

Relational Literacies and their Coalitional Possibilities

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Abstract: *“Relational literacies,” informed by women-of-color feminisms and literacy studies, implies the desire and possibility for shared action and conocimiento. It is a third-space concept related to borderlands rhetorics, coalitional gestures, relational knowledges, and queer migration politics that can intervene into the delegitimation of particular bodies/bodies-of-knowledge. They can also be understood as multimodal, participatory, and embodied meaning-making practices and performances. Relational literacies, at play in the accompanying experimental video, are related to queer temporalities that are both past- and future-oriented at once and have the capacity to produce knowledge from home spaces, abuelit@ wisdoms, and wild imaginings.*

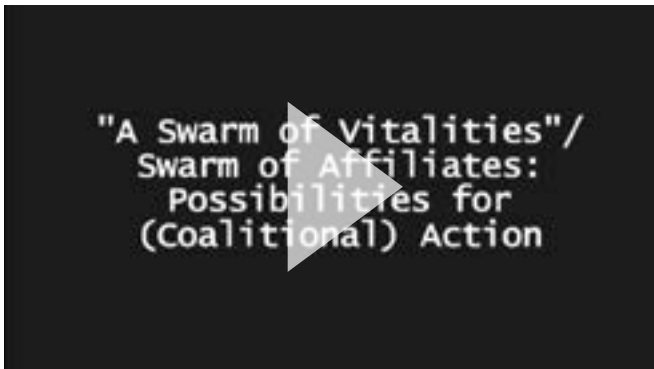
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Relational literacies¹ are ripe with coalitional possibility as they can open people to new ways of understanding, learning, imagining, and being in relation to others' stories, interests, and contexts. As such, they can be understood as both events and practices. As events, relational literacies are interactive occasions. Shirley Brice Heath understands a literacy event as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes” (93). While we maintain an emphasis on process, interaction, and context, we move from Heath's engagement with alphabetic literacy to also include non-alphabetic literacies. Therefore, an event for us implies interaction around “a piece of writing” as well as around multimodal, technological, embodied, imagined, and/or performed works (see Martin). Understood as practices, relational literacies imply the labor of making meaning, of shared knowledges, or of producing and developing new knowledges together. In other words, relational literacies are understandings and knowings in the world that are never produced singularly or in isolation but rather depend on interaction. This interdependency animates the coalitional possibilities inherent in relational literacies. The rhetorical function of relational literacies is to treat “community histories as meaningful [and to] make people and places knowable and understandable”—legible to one another for purposes of shared social action (Licona and Russell 2). Relational literacies and

the coalitional possibilities they imply and generate are of vital importance to understanding an array of often-marginalized rhetorical practices, histories, and events.

Our understanding of coalition differs slightly from conventional definitions, which often situate coalition in the realm of the temporary and the politically expedient. Coalitions can certainly be these things, but our view draws upon that of María Lugones, who defines coalition more expansively as “always the horizon that rearranges both our possibilities and the conditions of those possibilities” (ix). In this way, coalition is “a space of convening” that might be a brief juncture or an enduring alliance (Chávez 7). As a horizon, coalition is that which divides and that which brings together; it exists in the present—the land we sit or stand upon is a horizon; a horizon that is simultaneously in our vision.² Relational literacies create such horizons of possibility for convening, and those horizons in turn function to open to new and deeper relational literacies. Put concretely, relational literacies enable the space for new kinds of understanding, interaction, and politics.

To begin to see the coalitional possibility present in relational literacies, we offer a short experimental video titled “A Swarm of Vitalities/A Swarm of Affinities” as an illustrative case.



Click on the image above to view this video and transcript online.

We produced this video as a part of a yearlong dialogue we conducted in preparation for a presentation at the 2014 Rhetoric Society of America conference, where we were one of several dyads invited to create a public dialogue in recognition of the 100th anniversary of the split of communication from English departments. Knowing the origin of our work is important because it indicates how we came together—as partners in a dialogue not necessarily

collaborators on a research project. This origin story also signals the audience and occasion for which the initial ideas were designed: an audience of rhetoric scholars from both English and communication on an occasion where many were considering what the division between the “two” rhetorics means after 100 years. Our dialogue was titled, “Coalitional Gestures, Third Spaces, and Rhetorical Imaginaries: A Dialogue in Queer Chican@ Feminism.” Perhaps because of our situatedness on different “sides” of rhetorical studies, we did not know each other well upon beginning the dialogue in the spring of 2013, but we very quickly realized that the resonances and connections in our scholarship and activism were profound.

