

Queer Ruptures of Normative Literacy Practices: Toward Visualizing, Hypothesizing, and Empathizing

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This project focuses on the co-teaching and co-researching of a high school LGBTQ-themed literature course with particular attention to the reading and discussion of a queer-themed young adult novel, Brezenoff's Brooklyn, Burning. In blending teacher inquiry and ethnographic methodologies, we found that students and teachers encountered ruptures to normative literacy practices of seeing, understanding, and connecting. When the class collectively treated these disruptions as excesses and problems, they disengaged with these ruptures such that dialogue was destabilized and sporadic. Without sustained dialogue, the class reproduced dominant literacy practices of seeing, understanding, and connecting, which in turn contributed to reifying normativities around sexuality, gender, race, and epistemologies. In contrast, when students and teachers stayed with disruptions and continued to dialogue about them across time, they took them up as opportunities for learning. Collectively they co-constructed alternative enactments of literacy practices, centered around visualizing and hypothesizing, which in turn facilitated empathizing. Through these alternatives, they contested normativities around sexuality, gender, addiction, and epistemologies, although not race and whiteness. Ultimately, we argue that with ruptures as obstacles, readers may or may not be able to see, understand, or connect with characters; but with ruptures as opportunities, readers can visualize, hypothesize about, and more deeply empathize with characters and their circumstances. Therefore, reading with ruptures is a risk worth taking.

It was spring break in 2015, and most students in our high school LGBTQ-themed literature course were participating, with us, in a videoconference with Steve Brezenoff, author of *Brooklyn, Burning*. We had met in a restaurant's community room less than a week after finishing the book. Early in the conversation, one of the students said, "I guess this is like the question that's been like burning in my mind, but like, why did you choose not to gender Kid [the narrator] and Scout [Kid's love interest]?"

Brezenoff described how this decision came out of a move that began as feminist and ended as queering. When he started writing the story that later became the book, he was critiqued in a writing workshop for a character he was creating for another book, who he was told was unconvincing as a girl because she was "into online gaming," "really into eating," "had body odor," "had a kind of filthy mouth," and "spoke her mind a little bit too loudly"—critiques he experienced as sexist (whether they were is impossible for us to know). So, he experimented

with writing in “second person and first person at the same time . . . avoiding all of the gendered pronouns in English.” At this point, he was “strictly being feminist.” He brought the writing to the workshop, hoping to show the other writers how stereotypes were informing their critiques of his writing. “I really wanted these people to just see what they were doing,” he explained. Thus, Brezenoff initiated a feminist rupture, by destabilizing and interrupting sexist practices and ideologies that (over)determine what a girl can and cannot be.

Brezenoff’s feminist rupture evolved into a queer one. Whereas he could not “even remember if [he] had assigned Kid and Scout genders” initially, he ultimately chose not to gender them. He said,

I never assigned [the characters] anything. . . . I was thinking about sort of, I mean, genderqueer for sure. I don’t know if necessarily trans or just generally nonbinary, um, but, you know it all, it all crossed my mind. . . . I definitely didn’t want to give it any one place on the [gender] spectrum.

By creating two genderqueer characters, Brezenoff destabilized not only sexist practices and ideologies but also those grounded in cisnormativity.¹ Moreover, by creating storylines that embraced these characters’ love lives and provided glimpses into their sex lives, Brezenoff interrupted heterosexist practices and ideologies. In these ways, he initiated queer ruptures beyond his writing workshop in the spaces where *Brooklyn, Burning* is read and discussed, including our high school LGBTQ-themed literature course.

The fact that a queer-themed text features disruptive elements and ideologies does not mean that readers will take them up in any particular way, if at all. As our literature review reveals, textual elements can be ignored, distorted, or used to harm people and reify oppression as much as they can function as resources for people to relate to other people and enact social change. This tension provoked the questions that guided this study:

- What happened when people in the LGBTQ-themed literature course engaged with the ruptures (re)presented by and through this queer-themed text?
- How did people contest and reproduce normativities as they navigated disruption, and with what consequences for understandings of sexuality and gender?

We argue that students and teachers, in the context of reading *Brooklyn, Burning*, encountered ruptures of normative literacy practices of seeing, understanding, and connecting. In some instances, the classroom group treated these disruptions as obstacles. In turn, they destabilized dialogue, naming normativities but not offering alternatives, and thus reproducing these normativities. In contrast, when they took up ruptures as opportunities for learning, they sustained dialogue, contesting normativities and co-constructing alternative literacy practices of visualizing and hypothesizing, which in turn facilitated empathizing.

Literature Review: Queer Ruptures in Literacy Research

In seeking to understand queer ruptures in classrooms, we turn to educational scholars who have empirically investigated literacy practices in secondary classrooms through perspectives informed by queer theories. As Lovaas, Elia, and Yep (2006) explain, scholarship drawing from queer theories overlaps with, yet is distinct from, scholarship grounded in LGBT studies. While both approaches use qualitative research methodologies and seek social change, each offers different perspectives. Scholars drawing on LGBT studies tend to characterize sexuality and gender as stable, using positivist and modernist lenses. In contrast, scholars using queer theories aim to “continuously destabilize and deconstruct the notion of fixed sexual and gender identities” (Lovaas et al., 2006, p. 6), deploying poststructural and postmodernist lenses. While we are interested in queer analyses of queer work in secondary classrooms, we have yet to find scholarship doing this work (Blackburn & Schey, 2017). Alternatively, we have studied research reports with an analytic lens informed by queer theories to identify queer elements in the literacy events and practices previously documented. While three studies (Blackburn & Schey, 2018; Cruz, 2013; Simon et al., 2018) have considered composing, we discuss those examining reading since our study focuses on this aspect of literacy. Some of these reports consider LGBT representation while others do not, meaning that only some of them would be categorized by Lovaas et al. (2006) as LGBT. However, all of them would be categorized as queer since they all *aim* to destabilize fixed notions of gender and sexuality. Across all of these reports, we look for evidence of queer ruptures.

