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Transdisciplinary and Community Literacies: Shifting Discourses and Practices through New Paradigms of Public Scholarship and Action- Oriented Research

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Transdisciplinary and Community Literacies: Shifting Discourses and Practices through New Paradigms of Public Scholarship and Action-Oriented Research

Adela C. Licona and Stephen T. Russell

In 2010, we received a nationally competitive grant from the Ford Foundation to undertake cross-disciplinary, community-engaged work to shift public conversations around youth sexuality, health, and rights (YSHR). We came to the projects from our positions as a humanities scholar (Licona) and as a social science scholar (Russell). According to the Ford Foundation, “a deeper understanding of human sexuality is an essential element of human rights and healthy social relationships.” Beginning with this assumption, we seek to be informed by and to inform policies and local practices; to initiate broad conversations that address sexual health and healthy sexualities for youth; and ultimately to develop innovative collaborations, programs, and research.

We proposed and were funded to: 1) engage in action-oriented research; 2) train cross-disciplinary sexuality scholars; and 3) produce strategic communications that would allow for our collaborative research to circulate meaningfully throughout academic and non-academic contexts. Community literacies are relevant to each of these goals, as they must necessarily inform participatory research and its circulation. By “community literacies” we mean not only the lived, relational, and situated knowledges that circulate in and across communities, but also the ways in which those knowledges are produced and communicated.

With our funding, we established the Crossroads Collaborative, a *think-and-do tank* that brings together University of Arizona faculty, postdoctoral research associates, graduate student scholars, youth-oriented community partners, and local youth to understand what and how young people learn about the dimensions and intersections of the full spectrum of their identities and what it all means for their sexualities, health, rights, and well-being. Our grant was one of six such grants in the US that year. Instead of taking already established research agendas to a community, grantees worked to develop their research agendas *with* communities to address topics deemed by the community to be locally relevant and connected to youth sexuality, health, and rights (YSHR). The projects that were funded, and are delineated in this special issue, hold the potential to critically and creatively address the possibilities and constraints that often exist simultaneously in community contexts. These local possibilities and constraints aid and/or prohibit youth access to sexuality and health knowledge, information, and resources that are basic human rights. The same possibilities and constraints are at play when youth attempt to express themselves about these issues and others regarding their sexual and gender identities. Articles here highlight the ways in which literacy practices produce and inform, as well as are produced and informed by, these very possibilities and constraints and the broad social issues, relations, policies, and practices from which they emerge.

Our own research at the Crossroads Collaborative began in a context of “legislated intolerance,”¹ which initiated and enforced restrictions on particular bodies,

groups of people, and bodies of knowledge. After Arizona became known as having passed the most regressive anti-immigrant and anti-immigration legislation in decades, other states quickly followed suit. Through our collaborations at this historic moment, we worked with youth who responded to repressive conditions with creativity, knowledge, curiosity, and advocacy. In yearly grantee gatherings, we learned that others shared similar experiences with youth in their communities. Across projects, we learned that youth care: they are interested in learning, and in participating in learning environments that are respectful, meaningful, and culturally relevant. They have dreams, desires, ideas, and demands, as well as fears and uncertainties. They are interested in productive social change, particularly regarding issues that affect their lives as multiply situated historic and sexual subjects. Across these diverse research/community collaborations, we learned that changing the status quo requires increased understanding of youth perspectives and support for amplifying their voices, and their multi-modal literacies, as they claim their collective right to knowledges that are meaningful to their lives. The projects in this special collection demonstrate multiple approaches to understanding youth perspectives, including approaches that are implicitly and explicitly about the literacies that informed and contextualized each project. Such situated literacies² were expressed and exchanged between community organizations and academic institutions, youth and community researchers in youth-serving organizations, and action-oriented academic researchers.

For this special issue, we sought submissions that feature innovative “research with respect”³ and the possibility for reciprocity; that address theoretical, methodological, pedagogical, and/or policy implications; that attend to how research is undertaken by academic and non-academic community members, and is translated and made legible across community contexts for the explicit purpose of social change; that include and highlight youth voice and vision; and/or that creatively bring stories and numbers together in participatory action-oriented research.⁴ We circulated our call to other Ford Foundation grantees and explained our approach as one that considers each of us, and our community collaborators, “literacy workers.” We defined “literacy work” as work that is relational, informed by community concerns, considers community members as knowledgeable, treats community histories as meaningful, makes people and places knowable and understandable to one another across contexts, and is oriented toward social change.

