

RADICAL TEACHER

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The Category Is “Pandemic Queer”: Reading, Connecting, and Reimagining Literacy with LGBTQ+ Youth in the Age of COVID-19

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PETE RAILAND, FROM VOICES FROM OUTSIDE: ARTISTS AGAINST THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX PORTFOLIO VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the ensuing lockdown and political turmoil, ruptured many young people's experiences and well-being, particularly students who face additional marginalization due to systemic oppression. A national survey conducted by the Trevor Project (2021) found that nearly 70% of LGBTQ+ youth noted that their health was "poor" most or all of the time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Factors contributing to this deterioration include LGBTQ+ youth being isolated from the supportive communities formed at school, lacking access to social services provided by schools, and being quarantined with family members who were unsupportive (Cohen, 2021; Valencia, 2020). These fissures in support and resource structures curtailed potentially affirming and integral educational, social, and emotional experiences, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth who thrived in traditional schooling settings. However, it is also important to note that even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools were not idealized institutions for LGBTQ+ youth. K-12 schools, situated in the broader socio-political landscape of the United States, are bastions of homo-, trans-, and queerphobia (Mayo, 2014). Still, many LGBTQ+ young people employed resilience and ingenuity to create affirming and loving social circles, which were thus interrupted by restrictions, trauma, and isolation during the pandemic.

Our (shea and Cody) positionality and experiences afford us a deep understanding of the importance of affirming community and curriculum for LGBTQ+ youth – shea is a Black, queer, nonbinary scholar-educator and Cody is a white, queer, cisgender education professor. Collectively, we have almost two decades of experience teaching in public and charter schools as well as in community settings and higher education. Building on our experiences as secondary English language arts teachers, we constructed a national online book club dedicated to reading, analyzing, and celebrating LGBTQ+ young adult literature with LGBTQ+ youth. While the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on schooling spurred the dreaming up of this community, our urgency for dreaming was the result of several factors including the continued rampant police violence against Black folks, continued murders of Black transwomen across the country, and increased anti-trans rhetoric and legislation from both federal and state lawmakers. We aimed to create an online literacy community for LGBTQ+ youth with the following realities in mind:

1. Increased isolation (and student support needed) due to COVID-19 safety precautions and shifts to online schooling warranting the urgent necessity of safe, affirming, and joy-filled literacy spaces
2. Existing gaps in the availability, prioritization, and discussion of LGBTQ+ texts within traditional secondary ELA curriculum and classrooms necessitating a space centering the LGBTQ+ narratives
3. The continued systemic violence from the state, whether in policy or policing, warranting increased critical engagement with literature to explore aspects of identity, community, and current events

(with specific attention to how gender and sexuality interact with other identities and social realities)

These observations and need for change, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, ultimately resulted in Love & LiteraTea (L&L), an online book club for LGBTQ+ youth. In the remainder of this article we detail how we organized and structured the online book club, how we reimagined literacy and literacy learning spaces with youth members, and the hopes we have for the future of literacy education.

Planning and Organizing in a Pandemic

After a summer of planning, we launched the online book club that resulted in over 160 secondary students from across the United States (and some international students) joining us for a year to engage in readings of Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019), Dean Atta's *Black Flamingo* (2019), Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2016), Mark Oshiro's *Anger is a Gift* (2018), Kacen Callendar's *Felix After Ever* (2020), and Aiden Thomas's *Cemetery Boys* (2020). However, we did not complete all six books (a point we will address later in the article). We selected the young adult titles during our planning sessions. Our selection was guided by our commitment to centering QTPOC (queer, trans, people of color) authors and characters.

We created an application for membership using Google Forms and distributed through our professional learning networks and social media. We stressed that outness not be a prerequisite for joining our group and documented how we would ensure safety, especially for students who were not fully out. "Be in high school" and "identify as LGBTQ+" were the major criteria for joining in the initial cycle of the group; based on multiple requests, we opened the group to 8th graders during the second semester of the academic-year. In the end, we accepted every applicant, which totaled more than 160 students over the course of the year. The applicants ranged in terms of age, sexuality, gender identity, race, and geography. We committed to providing books to all members who needed them at no cost. To obtain funding for this endeavor, we created a Patreon and GoFundMe campaign outlining our goals and needs. Money raised via these avenues was spent on books, technology tools, student raffle prizes, and guest speaker honorariums. We bought all books from a local bookstore owned by a former teacher and shipped them out to members ourselves.

