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Stepping Out with the Fop: Literacies of Embodiment and Becoming in Youth Drama

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CHAPTER 9

STEPPING OUT WITH THE FOP:

LITERACIES OF EMBODIMENT AND BECOMING IN YOUTH DRAMA

Drawing upon perspectives of New Literacy Studies, characterization and gender performativity, this interpretive case study used Multimodal Inter(Action) Analysis and ethnographic methods to examine how a queer youth, Michael, embodied the fop character type as he acted in a youth theatre troupe. The study examines Michael's embodiment of the fop as a composition process in drama that evoked discourses of queer masculinity and the performativity of selves becoming. Embodied composing of characterizations in the troupe, and specifically the fop, were multimodal designs that intertwined with Michael's self-cultivation and self-efficacy as a queer youth.

Introduction

Dramaturgy is an area of aesthetic literacy that entails composing and responding to the body as a multimodal text through intonation, gestures, facial expressions, image, and action (Aston and Savona 1991). The dramaturgical process typically occurs within an acting troupe where interpretation of dramatic texts arouses embodiment of characterizations through role-play, appropriation, and performance (Bogard 2011).

As a literacy educator, scholar, and former drama teacher, I have studied intersections between literacy, embodiment, and becoming in the lives of queer young men whose engagement in the dramaturgical process was enmeshed in strategies for selfhood (Bogard 2011). I dubbed these young men the "drama boys" because of the many hours they spent organizing their lives around their participation in the theatre arts. In many instances their dispositions exhibited characteristics of queer masculinity or "…ways of being masculine outside the

heteronormative construction of masculinity that disrupt … traditional images of the hegemonic heterosexual masculine male" (Heasley 2005, 310). As a result, the social structures and relations of their families, schools, churches, and other mainstream institutions often failed to accommodate their natural inclinations, leaving them to wander and wonder where they fit in.

Within heteronormative school cultures, queer youth frequently encounter emotional and physical violence, lack of inclusive curricula, silencing, and covert prejudice (Blackburn 2002/2003; Blackburn and Buckley 2005). These conditions often stunt academic, social, and emotional development, contributing to a low sense of self and increased likelihood of experiencing bullying and other antisocial behaviors (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network 2013). Perhaps unsurprisingly, many queer youth access participatory cultures where they have more latitude for developing a positive self-image. In these cultures, members have "low barriers to artistic expression, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, informal mentorship, social connections with others, and the sense that their contributions matter" (Jenkins et al. 2006, 7). I argue that dramaturgy, and specifically the work of character development, incites a participatory culture that offers queer youth an environment for identity exploration and self-cultivation (Bogard 2011). Literacy practices within the troupe mediate this culture via interactions around texts, embodied response to literature, role-play, appropriation, and other practices whereby literacy is a means of community involvement, performativity, and composing through multiple modalities (Jenkins et al. 2006).

In this chapter, I focus my attention on how Michael, a drama boy who was marginalized at his school, embodied the fop in Richard Sheridan's (1777) *School for Scandal*. As an 18th century stock character in literature and comic drama, the fop is generally portrayed as a "man of fashion" who aspires to wit and puts on airs (Williams 1995). Informed by the New Literacy

Studies (NLS) and my previous research, I framed Michael's case around perspectives on embodiment, characterization, and gender performativity to answer the following questions: How does Michael compose the fop in an embodiment process? How might embodied composition cultivate a sense of self-efficacy that is unique to his experience as a queer youth, and what is the role of literacy in doing this work?

Embodiment as Dramatic Composition

The New London Group's often-cited *Pedagogy of Multiliteracies* broadens understandings of text to include the body-as-text, particularly as it composed through "…situated configurations across image, gesture, gaze, body posture, sounds, writing, music, speech, and so on" (Jewitt 2008, 246). These are semiotic resources that people draw upon to make meaning. Design, as a compositional process, is the intentional arrangement of these resources in light of one's social purpose, intentions, context, and audience (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001).

