Writing the Self: Black Queer Youth Challenge Heteronormative Ways of Being in an After-School Writing Club

Latrise P. Johnson  
University of Alabama

Although contexts for writing have shifted in recent decades, traditional views tend to focus on and perpetuate standards-driven practices for “effective” writing. Literacy scholars have demonstrated the rich possibilities of the English language arts, and of queer-inclusive practices, but few have discussed how the writing of queer youth might disrupt heteronormativity and affirm gender and sexual diversity. Merging an expanded view of authentic writing and Yagelski’s (2011) writing as a way of being, this study explores the writing of Ava, Sanavia, and Anika, three Black queer youth who participated in an after-school writing club. This study examines how normalized literacy participation and ways of being are interrupted when queer youth write the self. In other words, participants constructed identities through the experience of writing and not the extent to which the content or form of their writing conformed to convention or what was “acceptable” in school spaces. Findings suggest that the act of writing enabled the participants to navigate and disrupt heteronormativity and traditional writing practices while being who/how they were. These findings contribute to research that seeks to interrupt literacy normativity and calls for restorative literacies aimed at enabling Black queer youth to (re)claim who they are through their writing.

Introduction

“Here and now, we write ourselves in the world no matter who/how we are.” This motto of Writing@West, a writing club at West High School, took most of the 2015-2016 school year to write. Members added and removed words, erased entire phrases only to write them the same way again, and revised the statement until everyone decided on the above motto. The act of writing and rewriting the motto serves as an example of how writing might provide youth with the space to expand, construct, and (re)claim identity while challenging the invisibility, silencing, and violence queer youth may encounter in school.

Research on the educational experiences of queer youth in school reveal that schools have failed to provide safe environments and meaningful educational experiences for queer youth, and even less so for queer youth of color (Blackburn, 2005; Brockenbrough, 2013; Cruz, 2013; Ngo, 2003). The effects of homophobia, harassment, and violence against queer youth have led to various initiatives to increase public awareness and efforts to support positive and inclusive learning.
environments for these students (Meyer, 2010). Despite these efforts, locating spaces and practices that honor the identities and knowledges of queer youth of color is difficult, as schools privilege languages and practices that reinforce structures of domination and heteronormativity (Blackburn, 2005; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). According to Brockenbrough (2013), “Queers of color [experience] academic underperformance, harassment and violence, and institutional exclusion across educational settings” (p. 426). In other words, queer youth of color face multiple forms of marginality. In addition, schools and classrooms that uphold hegemonic ideologies by privileging Standard English as well as heteronormative ways of being (e.g., discipline practices, dress codes) may alienate students who are linguistically diverse, who are from minority populations, who are gender nonconforming, and/or who identify (or are perceived) as lesbian, gay, transgender, or queer. Queer youth of color may experience schooling that does not support or affirm who they are as individuals or as members of intellectual communities. As a result, education can act as a practice of dominance and oppression for these youth.

Scholars are documenting meaningful educational experiences and literacy participation among queer youth of color (Blackburn, 2005a; Brockenbrough, 2016; Kumashiro, 2001; McCready, 2004). Scholars have reported culturally relevant practices, anti-oppressive knowledge production, and writing that invite queer youth of color to engage in literacy practices that affirm who they are and work against heterosexism and homophobia (Blackburn, 2005). Specifically, Jocson (2005) found that through writing, youth were able to comment on their worlds as a way to “write” the wrongs they had witnessed. This type of witnessing has potential for queer youth of color, as writing invites communities to engage in the critical work of challenging dominant narratives (Love, 2014; Muhammad, 2015; Pritchard, 2017).

This article builds upon the extant research by examining literacy participation and texts of three Black queer youths—Ava, Sanavia, and Anika—in an after-school writing club. Drawing from research on literacy as identity work (Blackburn, 2005b) and notions of literacy as events, practices, and ways of being (Gee, 1996; Yagelski, 2011), I use the phrase writing the self in order to describe the experience of writing and not the extent to which the content or form of writing conforms to convention or what is “acceptable” in school spaces. Writing the self focuses on the writer writing. For this study, I pose the questions: How does writing the self enable Ava, Sanavia, and Anika to explore aspects of their Black queer identities? Also, what happens to these writers as a result of writing? In order to shed light on the ways that the participants navigated and sometimes disrupted the heteronormative practices and contexts of their experiences in and out of school, I share their words, narratives, prose, and poetry as representations of their complex selves. By writing the self, these youths use writing to express their own feelings of pain and exclusion, as well as to interrogate heteronormativity they encounter in their lives.

School as a Heteronormative Landscape
Schools reproduce discourses of heteronormativity—that is, language, practices, images, and ways of being that privilege heterosexuality and gender “norms” (Dal-
Heterosexual hegemony in schools is constructed through silencing processes, including ignoring or denying the presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people, and regarding homosexuality as pathological and dangerous (Dalley & Campbell, 2006). In their study of a Canadian high school, Dalley and Campbell (2006) conclude that “any move by an individual student or teacher to introduce a queer perspective into classroom discussions was systematically negated, met with rejection (exclusion) or negative inclusion by teachers and students alike” (p. 15). Students in the study who identified as gay chose to hide their sexual identities in school out of fear of negative repercussions. Silencing processes result in queer students developing strategies and creating heteronormative and heterosexual personas to remain hidden and protected while in school spaces (Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Endo & Miller, 2014).

