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Rainbows and Mud: Experiments in LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Care

For many years, we—a lesbian anthropologist, a gay philosopher, and a gay developmental psychologist—have been struck by our LGBTQ+ students' disconnection from the LGBTQ+ histories, cultures, and people who came before them. At the same time, we have learned from our work with LGBTQ+ older adults how forgotten and isolated they feel from the LGBTQ+ communities they helped to create and liberate. In 2019, we launched The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project (hereafter the Dialogue Project). This Chicago-based project—a partnership between a large LGBTQ+ community center, an art and design college, and a public research university—brings together racially, socioeconomically, and gender-diverse cohorts of LGBTQ+ younger (eighteen to twenty-nine years old) and older adults (sixty-two to eighty-four) for dialogue, creative collaboration, and shared dinners. The project has evolved into a hybrid pedagogical/research experiment in which participants become partners in education, community formation, and knowledge production.

In the second year of the project, we began incorporating storytelling hours into our biweekly meetings. Before a dialogue session that focused on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, we reached out to several elders in the project

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who had previously mentioned personal connections to the topic and asked if they would be willing to share a six-to-eight-minute story. We ended up with enough volunteers to fill an hour with stories. Ricardo, a seventy-one-year-old Italian American, described his abandonment by his family as a gay teenager living in New York in the 1960s, being taken in by a gay uncle, and being diagnosed as HIV+ in the 1980s.[1] Ricardo watched his friends and, eventually, his uncle die until he had no one left. Ron, a white seventy-four-year-old gay man who was usually a quiet presence in our conversations, began crying as he recounted the moment he was informed about his own diagnosis and his years of activism as a subject in experimental drug trials. George Garcia, a sixty-five-year-old Filipino gay man who usually likes to joke around and make folks laugh, recalled how he gave away all of his possessions in the month after his diagnosis as he prepared to die. Marti Smith, a seventy-seven-year-old white Midwestern farm girl and card-carrying lesbian feminist (not separatist), described the time she had spent as a volunteer "angel of death" who helped console young men dying alone and convince them to sign do-not-resuscitate orders in the AIDS ward of the hospital where she worked.

For our younger participants (undergraduate and graduate students), the realization that the majority of the older men in our group had been HIV+ for decades came as a shock. As they listened to stories of HIV/AIDS-related LGBTQ+ care networks, political activism, solidarity, and trauma, many of the "youngers" became visibly upset.[2] Leisha, a nonbinary undergraduate, started crying. "No one told us about this," they said, "we thought it was in the past." Ash, a transfeminine student, became angry that they did not know this history: "I remember the first time someone taunted me that I would get AIDS because I slept with men, I didn't even know what AIDS was. It's never taught in schools." Logan, a cisgender gay writer, concurred: "I haven't heard these stories—stories like we heard today. I am realizing I don't even know what I'm missing. I'm ashamed I don't know."

The elders shared their dismay. Ricardo was disheartened to learn that many of the younger folks knew very little about the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its impact on LGBTQ+ communities. Marti thought schools today were required to teach about AIDS (past and present). George expressed

[1] Participants in the project determined how they wanted to be named (e.g., pseudonym, first name, or first and last name) and described in this article. Participants who appear on the project website have given permission for the different ways in which they are represented.

[2] Use of the terms "youngers" and "elders" emerged from dialogues in which participants grappled for ways to refer to each other and have become the most popular way in which students and older adults refer to themselves in relation to one another.

concern that our younger participants were unaware that the HIV/AIDS pandemic has not ended and that they are at risk. "People are still dying," he said. "You're not protected from this. Tell me, what have you been told? What do you need to know?"

While an increasing awareness of the economic, legal, emotional, social, and physical precarity of LGBTQ+ people has sparked new laws, policies, and medical and social services for younger and older LGBTQ+ people, their epistemic needs are just as urgent. For many decades, young people—both LGBTQ+ and not—growing up in the United States have been systematically denied access to LGBTQ+ histories and knowledges through homophobic and transphobic gatekeeping within education, community, and family networks (Rofes 2005; Lugg 2016). As a result, generations of LGBTQ+ folks continue to come of age in relative social isolation, lacking tools to understand their experiences within broader social and historical contexts, and lacking respect and recognition from those around them.

We find feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice useful in thinking about these realities, particularly for getting at the ways marginalized groups are unjustly treated as knowing subjects. Fricker describes two forms of epistemic injustice, which are often related: "hermeneutical injustice," in which a member of a marginalized group lacks access to interpretive resources for making sense of their experiences, and "testimonial injustice," when a speaker from a marginalized group is given a deflated level of credibility by a hearer (147–61). Epistemic injustice can lead marginalized subjects to internalize historical and social biases about their intellectual capacities and hamper their ability to have their experiences taken seriously by friends, family, and broader communities.

A unique aspect of epistemic injustice for LGBTQ+ people results from the lack of intergenerational contact within the community. LGBTQ+ young people rarely interact with LGBTQ+ adults in school, family, or social settings. Unlike in many communities that face oppression "by virtue of their members' identity (e.g., racial, ethnic, or religious communities)," contacts between youth and elders are not intrinsic elements of LGBTQ+ social systems (Russell and Bohan 2005, 2). LGBTQ+ knowledges, histories, and cultures are lost or disavowed from generation to generation (Halperin 2012).

In this article, we reflect on the first three years (2019–22) of the Dialogue Project to develop an understanding of care rooted within a community-engaged project that brings together LGBTQ+ people across generations. Through the Dialogue Project, we explore how education and research, broadly defined, might be harnessed to empower LGBTQ+ people and communities. We engage the notion of epistemic care as a form of relational work designed to counter legacies of epistemic injustice. It is a way for

members of underrepresented and, often, disenfranchised communities to activate each other's epistemic agency through collaborative pedagogy and research in which participants are simultaneously teachers and learners. Through the sharing of stories and perspectives, participants come to recognize each other and their communities as important and credible sources of knowledge, culture, and history. Epistemic care is developed over time, through personal interactions and relationships. It is messy work that requires negotiation, emotional labor, and failure in order to generate new knowledge, relationships, and methods of care for one another within a shared community.