In theatre arts, the body is a text upon which actors embody signs and symbols that cohere in a characterization drawn from typified characterizations. Character embodiment, a multimodal design process that involves cognitive, social, physical, and emotive elements (Bogard 2011), positions the body as the textual canvass for materializing an idea, quality, or feeling (Aston and Savona 1991). Cognitive aspects of embodiment included repeated reading of the script, appropriation of media influences, and journaling about the self relative to the character. Social and physical aspects of embodiment featured in peer discussion, playing with character choices, internalizing others' responses to the body-as-text, and layering of props and costumes. Affective sensations, the emotions that catalyzed embodiment, were regulated by the actors' felt sense (Pearl 1980). With cognitive, social, physical, and emotive interactions at play,

characterizations emerged through literacy events that brought inner selves in relation to the outside world.

Embodied Composition and Gender Performativity

From a NLS perspective, design involves "…actively recognizing and using the 'available resources' of multiple modalities as dynamic representational materials and tools for 'designing' and then critically 'redesigning' their identities, opportunities, and futures as global citizens of an increasingly connected yet diverse world" (Leander and Boldt 2013, 23). Thus, there is a relationship between composition as a "design" practice and the "redesign" of identities. In the context of drama, the serious play of multimodal composing and embodiment enables the emergence of possible selves, literate identity, and self-efficacy.

Character embodiment in youth drama is often intertwined with identity exploration, including gender performativity and sexuality. Heath (2001) found "at some subconscious level, the young men and women want an active public means by which to contest, interrogate, and transcend through the use of their bodies the constrains of everyday mores around gender roles." (13). I aim to show how multimodal, embodied composing in drama can be liberating for queer young people whose inner selves are splintered from their outer presentation of selves within heteronormative culture.

In heteronormative contexts, young men may present a social front that meets the manners, expectations, and appearance of normative masculinity (Butler 1990; Goffman 1959). Often, this requires subordinating non-masculine cultural codes, for "...it is through body styling, performative and repeated acts, that boys ensure that heterosexual masculinities are naturalized and consolidated" (Dalley-Trim 2007, 203). In these social relations, cultural discourses get reproduced and re-contextualized in and through bodies (Connell 2005; Medina and Perry 2014).

Similarly, a character type can be thought of as a configuration of signs and symbols that have formed through socialization and are so widely circulated they have become collectively recognizable as a cultural model (Aston and Savona 1991). In this case, that cultural model is the "fop," a male character of 18th century drama that evokes gender and sexual ambiguity. Although presumed heterosexual, the fop's "body and psychology float delightfully back and forth between the two poles [the masculine/feminine]" (Greene 2003, 45). The fop is graceful, fashionable, and, as an usher of the avant-garde, he continually reinvents himself. As he is "always on the fringe of things" (Camus 1991, 52), the fop is entrapped in a cycle of astonishing others, though gossip or unconventional behavior, to validate his being.

Embodying the Fop at The Civic Stage Theatre

I got to know Michael during three months of fieldwork at the Civic Stage Theatre. Its Summer Youth Program provided free drama training to teenagers and cast them in full-scale stage productions of dramatic masterpieces. My time at the Civic Stage coincided with its production of Robert Sheridan's (1777) *School for Scandal*, a Comedy of Manners from the British Restoration. The play satirizes the sanctimony and propriety of upper class British society, particularly their slavishness to appearance over substance, their self-centeredness and never-ending desire to gossip. Characterizations required embodying upper-crust English etiquette and dialect as well as the use of irony, wit, double entendre and other verbal repartee.

The troupe included twelve youth ages 13-18 (four men, eight women) and two adult male actors who served as mentors. The Civic Stage became a welcomed excursion from the teens' provincial communities, a kind of metropolitan clubhouse where the young actors built community around shared endeavors and their affinity for theatre. The troupe adhered to an intensive ten-week production schedule from June until mid-August with rehearsals each

weekday evening. On Saturdays they attended workshops on set construction, lighting design, character make-up and costumes. A dramaturge oriented the troupe to the performance styles and conventions of the Comedy of Manners. A dialect coach tutored the young actors in the delivery of accents, verbal humor and colloquialisms typical of the period.