Some teachers, in the absence of curricular representations of LGBT lives, engaged with queer(ed) classroom literacy practices, asking their students to pay attention to how norms around gender and sexual binaries were constructed, maintained, and privileged. Across the studies, these actions consistently resulted in some degree of rupture introduced by a reader, whether a student or a teacher. Some teachers abandoned these moments, while others stayed with them. In cases where teachers abandoned these moments (Quinlivan, 2012; Shelton, 2015), they framed texts queerly, students amplified ruptures, and then teachers shut down discussions because tension, emotion, and volume were too high. In Sieben and Wallowitz’s (2009) account, teacherly resolve resulted in sustained, rather than abandoned, engagement with disruption, with the purpose of questioning heteronormativity. Sieben encountered tensions because her queer pedagogy was defined as disruptive by youth and adults in the community, but she still made pedagogical and curricular moves that resulted in students learning queer interpretive practices.

Such perseverance was commonly seen in studies with an analytic lens informed by queer theories that included representations of LGBT lives in classroom curricula. In these literacy events, there were tensions between queerness and literacy practices as students and teachers negotiated ruptures with respect to lesbian and gay subtexts, homonormativity, and interpersonal relationships. In two studies (Greenbaum, 1994; Helmer, 2016b), ruptures were initiated through interpretive practices regarding lesbian and gay subtexts in canonical literature.

Teachers had students interpret these subtexts, yet there were tensions between dominant heteronormative school reading practices and the queer aspects of these texts and subtexts (see also, Martino, 2009). For instance, in Helmer's (2016b) report, the teacher challenged students to read Cather's *A Lost Lady* for a lesbian subtext, even though this interpretation wasn't initially evident to them. Ultimately, teachers in both studies positioned disruptions as opportunities to learn how to interrogate heteronormativity, and they sustained these discussions, even in the midst of homophobia (Greenbaum, 1994). Other studies (Helmer, 2016a; Kenney, 2010) have examined ruptures to homonormativity rather than heteronormativity. While teachers facilitated ruptures around homophobia through sustained engagement with curricular representations, they simultaneously reified aspects of homonormativity. For instance, Kenney (2010), who documents multiple types of ruptures, discusses how her use of binary framings in teaching LGBTQ-themed texts led to oversimplification in student beliefs about sexuality instead of greater nuance, whether these beliefs were homophobic or queer-friendly.

In some studies (Gonzales, 2010; Kenney, 2010; Loutzenheiser, 2001), ruptures in classroom literacy events affected people's interpersonal relationships. Teachers used their authority to sustain engagement with disruptions, yet at times this veered into reenactment of harmful, even coercive, institutional power relations, undermining the activist aspects of these pedagogical encounters. The tensions shifted to reflect the relative privilege or marginalization experienced by teachers due to their identities. For example, Loutzenheiser (2001) grappled with a situation where a straight student expressed homophobia and was challenged by other students and Loutzenheiser herself. The student accused Loutzenheiser of siding with a different student because the two were both gay. As a result, what was once a close and trusting relationship became one that was distant and fragile. Gonzales (2010), who unlike Loutzenheiser and Kenney (both of whom identify as queer) identifies as a straight cis man, describes how his heavy-handed responses combated homophobia but simultaneously closed off possibilities for dialogue because students were fearful of his potential response.

This collection of studies in which queer theories informed literacy events and practices in secondary classrooms, and particularly our close look at ruptures within these studies, guided our own. We were provoked to notice when ruptures closed down or opened up conversations, and challenged to reflect on the impact of ruptures on interpersonal relationships. We considered these sociocultural dynamics alongside our exploration of literacy events and practices.

Theoretical Framework: Rupturing Normative Literacies

We understand literacy to be a situated sociocultural phenomenon, or, to use Street's (1999) words, as ideological. From this perspective, literacy is not a decontextualized set of technical skills. Instead, it "varies with social context and is not the same uniform thing in each case" (Street, 1999, p. 37). For instance, a youth may find reading an LGBTQ-themed novel with friends they trust a qualitatively different experience from reading that same book in a classroom where they have observed a

teacher remain silent in response to homophobic and transphobic statements made by students. The significance of their reading, and thus the meaning of literacy, shifts across these situations. Thus, to understand literacy in a given context, people must examine literacy events, the “observable behaviors around literacy” (Street, 1999, p. 38). By participating in and observing series of events, people can infer literacy practices, which Hornberger (2000) describes as “the more ideological aspects” of reading and writing, including the “underlying norms, values, and conventions” (p. 360), such as norms of sexuality and gender. From this perspective, literacy is not neutral but rather “the uses and meanings of literacy are always embedded in relations of power” (Street, 1999, p. 38). Therefore, in contexts such as classrooms, some ways of reading and writing become normative and dominant while others are marginalized, even entirely erased. We are interested in how classroom readers (re)produce, challenge, and transform normative literacy practices such as seeing, understanding, and connecting, particularly with respect to queerness.

Queer theorists (e.g., Jagose, 1996; Johnson, 2016; Muñoz, 1999; Sedgwick, 1990) are concerned with questions of power, normativity, and social change, and they foreground qualities such as variability, multiplicity, and situatedness that resonate with an ideological model of literacy. They are committed to “interrogating the social processes that not only produc[e] and recogniz[e] but also normaliz[e] and sustai[n] identity” (Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005, p. 1), including (but not limited to) social processes that affect sexual and gender identities, such as literacy practices.

Educational scholars (e.g., Britzman, 1995; Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Mayo, 2017) extend queer theories to teaching and learning, particularly pedagogy. Rather than, for example, normalizing representations of lesbian and gay people, these theorists seek to understand how educational practices reproduce normative epistemologies and what practices might *rupture* such normativities, a concept regularly considered by queer theorists, as we discuss below. Britzman (1995), for instance, advocates for interrogating the limits of thinkability and the reading practices that produce ignorance and understanding. She argues that through this interrogation, people in classrooms might refuse or disrupt normalcy, restructuring relationships in more ethical ways.

