

# The Queer Poetics of Social Justice

## Literacy, Affect(ion), and the Critical Pedagogical Imperative

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### Introduction

In this chapter, the author explores the importance of literacy to the project of social justice. Through critical analysis and personal insights, the author contextualizes literacy and poetry—as critical discourses of power and resistance, conditions of positionality, and essential curriculum for those engaged in higher education. The author contends that writing is a queer act, precisely because it requires the writer to deviate from normalcy, incorporate differences, and employ a praxis and pedagogy of affect(ion).

mmm girl: a prelude<sup>1</sup>

power is neither good nor bad, just dangerous,  
as if cover-ups are double downs  
it is true power, the ability to listen  
god why didn't you give us any power  
to love our double standards

ignorance isn't bliss, it's insensitive  
your struggles not my own  
alone and making a crossroad vow  
and let my living be your inspiration

but, why do I have to be your inspiration  
you never truly have power  
if you don't care to listen to the insensitivities  
of those girls and boys with insidious cover-ups  
find the power all around me, vested in me,  
and

mmm girl ...  
 they say  
 recognizing the sisterhood  
 in my eyes  
 circles and circles of sorrow

This chapter grew organically from a Fall 2013 course titled “Social Justice in Higher Education” taught by Dr. C. P. Gause, at my alma mater, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). I took the class because I thought it would supplement my educational and research interests in social justice and advocacy. Quite a bit of my research centers around what I call the “queer poetics of social justice.” Fundamentally, I examine ways critical literacy functions as a cogent form of political resistance, an analytic that exposes the workings of oppression and hegemony, and a method(ology) of critical pedagogical inquiry. As a critical bricoleur, as conceptualized by Denzin and Lincoln (1999) and Joe Kincheloe (2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2005), I pull together the disparate fields of critical pedagogy, rhetorical studies, and (black) queer studies as the nexus of my critical framework. I contend that writing—especially poetry—is a queer act, precisely because it requires the writer to deviate from normalcy, to incorporate differences, and to employ a praxis and pedagogy of affect(ion). Furthermore, through critical analysis and personal insights, I contextualize poetry and literature as discourses of power and resistance, conditions of positionality, and essential curriculum for those dedicated to the aims of critical pedagogy.

Given these pedagogical imperatives, I was pleasantly delighted to see Dr. Gause incorporate analyses of visual art, music (various genres), and poetry in course curriculum. But the tribulations of that semester and a particular incident that occurred in the course would challenge, yet strengthen, my commitments to the pedagogical promises of poetry. Eva, Bernis, Quist, and Hollands (2013) argue that “Poetry, as one art form, can also be used as a teaching tool for enhancing numerous skills and dispositions, including detailed observation skills, reflective thinking, creativity, inferential thinking, and higher-level cognitive skills such as analysis, evaluation and synthesis” (pp. 63–64). What does it mean to shape my life, indeed my world, with language? This question has been at the crux of my being from my earliest childhood memories to the present moment. As a scholar and educator, I am concerned with how poetry can be dispatched and deployed and serviceable to the ongoing project of social justice. In what ways can my poetry or the poetry of others affect meaningful, substantive change as I struggle to become an educated and lettered black man in the 21st Century?

### The Poet's Soul: An Interlude

*When I was a child, I expected poems to be honest, but they were (and still are to some extent) deceitful. They told me what I wanted to hear and gave me nothing more than shallow glimpses into the poet's soul but not into my own, at least not the way I wanted to see myself. When I was young, I was naïve enough to expect truth from poems; and I wanted them to spur me to my own truth.*

### Words that Negotiate Violence

To poetize (here I purposefully use the verb rather than the noun), one must be amenable to the daily changes and challenges of language, open to its dangerous utterances, to be vulnerable in ways that eschew ego, style, essence, or idealism. These skills are rather dynamic and are concerned with the very act of literacy itself. A writer must read the world before she can write it. For instance, Amanda Cobb (2000) argues,

Literacy is valued, for perhaps different reasons, by those who teach literacy and those who learn literacy. What value literacy has for either party is dependent upon the community and context in which it is used, for literacy is always tied to purpose; it is something to be used, used for something. (p. 11)

My literacy is bound up in survival, and my performance of literacy is both racial and gendered. I am not alone in my understanding of literacy's power to affect change. Indeed, I come from a storied and long line of ancestors who depended on literacy to express the complexities—tribulations and triumphs—of the American experiences from the point-of-view of displaced Africans.

Historically, for African Americans, obtaining literacy was not without peril and progress ravaged by the American slavery regimes. We were not allowed to engage in certain written literacy practices because some slave owners feared the ramifications of literate slaves. Here, Frederick Douglass (1845) describes his master's reasoning and justification:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master."