Michael: Actor and 'Resident Bookworm'

Having just completed the 7th grade, Michael was the youngest member of the company. He played Sir Benjamin Backbite, the fop character, described in the production notes as "a gossip who will slander anyone, even those he does not know." Early on in my fieldwork I recognized Michael's characterization of the fop as an ideal referent for exploring embodiment relative to social, cultural and historical representations of gender and sexuality, in part because Michael was gender ambiguous, wearing oversized t-shirts in blue and pink pastels. Long, black hair fell past his shoulders and over his forehead. When talking in his usual quiet voice, he would flip his hair back, revealing brown doe eyes and cherub cheeks that evoked such androgyny that I could not discern his gender preference with any confidence. During the second day of rehearsal, the artistic director introduced me to Michael and emphasized, "*He* is our resident bookworm."

During the first two weeks of rehearsal, Michael typically sat alone in a dark corner of the theatre reading a book. In casual conversation he spoke in a formal register and made acute observations about art and literature that bespoke an intellectual savvy and wry humor in order to relate to adults in the company more than his peers. Around other teenagers in the troupe, his fey manner was so much more subdued.

Data Sources and Analysis

Focusing on Michael's affinity for drama and his embodiment of the fop, I compiled transcripts from two interviews with Michael, fieldnotes and video recordings of rehearsals along

with excerpts from his social media that documented his dramaturgical process. When analyzing interview transcripts, I focused on how his affinity for the theatre arts and his experiences as a queer youth overlapped, noting instances in the interviews where Michael felt marginalized or silenced in school. I also examined interviews from fellow company members that helped illuminate aspects of the dramaturgical process that featured in Michael's characterization. I recoded transcripts and fieldnotes using three broad, thematic trends that had emerged from my constant comparative analysis of the entire data set (Strauss and Corbin 1990). These themes included 1) Arrested development; 2) Retreat into a private literacy world; and 3) Integration of mind-body-action through drama.

To examine how Michael embodied the fop, I employed Multimodal (Inter)Action Analysis (Norris 2014; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). I selected a three-minute segment of scene work during which Michael used feedback from the production's director in his characterization. At this point in the dramaturgical process, Michael had memorized his lines (i.e., he was off-script) and knew the staging (i.e., blocking). Therefore, he was focused on refining his characterization through the subtleties of movement, voice and timing his actions/reactions. As shown in Table 17.1, I documented Michael's lower-level actions—utterances, gestures, gaits, vocal inflection and gazes. Then, I corresponded these actions to the particular meanings the actor intended. These higher-level meanings emerged from embodiments coming together in three iterations of scene work to evoke discourses of queer masculinity. The analysis revealed how embodiment of the fop increased Michael's social interactions and broadened discourses of masculinity, abetting his self-cultivation and agency as a queer youth.

[Insert Table 17.1 here.]

Table 17.1
Three Iterations of Embodiment

Iteration	Time	Michael's Action	Director's Response	Modality	Meaning
1st	7 Seconds				
	13:51	M deliver's line: "What, no mention of the duel?"		Vocal: Inflection up	Patronize
	13:53	M crosses from behind bench, taking his time.		Gesture: Right hand up; left hand on hip	Flaunt status
	13:54		Whistle if you need to.		
		M whistles.		Vocal: Idle whistle	Build anticipation
	13:58		Don't take too long [with the cross]. Now look at them [the women].	Gaze: Stare Timing: Speed up cross	Allure
	13:59	M dashes to bench without looking at the women.			
	14:00		No, No, *look first*. You are aiming straight for the bench. We don't want to do that. We want a head turn.	Gesture: Turn head	Entice
	14:03	M: "Is there like a theme for School for Scandal I can whistle?		Vocal: Whistle	
	14:05		No. Just don't make it *Kill Bill* [whistles theme from *Kill Bill*, then laughs]. Do it again and give a little head turn with your	Gesture: Tilt head Gaze: Pompous stare	Reveal