We connect our work to earlier feminist and gay liberation consciousness-raising practices and feminist scholarship on care as a relational practice (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Tronto 1993). Bringing feminist philosophical work on epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Kidd, Medina, and Polhaus 2017; Johnson 2019) into conversation with Nel Noddings's writings on the ethics of care in education (1995, 2011), we think about epistemic justice work as a form of collective self-care. We situate the Dialogue Project as a methodological attempt to bridge theory and practice, and we weave together higher education and nonprofit social services institutions within a recent turn in feminist scholarship, queer studies, and feminist cultural anthropology to think about research and scholarship through an ethics of care.[3]

We have structured this article to interweave ethnographic narrative with theoretical discussion. In the first section, we describe the evolution of the Dialogue Project as an experimental pedagogical invitation to an embodied feminist and queer education. Next, we take a deep dive into the messiness (rainbows and mud) of epistemic care work as experienced by new project participants. The following two sections engage Noddings's scholarship on ethics of care in education and histories of consciousness-raising to think about epistemic care as a component of holistic approaches to care. We complicate assumptions that members of a society should ideally care for one another and explore how dialogue can serve as a (sometimes uncomfortable) forum in which people in unequal relationships of power, privilege, and life experience decide whether or not to care for one another and negotiate its parameters. In the last two sections, we examine a recent analytical conversation between longtime participants to think about the ways they, through time and relationship building, have become epistemic partners in both the pedagogical and research components of the project. Calls for community-engaged research that bridges theory and practice, and acknowledges thinkers outside of academia as epistemic agents, beg the question of *how* to do this work. It is our hope that a frank account of our attempt to forge such

[3] See Walters (2015), Brim (2020), McGladrey (2020), and Weiss (2020).

a methodology within and between institutions of higher education and nonprofit community service can further these discussions and practices.

Project overview: An embodied, intergenerational LGBTQ+ pedagogy

From the very beginning, the Dialogue Project has been a constantly evolving experiment in which members of a community (elders, students, and faculty cofacilitators) are invited to create their own form of feminist and queer studies informed by embodied histories and their complex interactions. The project pushes back at the erasure and suppression of LGBTQ+ people and histories within education; it experiments with a collaborative approach that brings very differently situated members of younger and older generations together to teach each other and to learn together about "our people."

The diversity of participants is one of the project's great strengths. All participants self-identify in some way as LGBTQ+. Almost half identify as people of color, half as women, and over a third as transgender and/or gender nonbinary. Younger and older generations include transgender, bisexual, gay, lesbian, and queer folks. Approximately half qualify as low income and food insecure. By and large, participants have had limited access to and involvement with feminist and queer studies as intellectual pursuits and the resources they provide for making sense of genders and sexualities in diverse forms. Most have received little to no formal education about LGBTQ+ people and histories. Yet, while they may lack the language of academic discourses, they carry with them the material and historical experiences that can help educate others on LGBTQ+ historical and present circumstances.

We, as the faculty facilitators, find ourselves in a complex position of being comfortably situated and uncomfortably implicated within the elite and often exclusionary ivory tower of academia. As the project's only middle-aged (thirty-eight to forty-eight years old) participants, we occupy an interesting place between the generations, with experiences sometimes quite similar to those of older participants while also having years of teaching experiences with younger LGBTQ+ students.[4] Our positionality in the project as its white, cisgender, tenured or tenure-track lesbian and gay faculty facilitators is significant. It speaks both to overlapping forms of privilege and, for some older participants, progress, as the institutionalization of LGBTQ+ studies has allowed us to be out teachers and scholars who engage LGBTQ+ issues as part of our professional work. Our role in the project, as both participants and facilitators,

[4] Efforts to recruit participants ages thirty to fifty-five for such a time-intensive project have proven difficult due to people's jobs and other obligations. Students and retired folks can more easily fit the project into their schedules.

has at times been confusing to navigate. Some participants want us to fix things when tensions arise, while others (and we) see this work as part of community building and collective pedagogy. These complexities have been fruitful topics of discussion in dialogues and an inspiration for interested participants to step into leadership positions.

Over the course of the first four years, the project has settled into a structure in which, each fall, a new cohort of approximately thirty older and younger adults join the project. Participants are students at one of our academic institutions or older adults who come to the project through the senior services program of our partner LGBTQ+ community center—Center on Halsted—as well as through word of mouth. Incoming participants commit (with the acknowledgment that schedules and desires can change) to participate for a nine-month period over the course of an academic year for a total of sixteen dialogues. Newly joining students enroll in a college course taught by the faculty facilitators. The course, titled Generating Queers, was created in response to suggestions from students in the first year of the project. The course structure alternates between seminars (with assigned readings, films, and podcasts on LGBTQ+ histories, theories, and politics) and themed intergenerational dialogues in which students and elders discuss their personal experiences with, and perspectives on, the topics engaged in the assigned materials.

Themed dialogues in the fall semester have concentrated on topics such as histories of LGBTQ+ politics and activism, gender and sexuality, radical care and chosen families, and experiences with health care. LGBTQ+ oral and visual histories help us to explore racism and ageism within LGBTQ+ communities. Meetings usually begin with storytelling sessions, followed by unstructured dialogue in large and small groups, and in pairs.