Likewise, in her work at Dynamic High School, Ngo (2003) has documented that even though the school “seemed to be doing all the right things to address LGBQ issues” (p. 121), combatting homophobic language and discourse is a slow process because of their pervasive and insidious nature. In addition, she asserts that heteronormative discourses in the school created an unsafe environment for LGBQ community at the school. As a social institution that mirrors larger structures of societies, schools reinforce “acceptable” sexual and gender norms and behaviors through heteronormative discourses that can be detrimental to the educational and social well-being of queer youth (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Sears (2003) describes how the construction of gender roles and stereotypes was perpetuated in schools through the idealization of masculinity and femininity. Events like school dances and sporting events serve to reify gender norms and serve as the “crucial foundation of a gendered order” (Sears, 2003, p. 161). Together, these findings highlight heteronormative privilege and discourse, social construction of gender difference, and gender inequality woven into the very fabric of school culture and identify a crucial place where restorative work is necessary.

**Literacy Normativity and Black Queer Youth**

According to Blackburn (2005a), “Heterosexism and homophobia in schools impede both the literacy work and the identity work of students perceived to be LGBT” (p. 17). Young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer hardly see aspects of their identities reflected in literacy content or practices used in their classes (Gray, 1999; Owens, 1998). Schools and English classrooms reinforce heteronormative discourse as students are discouraged from including aspects of their queer selves, while teachers may be reluctant to include queer content or center queer experiences (Wiltse & Boyko, 2015). In addition, Goldblatt (1995) has found that students were alienated by heteronormative and homophobic discourses of schools and classrooms, which hindered their literacy work. Across these studies, the lack of visibility and the inability for students to see themselves in the curriculum send alienating messages of despair and denial (Norton & Vare, 2004). Pritchard (2017) refers to such practice as literacy normativity, where normalized literacy practices inflict harm as well as “[steal] the emotional
resources from people, wounding people through text” (p. 24). Literacy normativity contributes to further marginalization of and violence against Black queer youth.

Research related to the literacy practices of queer youth outlines how educators may include queer content, center queer voices, and engage queer youth with affirming images of queer identity (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). Over time, young adult literature has taken up queer content and characters that have become more complex, moving from the stereotypical and pathological to more personal stories that represent nuanced views and understandings of queer identities, perspectives, and lived experiences (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). Increasingly, literacy researchers use queer frameworks in order to discuss the importance and subversive potential of literacy participation that centers the lived experiences of queer youth (Doucette, 2015). A study conducted by Blackburn and McCready (2009) examines the potential of “journalistic texts” written by queer students for centering sexual and gender identity alongside “race, class, religion, social geography and political economy” (p. 223). Alexander and Banks (2004) suggest that educators use writing as a way to usher all students into an understanding of sexuality and sexual literacy that is critical and conscious. In addition, Alexander and Banks (2004) also posit that educators seeking to include queer content and practice must do so in ways that do not reify “the centrality of White, class-privileged heteronormativity” (p. 277). These studies offer insight into the ways educators might consider the literate identities of Black queer youth and enact what Pritchard (2017) refers to as “restorative literacies, which consists of literacy practices that Black queers employ as means of self-definition, self-care, and self-determination” (p. 24).

Including queer content and centering voices of queer people in the classroom have the potential to disrupt and challenge heteronormative ways of being. Doucette (2015) suggests that “queer [and queer-minded] students and educators might find ways to claim a sense of agency in and through writing” (Doucette, 2015, p. 5). This study builds on research that suggests literacy participation and practice for Black queer youth should be liberating and include naming and linking issues that schools have difficulty addressing (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996). Thus, I explore how writers’ writing and writers writing the self enabled three Black queer youth to (re)claim who they were as well as navigate the heteronormative practices and contexts of their school.

**Theoretical Considerations: From Authenticity to Writing as Being**

Contemporary discourses on writing focus on the differences between academic and personal writing. In many instances, academic writing is characterized as paradigmatic, whereas personal writing privileges experience (Mlynarczyk, 2006). Academic writing usually focuses on writing according to rigid essay formats, analyzing teacher-selected texts, and improving writing as a skill to succeed in college or the workplace. Unfortunately, according to Yagelski (2009), “school-sponsored writing is about separating self from experience by changing an experience into a stylized textual artifact” (p. 19). More progressive writing pedagogies expect
“students to write more freely and openly about their experiences in the world” (Moje & MuQaribu, 2003). As a way to complicate limiting views on student writing, authentic writing—writing that students perceive as relevant to the world and written for “real” audiences—is seen as a way to include writing instruction and practice that has the potential to engage “diverse” students and connect to their lives (Behizadeh, 2014; Garcia & O’Donnell-Allen, 2016). The narrow focus on audience and/or purpose in authentic writing excludes the transformative potential of the act of writing or in how people make meaning through writing (Pritchard, 2017). Although discourse around authentic writing focuses on “making connections between schoolwork and students’ lives” (Behizadeh, 2014), it fails to address how writers might interrogate racialized, gendered, and othered worlds and obliges pedagogues to assume authenticity for students. As a result, writing assignments and opportunities may reflect heteronormative discourses as well as normative views of literacy.