While we find this scholarship compelling, we pause before considering what it offers for literacy research, particularly for theorizing disruptions to normative literacy practices. There is a trend in many queer theories to draw on psychoanalytic traditions that foreground individual cognitive experiences of rupture (e.g., Bersani, 1987; Britzman, 1995; Edelman, 2004), which contrasts with our ethnographic focus on shared and public sociocultural characteristics. Moreover, we recognize critiques (e.g., Cohen, 1997; Johnson, 2016; Johnson & Henderson, 2005) revealing that queer analyses are too often entirely silent about race and thus implicitly reify whiteness. We are cognizant of Muñoz’s (1999) insight that even when queer scholars of color are cited, they “are barely ever critically engaged and instead are . . . merely adored from a distance” (p. 11). As two white scholars in a national context that is structured through white supremacy, we attempt to honor

and learn from these insights, striving to apply them with humility and reflexivity by foregrounding and substantively engaging with queer of color scholarship.

In theorizing ruptures, therefore, we turn to Ferguson (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2012). We do so not only because we find his work to be compelling, but also because extending it to consider literacy education follows the trajectory of his body of work. By exploring racialized sexuality and Black nonheteronormativity, Ferguson intervenes in canonical sociology (2004), queer studies (2005a), and African American studies (2005b). He destabilizes boundaries of academic disciplines and gestures toward alternative epistemological practices—efforts that we believe complement educational queer theorists such as Britzman and literary writers such as Brezenoff. More recently, Ferguson (2012) has continued to analyze epistemological practices, shifting from scholarly fields to educational institutions by exploring pedagogies of minority difference, albeit focusing on higher education rather than secondary schools. Given the arc in his scholarship toward educational institutions and his focus on disrupting normative epistemologies, we seek to extend, not appropriate, his work by exploring what it offers for understanding ruptures in normative literacy practices in a high school classroom.

Ferguson (2004) discusses connections and tensions between capital and heteropatriarchy in the formation of the categories of race, sexuality, gender, social class, and nation-state in the twentieth-century United States. These formations resulted in heterogeneity, meaning that some identities were constructed as normative while others were constructed as pathological in an attempt to suppress, discipline, and delegitimize this heterogeneity. As contradictions among competing logics accumulated, possibilities for agency and transformation emerged because these nonnormatively “gendered and eroticized elements of racial formations” (Ferguson, 2004, p. 17) presented ruptures, which he conceptualizes as critiques and alternatives to processes of domination. Thus, ruptures are about epistemological practices, which we understand to subsequently generate pedagogical possibilities. Because Ferguson vehemently denies the discreteness of any category such as gender, sexuality, or race, his discussion of disruption is never exclusively, nor always primarily, about queerness, although all ruptures have implications for queerness due to the inextricable interrelations among sociocultural phenomena. We build on his work to conceptualize ruptures in literacy events as moments when the underlying norms, values, and conventions for using literacy become unsettled, destabilized, and questioned to such a degree that people, through interaction, attend to these dynamics, whether to contain them and shut them down as problems or to explore and learn from them. As people react to disruptions, we are interested in the consequences of their actions.

Methodology and Methods

In this study, we blended research methodologies—specifically ethnography and teacher research—a situation that reflected our shared commitments and different roles. We were concerned with oppressive power relations, which are tied tightly to ethnography, according to Blommaert and Jie (2010), who assert that ethnography

is “necessarily critical and counter-hegemonic,” with its primary purpose being to challenge hegemonies (p. 10). Ryan typically foregrounded an ethnographic participant observer role, taking field notes and recording classroom interactions, in part because he was doing this work for a university ethnography course and research apprenticeship, both led by Mollie. With regard to teacher research, we had previously worked together in a teacher inquiry group focused on combatting homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia (see Blackburn, Clark, Kenney, & Smith, 2010; Blackburn, Clark, & Schey, 2018), and we shared a commitment to cultivating schools where LGBTQ people can learn and flourish. But it was Mollie who adopted more of a practitioner inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), taking primary responsibility for designing and implementing the curriculum and assessing student work.

School Context and Participants

The school was an arts-focused public charter high school in a Midwestern city and had developed a reputation for being queer-friendly. Administrators estimated that at least 30% of students identified as LGBTQ. School personnel communicated an expectation that students would not act homophobic or transphobic, complementing these statements with school-wide policies and practices. During the 2014–2015 academic year, a little over 300 students enrolled. Approximately 56% received free or reduced lunch, a measure commonly used as an indicator of economically disadvantaged and impoverished students. With regard to race and ethnicity, 56% of students were white, 26% were African American, 10% were multiracial, 6% were Latino, 1% were Asian, and 1% were Pacific Islander.²

The course was an elective semester-long (18 weeks) English course for juniors and seniors. The class typically met four times weekly, with the final class session of each week being an extended double-blocked period. During spring 2015, 14 students enrolled, 13 of whom participated in the research project. All of the youth identified as white except one who identified as biracial (white and Asian). Five identified as both straight and cisgender (two of whom are not named in this report), one identified as a gay trans man (also not named here), and one identified as a queer woman, while the other students were more fluid with respect to sexuality and gender. We provide a description (Table 1) of the 10 out of 13 participants who are named, but do so with hesitation. Some of these identities have changed since the study ended, and some shifted during the study, and while we convey the shifts we saw during the study, we do not attempt to convey the changes we know have occurred since the study because our ongoing contact with the students is uneven, at best. In short, the table is designed to help readers get some sense of the students, but readers should recognize that students’ identities were multiple, variable, and fluid.

Curricular Context and Focal Text

We organized the curriculum into five units, each with different focal texts and compositions (Blackburn & Schey, 2018). Focal texts included fiction and nonfiction, novels and short stories, and multimedia and traditional print texts. Brezenoff’s

TABLE 1. Participants Named in Findings

Pseudonym	Gender ^a	Sexuality	Race
COREY	Cisgender man	Straight, bicurious	White
HEATHER	Cisgender woman	Straight	White
JAMIE	Cisgender woman	Straight, open to queer experiences	White
JAYLA	Cisgender woman	Straight, previously questioning	White
KIMBERLY	Fluid	Fluid	White
PARKER	Fluid	Queer	White
RHYS	Fluid	Fluid	White
SHERRY	Cisgender woman	Lesbian	White
STACY	Cisgender woman	Straight	Biracial (white and Asian)
TORI	Cisgender woman	Straight	White

^aWe use *woman* and *man* instead of *girl* and *boy* in part because most students turned 18 during the study, but also because we do not wish to give undue credence to the adolescent/adult line (Lesko, 2001).

