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Articles

LGBTQ Youth of Color Video Making as Radical Curriculum: A Brother Mourning His Brother and a Theory in the Flesh

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines a video poem curriculum for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer¹ (LGBTQ) students of color at a continuation school in Los Angeles, California. In this close reading of a video poem that draws from a larger research project of a community-based learning curriculum, I have found that for LGBTQ students of color whose lives often intersect multiple oppressions, it is in the reflexive pedagogical work of “storying the self” (Goodson, 1998) where they develop a critical consciousness through an interrogation of their own bodies as they confront HIV, survival sex, and violence. The racially queered self/body, particularly in media work, becomes a rich representational tool used to facilitate reflection and praxical thinking about the multiple, often simultaneous experiences of Latino and African American LGBTQ students. It is in this pedagogical space where the urgency and necessity of a radical politic emerges from the analysis of intersection and intermeshment in student experiences, and where a “theory in the flesh” that is derived from youth bodies may literally save your own life.

INTRODUCTION

Seventeen-year-old student Peter John Cord’s video poem² “Lost in Your Eyes” (1995) begins with a close up of his face, focusing on his eyes, with a camera panning slowly across the screen to reveal the video maker—a tall, handsome youth standing in front of a mirror in a small room. In his hand he holds up to the mirror a photograph of a young man sitting in a lawn chair, his head turned back to look at whomever was taking the picture. It

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is a familiar image, perhaps of a camping trip, outdoors, relaxing. The narrative voice speaks of “dreamy brown eyes, exact to a tee,” of the youth in the photo. The next frame shows a crucifix on a chain being pulled from Cord’s neck and dropped onto the floor. The photo follows.

Your eyes full of hope, for all I could tell
 Are so deep inside me
 I only know so well.

It is the epilogue that is striking when the viewer learns that the photo in the 2-minute video poem is not of Cord but of his twin brother, Frankie Ortiz, who had passed away due to complications from acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). With this knowledge, the audience becomes a witness to the public mourning of one brother for another. Cord’s video poem is not only a eulogy for his brother, Frankie, but it is also an instance of social memory, an ethnographic snapshot of the lived experiences of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) street youth from a continuation school in Los Angeles, California, and a yearning for home from students who are often homeless, migrants, and sometimes even exiles.

Cord’s remarkable video should not only matter to people who are also lesbian or gay. His narrative intersects multiple experiences and subjectivities, and moves differentially in relation with other communities, some emergent, yet in a way where race, class, gender, and sexuality are never fixed. The identity categories as represented by the video poet are surely not a singular experience with racism, homophobia, or poverty, but are often an interlocking, intermeshing,³ intersecting system of domination that defines LGBTQ student of color realities. Peter John Cord’s use of “storying the self” (Goodson, 1998) allows for the possibilities of making clear the intersections or intermeshments of his experience.

For young people whose lives often intersect multiple oppressions, it is in the reflexive work of storying the self where LGBTQ youth of color begin a process of developing a critical consciousness through an interrogation of their own bodies as they confront human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), survival sex,⁴ and violence. The self/body, particularly in media work, becomes a rich representational tool used to facilitate reflection and praxical thinking. It is in media production where youth video provides the opportunity to develop these kinds of cultural artifacts to help students investigate and transform their vision of the world. But it is through the corporeal where LGBTQ youth of color story the self, offering the possibility of reconstructing social memory, a politicization that Cherrie Moraga (1981) names as a “theory in the flesh” (p. 24). Storying of the self is the work of interrogating the narratives of the body—the scars and legions of violence, neglect, and poverty that are often literally inscribed onto youth bodies—where the pedagogy of a theory in the flesh is practiced. This essay describes this practice of storying the self in a video poem workshop for

students enrolled in a continuation school for LGBTQ youth, where student video work becomes a mediating tool toward a reflexive and critical thinking politic.

STARTING WITH A THEORY IN THE FLESH

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity.

(Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 23)

This essay brings together my thinking about video work with LGBTQ youth of color whose histories and experiences are not being made available in public school classrooms, with the notion that young people mediate through and across “multiple registers of experience” (Alarcon, 1991) as they struggle to create the cultural artifacts necessary to educate themselves about LGBTQ lives. Students in this video-making class begin their work theorizing from a standpoint that begins in the body, from thinking derived from U.S. lesbian of color theory.