For queer youth, the gap between private and public self creates an inhospitable climate for writing (Winn & Johnson, 2011; Muhammad, 2015). Therefore, expanded and restorative notions of literacy are needed in order to invite Black queer youth to contribute to, critique, and make sense of being in the world. Writing as a way of being is an ontological view of writing that focuses on the “experience of the self in the act of writing” (Yagelski, 2011, p. 107). As a theoretical and pedagogical shift, writing as a way of being allows one to focus on the writer’s experience of writing. It subordinates writing as a skill to writing as collective and collaborative inquiry, where students name, question, make sense of, and reflect on their experiences in the world (Yagelski, 2011). A shift from conventional thinking about writing means that teachers of writing focus on the act of writing itself—which is not bound by limited (i.e., dualistic, heteronormative, racist) views of the world.

Instead, writing as a way of being has the potential to invite Black queer youth to experience writing and its transformative power (Yagelski, 2011) as well as to “create and sustain their identities and environments in ways that demonstrate and engender self- and communal love” (Pritchard, 2017, p. 246). A focus on the experience of writing and its potential to be restorative and transformative requires us to view writing and writing instruction as vehicles for change and truth-seeking practices, that “help us understand and transform ourselves—individually and together” (Yagelski, 2011, p. 21). Viewing writing within both sociocultural and ontological frames attends to the possibilities of writing as productive acts of refraction (Bakhtin, 1981) where youths’ writing and youths writing become meaningful pathways to understanding and enacting multiple identities. Without the focus on product, this expanded view and restorative potential of literacy offer a way to examine the writing and the act of writing of Black queer youth as meaningful to the construction of discourse that may interrupt heteronormativity and locate how Black queer youth might use writing to create and sustain their identities. For this study, these frames are useful for understanding how Black queer youth use the act of writing to create environments where they are able to define themselves on their own terms.
Context of Writing@West

Participants in this study attended West High School (WHS), a public high school located on the west side of a southern college town. At the time of the study, over 95% of WHS students qualified for free or reduced lunch and nearly all of the school’s 661 students were African American. WHS offers the only International Baccalaureate (IB) program in the school system. The school has received national attention as the focus of two documentaries that examined how the town’s rezoning has affected the school’s academic and athletic achievements.

The principal of WHS, Dr. Bivens, has been active in seeking out programmatic and communal resources for the students at West. In addition to the IB program and a dual-enrollment program with one of the town’s community colleges, the school houses over 10 additional programs that focus on various aspects of student life and achievement. For example, one program focuses on keeping teen mothers in school. In addition, Dr. Bivens has also been active in obtaining instructional assistance for teachers, ranging from scripted programs to monthly in-school professional development. The overall plan to increase student achievement and continue the incremental gains made since Dr. Bivens became principal in 2010 included improving writing instruction and achievement. Dr. Bivens and I created a plan whereby I would conduct a literacy audit of English classes, provide professional development for teachers, model writing instruction in their classes, and work closely with students. Thus, my work with students includes partnering preservice teachers enrolled in a teaching writing course with WHS students and starting a writing club where I can write alongside students and continue to improve my own teaching of writing practice.

Writing@West is housed in a classroom provided to me by Dr. Bivens as part of my Professor in Residence project. I use the classroom to teach university classes in the mornings and hold writing club meetings after school. WHS students—writing club members and many nonmembers—stop by the classroom during the day. Students come if they have been put out of class, to eat their lunch, and/or to get assistance with their writing.

The activities for Writing@West are inspired by culturally relevant practices (Gay, 2010; Winn & Johnson, 2011, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995). We begin each session with snacks and a “check-in” session where we talk for 10 to 15 minutes about issues of participants’ choice. Because students are invited to speak and write in ways that are more common to out-of-school contexts and beyond school literacy practice (Green, 2013; Hull & Schultz, 2002), content of the students’ check-ins includes youth language (Paris, 2013) and sometimes explicit language to describe relationships, significant others, experiences with teachers, and family “drama” that ranges from healthy to tumultuous. In addition, students read “meaningful texts” together (Tatum, 2006) that prompt discussion of complex issues and illuminate possibilities of what it means to write the self. Students read examples of how Black and Black queer writers have used writing to examine and interrogate issues of sexual identity and race. For example, we have read excerpts from James Baldwin’s
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I have shared my own writing that described aspects of my Black queer identity. Each student is provided with a journal and encouraged to write freely. Members are encouraged to write at least three times per week, and many students share journal entries during our read and feed (Fisher, 2007) sessions every other week. Students also respond to prompts inviting them to write identity narratives, poetry, and prose describing times, spaces, and people that have changed their lives.