And his master's fears were warranted, enslaved people began to appropriate Western notions of literacy as a means of resistance, using their knowledge of the reading and writing to forge bills of sale and "freedom papers," to write their own narratives to aid the abolition movement, to create newspapers, and even to spread word of Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Like Douglass, I learned at an awfully young age to use my literacy against other classmates (and some adults), to protect myself from their insults, their wiles and oppression.

Let us consider an artifact: I practically cut my teeth on old westerns. I loved the exsanguination of shoot outs at high noon, the hustle and bustle of salons, the spurious and *ad hoc* nature of posses, the incredible hubris of "settlers," the rough manner of cowboys, and the intractable tenacity of the "Indians." The American West was a place of wonders and excitement that no one could tame although everyone was desperately trying to do so. Those westerns, though I was not fully aware of this fact at the time, were my first introduction to what I was expected to become in this society—a man. Men were expected to use guns, violence, and rough talk to subdue and conquer each other. And more important, all of these characteristics were desirable. Manhood depended upon my desire to master violence and mete it out when "appropriate." One had to bigger and better than the other cowboys and especially the Indians. Someone had to win, someone had to lose, and the Indians almost never won. Noted social and cultural critic James Baldwin (2012), participating in a 1965 debate at Oxford University, offered this thoughtful observation to an audience of young white men,

It comes as a great shock around the age of 5 or 6 or 7, to discover the flag to which you have pledge allegiance, along with everyone else, has not pledge allegiance to you. It comes as quite a shock to discover that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, when you are a child rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you.

Even now, the fact that I rooted for my own colonization and oppression strikes me as the bitterest poison I could have swallowed. But the heart of this anecdote illustrates a brooding sense of and ignorance toward difference. This is not to say that I was unaware of difference as a child, but I was aware of it in ways that were not generative or affirmative. For instance, I knew I was different from girls. But this difference was grounded in what I thought was the inferiority of girls. Simply, they couldn't do what we boys did—they could not jump as far, run as fast, hit as hard. Paradoxically, as I began to recognize the difference between myself and my female classmates, I also began to notice, with increasing clarity, that I was *different* from the other boys as well. Because my teachers read this difference as brilliant

exceptionality, so I choose to as well. While this difference endeared me to my teachers, the distinction made my presence increasingly dubious to my peers. What I didn't realize, almost until it was too late, was that my performance, both intellectually and socially, began to alienate me from my peers. Johnson (2006) notes that "not being aware of privilege is an aspect of privilege itself, what some call 'the luxury of obliviousness'" (p. 22). I want to believe I was completely oblivious to what was going on, but I was not. I loved when my teachers doted and secretly loved the negative attention I received from other boys because of it. Indeed it was the only time I interacted with them. My alienation from other black males began early, and the gap only increased as I moved through educational institutions.

### My Own Self-Making: An Interlude

As a boy, I expected poems to entertain me. As a teenager, I wanted them to make me feel happy again and to pull me out of my sallow moods. In hindsight, now that I am saddled with the question of my own self-making, I always wanted busy poems because I was always so still, loud poems because I was so quiet, and conked poems because I was so nappy. I wanted their theatricality, to bestow upon me some grand notion of life or death, good or evil, black or white. However, poems, now that I am a man and a poet, are too busy for me.

### When Word "Nigger" Is Implied yet Unspoken: An Interlude

In January 2013, Kendrick Johnson, a black teenage boy, was found dead in his gymnasium, rolled up in a wrestling mat. His death was deemed "accidental," and to add to the horror of his death, the morticians who attended to his body stuffed his chest cavity with old newspapers. During the spring, George Zimmerman stood trial for the 2012 slaying of Trayvon Martin. Just before the fall semester started, he was acquitted of second-degree murder and of manslaughter. The litany of black deaths continued and followed me into the semester. My haunting by the dead and dying black men in America was exacerbated by my PhD studies. Because of the sometimes harrowing experiences of schooling process, getting an education can often be described as a dominating and subjugating—essentially a colonizing experience. "[For] a black person to get an education [in America]," Baldwin (2011) stated at UC Berkeley in 1977, "he's got to have a lot of guts ... and you risk schizophrenia." More than any other time during my tenure as a Ph.D. student, I have seen Baldwin's words manifest in ways that required me to develop a steely mind and a stealthy resolve.