Brooklyn, Burning was among these. We focus on this text because it was the course's only queer-themed novel. Extending Cart and Jenkins's (2006) categorization of LGBT young adult literature, Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth (2015) explain that literature with queer elements and ideologies has several qualities:

It offers multiple, variable, and conflicting conceptions of sexual and gender identities, including poststructural ones. It disrupts normative notions of sexuality, gender, families, and homes; and it disrupts other norms . . . [such as those] associated with time. (p. 33)

While many texts representing sexual and gender diversity can contain queer elements and ideologies, Blackburn et al. (2015) explain that texts foregrounding these qualities are less common, especially texts with protagonists "whose sexual and gender identities are represented as multiple, variable, and fluid" (p. 31) or are entirely suspended, thus introducing ruptures into reading experiences. While these texts are rare, they offer unique opportunities due to the intensity of the queer elements and ideologies they offer readers. Before continuing in our methods description, we pause to make the case that this novel is a queer one, since this is foundational to our driving argument.

The novel is set in Brooklyn, beginning in the summer of 2005 and concluding at the end of the summer in 2006. Kid is the narrator, who is never named in terms of sex or gender. Kid starts spending significant time outside of their parents' apartment in the summer of 2005, at the age of 16. Kid hangs around Fish's

bar and meets and falls for Felix, a singer, guitar player, and “junkie” (Brezenoff, 2011, p. 59) who lives sometimes in the basement of Fish’s bar and most times in a warehouse. Later in the summer, Kid is “evicted” (p. 43) from their home by their father for failing to “make up [their] mind” (p. 31) regarding gender. At this point, Kid becomes increasingly close to Felix, even “mov[ing] in” (p. 64) with him. But Felix disappears, and their home is destroyed by a fire. Kid makes it through the school year with the support of best friend Konny and adult advocate Fish, who lets Kid sleep in the bar’s basement. The next summer Kid falls in love again, this time with Scout, who is also gender nonidentifiable. In doing so, Kid makes a move toward a healthier life—not a more gender-stagnate one, but one with stability in significant ways.

The novel queers gender (as described above), which is discussed most extensively in this manuscript, but it also queers sexuality, families and homes, and time (Ahmed, 2010; Blackburn et al., 2015). Most characters are identifiable in terms of gender; only Kid and Scout are not. No one is explicitly identified in terms of sexuality, although sexuality is implied for some if not most characters. Readers cannot identify Kid’s or Scout’s sexuality since they cannot identify their genders. This leaves room for a heteronormative interpretation, although this would be a stretch, but other characters fill in this possible queer gap. Konny, for example, is never labeled in terms of sexuality, but readers know “all those boys and girls . . . follow [her] around” (Brezenoff, 2011, p. 49). Readers also know that she has sex with boys and girls (p. 57). Fish is all but explicitly named as lesbian. She is the matriarch of what can be identified as a queer family, which stands in stark contrast to Kid’s biological and heteronormative family and home. When Kid’s father “evicts” them, Fish gives Kid a place to sleep (Brezenoff, 2011, p. 27), as she had done for Konny. She feeds (Brezenoff, 2011, p. 13), protects (p. 16), and loves (p. 59) both Kid and Konny. Time, too, is queered in *Brooklyn, Burning*. There are 29 chapters; 8 chapter titles are in parentheses. The 8 parenthetical chapters are the ones focused on Felix, in the summer of 2005. In these, Kid seems to be addressing readers. The other 21 are focused on the following summer, and in these, Kid addresses Scout. The Scout chapters are in chronological order, suggesting a sort of order and stability, but the parenthetical ones are not. Moreover, the parenthetical ones are dispersed among the Scout ones in no uniform manner. In these ways, the novel queers time. In queering gender, sexuality, families and homes, and time, the novel brings to the fore ruptures in cisnormativity and heteronormativity, including how these norms play out in families, homes, and time (Ahmed, 2010).

Researchers’ Positionalities

Ryan identifies as a white straight cis man and has worked in solidarity with queer communities throughout his careers as a teacher and researcher. For example, he co-advised his school’s Gay-Straight Alliance (Schey & Uppstrom, 2010). Mollie identifies as a white queer cis woman. She has worked with LGBTQ youth in out-of-school settings in the decades since she left the classroom and became a researcher. She helped to found the teacher inquiry group in which both of us participated to foster teacher activism on behalf of LGBTQ students and the teachers who serve

them. In these ways, as well as others, we have worked diligently to acknowledge our privileges, discover related ignorance, and educate ourselves in ways that compensate for our experiential and epistemological shortcomings defined by our whiteness and cisgender identities, in particular. We understand this as lifelong work and recognize that in this study we are, as always, in process.

Data Collection

Ryan wrote field notes and collected classroom documents such as curricular materials, lesson plans, and student work for research purposes, whereas Mollie kept track of the same things (aside from field notes) but for planning and assessment purposes. During the second month of the class, Ryan began video- and audio-recording each session. All 70 days were documented, 37 of them video-recorded, and another 9 audio-recorded. Together, we identified key sections of talk for transcription. Additionally, we conducted semistructured entrance interviews with the 13 student participants and 8 exit interviews, based on student interest and availability. All of these were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

While fieldwork and data collection are always interpretive—and therefore analytic—acts (Blommaert & Jie, 2010), here we focus on the recursive analytic cycles we engaged in after the semester ended. For this manuscript, we became interested in how people responded to queer-themed literature. We used an initial cycle of structural coding (Saldaña, 2016) to identify the subset of data relevant to this question. Our unit of analysis was literacy events involving the only queer-themed novel included in the curriculum, *Brooklyn, Burning*. This resulted in a focus on 9 class sessions and approximately 2 hours and 27 minutes of recorded classroom conversations, as well as a recorded meeting with the book's author lasting approximately 49 minutes. Other selected data included the novel, assignments (i.e., writing prompts), and student work (i.e., journal responses).