In their critiques of hegemonic feminism, the women of color writers and editors of the foundational texts of U.S. Third World feminism such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), *Haciendo Caras/Making Face, Making Soul* (Anzaldúa, 1990), *All the Women Are White, All the Men Are Black, but Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982), *The Combahee River Collective: A Black Feminist Statement* (1981), *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Christian, 1983), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Lorde, 1984), and others,⁵ offer a framework for thinking about consciousness raising, pedagogy, and coalition building that centers the stories and experiences of women of color in a radical political analysis. The act of testifying to the daily contradictions of living as a woman of color in the United States is prominent, where the pedagogy of bridging relations between women begins in the “naming [of] our selves and by telling our stories in our own words,” where to assess the impact of the intersections of racism, sexism, homophobia, and poverty on women’s bodies becomes the basis for powerful coalitional politics (Moraga, 1981, p. 32). *Bridge* and other texts, in their approach to theory and praxis, refuse easy categorization, often reflecting this refusal in the multiple genres of storytelling, *testimonio*, open letters, poetry, and women’s history found in the texts. “To assess the damage is a dangerous act,” writes Moraga (p. 32), and in narrative after narrative in all of the foundational texts, there is the hard assessment that is enacted as an interrogation of self, the examination of internalized homophobia and racism, the recognition of how women have failed each other in the feminist movement in multiple ways, and the realization that social change for women and lesbians of color

will not move forward without understanding the source of our inherent oppressions, both as victims and victimizers. It is a process both reflexive and pedagogical. Moraga writes:

I feel angry about this—the years when I refused to recognize privilege, both when it worked against me, and when I worked it, ignorantly, at the expense of women who invariably know a hell of a lot more than I do about racism, as experienced in the flesh, as revealed in the flesh of their writing. (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 34)

A theory in the flesh begins in the examination and analysis of the origins of the pain and subjugation of U.S. women of color. It is the process of theorizing across the political, cultural, and intellectual work of women of color. In particular, it is the interrogation of the lived experiences of lesbians of color⁶ in the United States. Much of the epistemological work of women and lesbians of color in U.S. Third World feminism begins with the body and is a conscious effort to address the Cartesian split that invalidates embodied knowledge, alternative ways of knowing, and the problems with the categories of identity (Cruz, 2001; Lugones, 2011, 2012; Moya, 2000; Sandoval, 2000). A theory in the flesh is not only the subversion of these identity categories, a tactic that refuses the logic where women and lesbians of color and LGBTQ youth of color are made absented (Lugones, 2011, p. 52; Cruz, 2011), but it is also a theorizing that emerges from an understanding of the multiple relations of domination that oppress women of color.

When the Combahee River Collective (1981, p. 210) states that “we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women’s continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation,” it is an acknowledgment of the climate of impunity in Boston during the late 1970s,⁷ where Black women’s lives necessitated an analysis of this terrorization. A theory of the simultaneity of oppression, grounded by a decolonizing and anticapitalist critique, was required to fully articulate the racial and sexual violence that women of color were experiencing in Boston. For the Combahee authors, this enunciation of a multiple-leveled analysis frames the oppression of Black women’s bodies as part of the legacy of violence of the “political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism” (p. 213). In this call to value Black women’s lives, there is an urgency in the Combahee statement that is both survivor-rich and life-affirming. It is a similar urgency where this video project with LGBTQ students of color begins, centering their stories in a curriculum that starts in the analysis of the body. Many of the students in the LGBTQ continuation school had experienced homelessness and other kinds of violence at home and/or in their previous schools. Youth are offered so few alternatives about the conditions in which they live every day, and the answers they do receive are often tropes that reinscribe criminality and deservedness (Cruz, 2011). Making the space for the narratives of LGBTQ youth of color central in a radical curriculum is to acknowledge

this process of interrogating the body and a theory in the flesh. With HIV rampant in the Los Angeles street youth community and students in the program experiencing many of the same issues at home and at school, a theory in the flesh offered students a chance to “story the self” in video, where in lieu of textbooks or archives of histories of an LGBTQ experience in the world, students created their own texts. Much like the narratives from *This Bridge Called My Back*, the video poem becomes a teaching artifact for other students. And like the feminist narratives of women of color, the video poem begins in a testimony of the contradictions of the lived experiences of LGBTQ students of color.

INSCRIBING LGBTQ YOUTH BODIES

During my first week as a curriculum coordinator and teacher in the continuation school in 1992, I saw a sign taped to the single restroom door that said “No More Than One Student at a Time in the Restroom.” I was concerned about the implications of the sign—that students were having unprotected sex on school grounds—and that for these students, a comprehensive sex education curriculum needed to be put in place immediately. Yet it seemed that sex education curricula did little in helping LGBTQ students examine the everyday conditions of their lives and of those around them. How did these conditions shape the available options of safe sex, healthy relationships, and wellness for youth? Like many urban spaces in the United States, the city of Los Angeles, California, experienced a massive reduction of core services for residents and tensions ran high between communities, where the specter of AIDS was prominent in the discourses around youth community organizing.⁸ Drop-in centers, youth shelters, and social services agencies in Los Angeles cut hours, emergency beds, and personnel, and innovative sex and health education curricula were eliminated.