Midway through the fall semester, intergenerational working groups of four to six people form to collaborate on creative projects to be featured on the public-facing website generationliberation.com. These small groups decide on the idea, content, and format of their work (such as photographic essays, zines, comics, board games, sound pieces, written narratives, and visual art) that will bring to life the stories, histories, and/or lived experiences of LGBTQ+ folks. In the second year of the project, for instance, participants decided to focus their small group projects on queer joy to counter negative representations of LGBTQ+ lives in media and public culture. In the third year, participants explored LGBTQ+ challenges in finding housing, queer spaces (past and present) in Chicago, the term "faggot," and LGBTQ+ spiritual connections.

Most participants continue with the project on an extracurricular basis in the spring semester, some of them choosing to shift into leadership positions.

Participants determine the topics for spring dialogues (past topics have included gender expansiveness and nonbinary identities, lesbian cultural shifts, media representations of LGBTQ+ folks over time, racial reckoning in LGBTQ+ communities, and disability) and work in small groups to plan and facilitate discussions. Those who are interested continue creative project work in small intergenerational groups. At the end of each year, participants reflectively discuss the project and ways they would like to see it develop. More than half of the participants from each year have elected to continue on with the project in following years, and two cohorts have formed—"new" folks in their first year and those continuing on with the project from previous years.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic forced the project online, participants met at our partner LGBTQ+ community center for dialogue and informal conversation over shared meals. In February 2020, we transitioned to Zoom, using breakout rooms for one-on-one and small group conversation. Zoom offered participants a different (sometimes deeper) level of intimacy with one another and proved to be more accessible for hard-of-hearing folks than in-person conversation. At the same time, participants often talked of their longing for the day when they could again gather in person. For some, our return to in-person gatherings (whenever possible) in the last year has been cause for celebration (with an intergenerational group heading to a nearby leather bar afterward); for others who had moved away during the pandemic and continued to join virtually, it is a loss. The lessons learned about in-person and online modes of dialogue have laid bare for us—facilitators and participants—the centrality of relationality within an embodied intergenerational LGBTQ+ pedagogy.

Rainbows and mud: The messiness of epistemic care work

For almost everyone who has participated in the project so far (two authors included), this project has been our first time within an exclusively LGBTQ+ educational space and within an intergenerational LGBTQ+ community that gets together regularly. Many of our participants have recounted their high hopes and excitement on entering this unique space and their ensuing disappointment at finding it was not, as a student put it, "all sunshine and rainbows all the time." Instead of a utopic safe space in which differently located members of a marginalized population automatically understand and accept each other, the dialogues were a space that included divisions, lack of understanding, discrimination, and histories of suppression and oppression within and between LGBTQ+ communities due to the built-in diversity the acronym implies. These tensions, we find, can often be traced to histories of epistemic

injustice that both deny access to LGBTQ+ knowledges and collapse such diverse knowledges under the acronym's banner.

In September 2021, the new intergenerational cohort met over Zoom for their first formal dialogue session. Five long-time participants joined the meeting to welcome "the new recruits" (as Donald Bell, a seventy-two-year-old cisgender pro-feminist Black SGL man, jokingly referred to them) and lead an orientation session.[5] Members of the new cohort were then whisked away to Zoom breakout rooms for a series of one-on-one and small group "speed-dating" sessions in which they talked about why they were joining the project, their hopes for what it might entail, their concerns, and the atmosphere and community they would like to develop. Things were going well. During quick breaks in the main Zoom room between breakout sessions, elders and youngers chatted about their very different high school prom experiences, traded "bar stories" about past and present gay bars and drag clubs, and remarked on how much they were enjoying meeting each other.

After their icebreaker conversations, folks came back together to discuss their goals for the project and the community they hoped to create. Casey, a twenty-two-year-old white nonbinary femme clothing designer, described their desire to "be involved . . . to learn more" after "scrambling just to get any little tidbits of information [about LGBTQ+ history] I could." Alex, a twenty-eight-year-old white transgender middle-school teacher, shared their hope to learn from older trans people that "it can be fun to be LGBT." Jeffrey, a seventy-year-old mixed-race trans man who had recently transitioned, expressed his interest in knowing "our history and where we come from."

Cathy Knight, a sixty-eight-year-old white cis lesbian who loves show tunes and nature, sat quietly, listening as several older gay men spoke about the gay rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s as a precursor to HIV/AIDS activism. At some point, she unmuted herself and began to share: "I think a lot of our history is whitewashed, focused on gay men, and excludes the folks who were really behind the scenes and supporting others during the days of AIDS. . . . I want to be a community where people want to really dig into their story in history and what we've been taught, why we haven't been taught the whole thing, and as a white cis lesbian, I get really tired of hearing men talk. Gay men have had a platform they haven't necessarily earned . . . and I think there are lessons we can all hear from each other."

[5] Don has explained at other moments that "SGL stands for 'same gender loving' and is used by some African American gay men to racially distinguish from white gay men."

Alexis, a seventy-one-year-old Latinx trans woman and social justice activist, responded:

> I have to really cheer you for saying those things, Cathy. But it also goes for white lesbians, too. I mean there's a privilege of whiteness that we don't address. They write the history. I remember in 1966 I ran away to New York City, and I was on Christopher Street. And that was a bunch of badass drag queens and . . . you had to have been there, okay . . . it was tough. And it's also tough today. I mean the most marginalized people are trans women of color who are not being supported . . . they're still suffering, getting murdered. Those are some of the discussions I would like to have. It's kind of raw and it's hard for people to deal with. Sometimes we wanna clean it up real pretty, and that doesn't work for me.

Alexis's comments were met by several nods and affirmations.

Two older white cisgender gay men became upset. Tom Stabnicki, a seventy-six-year-old retired social worker and social activist, asserted forcefully that it was "too late in the day" to talk about this further. Larry, a sixty-eight-year-old former bartender, expressed "major concern" that the group was on their way to creating "scapegoats" to blame.