			eyes like, ‘Oh my god this is too good, I can’t hold it.’ Run this again.		
2nd	9 Seconds				
	14:15	M crosses from behind bench.			
			Now look at them.	Timing: Speed up gaze	
	14:18	M pauses to pose.		Gesture: Right hand up and wrist is bent. Left hand is on hip. Head tilts up, and eyes look straight up.	Flaunt status
	14:20		No, no you didn’t look at them totally. *I want a bigger, bigger look.*		
	14:22	M: “Do I totally turn my head like this?” [he turns his head toward the women]		Gaze: Facetious stare	Engross
			Yeah, exactly.		
	14:24	M: Okay.			
	14:25		And then turn your head back and role your eyes [he models the expression].	Gesture: Roll eyes	Condescend
3rd	7 Seconds				
	16:28	M repeats cross.			

16:31		Look at them!	Timing: Speed up gaze	
16:32	M poses and turns head toward the women, giggles, and runs toward the women to gossip.		Vocal: Giggle	Beguile
16:35		You are rushing it. That is about comic timing. You are doing it because I am telling you to, and you are trying to do it too quickly.	Timing: Slow down bit	

Michael's Private Literacy World

In many respects Michael encountered challenges not unlike most teenagers in the quest to form an integrated, coherent sense of self during adolescence. However, as a queer thirteen-year-old, his immediate social-academic environment offered few resources for negotiating such a critical task. Averse to contact sports and athletics, Michael's interests, preferences and tendencies seldom aligned other young men his own age. His passionate interest in reading, writing and aesthetics alongside his gender ambiguity, high intelligence and quiet nature queered his masculinity, not in and of themselves, but because they were not offset by other activities through which hegemonic masculinity was constructed. With little social status, he occupied the margins of school culture, where he was subordinated to young men who favored aggressive and competitive social practices in which dominant images of heterosexual masculinity were circulated and embodied.

Michael had few positive interactions with peers and fewer affirming representations from which he could see and understand himself. Because he anticipated negative responses, he avoided attracting much attention to himself: "You always have to watch what you say [at school] … if you make a mistake, or if you say something, then it kind of stays with you for the longest time and it is really hard to make that up." Consequently, he struggled finding congruence between his inner selves and the outer world, which is to say his interests and desires seldom found expression at school for fear of them becoming sources of Othering.

Michael enjoyed learning and liked being in his school's 'gifted and talented' program, but overall he regarded the general academic curriculum at his middle school as curtailing his creativity. His account of 7th grade suggested that the structure, routine and the lockstep

curriculum were antithetical to deep learning, further exacerbating his social (dis)engagements at school. Even subjects that intrinsically motivated him were mired in a culture of busy work, boredom and compliance. His enjoyment of writing, for example, was stifled by restricted invention: “In school what they [teachers] really like to do is give you a topic which is kind of weird because you can’t really be creative when they tell you how to do something.”

Like many of the queer youth in this study, Michael had a rich reading life outside of school and retreated into novels, short stories and poetry. An advanced reader, he was drawn to books with complex themes and vulnerable characters whose situations revealed the complexities of human nature. Michael also pursued creative writing as a hobby. “I like writing poetry and short stories,” Michael said. “I am working on a story that I hope could be long enough to be an actual novel.” Michael dreamed of becoming a successful novelist and mimicked the writing styles, eccentric characters, and fantastical plots of his favorite science fiction authors. Despite his aspirations as a writer, his sense of self as a writer was fragile “I am just kind of keeping everything to myself,” he said. “Maybe one day I will show it.” Like the majority of queer youth that I interviewed, the qualities that made Michael unique were also those that made him vulnerable. His writing was something he withheld, and withholding a strategy for protecting the sense of self he was nurturing. His private literacy world was a holding environment where reading and writing were a means of self-cultivation at a time when his immediate environment offered little means for seeing and understanding the self.