For example, we both agreed that much of the rhetorical scholarship on social movements neglected attention to community organizing and coalition building, two key components to movement work. We also recognized the dearth of queer Chican@ feminist perspectives in rhetoric, which in our shared view, also limited whose rhetorical practices would be deemed legitimate for rhetorical analysis and the construction of rhetorical theory. These affinities in our work made our extended dialogue very generative as we sought to practice and invent relational literacies that would be personally and politically beneficial, while also enhancing rhetorical studies. Our goal in the dialogue was to generate ideas by encouraging one another to work with still-forming questions.

“A Swarm of Vitalities/A Swarm of Affinities” emerged in response to one of the many prompts we created for one another in our collaboration; this one about our wildest imaginings of coalitional possibilities. The video features several instantiations of relational literacies that point toward coalitional possibilities by displaying communicating bodies across generational contexts engaged in relationship/s and (attempted) reciprocal exchanges. As a snapshot of the extensive practices of varied relational literacies, the video juxtaposes exchanges both from segment to segment and also within each segment. Adela produced it, drawing upon footage from both a community-based, action-oriented participatory media project she was involved in with queer youth and imagery of her then ailing mother. “A Swarm of Vitalities/A Swarm of Affinities” calls viewers to consider what Jane Bennett describes as a wide-ranging and distributive agency as well as vital forces or “swarms of vitalities” that include the non-human and compel broad considerations of coalition and justice (32). Such a view compels a consideration of agency as an always contingent and contextualized relational practice as well as a possibility for action (see Herndl and Licona). This view also serves our considerations of the relationship between literacy and coalition as always change-oriented and relational practices premised on new understandings.

The video begins with Adela's mother, Grannie Dottie, lying in her in-home hospice bed, oxygen tube under her nose. During the edit, the frame rate is tripled creating a sense of urgency and commotion (perhaps unrest) that both suggests and keeps viewers from knowing what might have come before and what might come next. Together, the high-paced scene created in our edits and in the potential flashpoints embody, for us, a queer temporality that resists a normative temporal order and instead compresses time to "propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others" (Freeman xxii). Our understanding of queer temporality here also recalls Jose Muñoz's notion of ecstatic time as signaled in "contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one's past, present or future" toward greater openness and relational possibilities (32).

In looking back at the scene during the editing process, Adela confronted the reality that she and her mother had very little time left together and realized that each was living these final days in a kind of double-time. She recognized her mother as *both* living *and* dying. Viewers, by contrast, might experience the scene and subject as incongruent. Chronological time then is effectively remixed in this segment to signal a disordering of a linear understanding of past, present, and future through the dispersal of vitalities and in order to imagine those dispersals as absorbed relationally and across multiple temporalities. The video here establishes a "tempo of always becoming" (Puar xvii). Jamie A. Lee, following Jasbir Puar, argues that a flashpoint is a moving frame that elucidates a relational opportunity for viewers to experience the past and the future in and as transformation. Viewers watch Grannie in conversation with an unknown interlocutor while amazing and vibrant squares of refracting sunlight dance across her body. A mobile of mirrors hanging outside Grannie's bedroom window produces this effect, reflecting, refracting, and co-mingling images of light, of Grannie, and an ever-shrinking world comprised of the life inside and outside her bedroom window.