Due to the number of applicants accepted, we created three cohorts: A, B, and C. Cohorts A and B met bimonthly via Zoom for 90 minutes while Cohort C interacted solely through an asynchronous model via Google Classroom due to members' scheduling conflicts. Between each meeting, members read assigned sections of the books in addition to paired texts that we uploaded on each cohort's respective Google Classroom page. A brief overview the 2020-2021 schedule we implemented is below:

Table 1*Schedule for 2020-2021 Cycle*

Meetings & Months	Focus
#1-4; October-December	<i>Out</i> (2020) directed by Steven Clay Hunter <i>Like a Love Story</i> Abdi Nazemian author visit
#5; December	Creative Writing Roundtable and Workshops: Claire Rudy Foster, Kyle Carrero Lopez, and Eve Ettinger
#6-7; January	<i>Juliet Takes a Breath</i>
#8; February	"Dear White America" (2014) by Danez Smith "Monica West Is Moving to Omaha, Nebraska" (2017) by Hieu Minh Nguyen
#9; February	"We Could Be Heroes" (2018) by Malinda Lo
#10-11; March	<i>Black Flamingo</i> "cuz he's black" (2013) by Javon Johnson
#12; April	"MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)" (2021) by Lil Nas X "Lil Nas X, Unapologetic Queerness, and The Books I Wish Upon My Past Self" (2021) by Mikkaka Overstreet "Conservatives Are Enraged at Lil Nas X and His 'Satan Shoes'" (2021) by Matthew Dessem
#13-16; April-May	<i>Anger is a Gift</i> Mark Oshiro author visit
#17; June	Reflections from the year

Facilitation planning for bimonthly meetings happened over ongoing text conversations, Zoom meetings, and FaceTime check-ins. Never exclusively focused on L&L, we spent a lot of time chatting about the state of the world – politics, pop culture, personal struggles, family, and the shifting educational landscape. As friends, colleagues, and co-facilitators, our conversations were fluid, joyful, and thoughtful. We flowed seamlessly between discussing Supreme Court decisions, Olivia Rodrigo's revitalization of pop-punk, educational theory, and grief. In these planning meetings, we embraced the messy and nuanced nature that accompanies a queer and trans existence – happily holding multiple truths and ideas at once. In many ways, we had the pandemic to thank for our ability to blur the lines between work and play, to bring our whole selves to our community planning meetings.

This freeform planning structure was reflected in our design of the community space, a space that welcomed fluidity and elasticity in a defiant resistance of normative literacy practices. Love (2016) argues for ratchet imaginative orientations when working with Black queer youth that embrace "messy ...contradictory, fluid, precarious, agentive, and oftentimes intentionally inappropriate, which makes it an ideal methodological perspective for exploring how Black queer youth...form subversive and creative spaces that humanize" (p. 540). We carried this sentiment into our design and dreaming up of L&L – embracing the fluid and prioritizing humanizing literacy practices. Given our positionalities and the diverse racial demographics of L&L, we do not purport that we employed a ratchet lens to our norms and facilitation. However, models of queeruptive learning and research practices provided a roadmap that led us to implement a non-linear queer pedagogical framework grounded in the abundance, complexity, and fluidity often considered synonymous with queerness itself (Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Queering Spaces: Dreaming and Developing Community Collectively

In our dreaming and design of the L&L community framework, we drew heavily from the work of past and present LGBTQ+ educators and organizers, paying close attention to the ethics and pedagogies of QTPOC communities of care, learning, and resistance (Combahee River Collective, 1979; Gossett, 2014; Wortham, 2019). As the existing schooling infrastructure eroded during the pandemic, we looked to the work of folks educating, organizing, and building outside of (and against) institutions. QTPOC collectives like the Brooklyn-based Papi Juice and the bklyn boihood provided modes of how to create joyful spaces of resistance and critique (Wally, 2021; Wortham, 2019). When studying the history of community literacy efforts, we turned to the legacy of freedom-schooling in Black southern communities (Hale, 2011; Sturkey 2010) and community education through the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 90s (Gossett, 2014). We used the tenets, programming, and goals of these models to inform our dreams of L&L as a space not just for reading and discussing books but also for political education, student organizing, and youth-led dialogue about LGBTQ+ futures.