One conversation I had with one of the continuation students underscored the urgency of curriculum work that addressed health and the body, when I had commented on how physically fit this particular student looked. He answered that he worked out a lot so that he did not give the appearance of being infected with AIDS. The student’s explanation of his fitness forced me to reconsider what was happening in his world that looking physically fit is the reaction of a young man of color against HIV. For this one student, how was this disease, which by 1995 had already infected over half a million Americans,⁹ intersecting with working-class masculinities? Furthermore, in what ways was poverty affecting the women and the men of his community with the reductions of medical and social services in California? What kinds of powerful literacy interventions needed to be created in this situation, if literacy was to be defined as reading the word and the world, and how could this work begin to occur in a public school classroom?

There was a sense of urgency in teaching LGBTQ students of color during this time of the AIDS epidemic. I believed that building a learning environment that created spaces where students could reflect deeply about the worlds around them and their families should be a priority for teachers, social service workers, and youth activists in 1992. By 1996, 27% of LGBTQ street youth in Los Angeles County tested positive for the virus that causes AIDS (D. Kerrone, personal communication, May 12, 1996; Kipke, O'Connor, Palmer, & MacKenzie, 1995). At no other time was a "political born out of necessity" (Moraga, 1981, p. 23), where an active commitment of resistance against racial, homophobic, and class oppression was, for LGBTQ youth of color, a life-or-death struggle for their lives. In this space, a theory in the flesh offered a framework of understanding the multiple levels of oppression that students found difficult to name, where the "many-headed demon of oppression" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) haunted their everyday lives. In essence, pedagogies that centered student lives were attempts to bridge the contradictions of their experiences in narrative form, in video poetry, and in the stories students told each other about their bodies.

METHODOLOGY OF A VIDEO POEM

This close reading of a video poem originates from a research project that is looking at a community-based learning curriculum at a continuation high school program in Los Angeles that serves LGBTQ students. In a spacious three-story building leased by a nonprofit community organization, approximately 60 students were enrolled at the time of the study in 1996¹⁰ at the small continuation school that emphasized LGBTQ youth educational services. Continuation schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District are often small campuses with low teacher-to-student ratios that serve students ages 16–18 who are deemed at risk for not graduating. The goal of each continuation student is to make up credit deficiencies and eventually transfer back to the student's original comprehensive high school. Most students had transferred to the LGBTQ continuation school because of homophobic, transphobic, and gendered forms of harassment at their previous schools, sometimes from the teachers and administrators themselves (Cruz, 2006; Himmelstein & Brückner, 2010). As is often the case, the environment of the original school was often so violent and dangerous for queer or differently gendered students that the LGBTQ students often stopped attending their school for fear of further harassment (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2004). Due to their past experiences of harassment and violence, most students did not want to transfer back to their previous high schools and stayed to graduate at the continuation school.

Like most dropout recovery programs¹¹ and continuation schools that are created to recover credit deficiencies, the LGBTQ continuation

program used the independent study curriculum based on a credit-hour system: one worksheet completed equals one credit hour of classwork, and 80 credit hours of classwork equals one completed course. If a student was motivated enough, she could finish multiple courses and make up several semesters of classes in just a few months. Several students did this and completed all of the district high school requirements years early. For many of the LGBTQ students, this would be the first time they found a ready community of friends and allies, including out LGBTQ teachers, in a school setting. Despite the independent study curriculum which often reduced coursework to the 80 hours of worksheets, students perceived the LGBTQ continuation school as a sanctuary, where there was often an environment of celebration of being LGBTQ and out among students (Cruz, 2001, p. 367).

The video poem workshop was developed as part of a community-based learning program and an arts-based grant shared by artists Julia Metzler, Ming Ma, and Luis Alfaro. Together with the community-based learning program that worked with students, teachers and community organizations to change the teaching and learning environment of continuation schools from a curriculum based on independent study worksheets to a more community-centered curriculum, Metzler and Ma worked closely with Alfaro and students to help them begin to think about organizing and developing their video poem projects. Chosen by the students to complete a narrative composition assignment, the video poem project was conceived and implemented by students as a project where multiple credits and multiple competencies such as autobiographical writing, storyboarding, mastery of video equipment, and collaborative skills would be developed. Video artists Ma and Metzler trained students and provided mentorship in the use of video technologies, including editing. Students wrote autobiographical poems and narratives and viewed and critiqued other youth videos in performance artist Alfaro's workshops, and then began the long-term planning through storyboarding and rehearsal. Students then recruited a crew of classmates who were competent in using the camera, lighting, acting, staging, sound and editing, and who then storyboarded the writing of choice, and shot their project. The project required collaborative and organizational skills along with the technical competence with the camera and the ability to communicate the creative vision, sequence, and narrative structure of what their projects might look like to the team of students working on the video. Altogether 25 students worked on seven videos in 8 weeks of production.