This sequence in our production, focusing on the dancing sunlight and refracted images of Grannie produced by the mirror-mobile, calls to mind Bennett's curiosity about the "ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). The productive possibilities of the inanimate made their way into our own imaginings about how things and people interact in the world and how those interactions might be at play in purposeful change. In actively reflecting the disintegration and dispersal of the body, its histories, and its wisdoms, the refractions and reflections of the dancing mirrors in the video animate the distributive agency Bennett's work can elucidate. These effects call us to imagine how dispersals of generational wisdom, lived histories, love, light, and life might interact in the world and to what effects. These uncertainties together with the possibility and promise of these

ideas are expressed as a meditating hum or buzz that softly vibrates through the modulation of Adela's voice in the scene, providing an odd contrast to the images of Grannie who even in failing health appears lively, perhaps even frenetic due to the edited video speed. The hum is meant to signal a swarm, a shared experience, and an exploration of (the possibilities of) uncertainty.

A quick transition in the video shifts the temporality rather abruptly to a slower tempo. As the sound cuts from peaceful to playful, viewers must shift their listening to hear the voices and see the images of a group of Tucson youth assembled in a circle, talking and laughing in what appears to be an art gallery.³ These youth were participants in an anti-racist youth art and activism summer camp (see Licona and Gonzales). They filmed their video to address the limitations of abstinence-only sexual education at the same time the state of Arizona was working on banning Ethnic Studies. To produce the video, youth interviewed one another to learn about their distinct and shared experiences of sex education in their schools. They then cut up their stories and agreed to mix up—remix—the narratives so participants would read narratives they did not necessarily write. They purposely remixed their voices, stories, and images to co-create a call for action around access to knowledges and resources they need and want. In the video, the identities being claimed by the voices and the bodies featured in the images don't always match. Through the remix, viewers can get several senses of what it might mean to be in coalition by engaging with and producing "activism" that addresses issues of identity, health, and bodies. In the excerpt we incorporated into our video, viewers witness acts of young people creating together, confirming each other's positionalities and social locations. Viewers also see them learning to empower themselves and their desires for particular knowledges and resources while working to protect their bodies and their right to know. Again, the remix accomplished here indicates a queer temporality, one reflecting empathy as a relational understanding, in the moments when youth temporarily inhabit the positionalities and speak the experiences of one another with great care.

The youth whose work is incorporated in this video make themselves and their histories legible to one another as remixed bodies producing and collectively making claims and building coalition. We consider such productive practices and performances valid, seeing them as valuable hermeneutics for im/possibly re/imagined histories and futures. The possibility of such practices is especially vital within the context in which they were produced: the state of Arizona, where dehumanizing, criminalizing, pathologizing, xenophobic, transphobic, and deficit-driven discourses have produced powerful, if fictitious, images. The images and discourses continue to generate social and sexual panics and social controls—as well as resistances—while also cultivating a context for what Tsianina Lomawaima has referred to as a *regressive suite of legislation*.⁴

Students and faculty in Arizona have experienced the banning of ethnic studies in high schools; the establishment of a parent bill of rights that threatens abstinence-only education; authorized racial profiling; adoption preference laws; the privatization of prisons and detention centers; the vibrant production of the school-to-prison pipeline, which is always overrepresented by minoritized youth; and a plethora of proposed regressive legislative measures including considerations of “anchor baby” legislation and, most recently, the bathroom bill (proposed as SB 1045) and the religious freedom restoration act (proposed as SB 1062).⁵ The rhetorical force and function of these legislative bills is to re-entrench racism, homophobia, and transphobia while targeting queer, trans, and non-white populations legislatively while tacitly offering support for further non-legislative attacks against these groups. The collectively produced video and its participatory context intervene in such delimitations. By featuring the remixed voices and stories of some of those most compromised by and implicated in these legislative measures, the video offers viewers an imagined and performed alternative to coalitions across multiple identity registers.

Through their remixed stories and their acts of stepping into the voices and narrated lived histories of one another, the youth in the video perform the disarticulation of the body, sex, gender, and desire. In so doing, we propose they are engaged in rhetorical gesturing that enacts relational literacies, which in turn create possibilities for intervening in the delegitimation of their bodies and their lived knowledges across generational contexts as well as across racialized, sex/ed, and gender/ed locations. The young people in the video demonstrate a shared understanding of the power of knowledges to both do and undo. Their performance moves viewers to ask if such relational literacy practices might be the challenge Judith Butler imagined when she wrote about the “radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as ‘life,’” and, we would add, ways of knowing that count as knowledge. Such a production can “expand the very meaning of a valued and valuable body—that at once desires and produces knowledge-in the world” (*Bodies* 22).

