

Complexity through Concreteness and Collaborative Being-Together:
Lessons in *Engaging Cultural Studies*

This digital portfolio represents a sampling of the work I have done, in collaboration with my cohort, this quarter in BCULST 510: Engaging Cultural Studies. The artifacts that populate this collection include my handwritten notes from the first day of class, two online discussion posts displaying conversations between my colleagues and I regarding factoids related to my research, the results of an in-class brainstorming exercise related to my Capstone project alongside a skit that Frances and I wrote and performed as a class activity, and finally, two thank you notes from my colleagues and images of some members of my cohort during our final meeting this quarter, which took the form of a potluck at a colleague's home. This collection is by no means exhaustive, but it represents the different forms my work this quarter has taken, the collaborative and collective nature of the scholarly processes I have engaged in this course, and the ways in which the course has helped me to hone and sharpen my research skills, and the research questions I am asking, throughout the quarter.

During the first class session of BCULST 510, I took notes about moving from general and theoretical to concrete research questions by anchoring my work in specific artifacts: “*a concrete artifact can get you into complex histories/ideas...what are the material artifacts that are letting you speak to bigger theoretical issues?...what are your archives/artifacts?...taking everyday objects/forms and showing how they are political...working through the histories that produce things can help you come to alternatives...*” (Artifact 1) These reflective, scrawled reminders to myself, likely based off either a class discussion or comment from Professor

Gardner, illustrate the significance, to my own academic growth, of presence in class as a time/space where ideas germinate and come together, and where valuable research skills are learned and reflected on in scholarly community. These notes also articulate one of the most important ways in which my understanding of how to engage cultural studies research was sharpened and refined this quarter. I have always been a big-picture type of thinker, and have never had problems generating huge, theoretical questions, but the process of grounding my questions in specific, manageable sites so that I can actually begin to “research” and address them has historically been difficult for me. The relevance of this skill, as distilled in my notes from the first day of class, is something I have come to internalize and appreciate throughout my work in this course. In particular, the weekly assignment of locating a theme such as “place” or “map” or even “racial capitalism” in a particular artifact, or *factoid*, has allowed me to actually practice the skill of grounding my research in specific sites, finding and articulating the places and moments where my theoretical questions manifest in everyday objects and situations.

On that note, the factoids I posted each week on the course discussion pages throughout the quarter collectively serve as a group of artifacts that each allow slightly different questions to emerge but all connect back to my larger research foci. This has been extremely valuable, as I can now ground my research by referring back to not only this collection of artifacts, but also to the responses of my colleagues to my factoids, many of which bring up theoretically new and interesting ways of engaging with the artifacts and the ideas that emerge from them. This process has been infinitely more useful than just reading theory, then reflecting on and writing about my artifacts on my own, and points again to the collaborative and collective modes of doing cultural studies work that I feel have been so valuable throughout this course. To illustrate this, I have

included two discussion threads as artifacts in this collection, both of which include and begin with a factoid in which I see some of my research questions and interests located.

I chose to include the canvas discussion on my “map” factoid as an artifact in this portfolio both because I am interested in the discussion that emerged from the factoid and because it presents an example of the collaborative process of generating research questions and ideas I have engaged this quarter. For this factoid, I posted an image of “the chart” from the early 2000’s lesbian television drama, *The L Word*:



This is an image of "the chart" from *The L Word*, an early 2000's tv show "portraying the lives of a group of lesbians and their friends, connections, family, and lovers in the trendy Greater Los Angeles, California city of West Hollywood" (Wikipedia). The chart is a central technology of the show, where Alice (pictured above) maps the intimate connections of all the lesbians in her community on a giant whiteboard. While I am definitely **not** endorsing the *L Word* as a site of positive representations of queer life, I am interested in the chart's function in the show as a tool that tracks intimate connections and, I would argue, visually maps out a community and kinship structures. It leads me to think through questions around mapping intimate geographies and visualizing/spatializing the construction of community and kinship.

This factoid remains interesting to me for the reasons mentioned in my above post, as a spatial/visual map of intimate community connections and kinship structures. This is just one example of the ways in which the assignments and coursework in BCULST 510 have helped me to compile a collection of research artifacts. However, the online discussion between Miranda, Maisha, and myself that followed the above post points further toward the ways in which this course has provided the opportunity for me to engage in scholarly reflection with colleagues surrounding my research, their research, the assigned readings, and their intersections. Miranda and Maisha both brought up new and interesting ways of thinking through the L Word “map” I presented, and both approached my factoid as well as the readings they referred to from different angles than I had originally thought to (Artifact 4). Both Miranda and Maisha, like myself, center queer community and kinship in their research, so it was extremely generative to put our distinct lenses into conversation around a particular artifact.

For the third artifact of my course portfolio, I have included an image of the sticky-notes I came up with surrounding the sites, discourses, and expertise/knowledges at play in my Capstone research. Below this image, I have included a brief description of a skit Frances and I prepared and performed in class, based off my sticky-note ideas as well as theirs. Performing this skit was a very memorable moment in the quarter for me, partly because it was more powerful and generative than I expected it to be. When I first heard we were doing an “act-it-out” activity, I was apprehensive and a bit resentful at being asked to perform a skit; perhaps I was also harboring unchecked and internalized assumptions about the relative usefulness of such an activity. However, the process of dreaming up and performing a skit with Frances was extremely

generative, from synthesizing the common themes of our research into one scenario to the affective experience of performing the acts and discourses we had previously just been writing about. As we acted out the isolation of social media and call-out culture, and then the coming-together in person and seeing/embracing each other as whole, complex people, I was able to experience the stakes of both of our research in an emotional and embodied way that I could not access from simply writing down my ideas about the topic. This activity provided another useful experience in collaboration for me, and also an important reminder of the unique power of performance and an encouragement to include it more in my work.

The final artifact in my BCULST 510 course portfolio is a collection of images of my cohort during our final class meeting, which was a potluck, as well as two thank you notes given to me by colleagues. This collection of artifacts points, once again, to what I have come to understand as the integral importance of collaboration to cultural studies work and to the opportunity this course has provided to come together with my cohort and engage in scholarly collaborative discussion around each other's research interests, as well as to practice radical collective care within an academic context. The fact that we chose to hold our final class meeting at Yvonne's home, where intergenerational family members were present and where we shared lovingly prepared food, was itself an important intervention in the often isolating and solitary nature of academia as a whole. The work that I have done and the learning that has occurred for me this quarter is inseparable from the collective values and spirit of my cohort, which are constantly put into practice when we engage with each other. I am grateful that this course has provided opportunities for us to intentionally thank each other, and to come together in ways that transcend the models prescribed by the academic context that initially brought us together, and

know that these processes have benefitted both my learning and wellbeing in myriad ways.

These forms of being-together and caring for each other, as a cohort and with our family members as well as faculty, represent both method and praxis for enacting our theoretical understandings and collective values, and for *engaging* Cultural Studies.