Methodology

The data analyzed and presented in this paper are taken from a larger ongoing ethnographic study of students’, teachers’, and preservice teachers’ experiences with literacy teaching and learning in diverse learning spaces at West High School, a study that began in September 2014. The ethnographic case study approach (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) is an effective tool for identifying dominant sociocultural discourses as well as describing participants, activities, times, and spaces that are essential to the study. This ethnographic case study incorporates ethnography and case study, two empirical forms of qualitative inquiry used to examine how a unique group works together through interpretation (Creswell, 2003; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Wolcott, 1987). Participant observation, rooted in ethnography, has allowed me to document the culture and practices of Writing@West from the inside. Participant observation requires a researcher to establish rapport, blend in as a community member, and then become immersed in the data in order to understand particular phenomena (Bernard, 1994). As a familiar fixture at WHS, I have been able to establish rapport within the school’s community and blend in as an adult who teachers and students are used to seeing in the halls and in their classes. Because participant observation is characterized by such actions as “learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day routine activities of participants in the researcher setting” (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999), I want to be able to document not only the literacy practices of participants on the edge-of-school (Johnson, 2014), but also how their participation might be informed by classroom and school-wide practices, ideologies, and customs.

Although participant observation is the primary mode of data collection, I have made specific pedagogical and methodological choices in order to invite students to engage in dialogue (in writing and with community) about issues of individual, ideological, and collective struggle. The data set includes (1) participants’ journals used for responding to writing prompts and for personal journal writing, (2) memos created after encounters with participants in and out of Writing@West meetings, (3) two semistructured interviews, and (4) observations of English classes in order to document the culture and custom of literacy learning at West. Memos and field notes are handwritten in a field notebook and later expanded into descriptive narratives. Observations of English classes, a part of the literacy audit for the school that began in January 2014, are handwritten with an observation tool in PDF format using a note-taking application on my electronic tablet.
For this article, I construct a set of case studies (Merriam, 1998) of three Black queer youth—Ava, Sanavia, and Anika—who participated in Writing@West during the 2015-2016 school year.

Participants
Over 50 students signed up to join Writing@West during the school’s club fair in August 2015. While 23 students attended the first meeting, only 18 students attended most or all of the weekly meetings over the course of the school year. Each member identified as African American, and their ages ranged from 14 to 18. Among the 18 core members, there were diverse gender and sexual identities (see Table 1), and 10 had queer identities.

Case Study Participants
I used purposeful sampling to focus on three of the writing club participants. While all of the participants’ writing provides examples of the possibilities of the writing club, these three participants’ writing and participation stand out as examples of the role writing and being in the space played in their “identity work” as queer

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Youth (Blackburn, 2005). Specifically, all of these focal participants used writing to share aspects of their queer identities, describe accounts of their own struggles, and comment and/or write about the act of writing. Below, I describe these three case study participants in more detail.

**Ava**
Ava identified as an African American bisexual male. Many times, he also referred to himself as gay. He was a 17-year-old senior and was well known by teachers and his peers. He stood 6'2” and was a talented dancer. Ava established and choreographed for the school’s majorette dance team, but was advised by the school’s principal that he could not participate in actual performances. Ava was also on the bowling and tennis teams. He was not “out” to his parents or to people at school. However, he was perceived as gay because, at times, he performed femininity (e.g., flipping pretend long hair, dancing majorette-style). I chose Ava as a focal participant because he used writing to grapple with the pain he felt in not being able to be out in particular spaces.

**Sanavia**
Sanavia was an African American gender nonconforming female who identified as gay. She was a member of the school’s Junior ROTC program and marching band. Sanavia identified herself as a writer and poet. She had a twin brother who was a grade below her and saw herself as his protector against bullies and the abuse of family members. I chose Sanavia as a focal participant because she had a presence that was infectious. Other Writing@West members would look for her if she was absent. She emerged as a leader of the group by sharing many private aspects of herself in and through writing.

**Anika**
Anika identified as a Black queer female. She was not out to her parents and only a few of her friends knew about her queer identity. She was a member of West’s basketball and softball teams and also played tuba in the marching band. She attended each of the writing club meetings and ate lunch in the Writing@West space occasionally. In preparing for college, Anika brought her mother to the space to get my assistance with admission, financial aid, and freshman orientation. As a result, I was able to also develop a relationship with members of Anika’s family. I chose Anika as a focal participant because she was a dedicated member of Writing@West and because she used writing to share aspects of her identity that she kept hidden from many people. In addition, she was critical of the type of writing she had to do for school and would protest by not completing writing assignments required by her teacher.

**Semistructured Interviews**
In order to gain more insight into the participants’ writing, I conducted two semistructured interviews with groups of several participants. The first interview was conducted after the fifth Writing@West meeting with 7 of the 18 core participants.
The second interview was conducted after the twentieth meeting, where 5 core members were present. Each of the focus participants for this research study was present for both interviews. The first interview lasted 43 minutes, and the second interview lasted 61 minutes. During the recorded interviews, I posed questions about students’ experiences with writing and how they felt when they wrote about certain aspects of their lives, and sought to clarify ideas I read in their writing. Both interviews took place immediately after regular club meetings, and participation was voluntary.

**Researcher Positionality**

It is important to acknowledge my relationship with the WHS community and my intrinsic interest in this particular community. As a researcher, I sought out West because it serves a large African American student population. My work as a researcher and teacher focuses on documenting and improving the educational experiences and achievement of African American students. Being Professor in Residence at West allows me to work closely with the school’s administration, English teachers, students, and preservice teachers on improving writing and ELA instruction specifically, and improving the educational experiences of Black youth more broadly.