In our video production, both young and old bodies express, produce, and desire knowledge. After the final youth voices announce their identities, as the last of their faces flash across the screen, Adela’s meditating hum introduced earlier in the video re-enters the soundscape, and for only a moment Grannie Dottie, too, returns. Here she can be read as an elder in the mix, as the words, “vital material conjunction: locating possibilities for action” appear, flicker in rhythm with the checkers of sunlight, and finally disappear. The dissipating assemblage of words at the end of this brief video calls viewers to consider not only how knowledges might be remixed, refracted, and dispersed but also

how those same knowledges might inform (possibilities for) participatory culture as well as relational, intergenerational, and coalitional action. As Henry Jenkins asserts, participatory culture can shift “the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement whereby new literacies involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking.” This is akin to what we are calling relational literacies, which “build on traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and crucial analysis skills” (4).

For Jenkins, remix is a product of appropriation and transformation. This idea calls into question the potential for multimEDIATED queer performance to achieve queer temporality and to operate as a critical, coalitional gesture of intervention into the violences of the normative across multiple contexts (see Martin; Muñoz, *Cruising*). We understand these performed remixes of bodies and narratives as assemblages of “bodies-so-far,” a concept that, following feminist geographer Doreen Massey, encapsulates the dynamism implicated in becoming rhetorical bodies (Licona 2013). Too, the youths’ distinct embodiments serve to demonstrate multiple iterations of gendered performances that can destabilize any notion of fixed and permanent identities. In advocating for one another’s right to express and to access knowledge, to be visible in history and in their differently embodied performances, these youth were purpose-driven and coalitional. Their demonstrations of and calls for particular knowledges and specific information were made not necessarily by the writer of the narrative, but in coalition with an/other youth. It is an affirmation and production of multiple and unhinged author/ities, what we consider to be everyday experts, seeking knowledge and disseminating information through relational literacies and engendering swarms of vitalities and affinities as well as coalitional possibilities.

Our framing of their performances remixed with the images of Grannie signals one such possibility for the source of knowledges and authority—*abuelit@* wisdoms that simultaneously endure through the development of intergenerational coalitions and relational literacies and fade with the diminishing of life and mind. We return here to queer temporalities and recall Mimi Nguyen’s treatment of the “copy-image of a beloved body” as “an idea of a thing of the past, especially in a serial form [that] generates new feeling-states to shape a particular historical consciousness about the present” (86). For Nguyen, the photograph (and for us the moving image of Grannie as the embodiment of *abuelit@* wisdom) can elicit “the past’s profound resonance in our experience of the present” (Nguyen 83).

The embodied rhetorics performed in the video fuel and fire rhetorical possibilities. Through their connections to one another, knowledge production, and bodily movement, they rhetorically gesture to “mobilize new stories and new expressive possibilities” (Dolmage 8; see also Hawhee). In so doing,

the youth in relation to each other and in juxtaposition to Grannie evidence the possibility for building what Aimee Carrillo Rowe calls “coalitional subjectivities,” or the understanding of other people’s subjectivities and struggles as so integral to one’s own it is impossible to separate them from one’s self. Such a subjectivity is also a *subjectivity so far*, one that is as fragile as it is full and recognized as “not yet,” in process, “yet to come,” and always becoming (see also Halberstam; Muñoz, *Cruising*).