With the help of tutors, video artists, teachers, and the curriculum coordinator, student video poems facilitated a critical look at the community and the issues LGBTQ youth of color face. Part of the project was also about the negotiation of work completed for multiple courses with the various teachers they worked with, garnering a substantial amount of credit hours for each participating student. Data collection included my

field notes; interviews and conversations with teachers, student teams, and the video artists; participatory and public observations;¹² extensive teaching journals that were maintained to document the progress of students in the video poem program; and weekly meetings with faculty, students, artists, and tutors to insure the coordination of the workshop. An interpretative ethnographic analysis (Denzin, 1999) was used to frame student video work and writing, where close readings of videos, conversations and interviews, field notes, and teaching journals were analyzed, coded, and organized for themes and emergent issues. My documentation of the curriculum of this LGBTQ youth video workshop and my revisiting of notes and archives of this project is a meditation on my history as a community-based learning teacher. Although I have used the tools of ethnography to organize my thoughts and memories of this time well spent in the classroom, this is very much a reflexive practice and my need to contextualize these moments of working with LGBTQ youth of color in spaces that were creative, resistant, and filled with the possibilities of a radical curriculum.

VIDEO AS CRITICAL MEDIATING TOOLS IN THE CLASSROOM

Peter John Cord did not narrate his own video poem. He asked another student to read his story for the video, explaining that he wanted a strong voice and that he did not enjoy hearing the playback of his own speaking voice that was so much like his brother Frankie's. In the process of writing the narrative from the body, students organized into teams to work on each video, with students in collaboration with Cord collectively working on imagining, storyboarding, and organizing the material of the video poem. One student in particular, a transgendered Latina, transformed Cord with borrowed black clothes and her direction of his image in the video. She styled his hair slick with hair product and Cord liked his look. Another student lent him the crucifix that is pulled off in the first scene of the video. Two students in charge of shooting Cord's poem figured out the problem with a mirror shot, experimenting with camera angles and organized discussions with Cord's production team and the video artists around why the mirror needed to be prominent. Eventually, students chose a bathroom in the school with a large mirror where they are able to shoot the video without having the camera seen in the mirror shot. Other students helped with lighting, holding large floor lamps steady during shooting. Other students worked on sound. Multiple students participated, collaborated, and contributed to Cord's project as storyboard designers and stylists, voice-over and camerapersons, and with lighting, costume, and props. Editing was also collaborative, with students who had learned to use the VHS editing equipment working closely with the artists Metzler and Ma, and with the original storyboard as guide for all students involved. Storying

the self required the coordination and collaboration of a team of students, who supported and challenged the structure and look of the video, where oftentimes the crafting of the narrative became highly contested. For example:

Student looking through camera: Why are you smiling, Peter? It doesn't look right.

Cord: I am always smiling, smiling. I want to smile.

Student looking through camera: When you smile the audience might not take you seriously.

Student with lighting: Yeah, this is about AIDS—nothing funny here! It's not just about you, Peter. (Teaching journal, January 16, 1996)

When students “story the self,” they bear witness to the contradictions of the world(s) around them. In this setting with multiple students interjecting and challenging the structure and the visual representation of Cord's video, students are actively constructing meaning together as a political activity. The video poem as a storying of the self is about knowledge creation, where students like Cord and his teammates take risks in proposing alternative explanations about their experiences of trauma, violence, and AIDS. When a student states that the video poem is not just about Cord's experience or an individual truth telling (“It's not just about you”), it becomes a mutual risk taking with the other members of his team, at once both an affirmation and a witnessing of his experience as a young gay man of color. Like a testimonial narrative where a collective voice is enacted when a speaker tells her story, Cord's video poem becomes a stand-in for the experiences of many young gay men of color. The dialogic nature of student conversations in the team setting is profound. As a challenge for each student in negotiating what meaning can be made in Cord's project about the death of his brother from AIDS, the multiple readings of his story become so important in seeing the world and learning to think differently, reflexively. In the example above where students work out how Cord's facial expressions (“smiling”) can become problematic, students make the suggestion that Cord's smiling was not the correct visual needed for the shot and persuade Cord to make this correction. In these negotiations around the video projects, students learned to risk new interpretations of the story, not only in Cord's final video poem but in all of the video projects. The video poem as mediating tool is a critically important pedagogical move, even a reframing of a student's video poems (“When you smile the audience might not take you seriously”). In this setting, the collaborative process in the video poem curriculum provides students and their teachers with multiple mediating opportunities.

The final requirement of the project was a public presentation and after the final edits of Cord's video poem, a screening and discussion with the entire school takes place where students get to view the final video cut. The question-and-answer session begins after the video is shown and Cord begins by explaining to his audience how uncomfortable it is for the school to be located on Santa Monica Boulevard, a street known for male prostitution, or "hustler row," where the exchange of sex for money, food, drugs, or a place to sleep is negotiated.¹³ Cord tells students what it is like for him to be constantly misrecognized as his twin brother, Frankie, who was at one time a street hustler. He tells his story of his walk to and from school, passing the young men and trans-women who line up near the bus stop two blocks from the school: "Hey, Frankie, you are looking good," the youth call out to Cord. Frustrated and confused, he answers back, "But I'm not Frankie, I'm Peter."