Michael’s association with the Civic Stage began before he was cast as a fop. Several months before he got involved in the Summer Youth Program he was cast in a minor role in an original dramatic work about the politics of immigration. He accepted the part and caught the

"theatre bug." He described his fascination with the fact that "…the actors expanded everything and people's ideas build on each other." The experience inspired him to audition for *School for Scandal* and meet other young people with similar aspirations. He was as a proud member of a theatre that he said, "Pushes the envelope and makes people think…. You can't just like keep your mind closed to all this stuff. It is like when I read new books—it's not like I can stick with the same kind [of book]. I got to try new things." The Civic Stage provided him a set of social practices in which his private literacy world could become a public exploration of possible selves.

Discovering the Fop

Performing the fop required that Michael break out of his shell to cohere physical, vocal and emotive expressions that materialized this character. This began with mental structuring of the character's physical idiosyncrasies during reading. Gradually, visions of the characterization formed through repeated readings of the dramatic script. One of Michael's peers stated:

> You start with little things. Is your person handsy? Are they vocal? What about their eyes? What part of the body do they use the most? I have big hands for my guy. And you kind of decide on an accent for the person. Yeah, just little things. Like, what would that person do? Are they always like screaming a bit?

Initially, the meanings generated from the script were reader driven, flexible, and cooperative, often abetting associations with other characterizations in popular culture. These actors tapped television, films, novels, biographies, picture books, and performances of professional actors as inspirations for their characterizations. Michael's peers, for example, referred to the character Jack in the television sitcom *Will and Grace* as a contemporary parallel to Michael's fop.

An admirer of the fop's wit and aesthetic sensibilities, Michael had no problem envisioning the fop's mannerisms, but feared looking foolish and attracting negative attention when embodying them. "I am a little worried the fop is going to seem like really stupid…I mean part of being in theatre is looking stupid, but I don't want to seem like *really* stupid." As a novice actor he was nervous and fearful of messing up, but the fop also required projecting to the point of parody the expressive tendencies he concealed in himself. Anxiety for his masculinity had made him so reserved that he hesitated embodying the role with too much ease or enthusiasm.

Consequently, his peers modeled flamboyant gestures for him during rehearsal breaks to help him loosen-up. Several young men playfully demonstrated how Michael might bend and flap his hands. During one moment of downtime, the troupe discussed the film *Kill Bill* and improvised a plotline in which Michael's fop took a sudden violent turn, enacting vengeance with supernatural and acrobatic feats like the *Kill Bill* characters, except with effete mannerisms. Together they queered gender through exploring prosody of voices, gaze, and other modalities of characterization. With less fear of being ridiculed, he grew confident opening up his mind, body and voice.

Embodying the Fop

Michael's characterization involved frequent collaborations with his director to cohere the timing, intensity, and arrangement of his fop embodiments. Their goal was to establish a comical mood as the fop enters the scene through mannerisms that would register the fop's dramatic physicality and penchant for spreading gossip, which occurred in three iterations documented in Table 17.1. The first iteration focused on identifying and extending character

choices. The second iteration attended to coordinating and timing embodiments, while the third iteration addressed naturalizing embodiment to manipulate social dynamics in the scene.

These iterations indicated a feedback cycle in which Michael kept aspects of a choice that worked, let go of what did not, and built again from that point. Time shortened in each of the iterations, increasing momentum and intensity of Michael's performance. His embodiment became more integrated and the director's response more focused on timing the fop's actions/reactions. Through this kind of repetitive sequence, embodiments gradually synced into a unified whole and the character emerged as a persona confident in his style and tastes, someone who is highly skilled at enticing others through ambiguous gender expression and a propensity for gossip.