Focusing on this subset of data, we conducted a second cycle of analysis, utilizing discourse analytic techniques (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2004; Wortham & Reyes, 2015) to identify and code the different types of talk in literacy events, considering linguistic forms and functions. For instance, in some literacy events people attempted to decipher a character's gender or sexuality, while in others they evaluated the narrative's believability. Based on this analytic cycle, we mapped and charted (Saldaña, 2016) codes and data, looking to synthesize trends and move toward higher levels of abstraction as we sought to understand the social actions people accomplished in and through classroom conversations. We then reread, reanalyzed, and recoded the data using pattern, axial, and theoretical coding (Saldaña, 2016), focusing on dynamics of disruption with particular attention to sexuality, gender, and race since we had identified these as significant themes during prior analysis. Our focus on these topical coding categories eventually gave way to insights about sociocultural patterns of action, specifically people's use of ideational functions of language—seeing and visualizing, understanding and hypothesizing, and connecting and empathizing—which organize the findings.

Findings: Ruptures as Obstacles and Opportunities

We argue that students and teachers, in the context of reading the queer-themed novel *Brooklyn, Burning*, encountered ruptures of normative literacy practices of seeing, understanding, and connecting. In these instances, they responded by recognizing and naming, sometimes with frustration, the disruptions to these reading practices. When the class collectively treated these disruptions as excesses and problems, they disengaged with the ruptures, leaving the dialogue destabilized and sporadic. Without sustained dialogue, the class reproduced dominant literacy practices of seeing, understanding, and connecting, which in turn contributed to reifying normativities around sexuality, gender, race, and epistemologies. In contrast, when students and teachers stayed with disruptions and continued to engage in dialogue about them across time, they took them up as opportunities for learning. Collectively, they co-constructed alternative enactments of literacy practices, centered around visualizing and hypothesizing, which in turn facilitated empathizing. Through these alternatives, they contested normativities around sexuality, gender, addiction, and epistemologies, although not race and whiteness. Next we examine how ruptures emerged and people responded with respect to seeing and visualizing, understanding and hypothesizing, and connecting and empathizing. While we pair these phenomena in our discussions, we do not intend for readers to see them as binaries, but rather as interrelated literacy practices with differing consequences.

Seeing and Visualizing

Some students expressed that the novel disrupted their normative reading practices of *seeing*, making it difficult for them to make sense of Kid and Scout. Recall that *Brooklyn, Burning* cultivates a suspension of the protagonists' gender, and thus sexual, identities. Initially, students noted with frustration how this narrative approach unsettled and disturbed their experiences as they attempted to use normative interpretive practices to decipher the text's representational strategies. In one conversation, Kimberly, with some aggravation, explained:

The problem that I have with trying to picture Kid as a girl is that I don't picture anything. Like I can't picture it like, very masculine girl or with a ponytail and just kind of like straight looking. I just can't picture it. I don't know what part of it, but like picturing Kid as a dude, I just kind of pictured something. It's not really specific.

Here, Kimberly said they could not picture anything when they thought of Kid as a girl, but could picture something (although not much) when they pictured Kid as a boy. In another discussion, Parker described feeling perturbed by a similar difficulty in picturing—in reference to both Scout and Kid, and even more broadly:

When I read a story, I always create the world in my head, so all I have from the story is Brooklyn, and like two pairs of legs with jeans on them, and that's all I've got, and a guitar hanging there, but I can't picture the rest of the story.

Thus, both Kimberly and Parker named normative literacy practices as inadequate for engaging with queer protagonists, and this experience left them frustrated and uncertain. They implied that they expected to be able, metaphorically, to gaze directly at the characters and find them legible according to the normative definitions of gender and sexuality that were intertwined with their reading practices. However, they found this wasn't the case, which resulted in frustration. Even as they could "picture" some features of the characters—such as jeans and guitars—other attributes were illusive, and these illusive aspects appeared to carry greater epistemological significance for interpreting Kid and Scout and "the rest of the story." In short, the textual features facilitated a rupture these two students experienced as a barrier, or even a void, in meaning-making during their reading, even as they at times questioned such categorical legibility in their own lives. In these instances, the class did not continue dialogue around the ruptures Kimberly and Parker identified. Instead, the disruptions were implicitly defined as frustrating and thus problematic.

In other instances, the class's dialogue didn't stop once they encountered tensions. Instead, they sustained their engagement with the ruptures, seeking possibilities for transforming normative literacy practices of seeing. For example, Rhys offered alternative practices of *visualizing* for classmates to consider. Rather than metaphorically looking directly at the characters from a vantage point in the classroom reading event, they described moving into the setting of the novel:

RHYS: Partly like I'm more seeing it like I'm behind their shoulders looking around the world instead of like

MOLLIE: Instead of looking at them yeah

RHYS: "I'm the god!" [sarcastic dramatic voice]

Rhys described looking over the shoulders of the characters and observing the setting of Brooklyn, emphasizing the desirability of this way of knowing through a sarcastic tone of voice mocking the omnipotent perspective of a deity, a playful contrast with Kimberly's and Parker's frustration. Rhys suggested that although their previous reading practices were unsettled, moving into and through this rupture facilitated a reconfiguration in which they came to visualize alongside Kid and Scout, potentially using the narrative as a tool to try out and understand such a way of being. They implied that only having jeans and guitars was enough for them to enact an alternative queered visualization practice, one that was less about seeing the character and demanding godlike singular knowledge, and more about extending narrative information to envision the world of Brooklyn from Kid's or Scout's perspective.

Similarly, Jamie identified directly with a character, drawing on the openness of the reading experience as a resource for claiming greater readerly agency. She asserted that disruptions to or gaps in seeing enabled any reader to identify with a character, to imagine themselves as that character. In one lesson, Jamie commented on this alternative visualization practice:

I also think that one of the main reasons that there isn't gender is so that the reader can put themselves into it better. . . . They can see themselves as Kid, or as Scout, like whichever one is easier, because there isn't a specific gender and specific traits that go to that person. It's very neutral and ambiguous, so that you can fill yourself in there and be able to experience better what Kid is experiencing while you're reading.