We wanted L&L to be a continuation of the long lineage of queer and trans efforts to etch space for our existences and dreams in a world that often refuses us what we deserve. In this, it became exceptionally clear that despite being marketed as a literacy education space, L&L would prioritize care, affirmation, and holding space for the full presence of the LGBTQ+ youth who showed up on Zoom each time we met. This prioritization mirrored much of the scholarship we surveyed focused on creating LGBTQ+-affirming spaces in schools and communities (Blackburn, 2003; Boatwright 2019; Brockenbrough, 2016) and reading LGBTQ+ narratives in community (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). shea was inherently drawn to adrienne maree brown's (2017) principles of Emergent Strategy and the flexibility, space, and time they provide to prioritize relationship-

building, dialogue, and care. When paired with a culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010), brown's principles offered a clear goal for gathering: building a care-filled literacy community. Notably, this focus is often antithetical to what is prioritized in secondary English language arts classrooms, fueled by standardized testing, college preparation, and compulsory reading of canonical texts that fail to represent the diversity of the classrooms in which they are taught (Schieble, 2013; Wyse et al., 2012). Thus, in our design of L&L, we audaciously aimed to implement a queer literacy pedagogy (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Nemi Neto, 2018) alongside our youth in a community that centered LGBTQ+ stories while also challenging the strict, binary, and fixed ideas of how students (and adults) read, learn, and engage in literary discourse.

Grounding in Care and Consideration

With our desire to create a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth online during the pandemic, we faced a conundrum in design – we wanted to actively co-design and co-create the space with youth but also knew we needed a solid framework that felt safe, affirming, and dependable for those signing into Zoom with strangers. While widely-accepted best practices suggest establishing expectations for students before their arrival and without their input (Lemov, 2010), we rejected that notion in our design. Drawing from our own experiences as teachers, Gay-Straight Alliance advisors, and organizers, we made a list of norms (Image 1) we appreciated in former settings. The norms intentionally centered both self and community care. Some norms such as “show up and show out” prioritized student voice, individuality, and confidence while others such as “share the mic” and “take care” emphasized the importance of equity and well-being. During our first meeting of Cohorts A and B, we worked with L&L youth to get their feedback, ideas, and dreams for our community.

At the beginning of the first meeting, we presented the list of norms as working, incomplete norms for breakout room introductions. Members showed signs of agreement and affirmation via Zoom reactions and the chat feature. Later in the meeting, L&L youth spent time thinking about their ideal community and reflecting on what might make them feel most safe and affirmed in our space. Following their individual reflections, they discussed their ideas in both small and whole-group settings. Themes of pride, love, and respect surfaced along with inside jokes from within our already budding community, memes, and references to pop culture. In our final activity, a Padlet reflection on the norms, members expressed an appreciation for the working norms and made connections to agreements and rules they had used in other affirming settings. Based on their feedback, we continued to use the initial list of norms, always welcoming feedback and shifting as necessary.

Throughout the year, L&L youth in Cohorts A and B made connections between our community's grounding norms and the LGBTQ+ communities in our selected texts. When Gabby Rivera's (2016) *Juliet* was mentored by Harlowe and Maxine, members said it reminded them of Cody's lessons on political organizing and queer resistance. When we read Dean Atta's *Black Flamingo* (2020), one member connected our “show

up, show out” norm to Michael's journey from Barbie-loving boy to fierce drag queen. Similarly, Moss's chosen family in *Anger is a Gift* (2018) reminded some members of the family they'd built with members of their L&L cohort. In these text-to-community connections, we observed the power not only of reading and discussing LGBTQ+ YA texts, but also of using youth-affirmed norms in the co-creation of a radically queer- and trans- inclusive literacy space.

Making Space for Connections and Care

More than books, we allowed the social-emotional needs and desires of community members to guide our trajectory. This prioritization of care and connection over text-based dialogue resulted in a shifting of our intended book discussion schedule. While we planned to read six titles throughout our year, we ended up only reading four books: *Like a Love Story*, *Juliet Takes a Breath*, *Black Flamingo*, and *Anger is a Gift*. We supplemented these core novels with short stories, articles, poetry, art, and music videos in order to spur members' cross-textual dialogue and connections between texts and current events. Reducing the number of books not only allowed for deeper analysis and richer textual discussions, but the decision also made space for more student leadership, connections, and creativity. Before each meeting, we designed a simple slide deck to guide our time with members. While content within the deck changed based on books, the format almost always remained the same: welcome, LGBTQ+ current events, small-group member check-ins, mindfulness exercise, textual discussions/activities, and closing. By grounding each meeting in an acknowledgment of current events, members' feelings and needs, and mindfulness, our spaces were rich

Today's Breakout Room Norms

- Show up and show out!
- Take care
- Embrace messiness
- Share the mic
- Own your impact

IMAGE 1: WORKING NORMS FOR FIRST MEETING

in connections between members (and outside guests).