The Fop's Queer Masculinity

Michael's embodiment and performance of the fop unsettled categorical thinking and gender roles that underlie heteronormative assumptions of sexual identity. His embodiment elicited ambiguities, inconsistencies and contradictory discourses. These and similar discourses circulated among the troupe during throughout the rehearsal period and performances. These discourses queered masculinity, inviting moments of cultural resistance and possibility, and afforded Michael more latitude with physical-social relations than he ordinarily experienced.

The Fop is graceful and yet ludicrous. Contradictions in the fop's presentation of self blurred the lines between gender/sexuality, dignity/decorum and propriety/impropriety. Michael aimed to embody these extremes in a number of ways; for example, in scene work Michael alternated between refined mannerisms to overzealous reactions.

14:03 **Michael:** "Is there like a [musical] theme for *School for Scandal* I can whistle?

Director: No. Just don't make it *Kill Bill*!

Michael whistles as he saunters across the stage

14:05 **Director:** Do it again and give a little head turn with your eyes like, 'Oh my god this rumor is too good, I can't hold it!'

14:15 *Michael saunters into the scene, glances toward the women, rolls his eyes, and then tilts his head up in an arrogant manner.*

14:20 **Director:** No, No! You didn't look at them *totally* I want a bigger, BIGGER look!

14:21 **Michael**: Do I totally turn my head like this?

Turns head and grins at the women in the scene

14:22 **Director:** Yeah, exactly! (laughs approvingly)

In this instance, timing Michael's walk, gestures, and facial expressions were essential to playing the extremes between decorum and impropriety.

***The Fop relishes being seen but is fashionably late*.** Much to the delight the bourgeoisie, the fop is both a harbinger of fashion and arbiter of satiric commentary regarding the high society. Despite his public appeal, he avoids being too available. His desirability is partially achieved through carefully timed reveals, entrances, and exits that ensure the fop remains in the minds the audience when he's offstage. Often, he is fashionably late to make a notable entrance (Atwood 2013).

To escalate the dramatic tension and increase the women's restlessness for the news upon his entrance, Michael used tactical delays and showy behaviors to build anticipation, as evidenced below.

13:51 *Michael enters the scene with the women waiting on him.*

13:54 **Director:** Slower. Whistle if you need to.

Michael slows his walk to meander, begins to whistle.

His meandering gait and whistle are a form of baiting and withholding that kept the women in deference to him and hanging on his every action. His ornate gestures rivet their attention and build their anticipation for him to come out with his latest gossip. Thus, Michael's performance of the fop depended a great deal on timing embodiments so as to beguile spectators with an aura of mystery and suspense that compelled them to hold their gaze on him. Conversely, anytime this did not happen, the illusion of his fop was broken, as when Michael repeated his entrance into the scene:

16:28 *Michael enters, given women a sly stare, but does not slow his walk.*

16:32 **Director:** You are rushing it! That [stare] is about comic timing. You are doing it because I am telling you to, and you are trying to do it too quickly!

In this instance, Michael's inattention to timing made the fop seemed more like a lackey than an aristocrat. Consequently, he learned that the fop's disclosures must be deployed in a manner that plays on other's desires, and provoke reactions that escalate his status and feed his self-esteem.

The fop bends gender yet his sexual orientation is ambiguous. As the fop Michael stepped beyond prescribed gender boundaries and engaged a wider spectrum of social practices than is generally available to young men. Although his character in *School for Scandal* has a

female love interest, Michael's performance does not embody heterosexual, masculine codes. Instead, he's encouraged to deliver his lines in a high-pitched voice and gesture with limp wrists or with one hand on his hip. Michael deploys effete mannerisms alongside his pursuit of a woman lover, which kept the fop's sexuality ambiguous for contemporary audiences. By refusing to collapse gender expression and romantic desire with sexual identity, his performance queered masculinity.