For Jamie, much like Rhys, the neutrality and ambiguity of the characters' genders and other traits enabled readers to shift their perspectives on and relationships with the characters. Rather than reading from the perspective of an outsider looking at characters and expecting them to reveal themselves visually, she suggested that rupturing this literacy norm of gendering characters opened up possibilities for readers to experience the life events of the protagonists more fully—potentially attempting to articulate a way for her, as someone who experienced a stable cis identity, to carve out possibilities for understanding protagonists who were different than she.

Whereas Kimberly's and Parker's practices of seeing were frustratingly interrupted by queer ruptures in the book, Rhys found that through visualization, they could better envision the narrative world and embrace the novel's queerness, and Jamie found that genderqueer elements actually enhanced her practices of visualization and identification. In these ways, Rhys and Jamie articulated experiences of literacy learning as they, alongside the classroom group, continued to grapple with and even embrace—rather than resist and reject—disruptions to normative reading practices, moving into and through the ruptures to go beyond *seeing* the characters in stable ways to *visualize* the novel's characters and setting or even themselves as characters.

Understanding and Hypothesizing

When the class resisted ruptures and expressed a need for reading practices that let them experience *understanding* in unambiguous and fixed ways, they refused to explore subversive, nonnormative possibilities. In other instances, uncertainty became an opportunity for trying out alternative literacy practices, and students tentatively *hypothesized*, particularly around gender.

Heather described her trouble when the novel challenged literacy, specifically literary, norms of revelation and resolution. In *Brooklyn, Burning*, there is a warehouse fire and initially a lack of clarity about its cause. Heather resisted this uncertainty, posing a question about the fire:

HEATHER: I have a question. Do we ever find out who does it at the end?

MOLLIE: To me it feels clear

HEATHER: Okay, because if the whole gender thing is not figured out, I want that at least, please

MOLLIE: I hear where the question is coming from, but I believe that—

HEATHER: I need something or I'm gonna die

MOLLIE: I would be surprised if you were uncertain about that

Heather suggested that uncertainty, a suspension of a fixed experience of understanding, was a problem: if she couldn't experience a singular answer about "the whole gender thing" then "at least, please" she wanted an answer about the fire. Heather clearly noticed and named normative reading expectations for a novel to reveal information unambiguously. She did not suggest that there was something to learn through the rupture or that sustained engagement with it could provide a learning opportunity. Instead, it was a problem, and if the problem became too widespread (so it was about both fires and gender), she implied her wants and needs with regard to literature would be unmet. For her, uncertainty was not an invitation to imagine alternatives, since she implicitly rejected possibilities of hypothesizing.

In contrast, there were instances where students and teachers took up suspension and uncertainty as opportunities for learning how to explore through and beyond ruptures. Hypothesizing as a literacy practice was less about establishing a singular correct answer and more about fluidly considering an array of possibilities. The class most frequently did so by sustaining dialogue about Kid's and Scout's gender identities as they repeatedly tried different strategies for interpreting characters' genders and understanding gender more broadly. Many initial attempts focused on character traits, such as descriptions of their appearance; these were tied to normative, even stereotypical or caricature-esque notions of binary gender. In these efforts, readers implicitly drew on a conceptualization of gender as a stable internal essence a person exhibited or expressed outwardly (moving into the rupture). When this interpretive practice failed to produce a definitive answer, students generated alternative interpretive approaches, examining social relationships (moving through the rupture). In one lesson, Parker sustained dialogue about whether the characters' genders, and Kid's gender specifically, were not about the traits readers interpreted but instead the social dynamics in the narrative's setting:

PARKER: The fact that Kid is living on the streets and this like, like the stereotype of surviving on the street always come with masculinity and strength, and you know, and I wonder if that part of Kid plays into Kid's gender

MOLLIE: Right

PARKER: Like would it be

MOLLIE: So the performance of gender is part of the protection device

PARKER: Like would it be more difficult for Kid to live away from home, in this warehouse, if Kid were a female because like then they're subject to, different dangers you know

Parker moved among different perspectives to hypothesize an alternative way of interpreting characters, positing that the group might approach gender as a set of social practices. They stated that Kid might need to present in more masculine ways, even as a man, for protection. Moving beyond the rupture, Parker suggested that gender was less of a stable point a person occupied within a regulatory cultural regime and instead more of a contextual relationship, where one's embodiment and expression could shift according to context, particularly if, as Butler (2007)

describes, gender is a survival strategy (p. 190). This instantiation of hypothesizing was in some ways particularly queer in that gender was denaturalized, no longer located within an essential self or even on the body's surface but rather as situated, contingent, and flexible. Contrasting with Heather, Parker here (unlike earlier) approached uncertainty as a resource and opportunity for alternative, subversive enactments of dominant literacy practices of understanding as they hypothesized about the possibilities and needs for particular gender expressions.

Connecting and Empathizing

Through engagement with *Brooklyn, Burning*, students and teachers encountered ruptures of normative literacy practices of *connecting* among people, within and beyond texts—connections that were inhibited further when readers' practices of seeing and understanding were destabilized. Students overwhelmingly expressed their fondness for Kid and Scout, implying that they could connect with them and thus understand and share at least some of the characters' feelings and experiences. However, when the implicit assumed homonormative whiteness of the characters was disrupted, some students resisted this rupture and closed down possibilities for empathizing with characters, particularly characters of color, because they didn't see or understand such possibilities. In contrast, when the class sustained dialogue around representations of queer people, they challenged dehumanizing discourses to expand possibilities for empathy, specifically with respect to addiction, because they were able to visualize and hypothesize these possibilities.