I enrolled in the "Social Justice in Higher Education" course because I knew it would be immensely rewarding. Based on the course material and topics, I thought it would be a class with like-minded scholars and educators open to the free exchange of dialogue and dedicated to the mores of social justice and advocacy. However, it became clear to me that some of my classmates, people who were training to be student personnel in higher education, were merely there for a course credit. Simply, they had no intention to use the class and the space that it provided to challenge themselves, their privilege, and their dominant ideologies. Roughly 80% of the class members were White students. There were times when I challenged their assumptions and ignorances about race and sexuality, and I was met with a host of micro-aggressions, the least of which were disengaged stares, rolling eyes, and sucking of teeth. I interpreted this behavior as their discontent of my "speaking up" and "talking back." It is worth noting that my professor suggested we read an article on microaggressions, and I'm sure he did so because he had noticed the behavior toward me, the only black male in the class. I resigned myself to keep moving in the course and tried to not let it effect me. But I was not prepared for an incident that, for a small moment, almost crushed my spirit.

During my presentation on "Seven Steps to Becoming an Ally" (this topic later struck me as ironic), a white-female student made comments about being a feminist. She asserted that feminism was for women only, a notion I took particular umbrage with because I am a black male womanist. I confronted her assessment of feminism, inquiring if she was aware that feminism is also about

gender—women and men—citing bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000). I asked if she was cognizant of discourses about black feminism, Womanism, or global feminisms. She admitted that she had never heard of these feminisms. I was about to continue with my presentation but was interrupted by another student, a Latina (who by her own admission is perceived as White) accused me of being condescending, arrogant, and sarcastic.

The room was already on edge before this incident. Given the microaggressions, blatant disrespectful behavior, and willful ignorance of previous weeks, I began my presentation by challenging the notion that my classmates even wanted to be allies to constituents who lacked the privilege we enjoyed. This sentiment had lain heavily on my heart for weeks, but it was not until my presentation that I felt compelled to say. As Audre Lorde (1984) states, "the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (p. 42). My comment was not meant to scold or chastise, but I wanted them to know that my very presence in the class was because of a member of Student Affairs division at UNCG. Indeed, my connection to Pam Wilson, the former Director of the Office of the Multicultural Affairs, kept me alive. During a turbulent time of my undergraduate career, I fell into a deep, rueful depression, one that threatened to consume me in more ways than one. I had had these bouts of sadness but never anything like that. She encouraged me to seek professional counseling and gave me a personal referral to a local therapist, a black man, who would understand my unique position of being a black man at predominantly white institution.

The student's comment about my arrogance did not surprise me. I had heard similar comments most of my life. It is worth nothing that I was never exposed to the thoughts and opinions that I was condescending, arrogant, pompous, and a know-it-all, until I began my formal schooling. I am a Head-Start baby/child. For those first formative years (pp. 3-5), I was taught by my family and my Black teachers that I was loving, thoughtful, and intelligent. So when I heard this student bark at me with accusations about my temperament and demeanor, they conjured up modes of defense and survival that run deep. I "became the jungle" Toni Morrison speaks of in *Beloved* (1987). I smiled and put this question to her, "Am I being condescending or am I refusing to be the good little nigger you want me to be?" She now appeared to be even more disgusted with me and the situation. I suppose no one expected me to say "nigger" in polite conversation. But by this point, we were not having a polite conversation, and I was not holding my tongue any longer. Implicit in her challenge to me was that I was a nigger and had no right to question white students about their knowledge or ignorance, that as a nigger I was lucky to be at a white university. The professor intervened and I finished my presentation.

Although I was not visibly disturbed, this incident shook me to my core. Toward the end of the semester, Dr. Gause invited Patrick Hale to speak to us about concerns of immigrant populations and the difficulties they face to become educated, mainly because of America's rabid xenophobia. At the end of this lecture, Gause asked the class what we thought, and I quickly, perhaps too hastily, responded that I wanted to quit, to give up. I expressed how tired I was of thinking and responding to racism. It occurs to me now that those words were borne out a tired, frustrated semester. I had forgotten number seven on my own list of becoming an ally: *develop spirit-sustaining communities*. These networks are essential for survival and help guard against nagging feelings of hopelessness. I returned to my own writers communities, friends, and my favorite authors. I began writing again, something I had convince myself I could afford to do because of my Ph.D. studies.

I survived and, as apart of my healing, I began writing poetry again. The affect of that horrific experience remains with me still. But that experience is not wasted. I understand more than ever that survival is resistance. Perhaps it is the most spiritual and politically rigorous form of resistance. As a sentiment I try to instill in my students, I am committed to speaking my mind no matter the cost. I cannot remain silent. Audre Lorde (1997) illustrates the dynamics of silence and survival in her poem, "A Litany for Survival" from her collection of poetry title, *The Black Unicorn*:

and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid.