The fop is socially dominant, influential, and cunning, but his status is not derived from proving heterosexual masculinity but from invention, keen wit, and a striking fashion sense. By ushering in the fashionable, and intentionally queering gender and sexuality, he embodies difference as style, transcending norms that would otherwise cast him out. His fop became a favored and fashionable misfit. Rather than let convention dictate what he is not, his relations and modes of being expanded convention into gradually accommodating the unconventional, but with style, wit and carefully timed reveals that produced dramatic effect.

In the process of character development, the traits Michael perceived negatively about himself were often the qualities that the director insisted he extend. During the initial rehearsals, Michael spoke in a soft, quiet voice. In response, the director prompted him to open up his voice: "I want a higher pitch in your voice [director demos line in higher pitch]...We need to get the fop! …Okay? Say it again. Bigger! In character! And be as flamboyant as you can!"

Playing with the Fop

The performed discourses of queer masculinity that emerged from Michael's embodiment offered pathways for transcending hegemonic masculinity. While it is not clear that this was a conscious goal of Michael's, it is clear that the multiple modalities of embodiment fulfilled his

need for creative expression. His arrangement of semiotic resources of gestures, vocal inflections, gaits and gazes to elicit queer masculinity was a design practice that broadened the repertory of possible selves available to Michael, and therefore increased the ways he could relate to himself and others. For example, as Michael gained confidence making bold character choices, he became more socially involved with friends off stage. They played off one another's reactions as their characters would and even took turns improvising each other's part. Michael would work backstage with his peers, playing with a scarf he had secured for his performance, practicing how he could wave it to accentuate his voice. When I asked Michael about the increased frequency of these interactions, he explained:

> It is kinda like learning to play off random things—um, if you do enough things something is going to be good. Tonight were just messing around and having fun …some of the stuff we are not going to do because it is stupid. But there are some things I'll keep. I remember Beth [the assistant director] saying that the first voice I did she liked. I thought that was a weird voice but she liked it!

In this playful composing process, convention emerged from invention. Rather than try to fit his embodiment within a set of prescribed givens, his characterization emerged using resources available to him in the collaborative moment. These resources, whether it be varying vocal inflection or using a prop or costume accessory a new way, were a part of a growing "semiotic toolkit" (Dyson 2003) for extending his characterization and creating new, available designs. In these movements of outward performance, Michael grew more autonomous making bold character choices on his own. Meanwhile, his social interactions increased, which in itself was a step toward cultivating a higher sense of self.

His fop became a unifying point of collaboration among the troupe, a kind of exposition of difference and resistance that was empowering for young people who were either cast out or

hemmed in by heteronormative structures. The fop manifested a spectrum of tendencies that tapped innate human desires. Those the young people found most enticing pointed to where imperialist demands of society had tempered their bodies, voices, and desires. The fop functioned as a kind of "textual toy" (Dyson 2003) for initiating conversations around gendered norms and sexual identity that are often silenced and laden with identity risks for many teenagers. For example, Bailey, a teenage member of the troupe, described how the queering of gender norms through their embodiment of characterizations linked with young people in the troupe conveying their reluctance committing to a fixed sexual orientation.

> I know a lot of the people here, there's a few but not all, but a few think of themselves as bisexual and stuff like that. And there is a lot of that with youth today. Everyone is trying to figure that out, you know, because it is actually so common now. Like everyone else is gay so I must be gay too. Like, I was like that for awhile, like, 'am I bi?' You know just wondering because, you know, I seem like someone who would be.

Queer discourses that disrupt a gay/straight binary are often excluded from heteronormative school cultures, but in this troupe's participatory context they became a natural extension of embodiment through fictional characters, which teens could adapt to play with different identities. The fop's queerness offered insight into how social practices far more than desire weld categorizations of sexual identity. The discourses provided more avenues for exploration and reflection on the processes of claiming identity and the degree to which doing so can truly represent the spectrum of tendencies and desires that lie within oneself.