In one conversation, students discussed how they interpreted various characters. Parker compared Kid to a character from the television show *The L Word* named Shane, a white lesbian who expressed womanness in ways that were neither butch nor straight-passing. Kimberly eagerly responded to this comparison, saying that it made a lot of sense, implying that they could see Kid in this way. Through these comparisons, Parker and Kimberly expressed fondness for Kid and Shane, suggesting that they were characters—implicitly white characters transgressing (cis)gender norms—who they knew and with whom they could connect. Through this connection, there remained a possibility of empathy. However, some students closed this down during the only instance when the class explicitly discussed race with respect to *Brooklyn, Burning*. In effect, the rupture to white homonormativity was treated as a problem and rejected, although not monolithically. In this event, Mollie explicitly broached the topic of race:

MOLLIE: Are the characters raced in your mind?

STUDENT: Well

STUDENT: No

JAYLA: No

PARKER: Oh god. Quit. Don't do that [throws down pen]

COREY: Wrong [inaudible]

MULTIPLE SPEAKERS: [Laughter and talking]

PARKER: We haven't even figured out what gender they are

MOLLIE: Stacy

STACY: I think in the beginning it does say, it says Scout has dark hair. Like I think that's all they give you

MOLLIE: Ah okay, I didn't even remember that so thank you

STACY: I think they said Scout had long bangs

MOLLIE: Oh I remember the bangs, I do remember the bangs, that's right

STACY: That's all they really say

MOLLIE: Yep

STUDENT: Yeah I don't

MOLLIE: Tori did you start to say something? It sounded like you had a strong reaction

TORI: I think Konny could, just because from her name, you could figure out she was either Italian or Spanish

MOLLIE: Yeah

STUDENT: Hmm

JAYLA: Or maybe her parents were just really evil

HEATHER: [Laughter]

PARKER: And they're [inaudible] they could be anything

JAYLA: Because that's a valid option, I mean my name's Jayla

HEATHER: I was going to say that

JAYLA: And my name does not sound like a tiny little white girl's name

STUDENTS: [Laughter]

[Bell rings]

In this interaction, Parker most vocally resisted a discussion of race, initially refusing to move into the rupture. In an argument echoing Heather's need for plot resolution regarding the fire, Parker explained that uncertainty around both gender and race was unmanageable. Because they didn't know about gender, race was not something they could explore, and they rejected Mollie's question. While Parker's earlier comparisons of Kid and Shane implied racial identities, here the explicitness or possibility of non-whiteness seemed to trouble them. They further considered it later in the interaction, but their meaning was obscured by others' talk. Parker defined a disruption of the racialized assumptions they had previously enacted as excessive and problematic; and through their actions, they destabilized an opportunity for learning to connect with characters of color, shutting down the possibility of empathy because they did not see or understand such characters.

Nonetheless, previously implicit racial normativities became explicit and publicly available for reflection, even questioning and interrogation. Moving into this rupture, Stacy—significantly, the only person of color in the classroom—attempted to sustain dialogue and offered up a physical detail to visualize alternatives to white homonormative interpretations of the characters, focusing on Scout's dark hair and bangs. Mollie took up this contribution, yet this detail didn't answer the question of race. Tori shifted the discussion away from exploring a range of racial

possibilities toward hypothesizing a narrow band of white ethnicities, basing her argument on the association of Konny's name—Konstantyna Zawadzki—with Southern and Western European countries (although we understand it to be Polish). Jayla challenged the approach of using names to index racio-ethnic identities, stating that her name was proof of its inadequacy, a claim Heather ratified. It is worth noting that Heather was dating a young African American man, and she had discussed how they sometimes encountered prejudice and racism. Although she wasn't able to articulate fully how and why race mattered, she nonetheless attempted to sustain the conversation, stepping into rather than out of the rupture. Stacy, Jayla, and Heather, in contrast with Tori, shifted the conversation away from ethnicity and back to race, with Jayla naming whiteness explicitly for the first time. However, the conversation quickly ended as the bell rang and students left. What might have happened had the bell not rung, we will never know. What we do know is that it was not atypical for conversations about race and racism to be initiated but then abandoned, which scholars (e.g., Leonardo, 2009; Matias, 2016) have noted is a pattern among white students in classrooms.

While Parker defined the disruption around whiteness and race as excessive and troubling, other students attempted to stick with the topic and explore—although only briefly and tentatively—possible racial and ethnic character identities, maintaining that it was possible to visualize a range of such identities. However, these identities were only beginning to be named, and the class didn't hypothesize the implications of these identities for the characters. With this tension regarding whether the rupture was an opportunity or obstacle for learning, the topic was quickly abandoned as the class period ended, and the group wouldn't return to it again. In doing so, they recognized the disruption around racialized dimensions of seeing and understanding but were unable to sustain dialogue enough to co-construct alternative practices of visualizing or hypothesizing, and the possibilities for empathy were undermined. So even as students such as Stacy, Jayla, and Heather drew on knowledges grounded in their experiences, they were unable to leverage these knowledges as resources for articulating alternatives to the disconnections resulting from disruptions of normative literacy practices of seeing and understanding.

While possibilities of connecting with queer characters beyond whiteness were mostly rejected, the group treated other ruptures as opportunities to learn to empathize with queer characters beyond homonormativity. In some conversations, students and teachers asserted that queer lives needed to be understood in more expansive ways. For instance, some students explored the characters' lives beyond a reductionary focus on gender and sexuality exclusively. Jayla and Sherry valued how *Brooklyn, Burning* enabled readers to visualize and hypothesize queer characters' experiences with addiction, which fostered possibilities for empathy. They appreciated the topic's inclusion but also valued how the novel's representation was caring, sympathetic, and humanizing:

JAYLA: I liked the way the author portrayed Felix, because that like, it talked about his addiction, but that wasn't like the center of who he was, it was

more like Kid's love for him that was kind of the center of his story instead of like his addiction. But it did a very good job of balancing like, "hey this is what addiction looks like. Hey this is what loving an addict looks like." And they did a good job of doing that without like going overboard on it

SHERRY: Yeah because addiction is usually present at least once in someone's life, like even if it's not you, there's people around you like it's like you hear about it a lot so, I mean, if you never, know like how to handle that or like what to do, then you're just going to go cry in your room [laughs]

RYAN: Oh yeah, it's tough not having a model or idea about like, what do you do in this really really tough situation

SHERRY: Yeah yeah

JAYLA: Especially because it talks about losing an addict and I think that's like the hard thing to deal with, because everybody who doesn't know them personally is like, "Oh, why do you care like? They're a stupid drug addict"

SHERRY: And I'd just be like, "Why don't you care?"

