-faculty/