Arthur, a sixty-four-year-old cis gay male retiree married to his partner of thirty-six years, challenged Larry to clarify what he meant: "Who in this group is blaming who? I've yet to hear anyone blame someone." Larry started to yell at Arthur and accused him of not listening. Alexis, audibly chuckling at Larry's anger, broke into the conversation, saying "You're not being honest, Larry. You're worried by us bringing up race you're going to be scapegoated." Larry exploded, demanding to know what Alexis was "trying to say." The next two minutes were a blur of arguing, with Larry and Alexis talking over one another. At some point, Alexis forcefully asserted: "You don't want someone to put you on the spot that gay history is basically presented as a white male construct, okay." "You are pissing me off right now," Larry said, to which Alexis retorted "So what? White men get pissed off all the time . . . anytime they're challenged, okay. You're being challenged right now."

At that point, a faculty facilitator jumped in to acknowledge how important this type of conversation is for the project and suggested that the group draw on it to think about shared community guidelines for difficult conversations. As participants took up this topic for the last twenty minutes of our meeting, we noticed that Larry and another white gay man (who hadn't spoken) had left the meeting. This first meeting ended on a positive note, however, with participants smiling and waving goodbye.

We began to hear from several of the older participants in the new cohort who were concerned about the negative impact of the first dialogue on our younger members. Cathy worried that her comments might have been too much. Larry announced it would be better for everyone if he stopped coming to the dialogues. The facilitators spoke and emailed with concerned elders, sharing our view, based on the previous two years of dialogues, that conflict in dialogue does not mean failure. Rather, it can offer an opening to new ways of understanding across our differences.

The students, on the other hand, were enthused. In the following class seminar, they talked about how "amazing" it had been to listen to the elders and how much they had learned from their conversation. While there was discomfort with the heated nature of the argument—a sign that heated arguments are not very common within higher education contexts—there was also recognition that the dialogues were not merely lessons in history but also lessons in the affective and charged realities of those histories on the "bodyminds" of participants.[6] They were immediately faced with the challenges that caring raises in relation to others. Drawing on Noddings (2012, 54), the argument showed that while "caring often requires highly sophisticated reasoning . . . it depends more fundamentally on emotion for its motivation." The charged atmosphere, felt through our screens, centralized emotions, notably anger and frustration, and drew students into caring about the elders, asking if and how the facilitators had reached out to them.

In that first meeting, members of the new cohort began to position themselves within LGBTQ+ history and claim agency. As people who would usually never interact found themselves being called to listen and talk back to one another, legacies of inequality and perceptions of harm between LGBTQ+ people became tangible. Much of it centered around epistemic injustice: whose stories have been heard and whose have been excluded, who dominates conversation among LGBTQ+ folks, and who has come to the project with expectations of receiving epistemic care and recognition without the need, on their part, for labor or explanation. The dialogue became a place for intervention.

We have found, in past years of the project, that moments of conflict and heartache have often been the moments when change occurs (Morris, Greteman, and Weststrate 2022) and epistemic agency is activated. A notable source of intergenerational tension in the project has arisen around shifting

[6] Following Margaret Price (2015) and Sami Schalk (2018), we use the term "bodymind" to refer to the interrelatedness of mental and physical processes. The term challenges the notion that bodies and minds are experienced separately and evokes "the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called 'body' and 'mind' " (Price 2015, 270).

concepts of gender and sexuality. Elders have noted that many students expect them to automatically understand their gender identities and use their pronouns correctly with little attention to the realities of age or generation. Some students have resisted requests to explain how they identify and define terms such as "nonbinary" and "cisgender," as they feel they should not be asked to do so within an educational setting. On the other hand, youngers have found that their use of the term "queer" infuriates a number of the older adults, who refuse to accept it, while also learning how to navigate the realities of aging and different forms of disability that impact elder participation. Different forms of oppression rooted in gender identity, sexuality, age, race, disability, and education status unfurl on top of one another as all of us, as participants, work toward a shared understanding of reality and approaches to caring for such complexities.

Within these negotiations of care is a struggle for recognition as knowers who should be listened to and respected. Over time, we have witnessed a gradual realization among most participants that caring for the histories and lived experiences of others is an important element of self-care. One breakthrough moment came, for instance, when Ricardo, who had vehemently opposed the group's use of the word "queer," announced, as the project entered its second year, that he was now "okay with [queer]": "I learned from the young people it can be a good thing." The dialogic space and time of epistemic care work, as we have experienced it, cannot be the bounded safe space often imagined for educational settings. Rather, as Alexis remarked several times since her cohort's explosive first meeting: "Change happens in lots of spaces that aren't safe. Really, the only place you're safe is six feet underground in the cemetery. So if you want that, you know where to go."

Epistemic care as a component of holistic care

Approaches to pedagogy as relational care work (e.g., Freire 1970; hooks 1994) usually envision adult teachers in classroom settings in the position of carers for younger students who are *cared for* (Noddings 1984).[7] With the Dialogue Project, we seek to cocreate, with participants, a space in which very differently positioned (and aged) members of a community learn to occupy the positions of both teacher and student, and carer and cared for. Such an educational project is rooted in an ethics of care.

[7] While Noddings (2013) has clarified her belief that roles of carer and cared for can be interchangeable, she most often presents adults as teachers who perform care, and children as students who are cared for.

Education, Noddings argues, should aim to educate the "whole child," which means not only improving the academic knowledge of students but also their "capacity to care" (1995, 679). For Noddings, learning to care is a relational process between students and teachers "rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" (1984, 42). It necessitates a learning environment that prioritizes human encounters and interactions over long periods of time. Emotion, dialogue, and reciprocity are key. Reciprocity is accomplished, as Noddings argues, through "the mutual recognition and appreciation of response" whereby "the response provides building blocks for the construction of a continuing caring relation" (2012, 53). Care ethics, as distinct from virtue ethics, are rooted in continuing such relations as opposed to merely signaling one's virtue as someone who cares with little attention to the impact or consequences of one's care.