Returning to Grannie’s presence and the expression of compressed time, viewers might imagine the range of embodied performances Grannie has had access to and herself performed over time. Her presence suggests coalitional possibilities and understandings across generational boundaries and thereby disrupts any notion of an impassable generational divide. As Bennett notes, “[w]hen diverse bodies suddenly draw near and form a public, they have been provoked to do so by a problem” (100). Demands for desired, relevant, and meaningful knowledges and information were often dislocated from particular bodies that could be read as “exceptional” to those that could be read as “deviant.” But those demands shifted back and forth, slipping in between producing and being produced by a kind of disorientation that functions to make delegitimated bodies legible as those that produce and desire knowledges (see Britzman, *Lost Subjects*; Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics*; Licona, “Remixed Literacies”; Martin, “Spatiality of Queer Youth”; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*). The relational practices in this segment of the video demonstrate a drawing near of diverse bodies and lived histories together with a keen recognition of the problem of positioning particular youth as exceptional and therefore others as unworthy. This reading and understanding of the world is disrupted by the youth through collective, disidentificatory practices and demonstrated coalitional gestures (see Muñoz, *Disidentifications*). As such, the bodies in this video are an unstable assemblage of *stories so far*: embodied spaces for articulatory practices—remixed literacies of and in the flesh—to be understood as embodied tools and performed tactics for rhetorical gesturing, storytelling, history-and-change-making, and possible coalition.

The juxtaposition of Grannie in our remix, especially in her visual dispersal through the refracted mirror images, is a reminder of the context in which this video was made—a context that included the ban on Ethnic Studies. Grannie, marked generationally by her advanced age and declining health, serves as a visual reminder of what we have introduced here as the *abuelit@* wisdoms that can be at play in young people’s home communities and that are relevant to them in their calls for the right to access particular knowledges and histories. Rhetorical theorist and Disability Studies scholar Jay Dolmage contends that rhetoric is perhaps best made dynamic by a range of bodies fighting against imposed ideological limitations (see also Juarez). Through

accomplished disorientations, disarticulations, and incoherencies of whose-bodies-are-speaking-whose-knowledges, histories, and desires, the bodies in motion in this video effectively scramble any normative matrix of coherent sexed, gendered, and bodily norms as well as the potential for exceptionalism to stick to any one body or narrative (see Halberstam).

"A Swarm of Vitalities/A Swarm of Affinities" affects a remixed literacy that insists on bodies and beings as dynamic, relational, sexual, participatory, and porous productions of and for knowledge exchange and desire and, in so doing, the video demonstrates coalitional possibilities, re-imaginings, radical openness, and relational literacies. Relational literacies (as both practices and events) imply, create, gesture toward, engender, and enable coalitional possibilities and also re-imaginings and so radical openness (see hooks). Remixing can also be an example of relational literacies but it is not necessarily so. One way to practice and develop relational literacies, as demonstrated here, is through remixing—a practice that disarticulates and delegitimizes normative logics and affirms/creates new, alternative shared knowledges. For those of us interested in rhetorical processes within and for coalition building, a consideration of relational literacies is thus of vital importance.

Notes

- 1 Relational literacies is a concept named and taken up explicitly in Londie Martin's 2013 dissertation titled *The Spatiality of Queer Youth Activism: Sexuality and the Performance of Relational Literacies through Multimodal Play*.
- 2 Undoubtedly, this view of coalition and the metaphor of the horizon will remind some readers of José Esteban Muñoz's discussion of queerness as always on the horizon. As Chávez notes in her uptake of this metaphor and engagement with Muñoz's definition of the queer, coalition and queerness certainly resonate with one another, but here coalition *is* the horizon of possibility, not a potentiality *on* a horizon.
- 3 Please go to the following URL, <https://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/crossroads/letstalkaboutsexed>, to see "Let's Talk About Sex Ed," the video youth produced as participatory media at the anti-racist summer youth art and activism summer camp (a portion of which was used here in "A Swarm of Vitalities / A Swarm of Affinities,").
- 4 Lomawaima made this reference at the "Arizona at the Crossroads 2010" presentation sponsored by the University of Arizona's Faculty Governance and President's Office, University of Arizona, 10 September 2010.

- 5 These each refer to legislation proposed or considered in the state of Arizona. In 2010, controversial State Senator Russell Pearce considered introducing a bill that would have denied citizenship to Arizona-born children of undocumented immigrants. In 2013, Arizona lawmakers proposed a bill (SB 1045) that would have protected businesses if they wanted to deny transgender people access to the bathroom of their choice. Also in 2013, the Arizona legislature approved (though Governor Jan Brewer vetoed) SB 1062, which would have exempted people or entities from abiding by state laws if doing so violated their exercise of religion.

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