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Inserting Oneself in the Story: Queer Literacy, Comics, and an Admonition to Move

Irene Papoulis

Trinity College, irene.papoulis@trincoll.edu

Nicholas P. Marino

Trinity College, nicholas.marino@trincoll.edu

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BOOK REVIEWS

Inserting Oneself in the Story: Queer Literacy,
Comics, and an Admonition to Move

Irene Papoulis

The books reviewed in this issue are on disparate topics. The reviewers, too, are very different people, with distinct vantage points: a rhetorician, a compositionist, and a retired bilingual elementary school teacher. Nevertheless, a connecting thread here is the way each reviewer weaves themselves into their readings of the books. Marino recognizes himself as a version of the “queer literate” that Mark McBeth defines; in his review, we learn some of the story of Marino’s own curation, growing up, of a queer archive of “ephemera.” Romatz describes her experience being inspired at a presentation by the writers of the two books she went on to review, Emil Ferris and Nick Sousanis, who described how drawing fueled their thinking and writing. Romatz realized that the theories of freewriting and other composition strategies at the root of her own teaching of writing could be applied to comics and drawing. She resolved to find ways to explore the implications of the visual more deeply, perhaps at a future AEPL conference. In a sense she is following Twyla Tharp’s prescription as H. Papoulis describes it in her review: to keep moving and growing in new directions. As Papoulis reflected on her personal experience of the resentments generated in her by difficult administrators and life circumstances, she too developed a personal engagement with Tharp’s advice. All in all, these books and these reviewers, with their emphasis on expansive notions of texts, processes, and ways of being—to include artistic orientation, viscosity, corporeality and movement, materiality and artifacts, as well as a range of personal and professional experiences and perspectives—embody the distinctive spirit that animates AEPL and this journal.



McBeth, Mark. *Queer Literacies: Discourses and Discontents*, Lexington Books, 2019, 280 pages.

Nicholas Marino
Trinity College

Reading Mark McBeth’s *Queer Literacies: Discourses and Discontents* brought me on a personal journey through my own literacy development as a queer individual. In addition, the book offers a useful theoretical framework and methodology for studying, researching, and writing about queer literacy. In the review that follows, I first present a recap of this framework and its scholarly contribution; then, I conclude with my personal connection to the text.

To begin, McBeth’s book is aptly titled given the scope and methods of his project. From the start, his intentions are clear: he will not only unite and extend the imbricated discourses of literacy, identity, and sexuality, but also do so in purposeful opposition to

mainstream, heteronormative discourses that control and suppress such knowledges. And yet, despite this almost adversarial approach, McBeth never stoops to defensiveness, but instead cultivates his “discontent” with heteronormative-homophobic literacy sponsors—whether they are institutions like schools and libraries or entrenched academic concepts—into a pleurably defiant project that positions queer voices at the center of literacy scholarship. The result is a new personal-political method to investigating, writing about, and working with archival materials; he coins it a “narrative-cum-analytic” approach that “demonstrates how paraphernalia and archival documents conjoined with memoir and critical analysis can combine into critical experimental genres” (25). This methodology—which fuses archival work, auto-ethnography, and high theory—aids McBeth as he reflects upon and builds a rhetorical framework around personal ephemera (i.e. school work, drawings, papers, etc.) from his educational history. Against this literacy background, he also maps out his own process of coming out, exploring the literacy journeys he undertook to understand and define his queerness through a paucity of print resources that sketched homosexuality in terms of perversion, not pleasure, and abjection, not identity. In doing so, McBeth pushes against the personal and scholarly discontents with heteronormative and homophobic discourses, which use “strategies of debasement and silence ... to reproduce and control a normative sexual worldview” (31).

This resistance generates a new subject position, that of the queer literate, who carves out their own literacy subversively and in direct contradistinction to the normative ideological freight imparted by literacy sponsors. At its core, *Queer Literacies* builds off Deborah Brandt’s foundational work in “Sponsors of Literacy,” while also integrating the pioneering work of literacy scholars highlighting queer and minority experiences. To name a few notable examples: Ellen Louise Hart (“Literacy and the Lesbian/Gay Learner”), Eric Darnell Pritchard (*Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*), Jaqueline Jones Royster (*Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*), Jonathan Alexander (*Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy*), and José Esteban Muñoz (*Cruising Utopia*). Uniting each of these projects through his own work, McBeth demonstrates that the queer literate is not an aberration, but actually produced by the process of literacy sponsorship itself. As McBeth states, “If these heteronormativizing literacy forces have sustained their dominant positions through an ongoing front of rhetorical-literate strategies, Queers would over the span of the twentieth century also labor to read the sources that oppressed them, research knowledge and worlds that others refused to acknowledge, and write new narratives that revised antagonistic readings of homosexuality” (32). Thus, queer literates emerge from their personal rejection of and resistance to the heteronormative-homophobic discourses embedded within their sponsors’ literacy training. Alone, the queer literate may seem sadly lost, an individual pitted against mainstream forces of suppression. However, when one’s story is placed in the context of other queer literates, what emerges is a community of subjects, with a complex, rich history, struggling against and remaking literacy platforms in their image.