We extended this focus by inviting the authors of our selected titles to join meetings for Q&A and dialogue about their work and experiences. Throughout the year, members were joined by both Abdi Nazemian and Mark Oshiro for Q&A discussions which allowed youth to voice questions, ideas, and even critiques about the books we read. In this connection, we desired to build a bridge between generations of LGBTQ+ readers/writers. Research consistently shows that LGBTQ+ youth benefit when they have easy access to LGBTQ+ affirming spaces and LGBTQ+ adult mentors and teachers. As queer educators, we

recognize two things to be true: (1) the burden of supporting LGBTQ+ students should never fall solely on the shoulders of LGBTQ+ educators and mentors (Martin, 2019); and (2) seeing and engaging with LGBTQ+ adults (particularly those invested in reading and writing LGBTQ+ narratives) can positively impact youth (GLSEN, 2020). Through author visits as well as a creative writing workshop with established queer and trans writers, we aimed to facilitate connections where youth were positioned as experts in their own literacy and identity journeys while also building bridges to the ideas and mentorship from adults similarly invested in reading and writing queer stories. When arranging these visits, we were backstage managers – taking care of technology, schedules, and payment; the youth took center stage – guiding the conversations with thoughtful questions and ideas.

As facilitators, we maintained this “hands-off” approach during most meetings. While our typical classroom practice involves teacher circulation and checking in with students, we refrained from doing so during small-group check-ins and discussions in order to allow members time to process and connect without feelings of surveillance within our digital space. “What if they are off-task?” a colleague asked, concerned about the safety and productivity of student-to-student discussions. In response, we queried, “what does it mean to be off-task when the main goal of our literacy space is to develop one’s community through books? If the goal is affirmation and safety through literature, does it matter if youth are following our directions or following a tangent they’ve started?” What we discovered through this release of control over member engagement was a greater investment in relationships (both inside and outside of meetings) and increased youth leadership.

With an established trust and freedom, youth members took the lead on most whole-group discussions, planned and hosted additional community events such as movie nights and small-group Zoom meet-ups, and maintained L&L’s social media presence, posting text-related memes, members’ analyses and creative work, and community announcements. Notably, a lack of mandates, curricular deadlines, and administrative demands gave us more leeway when pivoting in our design and facilitation of L&L. The realities of the pandemic and our positioning as an out-of-school literacy space allowed us more flexibility and freedom than are typically afforded to secondary English language arts teachers in traditional schooling settings. In this flexibility and freedom, our community’s discussions were marked by depth, richness, and criticality in not only our discussions about our texts but also in their own personal development and connections with each other.

Queering Reading: Intersectional and Anti-Oppressive Literature Analysis

At the core of L&L is a community of readers engaging with books that center and celebrate LGBTQ+ characters and experiences. As former high school English teachers, we know that a text does not exist in isolation. How the text is positioned and taught is equally important as the text itself. We were intentional about structuring conversations about young adult literature through intersectional and anti-oppressive literary pedagogies.

Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan (2015) argue that students need an intersectional approach to analyzing LGBTQ+ characters of color to “take into account the racialized, classed, and gendered ways sexuality is embodied and lived” (p. 89), while Durand (2015) suggests that to engage in an “intersectional analysis of young adult literature is to describe the ways in which identity categories such as race, gender, and sexuality are constructed by the individual characters, by the group or cultural communities to which they belong, and by the institutions with which they interact” (p. 77). Anti-oppressive education seeks to center experience and knowledges that have typically been marginalized within schooling spaces and to support students in understanding how privileging of some and thus marginalizing of others occurs – all with the goal of transforming both schools and society at large (Kumashiro, 2000). With these braided frameworks, we approached LGBTQ+ young adult literature by considering how characters are positioned in society and texts, how historical and contemporary socio-political forces shape such positioning, how characters imagine realities beyond their temporal reality, and how such texts create understandings of real LGBTQ+ histories and contemporary experiences.