Video work, in particular short experimental youth video, lends itself as a mediating tool to help students think and talk critically about the word and the world around them (Bing-Canar & Zerkel, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2007). The purpose of Cord's video poem is not only one to reclaim the memory of his brother, Frankie, but also to acknowledge the relationships among street youth where what you have to do to survive is not talked about openly in the public school classroom. The reality of survival sex and its relationship to HIV infection among LGBTQ students who have experienced homelessness and poverty is not only made visible in Cord's video, but also in much of the writing of the students who took part in the workshop but whose work did not translate into video. For example, "Street Scene," a poem by Dusty, a gay multiracial 17-year-old student who participated in the workshop, writes:

Standing post, their usual places,
 Same old thing, same old faces,
 Flirting and cat-calling on the prowl, not yet willing to throw
 in the towel. Longing for the car to stop and invite
 Only to disappear far out of sight.
 When the lights fade and again the sun glows,
 They run to their squats, no money—it shows.
 Waiting to again walk down the street,
 A possible client soon they can meet.
 (Dusty, 17-year-old student, 1996)

The death of Cord's brother, Frankie, from complications of AIDS underscores the few economic options available for youth, particularly for LGBTQ youth who are forced into survival sex and for whom social safety nets in the United States have been frayed beyond repair. Survival sex makes up a large part of LGBTQ street youth experiences. Every story told by LGBTQ youth of color in the video poem workshop in its own way emerges from these contexts of love, displacement, and migration. Marta Garcia, a 14-year-old Latina lesbian student, directed a video poem, "To Be With You" (1995), as a meditation on unrequited love and loneliness, where the video centers the yearning for connection to other young lesbians of color. Seventeen-year-old Jesse Farias's "The Role of Man" (1995) documents his father's condemnation of his coming out as a Chicano gay man and the suicide attempt that followed. Andrew Becerra, a 17-year-old queer Latino youth, tells the story of "strange strangers and strange places," in his video "Alone Once Again" (1996), where he reveals a story of clubs, drug abuse, and the gamble of unsafe sex. Other student video poems centered critiques of religious intolerance ("Gabbing With God" [1996] by Rhiannon Pollock, a young White lesbian), and the LGBTQ body and street life ("God Is Laughing at Me" [1996] by 17-year-old queer Chicano artist Gabriel Balthazar). Using the video poems as a heuristic in mediating students' lived experiences where a politic born of necessity is enacted, the issues of survival sex, drug and alcohol abuse, homophobia, street culture, and this profound physical and emotional yearning for connection that undergirds most, if not all, of the videos become instances where indeed the word becomes flesh.

STORYING THE SELF AS RADICAL CURRICULUM

Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead: in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the normal. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25)

I often taught the students in my classrooms that there is an important part to play for LGBTQ people of color in reimagining and remaking our worlds. Many of us have chosen to use our own bodies for coalitional

work—the human *Bridge*, the back that gets walked on over and over. The students I taught already possessed the skills to negotiate multiple languages and ways of knowing. They were youth who were translators for parents who spoke a language other than English, and young people who often understood all too well what “queer” meant when it was muttered in the hallways of their high schools or from families who could or would not tolerate difference. Students were familiar with Gloria Anzaldúa’s *los atravesados* (the transgressors), the technologies they learned as a necessity for survival for crossing cultural, gendered, and racial borders, to move in and out of the liminal, and to straddle multiple worlds precariously. As a teacher, I wanted students to think about these gestures and movements across these borders, to refuse the easy answer to the conditions we lived in, and to make visible what has been inscribed onto their own bodies so that we could begin to develop literacies both of the street and of the body. As an out lesbian of color, I could not imagine community-based curriculum work on queer identities, on negotiating difference, and empowering each other in the intersectional/intermeshment thinking that reflects the LGBTQ students of color experience without acknowledging that doing “queer” without thinking about race (and its subsequent histories) could never be a possibility. The alternative position that dismisses or makes race less than foundational (or not present at all) in curriculum work and educational research continues to make LGBTQ youth of color invisible.

For Cord, remembering his brother, Frankie, in video is to make him present and visible, not absent. It would not be difficult to trace these experiences of LGBTQ street youth back to what Edward Said (2002) calls the “new scale of modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambition of totalitarian rulers” (p. 138). Cord’s documentation of the AIDS epidemic and the casualty of his brother, Frankie, attest to this new scale of warfare, where multiple histories of migration, homophobia, and economic duress intersect with what is often a traffic in youth in Los Angeles. Yet in the work of re/membering his brother’s body, Cord’s necessary stitching and suturing video narrative to put together the contradictions of LGBTQ youth subjectivities may also be the very technology necessary for youth of color to build and imagine coalitional politics, where the queer student of color plays the role of the human bridge in organizing, in thinking praxically with others, in the connecting of one community with another (Anzaldúa, 1987).