Recently, I have become interested in examining the educational experiences of Black queer youth, as many of the queer students at West see me as “family” (a term used among queer people at West to acknowledge one’s queer identity or queer alliance). Although I identify as a Black queer female, students were not aware of my identity until meeting my same-sex partner. Being a Black queer female researcher/teacher/teacher educator (Collins, 2000) at West allows entry into many spaces. I am privy to many conversations, am invited to school and personal events, and consider West my professional home. Given my membership in the WHS community, my positionality does not allow me to document or designate damage (Tuck, 2009). I do, however, attempt to employ theoretical and methodological approaches that invite question-posing and problem-solving with communities (Paris & Winn, 2014). For instance, talking and writing about my own experiences and answering questions as a Black queer female has invited dialogic communication with and consciousness-raising about oppressed populations. I am not only a researcher in the space, but a person who is also becoming through writing.

**Data Analysis**

I collected and analyzed students’ writing, field notes, and interview transcriptions in order to “document the culture, the perspectives and practices, of the [community]” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), giving attention to the interrelationships, functions, and cultural and contextual factors of writing practice (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996).

In analyzing the data for this case study—expanded narratives from field notes, interview transcripts, and literacy artifacts (e.g., students’ journal writing and written responses to activities)—I started with a list of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that were grounded in an expanded view of authenticity and writing as
being. Initial codes were intended to reveal whether and how students were using words or phrases that signaled connections to their identities and/or to the act of writing itself. Some examples of start codes grounded in my theoretical frame are authentic/real/truth writing, lived experiences, academic writing, silencing, identity, being, act of writing, and creating text. After an initial pass through the data using these codes, I created interpretive codes based on emergent themes from the data. Next, I sorted data according to themes. I wrote memos to capture emergent patterns and differences in how themes appeared across participants. Common threads became a third set of codes that highlighted initial findings, such as being queer in school, undoing pain, and writing the self, which allowed me to synthesize the data of the three participants.

The final pattern codes allowed me to understand how writing helped participants work through being queer in different spaces and how their writing might challenge heteronormative ways of being and understanding. In addition, I analyzed observation data and memos to construct a descriptive picture of the practices, customs, and ideologies of participants’ English classes, in Writing@West, and school-wide. The following findings focus on the writing of Ava, Sanavia, and Anika in order to illustrate how the act of writing and specific contexts supported identity development for these Black queer youth.

**Findings**

Given that study participants had tenuous relationships with academic writing and that all focal participants used the writing in Writing@West to work through difficult aspects of their queer identities, I wanted to know whether the act of writing and, specifically, writing that centered their lived experiences were transformative and/or restorative for these youth, and if so, how. In the first section of my findings, I contextualize participants’ writing by considering the experiences of these youth in the context of the day-to-day heteronormative culture at West in general and in English classes in particular. In the subsequent sections, I share moments when Ava, Sanavia, and Anika used writing to (re)claim, proclaim, and understand the self. I share their stories, poetry, and journal writing, as well as their individual experiences in, with, and through the act of writing. I conclude by detailing why restorative literacy practices are necessary for all youth and implications for literacy teacher practice.

**Heteronormativity at West High School**

At West, queer students and adults (including me) are discouraged from sharing their non-heteronormative experiences in academic spaces (e.g., classrooms discussions, writing). For example, Mrs. Evans, a math teacher who identifies as a lesbian, shared with me that she established a space for queer students to meet after school. However, other teachers discouraged the meetings because it was “inappropriate” for teachers and students to talk about their personal lives (Memo: Conversation with Evans). In relation to writing, specifically, Anika was reminded by her English teacher not to include “personal stories” in an essay after she used an anecdote...
about a new relationship with “the love of her life” who was the same sex. In this way, teachers at West High School, like those at other schools, cite appropriateness when justifying their unwillingness to engage with LGBT issues and text (Wiltse & Boyko, 2015) and reinforcing intentionally or unintentionally heteronormative discourses perpetuated by fear, silence, and the unwillingness to engage in queer content (Dalley & Campbell, 2006).

Although heteronormativity is apparent at West, participants used writing to interrogate school spaces where they were not allowed to be themselves. Ava, Sanavia, and Anika participated in writing that was about “confronting life in all its wonderful and terrible pain and joy” (Yagelski, 2009, p. 19). Their writing served as anti-heteronormative acts in which they could write the self in ways that valued their queer identities. In other words, their ideas and language around being were not monitored or silenced by normative expectations of academic writing. Their participation interrupted normalized school discourse as they were invited to write themselves in ways that allowed them to practice enacting their queer identities while being critical of heteronormative and homophobic places in their lives.