As previously noted, our commitment to centering QTPOC authors and characters guided our text selection. During our first cycle, we read four young adult literature titles: Abdi Nazemian’s *Like a Love Story* (2019), Dean Atta’s *Black Flamingo* (2019), Gabby Rivera’s *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2016), and Mark Oshiro’s *Anger is a Gift* (2018). *Like a Love Story* follows Reza and his friends Judy and Art as they navigate New York City at the height of the AIDS crisis in the twilight of the 1980s. Reza is an Iranian American cisgender boy who is coming to understand his sexuality, while Judy is a straight cisgender white girl and Art is an openly gay white cisgender boy. *Black Flamingo* documents Michael, a Black Biracial boy, as he grows up and begins to understand his queer identity in London during college. *Juliet Takes a Breath* entails the eponymous character’s time taking tutelage under a famous feminist author for the summer. Juliet is a self-proclaimed “Puerto Rican baby dyke” from the Bronx, while her mentor is a white feminist living and working in Portland, Oregon (Rivera, 2016). *Anger is a Gift* is narrated by Moss, whose father was killed by police a year earlier. The book details the aftermath of state-sanctioned violence on Moss’s mental health and sense of self as he simultaneously is forced to survive his increasingly policed and underfunded public school. We spent two to three weeks on each title. Members were expected to read assigned selections prior to each meeting in order to engage in conversation and collective analysis.

We structured conversations about the young adult literature titles in a variety of ways. Typically, we began by opening up breakout rooms and asking members to discuss their initial thoughts about the assigned reading: favorite characters, emerging themes, important scenes, interesting quotes, connections with other texts, and other personal reactions. Then, we returned to a whole group conversation in which we unpacked our personal thoughts about the titles. L&L youth typically built off of each other’s insight and ideas, with inside jokes about certain characters becoming the

norm over the course of our year-long venture. Following personal responses, we opened up breakout rooms again organized around questions and tasks that required members to engage with the social, cultural, and political elements of the narrative. These activities required L&L youth to take critical approaches to the texts by considering how power and oppression operate within the texts. Members discussed the questions in their group while also working on a multimodal representation of their collective thinking. In doing so, we located knowledge as communal, dialogical, and dynamic. We initially shifted away from “right” answers about literature. L&L youth often used Google Jamboard or Google Slides to document their work.

At our request, members curated images, memes, and gifs to represent their responses to the questions posed. Again, members cultivated inside jokes as the year went on and parts of their presentations took on a jocular tone. When we returned as a whole group, members detailed their thinking and opened up broader conversations amongst all attendees. These member-created digital artifacts grounded our conversations throughout the duration of a title and we frequently returned to them throughout the year to make connections between various titles. A detailed overview of each activity with its paired text is located in the table below:

Table 2

Activities to Support Intersectional and Anti-Oppressive Readings

Title	Activities
<i>Like a Love Story</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Google Jamboard that represents the thoughts, interests, emotions, and experiences of one of the three main characters in the assigned reading. LGBTQ+ history note cards that explain one event, person, idea or piece of pop culture you believe is vital to LGBTQ+ history using the notecards from <i>Like a Love Story</i> as your mentor text.
<i>Juliet Takes a Breath</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Google Jamboard that describes how each major character represents or approaches a version of feminism and addresses who is centered and who is left out in this version of feminism? Quote response in which students discuss how words like dyke, queer, gay, etc. have a long history in our society and have evolved in what they mean, how they’re used, and who can use them; talk about connotations and denotations and how words change over time.
<i>The Black Flamingo</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small group discussion addressing how Atta uses verse poetry (figurative language, description, metaphor, etc.) to convey the story. Google Jamboard that describes how Michael interacts with gender and sexuality in a particular section; How the section display Michael’s relationship to his truth, his family and friends, and the world Small group discussion about the importance of reading LGBTQ narratives outside of the United States Cross-textual analysis using Javon Johnson’s poem “cuz he’s black” to consider how the poem is in conversation with Atta’s depiction of the police stop; how does the scene shows Michael’s understanding of how race intersects with other aspects of his life Small group discussion of an assigned section to consider form and structure of the book; intersectional identity; relations and development; themes; and connections to other sections
<i>Anger is a Gift</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Google Jamboard that describes how would the relationships among the various characters (adolescent and adults); how characters build community; how characters navigate differences; and how characters resist external oppressive forces Small group discussion that addresses the ending (final protest, press conference); Moss’ development; community; other characters you loved/wish had more; themes; connections to you/world