The histories, narratives, and poetry of LGBTQ lives in public school curricula had little impact in the continuation school where I worked when teachers were unable to make student experience relevant, even though this particular continuation school was designed to emphasize LGBTQ adolescent educational needs. Curriculum that dealt with LGBTQ issues was additive, or surface, where posters on the wall and biographies mentioned that particular authors and historical figures were gay, yet an in-depth examination of LGBTQ literature and lives was made not a

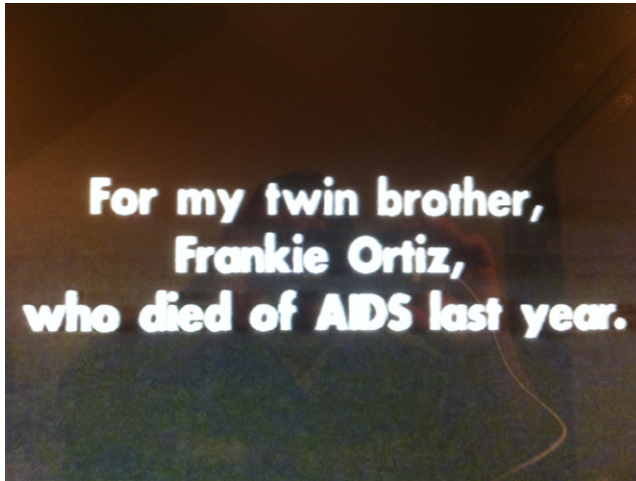
priority. In the continuation school curriculum, where worksheets dominated most units and lesson plans, very little teaching happened in these classrooms (Cruz, 2001, p. 367). Yet unlike comprehensive high schools where teachers see their students in 56-minute periods, continuation classes are often full- or half-day sessions for multiple subjects under a single teacher. Having one teacher in the secondary classroom teaching multiple subjects means that relevant community-based curricula that address student concerns were a possibility. Teachers in the school could not ignore the fact that some of the youth were homeless, participating in risky activities, including survival sex, and that students' risk for contracting HIV was very high, and yet they were still attending school despite their challenges. The sign on the door of the restroom said so much about what was not being discussed in the school's classrooms. Storying the self, then, becomes a political intervention, where the personal becomes political and the youth begin to understand that to tell your story of surviving HIV, homophobia, and poverty to draw attention to the plight of LGBTQ students was not only about recentering new curriculum, but was also about talking back to the larger discourses that dehumanize/silence/penalize youth of color. When a student states that "if she could not write, she would die," the political necessity of curriculum that honors work that critically examines youth experience is literally about saving the life that is your own.¹⁴

Goodson (1998) argues that in this era of late capitalism, storying the self becomes a means of making sense of new conditions of working and being. "The self becomes a reflexive project, an ongoing narrative project," where capturing this emergent process in the classroom requires an attention to social and community histories, and where teachers and students situate the life story or *testimonio* in an analysis linked to social history and geography, these narratives become embodied truth tellings that account for both time and space (Goodson, p. 16). Centering the stories of LGBTQ youth in video means that students begin with their own stories, write their own books, read each others' poetry, create their own cultural artifacts. To center the histories of LGBTQ lives is not only about examining the conditions of the LGBTQ youth of color lives but also about providing a counternarrative to the tropes of criminality and infection that are often inscribed onto youth bodies, where young people are not without agency but instead reveal narratives of resiliency and hope. It is life affirming to use video to tell a critical story of LGBTQ youth of color survival and resilience.

VIDEO AS ARTIFACT AND SOCIAL MEMORY

When Cord shows the final cut of his video poem to the school and begins the question-and-answer session with other students, the visual narrative of Cord's story as a young man in mourning becomes a new and relevant

cultural artifact for the production of knowledge. As a social memory of Cord's day-to-day situations, the video facilitates the abstraction necessary to enable dialogue around its themes of love, loss, and frustration, helping students examine the conditions of their own lives. Questions ensue, and the youth begin mediating between Cord's video and their own experiences as LGBTQ youth of color.



So many conversations come out of Cord's video from the students: the realities of street hustling, how no one will hire a young person when adults are competing for the same jobs, how survival sex is a dangerous game students are often forced to play, questions about whether a condom will really break, what happens to you once you find out you are infected, and how much is a youth body worth on the street? Students began to discuss, question, and work out the generative themes of poverty, HIV, survival sex, and homelessness brought forth by Cord's video. Students talk about Santa Monica Boulevard, hustler row, and how it mimics the zones of wealth and privilege of the city, where White youth hustlers are found closer to West Hollywood and hustlers of color are relegated to specific territories east of Highland Avenue. Many of these youth are working students and for a moment, young people connect this queer body to work and labor. Other students argue that employers do not want to hire youth when they can hire adults for low-wage jobs. One young man talked about how he had put dozens of applications for jobs at fast food places near the school and was never called in for any type of interview or even a review of his application. Students surmise that no one is going to give a job to someone who is young, queer, and homeless.¹⁵ Then someone in the classroom says it: Maybe Peter John Cord's brother died because this is the only work available for a 17-year-old gay Latino street youth.