JAYLA: And then like for the people that have a personal connection with them like it's a little bit different

RYAN: Yeah

JAYLA: Cuz it is like, yeah I know this thing is really bad but they're not necessarily like they haven't always been a really awful person

Moving into and through the rupture, Jayla and Sherry used visualization around what addiction "looks like" to empathize with characters. Jayla valued the novel's focus on relationships, echoing Parker's earlier use of relationships to hypothesize about gender. Jayla appreciated how Kid's love for Felix, rather than Felix's addiction, defined him. Moving beyond the rupture, Jayla, Sherry, and Ryan agreed this was important because it provided readers with a model of the complexities of loving someone with an addiction, whether those readers might encounter similar experiences in their lives or might need to hypothesize so they could adopt more humanizing perspectives.

Importantly, Jayla spoke with deep intimate knowledge of loving someone with an addiction, as she frequently shared information about her father's addiction and the difficulties her family encountered because of it. As she expressed feelings of pain around people's dismissal of her father, she advocated for more sensitive and caring readings of addiction in the novel. She implied that, rather than reducing Kid solely to queer qualities, the novel represents the character more robustly, which resonated with her. It doesn't exclusively emphasize the potentially same-gender or queer aspects of Felix and Kid's relationship, as a homonormative perspective might, but rather foregrounds the complexities of navigating difficulties and pain in their lives and relationship.

Even so, Jayla's and Sherry's empathy for people with addictions hints at troubling national dynamics of racism when considered alongside Parker's failure to connect with, much less empathize with, characters of color. Historically in the United States, Black people with addictions have been positioned, by white people

in power, as criminal and in need of incarceration, whereas more recently, white people with addictions have been positioned by these same people in power as sick and in need of public services. In other words, here, Parker, Jayla, and Sherry, as white people, reflect the national racist trend of white people empathizing with white people but disconnecting themselves from people of color.

Discussion

As Ferguson (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2012) suggests, ruptures foreground questions of epistemologies, and our focus on queer-themed literature locates epistemologies in the literacy practices classroom readers used to interpret characters such as Kid and Scout. Ruptures of dominant literacy practices of seeing, understanding, and connecting resulted in reification or contestation of the normativities—specifically around gender, sexuality, race, and addiction—produced and sustained through these reading practices. In considering when classroom readers treated ruptures as obstacles or opportunities for learning, we are struck by the underlying stance on knowledge. When readers engaged with texts implicitly expecting to construct fixed, stable, and singular knowledge, ruptures became problems. Kimberly and Parker suggested that they anticipated the ability to *see* a single, stable vision of characters, a vision they could individually experience and collectively agree on. Heather articulated her need to *understand* what happened in the warehouse fire. Parker, most predominantly, and Tori, in subtle ways, narrowed the range of qualities that could be important for characters, refusing to *connect* with them when whiteness was no longer a fixed frame of reference. In these instances, classroom readers enacted a need for rigid knowledge. When ruptures unsettled this rigidity, interpretive practices for literature were shut down: possibilities for seeing were obscured, possibilities for understanding were confused, and possibilities for connecting were severed. Moreover, there was a compounding effect, obscurity added to confusion, which led to troubles with—and troubling—connections.

In contrast, when readers approached texts in ways that left them implicitly open to constructing fluid, variable, and multiple knowledges, they were more open to learning through ruptures. Rhys and Jamie *visualized* the characters and narrative world in variable ways. Parker *hypothesized* about the fluid ways Kid embodied and enacted gender. Sherry and Jayla considered the multiple dimensions of people with addictions, thus *empathizing*. Rather than destabilizing or troubling the epistemological practices intertwined with students' reading, ruptures constituted a break with previous normative literacy practices of seeing, understanding, and connecting, which expanded epistemological practices so that the students co-constructed different ideas through different pathways. Rather than reproducing broader sociocultural normativities, in these instances, readers enacted visualizing, hypothesizing, and empathizing as practices that were generative in that they gestured toward alternatives that were more compassionate and humanizing. By rejecting fixity and stability in knowledge, readers reconfigured literacy practices of seeing, understanding, and connecting in order to visualize, hypothesize, and empathize so that they could know and relate to people beyond normativities.

Conclusion

Students can read without ruptures. When they do so, they can see, understand, and connect with characters. That does not mean they always do, but they can. As literacy researchers and educators, we encounter this all of the time. But students can read *with* ruptures, too. We don't see this very much, and when we do, as we did here, we see it's risky. There is the risk of impeding students' meaning-making through seeing, understanding, and connecting, but only if readers treat ruptures as obstacles. Alternatively, if teachers prepare and provoke students, instead, to treat ruptures as opportunities, by facilitating and sustaining discussions around ruptures, then students may visualize, hypothesize, and empathize. They may not, but the possibility is there.

We understand the difference between these ways of engaging texts as being about how far the readers can go into, through, and beyond the text. That is to say, with ruptures as obstacles, readers may or may not be able to see what is happening in the book; but with ruptures as opportunities, they may also be able to visualize the world represented in the book. With ruptures as obstacles, they can understand the storyline; but with ruptures as opportunities, they can also hypothesize beyond the plot. With ruptures as obstacles, readers may or may not be able to connect with characters; but with ruptures as opportunities, they can more deeply empathize with characters' circumstances. Therefore, reading with ruptures is a risk worth taking.

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NOTES

1. We recognize that readers will have varying degrees of familiarity with the terminology around sexuality and gender that we use. LGBTQ activist organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign and the National Center for Transgender Equality offer helpful glossaries (<https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>) and collections of resources (<https://transequality.org/about-transgender>) to help such readers.
2. Here, we use terminology used by the school.

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