By making such innovative, cross-disciplinary practices visible and legible here, we hope to inspire other change-oriented research collaborations. In keeping with this journal’s priorities, we are pleased that community and academic researchers have co-authored every article. Such collaborations effectively move beyond the division that can exist between the academy and the community and the knowledges that circulate and are produced therein. We have included individual and collaborative work by youth in our local communities; by emerging sexuality scholars; and by poets whose work inspired us and offered meaningful insight into lived experiences, dreams, desires, disappointments, and righteous anger. Each article manifests an approach to literacy that insists on valuing knowledges that emerge from the inside-out and the bottom-up. More importantly, each article works to use these literacies to make communities intelligible as historical agents of knowledge production. Re-

sulting shifts to the limiting and often pathologizing discourses of youth sexualities, health, and rights can be used to inform best practices.

In “Education/Connection/Action: Community Literacies and Shared Knowledges as Creative Productions for Social Justice,” Adela C. Licona and J. Sarah Gonzales share details of their community/academic collaborations in the context of a summer camp in which youth participants, together with adult allies, were treated as knowledgeable, capable, and interested in both the acquisition and production of knowledges. Such an approach allowed participants to be treated as teacher/researchers—each with something to teach, and something to learn. Through the community pedagogy of ECA, and with an emphasis on relational literacy and participatory media, youth rendered their individual and community histories, as well as other topics of perceived urgency, understandable to one another. Participants together explored the possibilities for connection across contexts that might facilitate coalitional action during a time of particularly egregious and politicized restrictions on the knowledge, information, and resources available to youth.

In “Empower Latino Youth (ELAYO): Leveraging Youth Voice to Inform the Public Debate on Pregnancy, Parenting and Education,” academic and community collaborators write about and demonstrate the *how-tos* of engagement in participatory action research with and for youth. Their article contributes to the teacher/researcher literacies that have emerged in this special issue within projects that teach the foundations of community-based research to young people across multiple levels of formal and informal education. With this foundation, young people become active in policy-relevant and practice-based research designed to intervene in deficit-driven discourses as well as to highlight issues critical to Latino youths’ sexual and reproductive health and educational rights.

In “Addressing Economic Devastation and Built Environment Degradation to Prevent Violence: A Photovoice Project of Detroit Youth Passages,” youth and adult authors offer a glimpse of what youth see in their everyday spaces, how they see it, and, even more importantly, how they are re-visioning and re-creating it. Members of the Youth Advisory Board of Detroit Youth Passages, with the assistance of project researchers, learned to use photography as a tool for discovery and storytelling. In their article, they analyze their own photographic representations to effect two important interventions. First, through their photographs and accompanying narratives, a different Detroit—one that is lived in and loved—is introduced and made visible. Secondly, their visions effect a youth-informed structural critique that insists that viewers understand themselves as implicated in Detroit’s economic and environmental devastation, explicitly linking these conditions to violence. Youth make themselves known as persons invested in the vibrancy of their city spaces. Lived knowledges that re-contextualize and re-historicize Detroit emerge in this photo essay as community literacies that can and should inform policy efforts, particularly concerning youth communities.

In “Paying to Listen: Notes from a Survey of Sexual Commerce,” colleagues from the Detroit Youth Passages team engage in self-reflection to interrogate the practice of “paying to listen.” The authors offer an elucidating discussion of the challenges and potentials of listening to and learning from young people involved in sexual commerce. As one reviewer for this manuscript noted, this work “touches on

methodological issues often left unexamined in sexuality research, community-based and participatory research, and ethnographic studies.” Through the intimacies revealed in their shared field notes, the authors confront distinct goals and protocols for researchers and literacy workers situated in community-based organizations and those situated in the research university. They question what research with marginalized youth can accomplish, grapple with the ethical challenges of their research, and conclude that reflection, progressive learning, and ethical listening must be a part of participatory research that is committed to social change and social justice with and for youth.

In “Moving Past Assumptions: Repositioning Parents as Allies in Promoting the Sexual Literacies of Adolescents through a University-Community Collaboration,” the collaborators in Project Safe SPACES (Social Pressures, Attitudes, Culture and Experiences related to Sexuality) call us to understand parents through an asset-based framework in research and advocacy concerning sexual education and sexual/ity literacies. Parents are often considered only as obstacles to progressive and comprehensive sexual education; the research team recognized that this presumption deserved interrogation. In the team’s research, parents emerged as potential allies in the effort to secure young people’s access to sexual knowledges and develop their sexual literacies. From this perspective, parents can be understood as community literacy workers who are distinctively positioned to facilitate sexual literacies for young people that can promote healthy sexualities and healthy relationships.