As a eulogy to his brother, Frankie, Cord's video is also a homage to the memory of those youth who did not survive the streets at the height of the AIDS epidemic. To have these frank discussions about HIV and survival sex was literally unknown in the school, even among the teachers. The use of the mirror in the video becomes one of the few ways that Cord can reconnect and remember his brother. The mirror may not necessarily be about the tension or opposition of the twin Cord sees in his own reflection. It certainly is confusing and frustrating to Cord that his everyday experience of walking to school is one of being misrecognized as his brother. But the video/mirror certainly forces students and teachers to examine their own intimate relationships with this terrible disease. When Cord tells us about his "intense dreams, my soulful hopes, and spectacular future/of what seems a fantasy life with you," it is an attempt to resolve or mediate his loss of his brother. Remembering the dead is to make them present and affirming. Cord is reminded of his brother, Frankie, in every mirror, where the history between brothers refuses easy categorization. Cord honors his brother in his mourning and in so doing, denies the erasure of an intimate memory of LGBTQ history.

THINKING PRAXICALLY ABOUT LGBTQ YOUTH LIVES

In their writings, editors Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and the writers in *This Bridge Called My Back* do not privilege what Haraway (1990) names as the "innocence of the merely violated" (p. 198). The political necessity is of understanding the source of these violations (Moya, 2000, p. 91). This "innocence" is incapable of challenging the limit situations of their relations with the world around them, nor does it suggest any kind of methodologies of reflexivity or of critical thinking. Often the narratives of women and lesbians of color are dismissed as confessional or naive. What Moraga and the *Bridge* writers do claim is knowledge that originates from an interrogation of the body in pain. It is a turn toward what Kris Gutierrez and Shirin Vossoughi (2010) in their work with social design experiments call a "genesis of a practice," a tracing of (embodied) origins. Cord's video traces his own pain in the video, and the video opens a deeper understanding of the choices young LGBTQ students of color are forced to make. When students begin to examine, debate, and discuss their experiences of pain and oppression in their own lives and how it is inscribed onto their bodies, the pedagogy of storying the self allows the possibility of understanding other kinds of oppression suffered by others. This connection can be sympathetic and possibly in solidarity with others. The genesis, in this instance, is the body, where a focus on lived experience is about thinking praxically, where teachers situate the work of learning in the particularities of a community. The video poem project provided opportunities for deep learning and the empowerment that comes from telling your story, a

reframing or remediating of LGBTQ youth of color lives that are often criminalized or made invisible. Social memory is created in the remembrance of a beloved brother, in the life histories carefully documented by students and their teachers, and in a much more nuanced context for teaching and learning with students of color. The exchange as a teacher with students is mediated by the contexts of street ecologies and experiences, where a “genesis of practice” and a theory in the flesh are nothing less than life-affirming pedagogies.

In a sense, to think praxically about the lives of LGBTQ youth of color means new roles for teachers as learners, one that draws from their own racialized, gendered, and classed histories, but also from learning to read and make meaning from the intricacies of a street ecology in a place like Los Angeles with their students. As teachers, we must ask ourselves and we must examine in community with the students in our classrooms, what are the material concerns for youth who live on the streets? A movement toward methodologies that are participatory, student- and community-centered, and decolonizing may prove to be not only beneficial in providing relevant curriculum for LGBTQ students of color, but may nuance and complicate how “LGBTQ” studies, or *how we study the queer*, gets implemented.

CONCLUSIONS

Deep learning, like the discussion that was started with Peter John Cord’s video, did not happen often at the school within a curriculum that was reduced to credit accumulation and worksheets. Conscientization is difficult work when testing and standardization and curricula that are reduced to seatwork are the standard in the continuation school system. Video poetry and the pedagogy of storying the self, where students create their own mediating tools to talk about the issues relevant to their lives, empowered students to develop their own curricula, to struggle against becoming absented. Beginning with a theory in the flesh in curriculum work is also my attempt to center women and lesbian of color thought in education research, where the struggle to acknowledge the contributions of U.S. Third World feminists in radical pedagogies and methodologies continues.

In my research with LGBTQ students of color, they have often told me that if they could not write, they would die. I believe them. Writing and the process of creating knowledge that comes from a theory of the flesh is a survival strategy for women and lesbians of color and LGBTQ students of color, a tactic to maintain visibility and resist erasure. When Peter John Cord tells a story in his own words, with the help of many of his classmates, he begins this bridging politics, a looking for a home out of exile, and affirming a life-loving practice as Cord’s video is at once a message of mourning and a showing of great love for his brother. What did it mean to

teach these corporeal stories, to make this brown and queer body the center of a radical politic? Students located their stories in the classrooms, students wrote their own books and reinvented themselves in video work and poetry, and talked about their bodies and what becomes inscribed upon them and how, and together students and teachers looked at our communities and tried to understand the trauma and anger and sometimes even the hope that comes out in these streets.