An ethics of care is no simple matter but one that requires a different form of attention, particularly receptive attention, which Noddings distinguishes from critical attention. Critical attention is focused on forming a rebuttal or exposing a limitation or problem: "Receptive attention, in contrast, is open and vulnerable. To learn what the cared-for is going through, we put aside our own projects and listen. If the cared-for is troubled or in pain, the carer is likely to feel some degree of pain also. The carer feels something as a result of the encounter" (Noddings 2012, 54). Noddings uses the term "engrossment" to describe the process through which a person seeks to gain a greater understanding of the position and needs of another as a precursor to acts of care (1984, 11): "all caring involves engrossment" (Noddings 2013, 17) and "a willingness to listen and be moved" (2010, 392).

Community-initiated intergenerational pedagogies outside of institutional education systems (e.g., the Black Panther Party's Ten-Point Program, Indigenous knowledge systems) have often embraced, rather than shied away from, the role of care and emotion that Noddings advocates. Histories of consciousness-raising (CR) practices within the feminist and gay liberation movements of the 1960s to the early '80s offer a constructive framework through which to think about the sharing of feelings and perspectives as reciprocal epistemic care.[8] A political education strategy, CR aimed to empower and activate oppressed people through collective knowledge production and transmission. CR groups, typically made up of six to twelve regular participants (mostly white middle-class women aged twenty-five to thirty-four and gay men), gathered in living rooms once a week over a period of several months

[8] The authors send a huge shout-out to Ramzi Fawaz, who wisely suggested that we think about our work within genealogies of CR practices and shared with us the manuscript of *Queer Forms* (2022) before it went to press.

to talk "almost entirely out of personal experience" about a selected topic such as family, employment, sex, or money (Gornick 1971, 22). Consciousness-raising sessions were envisioned as spaces of unity in which participants could speak without fear of judgment or conflict (Sarachild 1970). By embracing the personal as political, CR groups aimed to produce new analytical frameworks for understanding systems of oppression through marginalized participants' feelings and perspectives. Consciousness-raising practices took women and gay men's emotional experiences seriously as a source of knowledge that could contribute to a theory of oppression (Fawaz 2022, 170).

bell hooks credits the women in feminist CR groups as "the first to begin to create feminist theory" (2000, 19). Through the dialogic model of CR, women (and, later, gay men) came to see themselves and each other as important producers of radically transformative knowledge that needed to be shared with others across the country. "At first," hooks continues, "feminist theory [drawn from CR practice] was made available by word of mouth or in cheaply put together newsletters and pamphlets. The development of women's publishing . . . became the site for the dissemination of feminist thinking" (19–20). Over time, these practices and sites of dissemination became institutionalized within higher education, contributing to what Roderick Ferguson has called the "administrative university," which "adapts modes of difference by attempting to normalize them" (2012, 224). The radical practices invented by women and LGBTQ+ folks in previous decades gave way to newfound conceptual tools while also becoming subsumed by the university.

Those involved in CR groups did not usually articulate the practice in terms of care, in part due to prevailing notions of caregiving as devalued "women's work." Feminists recognized how care was tied up in larger systems of patriarchal oppression that understood women as "natural" at caring. Yet writing about CR often referred to the importance of relationality—sisterhood, for instance—especially the need for participants to respect, trust, and protect (from judgment) one another (Women's Action Alliance 1975; Combahee River Collective 1979). Noddings and CR organizers shared a view of education and care for a community as necessarily intertwined. Education, per Noddings, could serve to empower communities not only through the transmission of knowledge but through the development of members' ability to care about and for one another. CR participants came to care not only for each other but for women they would never meet through their collective production and dissemination of analytical tools.

These different approaches to community care through education, however, illustrate the complexities of epistemic care as concept and practice. Black and Indigenous women, lesbians, and younger and older adults were for the most part excluded from CR practices. As feminists of color and

lesbians and gays adopted and adapted CR models, they continued to focus on *intra*generational dialogue among relatively homogenous groups of people. Accounts from CR sessions in the '70s revealed cracks in the utopian (conflict-free) facade of CR when put into practice (Fawaz 2022).

Complexities of care

Our experiments in intergenerational LGBTQ+ epistemic care can expand who we think of as participants in pedagogies of care, the directions in which cross-generational teaching and learning flow, and the role of discomfort and failure within care relations. They can help us to further tease out the moral ambiguity and relational instability of practices of care (Cook and Trundle 2020, 178). Our dialogues attempt to do this by moving beyond a particular generation's experience and centralizing the difference that is present in the very LGBTQ+ acronym as sexuality politics rub up against gender politics, which are already refracted by class, race, and ability, not to mention age.

In the Dialogue Project, a diverse set of folks from the LGBTQ+ community are interpellated into simultaneous subjectivities as caregivers and care receivers. Dialogue is central to this process, allowing participants "to come into contact with ideas and to understand, to meet the other and to care" (Noddings 2013, 186). It serves as a way to negotiate care as well as an avenue through which to enact and receive care.

Like much feminist scholarship on the ethics of care and caring (Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1993; Kittay 2019), Noddings's work builds on a foundational belief that members of a society should, ideally, care for one another. In our experiments with epistemic care, we have quickly learned to veer away from such an assumption, however, as participants arrive with very different ideas of care. Many have experienced care as something undesirable and sometimes violent. Forced commitment to psychiatric wards, subjection to conversion therapy, and suppression by family members are just a few of the ways "care" for LGBTQ+ people can be a mechanism of subjection and oppression. Divisions, inequality, and histories of suppression *within* LGBTQ+ communities make questions of care even more complex. As participants have come together within this pedagogical project, they are confronted with disparate and often strongly held opinions on who in the group deserves care, who should do the caring, what care should look like, and if they indeed *want* to care.