To illustrate an example, members were asked to consider how the book *Juliet Takes a Breath* uses characters to engage in contemporary discourses about feminism. One group was tasked with the character Lainie, who dates the titular character of *Juliet Takes a Breath* throughout the book. Members used the image of a “girl boss” to discuss how Lainie represents a type of feminism that is allied with white, cisgender, corporate interests at the expense of liberation for people of all gender identities. Similarly, the group used a commonly circulated image from the 2017 Women’s March in which a Black activist correctly reminds the mostly white audience that white women were instrumental in electing Donald Trump to the White House. By making these connections, L&L youth put examples of the faulty and fragmented versions of feminism that exist in real life in conversation with the literary characters to deepen their understanding of socio-political discourses around feminism. Members used selected young adult literature to consider how white women thwart real progress within social movements (Amato & Priske, 2021; martin, 2021). This example demonstrates how we approached literature pedagogy within L&L to facilitate intersectional and anti-oppressive ways of knowing through textual engagement.

We were intentional in balancing both the content of the books as well as the order of reading to avoid conflating queerness and transness with trauma. While it was vital our community addressed how oppression manifests in the daily lives of LGBTQ+ people and characters, we did not want our work to be defined by such harm; we wanted to highlight and study the real ways characters built community and fostered resistance. This pedagogical belief was especially important when reading and discussing QTPOC characters, considering the ways market forces that dictate the young adult literature market commodify and itemize Black pain for non-Black audiences (McKinney, 2020). Literature curriculum that includes Black characters, especially when approached uncritically, can situate Black pain as justifiable means for the ends of white learning (Avery, 2020). We sought to fulfill the call by Shamari Reid (2020) for balancing the need to “address the very real challenges our students [of color] face due to their undeserved oppression” while being “mindful that this is not the only story we tell to and about them” (para. 14). Thus, we routinely prompted members to consider how LGBTQ+ characters imagined new ways of being and found joy even when oppressive forces continued to bear down on their daily lives.

Queering Current Events: Critical Consciousness of Contemporary LGBTQ+ Topics

We began each session with an overview of major stories and current events relating to LGBTQ+ politics, culture, and policy. Discussions of electoral politics made the bulk of these overviews as the 2020 United States presidential election waged in media and broader discourse. We did not

want to reify the idea that political participation was narrowly defined by engagement within statist institutions. In other words, we wanted to intentionally avoid what Wargo (2021) calls a “nationalistic vision of queer-inclusive civics” (p. 11). We constantly sought ways to challenge a prevailing idea that LGBTQ+ participation within electoral politics yielded LGBTQ+ liberation. Rather, we wanted youth to understand how electoral politics is a tool to harm LGBTQ+ people and communities and to consider how engagement



IMAGE 2: LGBTQ+ POLITICAL CANDIDATES WHO RUN RACES IN 2020

with existing political structures could be a form of harm reduction. In essence, we wanted to push members to critically examine the concept of “inclusion” of LGBTQ+ people and communities within dominant socio-political systems (Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2020). We worked to not conflate “LGBTQ+ topics” with “LGBTQ+ electoral politics” by incorporating discussions of popular culture and international news.

Young adult literature played an important role in developing critical consciousness around LGBTQ+ political topics. Young adult literature’s role in constructing political awareness around LGBTQ+ topics has been argued as essential for critical and affirming LGBTQ+ curriculum (Bittner et al., 2021). Angel Daniel Matos (2019), writing about how David Levithan’s (2013) *Two Boys Kissing* addresses the AIDS crisis, argues that LGBTQ+ young adult titles can push “readers to acknowledge a queer history that is constantly on the cusp of being forgotten” (p. 91). Similarly, we positioned Abdi Nazemian’s *Like a Love Story* (2019) as a text to teach about the AIDS crisis and the ensuing impact that still shapes the reality of many LGBTQ+ people today, while we drew on *Anger is a Gift* to address the school-to-prison pipeline with specific attention to how the pipeline harms QTPOC. We addressed the role Dr. Anthony Fauci, who became a type of national hero throughout COVID, played during the AIDS crisis, including his complicated antagonism with ACT UP.