NOTES

1. The “Q” of LGBTQ—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer—is interchangeable with “questioning” and the term “queer.” These are terms which youth used interchangeably and reflected how students in this ethnography named themselves, or refused to self-designate at all.
2. “Video poems” are 1–2 minute visual narratives of an autobiographical youth poem.
3. Maria Lugones has insisted that the term “intermeshment” offers a more nuanced description of intersectionality, one that emphasizes the interrelatedness and simultaneity of multiple forms of oppression. In a 2012 essay, Lugones writes, “Recently I have been looking at the need to rethink gender in a historical and global manner so that one could no longer separate gender, class, sexuality, and race but could not think of them as intersecting, either. The relation of intersection still requires conceptually separable entities, categories” (Milongueando Macha Homoerotics: Dancing the Tango, Torta Style, in *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands* [edited by Arturo Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter Garcia], p. 51). In essence, we need new conceptual language to describe outside of this problem with the categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.
4. Greene, Ennett, and Ringwalt (1999) define survival sex as the selling of sex to meet subsistence needs. It is an economic survival strategy linked to the circumstances and duration of an individual’s homelessness.
5. The 1970s–1990s were a very productive time for women of color writings with a small but growing infrastructure of women’s presses, journals, and bookstores to support a strong network of feminists of color writers. Other texts such as *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* by Barbara Christian (1985), *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), *Women, Race, and Class* by Angela Davis (1983), Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* (1983), and *The Last Generation* (1993), Asian Women United of California’s *Making Waves: An Anthology by and About Asian American Women* (1989), and Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1992), among many others, provided a theoretical foundation from a feminist of color, often lesbian of color, perspective.
6. Women of color writers such as Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Chrystos, Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, Doris Davenport, Cheryl Clarke, Maria Lugones, and many of the writers of *Bridge, Combahee River Collective*, and

Haciendo Caras make lesbian identity and heterosexuality one of the central themes in the theorizing and writing of literature of U.S. Third World feminisms.

7. The Combahee River Collective is writing in response to the impunity of police and the media to the murder of women, particularly Black women, in the Boston area in 1979. It was a recognition that a Black feminist political analysis was required in understanding the racially gendered sexual politics of violence against women of color.
8. I am not saying that AIDS decreased through the 2000s, yet the public discourse (and funding) of safe sex education did after 9/11, and HIV infection rates have consistently been high among young Black and Latino youth through the mid 1990s to 2012. During my time working for a community youth HIV clinic, where we primarily tested and counseled, our numbers in 1998–2001 among LGBTQ street youth were between 24%–28% positive test results.
9. These statistics come from the CDC *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, November 24, 1995, pp. 849–853.
10. Although this work was developed and documented in 1996, this essay was prompted by the November 27, 2012 report by the CDC that young people between the ages of 13 and 24 in the United States account for more than a quarter of new HIV infections each year (26%) while 60% of these youth living with HIV are unaware they are infected. The most-affected youth are gay and bisexual men of color. Public schools must address these issues of the health and well-being of LGBTQ youth of color in innovative HIV education curriculums and policies.
11. Continuation schools, dropout recovery programs or community day schools are often one-teacher sites scattered throughout the district. These schools exist primarily to provide interim educational opportunities for K–12 students who have been expelled, are at high risk for dropping out, or have been referred by probation or a School Attendance Review Board. The goal of these credit recovery educational spaces is to provide a challenging academic curriculum, develop social skills, and return students back to traditional schools.
12. Participatory observations are primarily structured and semistructured interviews and field observations of students, teachers, and staff, and my research notes and teaching journal document my time as a teacher facilitating the video poem projects. Public observations are my own thick descriptions outside of school of the participants, where “public” is not the classroom or the video project setting but often the street, a park, public transportation, or a drop-in center that was not the school site.
13. In the Greene, Ennett, and Ringwalt (1999) study of youth staying in youth shelters, the study found that 28% of street youth reported having participated in survival sex. An earlier study of Los Angeles street youth reports that 43% of participants have a history of trading sex for food, money or shelter (Kipke, O’Connor, Palmer, & MacKenzie, 1995). Other reports assert that homeless LGBTQ youth were more likely to engage in sexual survival strategies than their heterosexual counterparts (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003)
14. This line is borrowed from Alice Walker’s essay “Saving the life that is your own: The importance of models in the artist’s life,” where the author “discovers” the

work of Zora Neale Hurston in a footnote from an anthropological study of Black ritual.

15. This conversation happened during the question-and-answer session when Peter John Cord presented his final cut of the video.

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