

## Review:

### *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy* by Eric Darnell Pritchard

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In his direct and eye-opening book, *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*, Eric Darnell Pritchard shows Black Queers as “subjects of literacy, not objects of inquiry that literacy [acts] upon” who, through participation in literate practices, give meaning to literacy and enact love for self and community (35). He begins the process of filling a major gap within the field of literacy, composition, and rhetoric by exposing the literacy narratives of previously silenced Black LGBTQ people.

Though researchers have explored literacies of Hmong refugees (Duffy), Cherokee (Cushman), older individuals (Bowen), as well as digital literacies in the US (Selfe and Hawisher) and around the globe (Berry, Selfe, and Hawisher), among others, we know remarkably little about Black LGBTQ literacies, a community of which Pritchard himself is a part. His work opens up this important conversation that links literacy, rhetoric, and composition with community engagement and activism.

This book springs from the fact that examinations of racialized genders and sexualities remain absent from, or inconsistently represented within, literacy, composition, and rhetoric studies. While gender and sexuality are topics often covered in literacy, composition, and rhetoric, Pritchard demonstrates how these discussions focus on the binary and exclude non-normative gender identities and sexualities. Even less emphasis has been placed on the intersection of race, gender, and normativity within literacy, rhetoric and composition. To address this gap, Pritchard builds a framework in which *Queers of Color Literacies* can be further examined using what he coins *literacy normativity* and *restorative literacies* which build upon Brandt's sponsors of literacy in *Literacy in American Lives*.

Through his concept of literacy normativity, Pritchard identifies ways in which race, gender, and sexuality intersect to establish a set of boundaries for gender and sexual normalcy and dictate who is and isn't literate as well as what literacies are considered normal and appropriate. Unlike most examinations of Brandt's work, he leans into the negative side of literacy sponsorship to show how literacy is often withheld and regulated in the narratives of Black Queer individuals. Racialized views of Black sexuality as predatory and deviant police Black LGBTQ people more than other LGBTQ individuals; and for many Black children and adults, bookishness is seen not only as a White characteristic, but as a marker of non-normativity or queerness even if the subject matter is not queer. He doesn't stop there, however, and instead continues to examine the ways in which Black Queers give meaning to the very literacy that damaged them, enacting *restorative literacies* which in turn fuel social transformation.

Pritchard's findings emerge as a collection of literacy narratives obtained over the course of seven years, including 60 self-identified Black LGBTQ people born between the years 1940 and 1991. He prefaces these narratives with his own literacy narrative and then knits them between close readings of novels, films, and other cultural texts such as music and dance to illustrate ways in which Black LGBTQ people give meaning to literacies which cause them harm and also provide opportunities to "make a life on their own terms" (48). To do this, he looks first at ways in which Black LGBTQ individuals conceal

their literacy which they feel will mark them as non-normative—or queer—through hiding, stealing, and use of place as well as how they use literacy to fashion their identities as intersectional queer individuals. He continues to examine ways in which literacy meaning making incorporates ancestorship to combat historic erasure of Black LGBTQ people. He further examines the role of Black spiritualities in policing racialized genders and sexualities as well as how Black LGBTQ people interact in digital spaces.

In the third chapter, for example, Pritchard examines Black LGBTQ people of faith and the roles *literacy normativity* and *restorative literacy* play in their spiritual identities (themes and concepts that are addressed throughout rest of the book). Here, *literacy normativity* appears in the form of *spiritual violence*, a term borrowed from Reverend Jimmy Creech, where religious texts are used against non-normative genders and sexualities. It is important to note here that Pritchard uses Creech who was defrocked in 1999 after co-performing a same sex union for two men as it shows the intersectionality of literacy normativity. Creech himself was victim of the *spiritual violence* he spoke of; however, as a demonstration of *restorative literacy*, Pritchard referred to Creech using the title Reverend despite the title having been revoked by the Methodist Church—one of many instances in which this book is itself an act of *restorative literacy*. Through participants' narratives in this chapter, Pritchard shows how many of his participants employ *restorative literacies* by utilizing the same texts to affirm and support their identities as Black LGBTQ people of faith, taking what was used as a means of denying love to an individual and using it as an act of self and communal love, identity formation, and affirmation. Pritchard touches on the vast history of African American Christianity which further demonstrates how limited the options are for Black Queers to find normativity within a Black identity. While affirming churches such as the United Fellowship Church Movement (UFCM) are becoming more widely available and other religions are a viable option for Black Queers, many find that they are the only or one of few Black people in their new faith community. Through a queering of their faith, a reinterpretation of texts, and occasionally the creation of new forms of spirituality, Pritchard's examination of Black LGBTQ people of faith further illustrates how literacy creates a sense of space in which intersectional identities can converge to create safer literacies.

Pritchard's rhetorical distinction between the terms *Queers of Color* and *Black LGBTQ* may be less accessible to those who find the words "queer," "color," and "Black" to be politically and personally loaded or not to reflect their personal identity. However, it is Pritchard's description of the word queer "as a practice of non-normative subjecthood" which extends beyond the scope of his research project—*Black LGBTQ* people—and which truly acts as a call for action within the academic community (22). The brash tone of Pritchard's call for change within literacy, rhetoric, and composition may be off putting to audiences who are less aware of the experiences of both the *LGBTQ* and *Black* communities—especially the racialized sexualities imposed upon people of color in America. However, much like the reclaiming of the word "queer," the tone of this book does more in the favor of further inclusion than it does harm.

To say that this work is timely would be an understatement; the examination of *Queers of Color* literacies is long overdue and particularly poignant in the current political climate. *Fashioning Lives* does not fill the gap as much as exposes the gap in literacy, rhetoric, and composition studies as well as lay out a framework with which other scholars may investigate *Queers of Color* Literacies beyond those found within *LGBT* communities. Additionally, he captures narratives of *Black LGBTQ* people whose narratives may be otherwise lost to continued erasure of *Black* and *Queer* individuals. *Fashioning Lives* is a wake-up call to scholars of literacy, rhetoric, and composition, particularly those involved in community engagement and public rhetoric, asking that we take notice of the literacies that have been taken for granted, specifically those in which race, gender, and sexuality intersect. Readers are challenged to see the ways *Black LGBTQ* people interact with literacy despite the numerous ways in which it is continually being denied them even today.

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