We often placed popular culture in its socio-political contexts to consider how both creators of popular culture and audience members can inform us about LGBTQ+ socio-political topics. For instance, we watched and read responses to Lil Nas X’s music video “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)” to consider how non-LGBTQ+ audiences typically try

to restrict and silence LGBTQ+ art through both policy and cultural norms. We put Lil Nas X's video in conversation with an article by Matthew Dessem (2021) to discuss how religious organizations have historically used their power

wide Padlet board that allowed for responses and affirmations from community members. During the next meeting, members shared their freedom dreams for our community and discussed them in both small and whole groups. Using freedom dreaming as a processing tool in this space achieved multiple aims, including (1) acknowledging the heaviness of the moment and its impact on our community; (2) centering LGBTQ+ youth joy, agency, and dreams in that processing; and (3) reminding youth of the importance dreaming beyond existing institutional structures as an act of resistance.

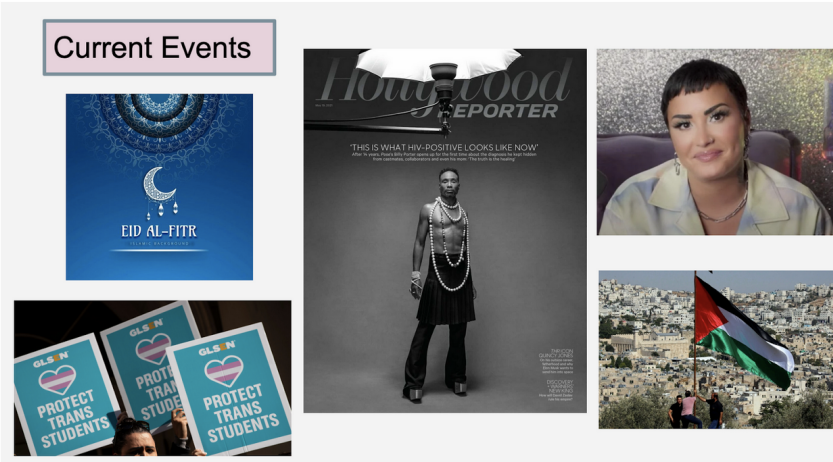


IMAGE 3: EXAMPLE OF POPULAR CULTURE AND CURRENT EVENTS

and influence to demonize sexual and gender minoritized people. Equally important, we addressed how LGBTQ+ religious groups and individuals turned to their faith to affirm their identities and experiences. In another example, we watched clips from the popular television show *Pose* to analyze how the scene approached a similar time period to that of *Like a Love Story*. In doing so, members drew connections between various types of texts to develop an understanding of contemporary LGBTQ+ political issues and their historical antecedents, which are often silenced within K-12 curricula.

Finally, we balanced discussions about politics and politics affecting LGBTQ+ folks with an intentional practice of dreaming in community. Throughout the year, we reminded students that "the future is queerness's domain, inviting them to critique, imagine, and create worlds rooted in a collective queer/trans liberation (Muñoz, 2009, p.1).

During this particular meeting, we shifted away from discussing texts and instead co-designed and facilitated a freedom-dreaming exercise in which youth reflected on their own experiences, needs, and desires for a world radically inclusive and affirming of their whole identities, not just their sexual orientation and gender, but also other identities they hold, such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, etc. During the meeting following the tumultuous 2020 election cycle, we facilitated a "freedom dreaming" exercise in which youth reflected on their own experiences, needs, and desires for a world radically inclusive and affirming of their whole identities (Kelley, 2003). In our framing of the exercise, we provided limited concrete directions, but provided a facilitator example (Image 4) and suggested members respond to the prompt via analog or digital written response, audio recording, or visual art.