Our experience with dialogue as central to epistemic care, then, has been significantly messier, more emotional, and more contentious than what Noddings theorized and what CR organizers envisioned. Dialogues serve as a forum in which people in unequal relationships of power, privilege,

and life experience decide whether or not to care for one another. This was evidenced during the second year of the project when several of the younger members framed their participation as "community service." "I get the sense that we're here to teach [elders] about being LGBTQ+ today," one student reflected in her notes, "and they don't have much to offer us." The storytelling session of our HIV/AIDS-themed dialogue noticeably shifted the group's willingness to care. As Leisha, Ash, Logan, and their peers listened to Ricardo, George, and Marti's stories, they recognized these elders—through their reactions, questions, and tears—as important sources of knowledge and as individuals deserving of care. George, in asking the students what they needed to know, acknowledged the reciprocal nature of sharing knowledge and the need for engrossment. He asked the students to take the lead in educating the elders about younger generations' experience with HIV/AIDS history and education. The dialogue around HIV/AIDS proved to be a watershed moment for the project and our shared understanding of reciprocity and time. In the following weeks, participants spent more effort trying to understand and learn from one another. The work of dialogue can, in this way, foster "epistemic experiences" (Johnson 2019, 256) in which participants come to see themselves through the eyes of others as valued keepers and transmitters of LGBTQ+ knowledge.

Becoming elders: Coming into epistemic agency

The week after the first meeting of the new intergenerational cohort in September 2021, members of the returning group met for *their* first fall dialogue. Donald, Danie, Lawson, Fox, and Kathleen shared their experience of visiting the new group to lead orientation the week before. The conversation evolved into a thoughtful dialogue in which "long-time" folks stepped into researcher roles as they analyzed together what had happened in the new group's dialogue and, through their analysis, reflected on the journey they shared. Fox, a white twenty-one-year-old trans man and cartoonist, noted: "It did get a little crazy at the end there . . . I want to say I feel like that's a good sign, though, because I feel like they were all pretty willing to, like, already open up and start discussing quite a number of heavier topics, right from the get-go."

Danie Muriello, a seventy-year-old white bisexual trans woman, agreed, saying: "You know what stood out for me with this. . . . Our growth. The last two years, we have experienced moments of conflict and disagreement . . . anger and resentment. And we have worked through those with each other. . . . We came to set aside our strong views and opinions and began to care. And form relationships. I don't know that we actually noticed that happening.

But I think they will eventually begin to care. . . . If they can learn to care for each other, that'll go a long way."

"Danie, you're so right," Fox replied:

> It makes me think of this interaction I had with Melanie [a sixty-five-year-old white lesbian]. She said "Fox, I have something I want to talk about, but I think it might hurt you." . . . I was like, oh God. We talked maybe two hours. She was asking about how it works to be trans masculine, and what I thought about this article that said lesbians are disappearing because they're all becoming trans men. . . . I wouldn't have had that conversation if I wasn't in this group. I'm sure I sounded annoyed, but I didn't think she was trying to be malicious . . . I think the caring thing Danie said is so key. By the end, Melanie said she hated the article, too, and wanted to burn it with me.

Donald, the seventy-two-year-old Black SGL man, observed that the "gay cis white men who got angry and left" the first dialogue likely have not been in conversations like this before: "It took a lot of strength to make the movements and the advances that have happened in our lifetimes. But it results in a lot of war-weary people who are used to standing on guard and in defense mode."

Ayana, a twenty-three-year-old bisexual Black woman who had graduated the year before, added her thoughts: "Something I learned from you guys is that there are certain things I'm ignorant in, and this is not because I don't care, or care to know, I just haven't had the chance to know."

Something has happened over time for these participants. They, both young and older, have become elders. Although today's older LGBTQ+ adults were the young activists who agitated within the Gay Liberation Movement, publicly celebrated gay pride when it could get them fired, and demanded change through ACT UP, for most it is a new experience to think of themselves as elders. One older gay man quipped, "I don't know how I feel about this!" Ayana, in turn, noticed with delight and surprise that new participants treated her and fellow young long-time participants as project elders. By embracing their newfound role as elders within our emerging community, folks of various ages are coming into their epistemic agency.

An element of generational play has emerged within the project's intergenerational framework, as participants recognize both the usefulness and falsity of generation talk. There is something to having been born at a particular time, but such a time is complicated by other variables such as race, gender identity, economic class, geography (urban vs. rural vs. suburban), and so forth. Time may be a particular arbiter, but other factors connect people

across time and generate different relationships. Our dialogues have rarely centered on generational identities in any traditional sense (boomers, gen-Xers, millennials, etc.), though folks often joke about their generation. Age has emerged as often distinct from generational experience and positionality. Anne, a sixty-three-year-old introverted, asexual Black lesbian who loves travel and continued self-discovery, has noted that she's in many ways "younger" than the young folks in the project, as she has only just begun her journey as an LGBTQ+-identified person. "I'm learning my history from the students," she said.

Recently, the members of the returning group began working on a timeline project in an effort to explore the ways their individual journeys as LGBTQ+ people overlap with each other's and intersect with dramatic cultural, political, medical, and legal shifts that have occurred over the seventy years their collective lifetimes span. The time line is an effort to better understand how each participant became who they are today because, as Donald put it, "what you are is where you were when" without privileging youth as the primary agents of social change.

Research methodology as epistemic care

As the project has evolved, many long-time participants have come to envision their role in it as "epistemic partners that define the imaginary and plot of our own inquiries" (Holmes and Marcus 2008, 83). Lindsey, a nonbinary graphic artist, built our website in spring of 2021, a process that involved countless dialogues with the group about who "we" were, what "we" were doing, and how the group wanted to be represented. The website has served as a constantly evolving collaborative project as well as a site of inquiry and analysis. Grant seeking to cover costs of shared meals, participants' labor as tech and research assistants, and materials have become a collaborative effort as well, with participants suggesting funding resources and writing testimonials for inclusion in grant applications. News that we would need to wait ten months to receive word on a large grant application was met with collective groans as Marti exclaimed, "Tell them I might be dead by then!"