Our special issue would be incomplete without consideration of the rhetorical force and function of poetic voice. Slam poetry, as noted in Adela’s and Sarah’s report, has emerged in Tucson as a coalitional practice of civic engagement for a number of different youth groups, and serves as a critical and creative tool for discovery, protest, and historic narration—it is, fundamentally, an expression of youth-driven civic engagements and community literacies. For this reason, we invited submissions from youth slam poets involved in the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam. “Man,” by Zack Taylor, intervenes in normative assumptions and expectations about what it means to be a man. In this poem, Zack slams about the right to sexual and gender non-conformity, particularly around expressions of masculinity. In “Boom,” slam poets Sammy Dominguez and Zack Taylor creatively and critically engage the realities of everyday bullying across contexts.⁵ Through their collaborative slam poem, we are reminded of the many ways in which young people experience ordinary spaces as threatening, and how educational contexts can fail to be inclusive spaces of meaningful learning. These poets use statistics about LGBTQ suicide together with the names of young people who have died by suicide—numbers and stories—to call attention to the mundane nature of everyday harassment and everyday violences. Spitting on the mic, Sammy and Zack use this performance to illuminate the intolerances that can prevail in climates where sexual and cultural literacies are restricted by normative expectations.

We also invited a submission from Niki Herd, whose poetry is simultaneously real, raw, and hopeful. She is a storyteller whose voice lends a particular urgency to our discussion of youth, sexuality, health, and rights, with a focus on the gender and sexual dimensions of young lives. In “Public Speaking,” Herd connects erased historical knowledges, invisibilities of gender non-conforming youth, and bullying, to reveal

the everyday risks of expressing non-normative sexualities and genders. Her poetry returns us to legislated intolerance and the need for education to contest such misinformed and still powerful practices. Her lyrical and poignant prose also invites us to witness the hopeful image of a young person “model-walking freedom” and “expressing confidence in youth and a young sexuality.”

We are particularly pleased to include *Project Connect: Youth Power*, a collaborative zine produced with contributions by youth activists from four of the Ford Foundation-funded research projects in Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, and Tucson. Youth contributors got to know each other via a cross-country, multi-modal curriculum designed by J. Sarah Gonzales, who facilitated the participatory production of the zine through a series of video exchanges in which youth introduced themselves and their communities, initiated conversations around YSHR, and considered the possibilities for ongoing collaborations and alliances. Through their video dialogues and shared writings, youth served as (media) literacy workers who taught one another about their home communities as well as about local issues pertaining to YSHR, including teen Latina parenting and LGBTQ rights. They co-produced this zine to “show solidarity, inspire long-term activism, and build community.” Their zine demonstrates that contributors understand themselves as part of a larger collective power and that the right to knowledge and resources around a broad understanding of sexualities is of crucial importance to youth across the country. Through this multimedia collaboration, they came to see more clearly that youth both alike and different from themselves are making change in their communities.

Our special issue ends with reviews written by Crossroads scholars Amanda Fields, Londie Martin, and Jenna Vinson highlighting texts relevant to scholars and activists who are informed by the goals and principles of action-oriented literacy scholarship. By engaging, (1) the history and meanings of slam poetry and hip-hop pedagogy in and beyond the (conflicted) classroom; (2) Latina lives and sexualities; (3) digital youth curricula that address contemporary sexualities; and (4) sexuality and health education for communities of diverse and fluid gender identities and expressions; these reviews collectively address the power and potential of storytelling, arts-based literacies, sexual and gender literacies, and multi-modal and place-based literacies to inform formal and informal curricula and research agendas committed to social justice.

Through our traditional and non-traditional approaches to community research and community literacies, we hope to have advanced an understanding of the promise and potential of reciprocal and relational literacies, highlighting how these can inform asset-driven approaches to youth knowledges, community knowledges, action-oriented and policy-relevant research, cross-disciplinary graduate training, and public conversations about YSHR. Through each project, diverse teams of academics, community organizers, students, and youth engage in collective inquiries that offer innovative examples of meaningful engagement with diverse community literacies in the pursuit of social change in the areas of youth, sexuality, health, and rights.

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Endnotes

1. Prescott College's Chair of Humanities, Randall Amster, J.D., Ph.D., has referred to the legislation emerging from Arizona's 49th legislature as part of a larger drive toward legislated intolerance.
2. See David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanič, *Situated Literacies: Theorizing Reading and Writing in Context* (New York: Routledge, 2000), and Kate Pahl and Sally Kelly, "Family Literacy as a Third Space between Home and School: Some Case Studies of Practice," *Literacy*, 39 (2005): 91-96.
3. Our use of "research with respect" is inspired by the University of Arizona's Knowledge River program's 2010 panel discussion titled "Research with Respect: Ethical Approaches to Native American Cultural Research and Archival Practices," which addressed research integrity in action-oriented scholarly projects with non-dominant and indigenous communities.
4. For us, the act of making something, someone, or someplace legible or intelligible can be understood as both a literacy event (see Shirley Brice Heath, "What No Bedtime Story Means: Narrative Skills at Home and School," *Language in Society*, 11 (1982): 49-76) and a literacy practice.
5. Readers can access Sammy's and Zack's slam performance of "Boom" from the Brave New Voices 2012 Competition in Berkeley, CA on the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam YouTube channel. Go to Sammy D & Zack T (Team Tucson—Brave New Voices 2012). Their performance is also accessible through the Community Literacy Journal website.

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