Becoming the Fop

As the discourses around the fop invited disclosure and exploration of genders and sexualities among the troupe's young actors, Michael's character embodiments became increasingly bold. By the end of the production period, when Michael entered the theatre, the troupe would erupt in applause. One of the senior girls announced, "He is the cutest thing on two feet!" This affirmation attests to Michael status within the company and nurtured a sense of acceptance. This was a gratifying social reversal for Michael, whose struggle for belonging at school was fraught by the culture's unrelenting endorsement of all that he was not.

Michael's fop was so well received that he presented himself as the fop on his social media profile picture, an instantiation of his identity as a young performing artist. Weeks after the show closed, a fellow cast member attempted to quote one of the fop's monologues on Michael's social media page in remembrance of their experience. In response, Michael wrote out his character's soliloquy, and emphasized with capital letters his punctuated, flamboyant affectations during his performance. Underneath his monologue, he proclaimed: "I hope every character I get is as fun as this one."

In circulating a representation of himself as the fop, Michael emphasizes publically a highly stylized presentation of himself. Having stepped out of his private literacy world, Michael seems to have recognized his power and agency to be read and recognized in a multiple ways beyond givens that were available to him. A stark contrast from his guarded, silent disposition in school, Michael's embodiment and performance of the fop served his self-expansion, expression, and sense of agency as a queer youth.

New Literacies, New Selves

Michael's embodiment of the fop was an iterative compositional process that evoked discourses of queer masculinity and the performativity of selves becoming. As a compositional process, Michael interacted with peers around texts in his arrangement of semiotic resources. Design was featured as he cohered signs and symbols that made his fop intelligible, which occurred through integrating thought, action and feedback through repeated interactions with the director and company. This kind of "authoring" included "intentional acts of generating, organizing, and reflecting on [bodies as] texts in social contexts in/through multiple sign systems" (Siegel 2006, 67). Further, his embodiment of the fop approximated conditions that are optimal for learning such as "…incessant repetition and incremental variation and extension under the close supervision of an experienced practitioner" (Deresiewicz, 2014, 174).

As Michael's his semiotic toolkit (Dyson, 2003) increased through these interactions, he became more autonomous in the troupe's participatory culture, deploying his designs for his own social purposes, intentions, and audiences such as his fellow troupe members, the production's audience, and his friends on social media. He positioned and repositioned himself in these social spaces, using the fop to instantiate his identity as a young performing artist and, importantly, expand the ways we could perform being a young man. As a queer youth, both these outcomes contributed to Michael's self-efficacy and a higher sense of self.

These processes are a means of becoming, of composing into other worlds and possible selves without settling into a fixed identity. In this way, Michael's case exemplifies embodied composition as a performative act in which semiotics, discourses, and social practices aided and abetted social transformation. Thus, Michael's dramaturgical process demonstrated the

intersection between embodied composition as a “design” practice and the “redesign” of identities (Leander and Boldt 2013). This dynamic was especially beneficial for Michael who, as a queer youth, did not know where he fit in. His literate practice of embodiment enabled interactions with people and texts as strategies for selfhood.

By embodying signs and symbols that elicited discourses of queer masculinity, his fop opened up a larger space for identity work unavailable in other contexts, such as school, where his self-expression was quelled by a narrow curriculum and a social reproduction of the heteronormative culture. Michael’s embodiment allowed him to step outside the heteronormative assumptions that had constrained him. The literacy practices Michael undertook in the dramaturgical process were deeply grounded in a need to discover possible selves through exploration and embodiment of difference in an environment of belonging and acceptance.

Arts based programs such as the Civic Stage Theatre can be rich spaces to find literacy in practice, where interactivity, role-play, embodiment and multimodality offer glimpses at people in the process of becoming. At time when queer youth are either on the margins or the cutting edge of school culture, these insights are important for understanding how they may engage literacy in ways that honor the pluralities of being and diverse ways of learning, knowing and making themselves known.

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