McBeth’s narrative-cum-analysis approach is a successful tool for uncovering and combining these shared struggles and resistances. Of note, in Chapter 2, “Archival Tracks and Traces,” he explores the memoir genre to reveal how queers, in their early stages of identity development, seek out literature about homosexuality, only to find that their identities are shrouded in the language of perversion. Even more, some accounts

mention how literacy sponsors such as libraries, schools, and bookstores kept the books in literal and figurative jail, locked away from the general public and only available by request. The watchful eyes of the librarians and other patrons served to regulate and withhold such literacy, thereby reinforcing the sponsored view of homosexuality as abnormality. In Chapter 5, “Gay book? Libraries? That rang bells for me!,” McBeth investigates how various activist movements within the American Library Association (ALA) attempted in the years after the Stonewall Riots to remedy this situation by “upending the tsk-tsk of heteronormative biblio-techniques and replace it with literate sponsorships in which Queer literates could find accurate facts and empowering words to buoy themselves” (133). In tracking the Gay Task Force’s work within the ALA, we witness how important inroads were made to provide access to reputable resources, while at the same time others criticized ALA’s lack of support for queer people within the library system itself. Thus, the narrative-cum-analysis in this chapter illustrates the complexity of sponsors, who are not simply unified figure-heads, but stratified organizations with multiple valences of power often at odds within itself. The throughline between Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, which covers the personal experiences of the sponsored and the institutional perspective of the sponsor, seems to suggest that McBeth is only interested in traditional literacy platforms (i.e. libraries, schools, etc.). However, Chapter 6, “Psycho-Babble” and Chapter 7, “Viral Impetus” explore how literacy in specialized fields, like psychology and the medical community, filter down into the cultural zeitgeist shaping general knowledge. Each case study is composed of the voices and perspectives of individual queer literates, quilted together in the chapter and across the book, creating the impression of a powerful, unifying experience that these individuals have suffered through, challenged, and still continue to overcome.

Given that *Queer Literacies* puts the author’s own voice and experience into conversation with memoirists, activists, and critical theorists, it’s appropriate then that I interject my own narrative into this review of the project. In particular, I want to reflect upon the implicit connection McBeth makes between queerness, collecting, and coming of age. While he doesn’t explicitly reflect on this relationship, it is embedded within his inspiration for the book. For instance, when cleaning out his family home after his mother’s passing, McBeth came across an archive of schoolwork, projects, drawings, etc. that his mother saved and housed safely within a desk drawer. Pouring over these artifacts, he was transported mentally to the sites and contexts of literacy learning, while also seeing how various sponsors shaped his experience of growing up queer in conservative central Pennsylvania. I couldn’t help but think of the various collections I amassed as a queer youth and the ways in which collecting is a queer literacy act. When I was young, my parents often called me a packrat and, for this reason, my grandmother always brought me trinkets from vacations, impromptu shopping trips, or catalogue buying sprees. “Nicholas loves his doodads,” she would say to my mother at the kitchen table, which was just a little too big for the breakfast nook. I remember this explicitly because part of the table was jammed next to the counter, creating a private lean-to where I’d play with my trinkets until they were chipped or threadbare. Once the novelty wore off, doodads were never tossed out. Instead, they lived in another sacred space, the tiny drawer next to my nightstand.

A queer archive in its own right; I can still picture it in my mind's eye. Immediately, I see a half-melted ballerina candle from my little cousin's birthday cake. I took it because it was pretty, and I hid it deep within the drawer so no one would find it. Its charred tip would brush against other items leaving traces of its history. For instance, I can actually remember tracing my finger over the charcoal smudges on "subscription" tickets for bodybuilding magazines, which I pulled from glossy pages while my mother finished shopping in the supermarket. There were pages and pages of superhero drawings and cassette tapes of recording artists that my friends and older brother thought were too girly to listen to. Each artifact stands out to me as the crystallization of a particular learning experience, as I transformed into a queer literate. More specifically, each doodad became a vehicle for gender play, as off-brand G.I. Joe's did splits, ballet, and partnered off with other male toys and figures. The more precious of the doodads, which I wouldn't dare put in the drawer with the abrasive wick of the ballerina candle, occupied a shelf in my mother's curio cabinet. This collection provided a chance to learn the art of domestic work, as I played at dusting, cleaning, and arranging these items for display. Then, in the more traditional sense, I sharpened my reading prowess with bodybuilding magazine advertisements. My physical education class involved secretly dancing to female pop-songs of the late 80s and early 90s. Like McBeth, I can also see those who sponsored that literacy: my grandmother who gave a fresh supply of trinkets with every visit, my friends and brother who pushed my musical inclinations underground, the abstract and distant publishers of bodybuilding magazines and comic books who boosted my imagination.

Until reading *Queer Literacies*, I thought I was alone in my curation of vast collections of ephemera that appealed to a secret, subversive side of myself that I couldn't quite grasp yet. "Why do you want to keep *that*?" friends and family would ask. I could never quite articulate why. Without a compelling reason to defend this collection, the queer archive in my bedside drawer was thrown out, then slowly replaced, then dumped, and built up again several times. The shedding of so many skins in my growth as a queer literate. The focus on archiving that spurs McBeth's book raises for me new connections to material rhetorics and social literacies, as well as the post-human impact of literacy learning. There're still a few boxes of ephemera in the eaves of my parents' house, begrudgingly saved when I became empowered enough to say I wanted to keep them. Long after I'm gone, these artifacts will speak for me: what will they say to my niece and nephew and their children about who their uncle was at different ages of his life? What will they reveal about social and cultural materials that shaped my growth into a literate, confident, gay man? What unknown cost was there in throwing away all of those past literacy materials? What would I give to hold, reflect upon, and write about the contents of that drawer again? *Queer Literacies* attests to the fact that every queer individual should hang onto, reflect upon, and chart their own archive of literacy growth, even if the reasons for doing so aren't clear. By sharing the contents of that secret drawer with others, we will find, in retrospect, a collective testament of our survival against literacy sponsors who told us that our self-knowledge wasn't valid, that we shouldn't exist, and that we can't be proud of the queer literates we've become.