“I Want to Dance in the Hall!”: Ava

Ava’s writing storied the difficulty of coming/being “out” and interrogated a heteronormative and difficult landscape (Cruz, 2013). For example, Ava wrote about being bisexual and gay, a truth he had not shared with many people, including members of his family. In a journal entry entitled “Bi,” he described his identity as a bisexual male as he experienced it in the school’s hallways. He wrote:

The halls want me to be something less than I am. . . . I have to walk a little less and talk a little less. I want to hold his hand. I want to dance in the hall. Dancing takes me to another land. It sends me to a land of milk and honey. (Journal entry)

Ava described the difficulty of being unable to perform his queerness in the school halls, where other students might recognize queer or gay performance (in this case, holding hands with another male or doing modern dance). He explained what he felt as he remembered writing the entry:

Boys are not quote unquote allowed to hold the hands of other boys in the hallway. Everybody is watching. [Other students] see you. So you can’t be gay or whatever. I just wanted to be myself in that moment. And y’all know I like to dance. (Interview transcript, April 13, 2016, p. 23)

For Ava, writing about being a bisexual/gay male meant dealing with feelings of pain and how being in community helped him cope. Ava composed a person who felt dehumanized and hopeless. He wrote:

Honestly, if it were not for my friends that I can’t wait to see every day, I don’t know where I would be. I can’t deal with these feelings in my head and my heart. I can’t pinpoint why I am living the shithole of a life. (Journal entry)
A similar sentiment is seen here:

To keep it real, I don’t understand why I am here. I feel like I am here for decoration. I just don’t feel human. No matter what people say, I will always be the boy who likes other boys. Writing my feelings down is never easy but I have to release this pain that is killing me inside. I can’t keep living like this. The way I am is not a choice. Writing this is all I could do to be at least a small bit of happy. (Journal entry)

Ava struggled with his identity even though in person you would never know that the tall, confident dance team founder and choreographer who played tennis, was on the bowling team, and flipped his imaginary hair when he spoke would “feel like decoration.” In many ways, Ava was able to manifest and represent his bisexual identity through his actions and body. In addition, it was through his writing that he was able to compose a fragmented self and at the same time construct an understanding of self that he would not have been able to through academic or even authentic writing (Wargo, 2016).

In his writing, Ava critiqued the heteronormative expectations of the people around him and bore witness to his inability to embody his true self. He used the act of writing to trace the pain of being still, not moving in the ways that made him who he was. Ava’s experiences speak to the choices that queer youth of color are forced to make. According to Cruz (2013), “When [queer youth] of color begin to [write] their experiences of pain and oppression in their own lives and how it is inscribed onto their bodies, . . . storying the self allows the possibility of understanding other kinds of oppression suffered by others” (p. 455). Ava was able to link the self and the experience of writing in order to name, explore, and deal with his experiences.

“I Wrote Down My Pain”: Sanavia

According to bell hooks (1999), “We do not write because we must; we always have a choice. We write because language is the way we keep a hold on life. With words we experience our deepest understandings of what it means to be” (p. 13). For Sanavia, writing helped her name her experiences and interrogate the spaces, people, and events that brought her pain as a gay female. During the first interview, Sanavia shared that “writing in my journal just makes me feel better. I am able to just write everything down and hope it stays there” (Interview transcript, October 14, 2015, p. 4). Sanavia used writing to deal with the significant challenges she faced as an adolescent growing up as a gay female in an abusive environment.

Being a gender nonconforming gay female was a constant struggle for Sanavia at school and at home. She wrote to help herself undo whatever pain she felt at the time. Sanavia wrote herself into an entry about her estranged relationship with her mother.

[Mom] tells me she drinks because of me. Because the real me aint who she wants for a daughter. I don’t know how to feel about that. It made me feel unloved, hated, like a
stray animal. I think she remembers saying that, she acts like she doesn’t and that hurts too. I want to talk to her, but when I try, she changes the subject. (Journal entry)

Here, Sanavia shares how she feels about her relationship with her mother and how painful it is for her. Because writing in this way was not about a product or its quality, Sanavia was freed from the constraints of demonstrating writing proficiency or skill, and thus could write in a way that enabled her to explore her experiences, confront her painful feelings about those experiences, and try to make sense of them.

When students were prompted to story one experience that exemplified who they were, Sanavia composed a narrative that she wrote in the third person and described as “fiction.” She did not complete the narrative and had no intention of finishing it. Her narrative described the experiences of fraternal twins—Bria and Brandon—who had an alcoholic mother and were “cursed by their father to live a terrible life.” She explained her choice to compose a fictional narrative and leave it “unfinished”:

**LATRISE:** Are you going to write any more of the story? It’s good.

**SANAVIA:** Nope. I don’t need to write any more of that story. I’m good.

**LATRISE:** So why did you write it about Bria?

**SANAVIA:** If I write about me, it becomes too hard. Too hard to deal with all the shit in my life. So I write about [Bria]. I write about her messed-up life and her alcoholic mama so I don’t have to write about mine.