What started as a pedagogical experiment has grown into a collaborative project in which research and education are intertwined. Like many LGBTQ+ folks who have come before us, we are creating something new for ourselves—a collective, a space, a methodology, maybe one day a model—to fill in the gaps of what does not yet exist. As the research component of our project grows, we are striving to develop a methodology that recognizes the epistemic agency and value of all participants in each aspect of

the process. As we work between three very different institutions, one of them a nonprofit community center, we look to grounded practices of gay and feminist liberation movements, broadly understood, as guides to community-organizing and institution-building practices (from within and between institutions) that put intellectual traditions of feminist and queer theory into action.

The past decade has witnessed a turn in feminist scholarship, queer studies, and cultural anthropology to thinking about research and scholarship through an ethics of care. Academic institutionalization of feminist and gay movements brought resources, validation, and momentum while, at the same time, creating divisions between those within and outside of institutions (hooks 2000, 22). Jennifer Weiss has traced a shift in feminist anthropological scholarship "away from the practice and application of feminist anthropology" as evidenced by a decline in journal articles addressing practices of teaching, mentoring, and policy change (2020, 113). Queer theorist Matt Brim has called for "a reinvestment by Queer Studies in anti-elitist general education . . . and a restructuring of queer knowledge production" (2020, 4). Similarly, in 2015, *Signs* editor Suzanna Danuta Walters announced the Feminist Public Intellectuals Project to bridge the "vexing divides between feminist theory and practice" (542). Margaret McGladrey has argued that current definitions of feminist public intellectualism "do not incorporate the equally important work of educating and mobilizing marginalized individuals into self-determining constituencies that are empowered to advocate for their own interest in a public sphere that is prefigured to silence and dismiss them" (2020, 1038). Within her critique, she points to the potential of feminist participatory action research to decenter knowledge production, foster relationships between institutions and communities, and mobilize counterpublics through consciousness-raising and "empowering [of] coresearchers as knowledge cocreators and producers" (1048).

Within feminist anthropology, similar calls for more community-engaged research have coincided with critical inquiry into the ways ethnographic writing can reinforce power, inequality, and the citation of predominantly white authors (see the Cite Black Women Statement [Smith et al. 2021]). Criticism of citation practices within anthropology, such as the automatic use of pseudonyms for research subjects to protect their identities, referring to interlocutors by first names and "scholars" by last names, and citing sources by predominantly white authors, connect "a politics of citation to a politics of acknowledgement" that reproduces hierarchical divisions between "knowers" and "known," theorists and interlocutors (Weiss 2021, 950).

How to do community-engaged collaborative work that bridges theory and practice, and do it well, is still being figured out. It is safe to say that nearly

all participants (including the faculty facilitators) of the Dialogue Project learned early on that collaborative research, no matter how earnest in intent, is inevitably "fraught and complex and shot through with multiple dynamics of power" (Alvarez Astacio, Dattatreyan, and Shankar 2021, 422). Success is never guaranteed, while repeated failure (or at least lack of consensus) is certain.

As the faculty facilitators, we have come to see our role in the project as learners, organizers, grant writers, food preparers, builders, and handypersons who more often find ourselves following the flow of the project rather than leading it. At the same time, we are teachers of the students' courses and often recognized as such by older participants. We have, as faculty, different, sometimes related, responsibilities to our institutions and our community that further complicate an ethic of care. Our community partner is a nonprofit organization constantly in search of funding to support the needs of a large, diverse, and majority low-income LGBTQ+ metropolitan population.[9]

In this joint effort across very different institutions, we are, as one of us likes to put it, with a nod to Matt Brim, "fairies who ferry" (Greteman, Morris, and Weststrate 2023). In his book *Poor Queer Studies*, Brim proposes a "model of queer ferrying between resource-rich and poor institutions as a way of restructuring queer knowledge production" (2020, 4). While Brim's focus is on the need to establish bridges between queer studies (faculty, departments, and students) at elite and nonelite institutions of higher education, we find his notion of "cross-class" ferrying (202) to be generative for building epistemic partnerships between both community members and institutions of higher education and, as in our case, within and between institutions of higher education and nonprofit community service. Queer theories, like feminist theories, emerged on the streets, in homes, and in beds, tenuously tied in their early days to nascent academic work. We now benefit from such work while ensconced in higher education with a responsibility to recognize and return to the communities so often cut off from higher education.

The sharing of knowledge, information, and resources has long been central to feminist and queer forms of community-based collective care (e.g., Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries [STAR], lesbian telephone hotlines, and homophile press; D'Emilio 2020; McKinney 2020). As we build a space for

[9] In addition to hot meals and programming such as therapy groups and social events, Center on Halsted's Senior Services Program provides a professionally credentialed staff of social workers to support folks navigating the issues of LGBTQ+ aging. Center on Halsted also hosts Town Hall apartments, Chicago's first LGBT-friendly housing facility for low-income seniors. Several participants in the Dialogue Project live at Town Hall.

intergenerational LGBTQ+ epistemic care, we pool resources between our three institutions in the form of money, access to software and media equipment, accessible meeting spaces, an industrial kitchen, and center volunteers who help keep costs down by preparing group meals. We have used our positionality to bring younger and older LGBTQ+ community members into academic conferences and research symposia as speakers and panelists and have pushed for changes to membership and registration fees that act as roadblocks for nonacademics. We shuttle ideas and concepts back and forth between academia, community service organizations, and community members in hopes that, as Brim puts it, "this professional shuttling enacts a certain kind of knowledge production not thinkable at either margin or center" (2020, 202). Rather, it enacts knowledge production that is relational, recognizing the work of reciprocity.