Some community members used tools like Jamboard or Procreate to express their dreams, while others wrote poetry and lists in word documents. When done, those who felt comfortable sharing posted our dreams on a cohort-

Moving Forward as Politics and the Pandemic Continue to Harm

At the time of this writing, COVID continues to ravage the globe. Governmental agencies' refusal to confront the threats posed by new variants continue to reveal the failures of capitalism and neoliberalism in the United States and abroad. While vaccines offer some reprieve, we can't help but feel the concept of a "post-COVID" world continues to shrink in possibility. Simultaneously, the institutional and systemic homo-, queer-, and transphobia that mars K-12 education has been fortified as several Republican-led states passed draconian book bans that intentionally targeted BIPOC and LGBTQ+ texts in libraries and classrooms (Shivaram, 2021). State lines continue to shape the educational realities of LGBTQ+

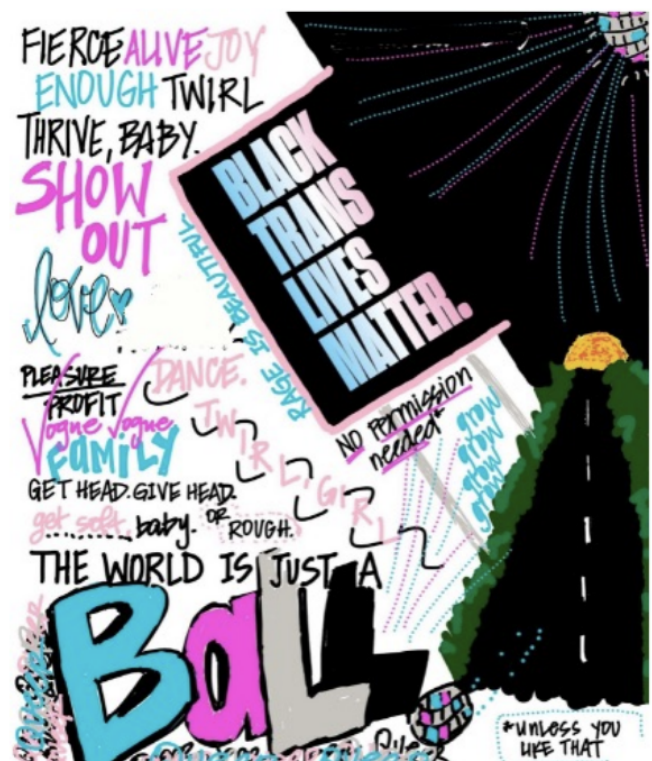


IMAGE 4: FACILITATOR EXAMPLE OF FREEDOM DREAMING

youth. Though the foundation of L&L emerged from our cocooned time early in the pandemic, the community created and literary approaches to texts constructed remain important and necessary.

We are not calling for a direct translation of our work within an online book club intentionally cultivated to center LGBTQ+ youth into a swift and regimented checklist. Context will always matter, and the contexts in which we constructed our group is not the same as a traditional classroom. We also caution against a teacher echoing our work without critical and constant reflection on their own positionality and experiences with LGBTQ+ texts and histories. With that preface established, we do believe there are pedagogical and curricular suggestions to be gleaned from the work we've outlined throughout this article. Teachers, especially those who teach secondary English and social studies, can incorporate and center narratives of QTPOC characters and people in their curriculum. Additionally, teachers can position texts from a wide range of genres as sites to interrogate oppressive structures and systems in order to cultivate a critical awareness with students. Given the current political landscape, all teachers might consider engaging in a review of their own classroom norms, policies, and procedures with the aim of identifying how practices may thwart LGBTQ+ youth from existing as their full selves within the space. All of these suggestions are not direct, uncomplicated steps to make tomorrow. Rather, they require constant work and unwavering commitment to eradicating from schools and our society at-large the forces that seek to marginalize LGBTQ+ youth.

Calls to resist a "return to normal" have become increasingly louder as COVID continues to infect and governmental responses remain ineffective. Such calls demand a more imaginative approach to the American social safety infrastructure that centers and nurtures people over profit, which would entail a radical departure from our neoliberal nightmare. Similarly, we, like many educators committed to justice, resist normalcy as a goal for K-12 schools. Normalcy has and continues to harm LGBTQ+ youth. Working within our contexts and boundaries to create more just schools for LGBTQ+ youth remains a goal of our work. Simultaneously, our hope is that educators embrace freedom dreaming as a practice to think beyond the limiting structures that continue to constrict our students' lives, communities, and futures.

We imagined, dreamt, and created a space where LGBTQ+ youth's experiences, ideas, and literacies were valued and loved. We hope we (both facilitators and members) can continue to build on this experiment of possibility going forward. Our dream is that spaces like L&L become integral parts of a COVID-free future that reaches beyond "normal," centering queer stories, dreams and pedagogies as an act of intentional investment into a more liberatory literacy landscape.

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