**LATRISE:** Did it help to write it in this way?

**SANAVIA:** I guess. I just wrote down my pain and disguised it as hers. I’m done with that. Things are good now. (Interview transcript, April 13, 2016, p. 40)

Sanavia used writing to help deal with the pain she experienced in her life. Instead of focusing on the product of writing, she was able to use the act of writing as well as to “write” the wrongs in her life (Jocson, 2005). She continued to write in this way throughout her time in the writing club. In response to the final journal prompt, she wrote:

Dear Sanavia, I have to keep it real with you. I wish I could go back and to do some things over. I wouldn’t be so rebellious. I wouldn’t drink so much. Don’t drink so much! You’ve done a lot in these 17 years and you have a lot more to come! But you can do better. As I write this, I am crying because I know I have hurt my mother by stealing and lying and I don’t want that to be you. I’ve been homeless and abused but now I am about to graduate from high school. I proved so many people wrong. I made it. We will make it. Stay prayed up. (Journal response, Prompt 7)

Sanavia wrote her true self as one who struggled with pain. She also used the act of composing the letter as a way of rewriting herself, revealing aspects of her personality and actions that she would change. For Sanavia, writing was a process of creating new knowledge “that comes from a theory of the flesh [that] is a survival
strategy for women and lesbians of color and LGBTQ students of color, a tactic to maintain visibility and resist erasure” (Cruz, 2013, p. 456). The act of writing the self freed her from the constraints of writing and allowed her to explore her experiences and confront the painful feelings associated with those experiences. Writing in this way also enabled her to restore her sense of self as she admitted that she was able to make it despite her experiences and pain.

“Keep It 100”: Anika
The writing, experiences, and ways of knowing of queer youth of color can have the potential to interrogate heteronormative hegemony (Brockenbrough, 2013). Doing so requires a “centering of queer of color epistemologies as lenses for knowledge production” (Brockenbrough, 2013, p. 427) and an invitation to students to tell their truths. As markers for students sharing their truths, the words “real,” “keep it real,” and “keep it 100 [percent]” appeared throughout Anika’s writing and language. During one of our weekly check-ins, Anika clarified that to her, to “keep it real” meant “being able to tell the truth even when it hurts.” She explained, “It could hurt you or somebody else but you got to keep it 100” (Field notes, January 27, 2016).

Anika’s writing also revealed a sense of truth-telling:

On the court, nobody cares what I wear. They don’t care because I wear the uniform. I wear a uniform for basketball and softball so no one is wondering why I have that on. But at school people ask me why I wear “boy” clothes. But I don’t, I wear clothes I like. There is no uniform for boys or girls even though people believe it is. Girls are supposed to wear dresses but that just ain’t me. (Journal entry)

As Anika described the spaces where she did not have to defend her choice of dress (e.g., the softball field and basketball court), she interrogated gender expectations related to dressing at school (Pascoe, 2012). Anika used writing to share her experience as well as defend her way of being in this world. Her writing also served as a space where she interrogated heteronormativity and questioned others’ perceptions of her. Such interrogation provided the opportunity to write authentically in that Anika, as a queer writer, positioned her experience at the center of her writing while interrogating larger issues of gender identity and norms perpetuated in sports. What made Anika’s writing authentic is that it represented not just her truth but also a truth that could be taken up and examined by an audience.

Anika continued this type of interrogation as she posed questions in a poem entitled “See me.” She wrote:

Why can’t you see me?
Is it because I love your sister?
Because I dress like your brother?
See me
Can’t you look beyond my love?
Beyond my clothes?
I am just me like you are you. (Journal response to Prompt 3)
The act of writing these questions allowed Anika to interrogate how she was perceived according to heteronormative ways of being. In other words, her writing questioned how others saw her while also centering her queer identity and thus rewriting heteronormative discourse as a violation of her choice to enact nontraditional gender identity (Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Pascoe, 2012). Although Anika wrote about her perceived marginalization, her writing served as discursive and refractive acts in which she rewrote herself—her love for another female and her gender nonconforming dress—as normal.

**Writing the Self—Apart from and in Community: A Summary**

Elsewhere, I have posited that “opportunities to write community may include students thinking and writing about their own experiences while exposing how their membership to particular communities affects their construction of knowledge, literacy participation, and practice” (Johnson, 2015, p. 32). The members of Writing@West used their writing to write themselves into queer and Black communities as well as intellectual communities. This understanding is reflected in their collective “We Are From” poem. The students wrote:

- We are from journaling and check-ins—
- We are from pages filled with feelings and freely spoken words—unfiltered and true
- We are from talking about it and speaking from the heart
- We are from shared smiles, shared struggles, and hearing all sides
- We are from acknowledging and loving who we are and how we are
- We are not from normal, regular, or ordinary
- We are future Martin’s, Langston’s, Maya’s and James’s
- We are from doing the impossible
- We are from being outside the box, standing on top of it, and hiding inside it
- We are from where we want to be, what we want to be, and who we want to be
- We are writers writing
- We are The West High School Writing Club.
  (Field notes, final draft copied from the dry-erase board, April 27, 2016)