There is still much to develop. While methodologies for collaborative research, preliminary analysis, and the production of creative materials for public audiences have begun to emerge somewhat organically within the project, the process of writing for academic audiences (attempting to bring grounded practice back into theoretical discourse) has been rocky. We credit this in large part to many participants' lack of interest in academic publication due to both a sense of exclusion from educational institutions and the time such publication work takes. We have instituted a process in which we share publications in progress with participants to solicit feedback. This process has at times been difficult and even painful (as in the time we received a terse text from an elder about an academic article we wrote stating "this makes me angry and sad you have clearly learned nothing from us") but has proven to be a process that pushes our interpretive analysis in new directions through our follow-up conversations.[10] Our citational and narrative practice has settled into one in which participants decide, upon reading a draft, how they want to be named, described, and otherwise represented. Most people involved in the project, we have found, *want* to be named in popular and academic publications. They explain how they want to be documented and remembered as part of this work and the broader struggle toward

[10] The same elder, several months later, sent one of the facilitators the following text while reading a draft of this article: "Am reading Rainbows and Mud. I get most of it and aren't we all just too interesting? Looong article but not dry. 🤓" A few minutes later, a new text arrived saying "Oops. Just found 'this makes me angry and sad etc' quote. Kind of like realizing you have regrets about someone you went home with. Except lots more regretful. 😬" A great follow-up text thread between the facilitator and elder discussed moments like this as part of "the journey," with no regrets.

liberation. In doing so, they assert their standing as epistemic agents of research, not merely its objects.

Conclusion

We did not initially think about the Dialogue Project within frameworks of care. People kept pointing out to us, and we to each other, the significant care work involved. Newly joining students have often expressed shock at the emotional labor (their term) they find themselves being asked to perform in an educational space. An elder left the project because he "didn't realize this was going to be therapy." Longtime participants began to articulate their work together as a form of care and to recognize the importance of developing trusting relationships in order to talk across their differences. They were the ones to start using the word "care" and to embrace (at times) the messiness and discomfort it involved.

As they met for their final dialogue of the semester, the newest intergenerational cohort reflected on their time together. Heart emojis kept appearing on our Zoom screens as participants reacted to each other's thoughts. Several elders marveled at the students' artistic talent and leadership in their small-group creative projects. Cathy, the sixty-eight-year-old lesbian who announced during the first dialogue that she was "tired of hearing gay men talk," said, "I want to say to the youngers that it's gratifying to this elder to see where you are at the ages you are. To me, this shows that the hard fights, lawsuits, and sacrificing our lives was worth it. . . . To see a younger have 'they' next to their name is huge. . . . To see you being so fully expressive of your gifts, graces, and talents. . . . I'm grateful."

Larry, the older white gay man who felt targeted during the first meeting and left, has stayed with the project and been actively involved. The other man who left never returned. As the group dialogued about their dialogues, a sense of pride in their journey emerged. Tom, who had become exasperated during the first meeting and asserted that it was "too late in the day to continue," shared, "The longer I've been attending these, the more happy I am, and more challenged I am. . . . So I want to say thank you to all of you. I think we needed to have conflict to bring us together in the first place. We needed the cauldron of exposing ourselves in a conflictual way in order to be able to establish ourselves as a group."

Casey, the nonbinary clothing designer, concurred: "I kind of want to echo that! That more nitty gritty discussion is something I look forward to."

The dialogue illustrated the transformative power of deciding to care and "staying in the room" (Rankine 2020, 151) when things get difficult. The

semester had been a difficult one in many ways. For the first time, members of the cohort reflected on the hurt and discomfort they had experienced as generative. Hil Malatino has proposed, in imagining a transfeminist coalitional politic, that we "might start with the simple admittance that we cause each other pain, that our desires—our visions of justice, of the future, our senses of political possibility and hoped for outcomes—are not the same, and might even be incompatible. Working through these tensions is messy, stuck, and ultimately transformative, but it necessitates beginning in a place of pain and distress" (2021, 846). Tom, Casey, and others in their cohort came to see conflict among multiply marginalized people as an essential part of the process.

Over time, the project has taught us that epistemic care work can be a radical form of self-care for both individuals and communities. Sustained intergenerational contact and exchange between LGBTQ+ people can foster epistemic experiences in which participants come to see and care for themselves and one another as epistemic agents, cultivate knowledge and culture, and generate community. They, too, become "fairies who ferry" as they shuttle queer theories and histories back and forth between our project and their own networks (friends, family, and coworkers) and activism (e.g., fighting for LGBTQ+ elder rights and care).

Through the Dialogue Project, we reframe knowledge production, and the relational ethics that accompanies it, as "a process of carework" (Cook and Trundle 2020, 181). A renewed commitment among feminist and queer scholars to collaborating with community members and organizations often excluded from the ivory tower will, we believe, produce new and exciting directions for both theory and practice. As we muddle through our attempt to do such work, we have learned to question rather than assume what care is and should be. We recognize that conflict, emotion, and discomfort are unavoidable within relational work and can be incredibly generative. We remind ourselves that any form of care "runs the risk of reproducing and amplifying inequality and injustice" (Malatino 2020, 69) and work to establish collective practices to mitigate harm. And in the midst of it all, we have come to appreciate and revel in the messiness of a process that is always incomplete.

We end with a recent exchange between two elders who have been with the project since the beginning. "As I get closer to dying," Marti said, "I'm not interested in my story being in the Smithsonian archives. I want it to do something that makes a difference." By way of response, Donald reflected on the Dialogue Project, saying, "We're not big, but the work we're doing is important. It's something people don't realize they need until they find it. . . . It's up to you to decide what to do with it. The work product belongs to us, the collective."

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