As evidenced in the above poem and in Ava’s, Sanavia’s, and Anika’s writings, participants invoked practices, ideologies, and community membership as Black (and queer) youth. They linked their writing to telling “unfiltered” truths; they connected their Black and queer identities to the experiences of Black, and in some cases queer, scholars; and they named themselves as writers writing. Their collective voice challenged dominant narratives around queer youth identity by shedding light on the fluid and plural possibilities of their experiences. Using dialogue, writing, and rewriting, members of Writing@West participated in the sophisticated act of taking on dominant discourses, refracting them in their writing, and rewriting themselves as empowered and powerful. Participants were able to see their membership in marginalized communities and their experiences (e.g., of being queer, Black) in a new light.
Discussion: Why Write the Queer Self?
As participants shared their experiences as Black queer youth in schools, interrogated school and classroom spaces, wrote to undo the pain of abuse and heartbreak, and engaged in writing and rewriting together, Ava, Sanavia, and Anika wrote in ways that were critical, courageous, and communal. Creating opportunities for queer youth of color to write the self in these ways has the potential to help them participate in acts of understanding that are integral to their awareness of themselves and the world (Yagelski, 2009). As members of the writing club, students exercised their individual and collective freedom to write about what mattered to them. The opportunity to engage in personal and collective writing invited students into a writing community “where they could foster literate identities without fear, limitations, or judgment” (Winn, 2013, p. 130). This type of writing increased students’ feelings of competence as writers and honored their voices and experiences (Ife, 2012).

For these youth, writing was a truth-seeking practice whereby the students not only named their experiences, but were involved in rewriting a world where they could enact several aspects of their identities. The participants’ journals allowed them to reveal their truths about being, their families, and other aspects of their lives. In their writing and being, they shared aspects of their queer identities that spoke to the complexities of their identities as well as the myriad possibilities of how queer students might (re)present and (re)claim the self. Writing as a way of being can interrupt the reproduction of power dynamics and make literacy participation and practice part of a process of political empowerment and liberation for Black queer students.

Writing the self involves a dialogic process of talking and writing about one’s life trajectory, personal identity, and lived experiences, as well as practices that support intellectual, academic, personal, and social engagement. For Black queer youth, writing the self may act as a restorative literacy practice in which youth “create an environment to truly have and live a life in the fullest sense of the word on their own terms” (Pritchard, 2017, p. 246). Ava, Sanavia, and Anika wrote the self in ways that challenged dominant narratives and heteronormative ways of being. They used writing to “reaffirm and proclaim [their] being in the here and now” (Yagelski, 2009, p. 17). Their journal entries, stories, poems, and prose provided practice not only for being gay, gender nonconforming, and queer, but also for just being. The writing shared among the members of Writing@West underscores the possibilities of writing the self outside the bounds of academic convention.

Conclusions and Implications for Literacy Teaching for Queer Youth
According to Blackburn (2005a), “Afterschool programs can nurture such imaginings and facilitate their actualizations by creating space for LGBTQ youth to engage in the kind of literacy work sanctioned by schools while simultaneously engaging in the unsanctioned work of developing their sexual [and/or gender] identity”
While creating opportunities where students engage in writing processes that center their lived experiences supports their ability to become competent writers, doing so also honors and extends who students are and supports their ability to enact their multiple and queer identities. For students who find themselves on the margins of intellectual engagement, such writing practice has the potential to encourage healthy academic and social identity development.

Educators are in need of theoretical and pedagogical models in which restorative literacies are enacted in order to undo the violence against and silencing of Black queer youth that happen in schools. According to Blackburn (2005b), educators who work with queer youth must “[understand] gender and sexual identities in complicated ways in order to meet the needs of queer students as well as all students who are confined by dichotomous, heterosexist, and homophobic understandings of gender” and ways of being (p. 398). For teachers of Black queer youth, specifically, there needs to be an exposing of normalizing and heteronormative practices that relegate Black queer students to the margins of school and academic achievement. There are theoretical and pedagogical models that promote broad views of writing and writing for different purposes that teachers might access in order to acknowledge their queer students as intellectual contributors to English language arts discourse. This is done by examining how literacy practices either welcome or deny voices and experiences of all youth (including Black queer youth) through ELA content, spaces, and practices. Doing so also requires an understanding of how educators may shape normalized literacy practice and participation that demand particular and prescribed rules of speaking and writing.

Whitney (2011) contends that schools must be sites of learning spaces and being places as opposed to sites of oppression and silencing. Mainstream views of writing instruction reinforce a sense of separation and the world (Yagelski, 2009). However, writing that connects the self and the world includes use of language to question the social construction of the self and challenge the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self- and social development. English classrooms, specifically, are obligated to create opportunities for students to interrogate perspectives, produce countertexts, and imagine a more just world. As Black queer youth develop their literate identities, it is important that teachers provide literacy practice aimed at empowering them to use their voices against racism, homophobia, and injustices while learning to be in a world where these are realities. In other words, students should be encouraged to write the self, not according to prescribed convention or gender roles or positions, but in ways that allow them to recognize and fight injustice. How well teachers teach English in classrooms that include Black queer youth will depend largely on how willing they are to know all of their students. When teachers invite students to compose themselves in ways that enact their queer identities, we liberate voices that are normally silenced.

NOTES
1. All names, including club, school, and participants, are pseudonyms.
2. For this study, I consider Kumashiro’s (2001) use of the term *queer* to describe people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, gender nonconforming, transgender, transsexual, queer, and/or questioning. For participants, I use *queer* to describe their collective identity and *gay, bisexual,* or *queer* individually according to their own identity at the time of the study.

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Latrise P. Johnson is an assistant professor at the University of Alabama, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in secondary English language arts and literacy. Her work focuses on writing and educational experiences of historically marginalized students.

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