So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive. (p. 256)

## Educators as Poets as Social Justice Advocates

As a poets, educators, and social justice advocates, we must be impeccable with our word(s) and strive to understand how language is imbued with oppressive machinations. We must be true to ourselves in ways that reconcile the realities we see with the lives and faces of those we teach and advocate for with our own positionalities (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. xviii). As a writer and poet, I look to other poets to inform me about how my words are a practice of social justice and activism. For writers, self-definition, world-making, and healing begins and ends with words, with poetry, “a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight” (Lorde, 1984, p. 37). In hindsight, I began to write early during my childhood and began to form a visceral appreciation for how words fought back the doldrums of my young life. But these words in and of themselves were inadequate because I kept them secret. And the few poems I chose to share were always hiding some bit of myself I didn’t want people to know.

It was not until graduate school that I finally began to write more openly about the complexities of my life’s goals and yearnings. Audre Lorde chastises her reader, “My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you” (1984, p. 41). I thought that my silence would keep me from suffering, from losing loved ones and friends, and from the often traumatic experience of explaining my existence. But this was faulty and foolish logic. My silence alienated me further. Audre Lorde muses about silence as a strategy for safety, “... if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. It is very good for establishing perspective” (Lorde, p. 43). A poet or social justice advocate cannot truly understand the suffering of others unless she understands her own. What makes all art transformative and transcendental is its ability to force the artist to continually self-reflect. As it relates to social justice advocates, this self-reflection helps “to uncover ... socialized blind spots, privilege, and internalized superiority” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 158). Thus, art offers to fulfill the democratic promise. Poets and social justice workers must constantly work toward their own liberation if we are to free others. Advocacy requires taking risks and rupturing boundaries, and art provides a unique education in this respect.

For example, earlier that semester, Dr. Gause showed our class a video of Richard Blanco reading his poem “One Today,” for President Barack Obama’s second inauguration. As a class, we noticed Blanco’s seemingly stilted performance, almost pedestrian in its presentation. But we also recognized how his multiple identities were played out for a national audience. Phrases like “first immigrant,” “first Latino,” “first openly gay person,” “youngest poet” crawled past the television screen and threatened to distract and detract from the gravitas of the moment. Thinking critically about the phrases, we surmised that this act was a political decision to highlight the progressive and liberal agenda of the Obama administration. In essence, like everything in America, the Obama administration had politicized and commodified Blanco’s identity and poem.

A month after the semester began, I coincidentally had the pleasure to see Richard Blanco read at North Carolina A&T State University. During the reading, which turned into a lecture about the responsibilities of poets as social activist, he reminded the audience that writers really do write to

change the world, to make it anew, to leave it differently than they found it. James Baldwin echoes this sentiment:

You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world ... The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change it. (Watkins, 1979, p. 3)

Richard Blanco stated that writing poetry is like opening "an emotional door" and lamented how many writers cannot quite get to where they want because they do not want to walk through that door. Additionally, he discussed the politics of writing an occasional poem. As a queer man of color, he not only had to navigate the politics of being queer but also a Cuban immigrant. Blanco initially felt a self-imposed pressure to write a politically-charged poem, but he did not want to his identities to subsume the work itself. Underscoring the intersectionality of queer identities, Michael Warner (1993) explains why Blanco did not want what he calls "cultural sexuality" to foreground the political potentiality of the inauguration poem:

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, trust and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. (p. xiii)

Thus, Blanco's identities were already implicitly political. During his lecture, he also reiterated that, while the poem moved and extended beyond his autobiographical sphere, he also wanted to include an intimate space, a moment of personal vulnerability and reflection. For Blanco, or any poet, to display his life-truths and emotions so honestly and in such a public manner, is nothing less than courageous.

"Poetry is not a luxury," as Audre Lorde (1984) tells us, but is "a vital necessity of our existence [that] forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change" (p. 37). For Blanco, writing and performing the inaugural poem was like "renewing our vows," a way of reminding the country—lawmaker and citizen alike—of our commitment to our democratic ideals. "I became a channel," Blanco explained. Blanco is what he calls a "working poet," an engineer "obsessed with bridges." On that national and international stage, Blanco scrutinized the truth of what it means to be an American and also shaped the language by which we tell that truth.

Highlighting the awakening of one of his personal truths, Blanco read a poem titled "Queer Theory: According to My Grandmother." The poem provided a long laundry list of observations that confirmed, at least in his grandmother's mind, Blanco's early queer tendencies. I chuckled at the first line ("Never drink soda from a straw—") because I, too, had been advised by my father to avoid drinking from a straw (2012, p. 34). This policing of behavior serves to reify dominant/dominating practices of oppression. While the poem's tone is sarcastic and humorous in its complete absurdity, it nevertheless illustrates how deeply wounding the policing of a young boy's affection can severely damage his psycho-social health:

Avoid hugging men, but if you must,  
pat them real hard  
on the back, even  
if it's your father. (p. 34)

### Sing To Me: An Interlude

Now that I am a man and a poet, poems prick me, pinch me, burn me, bind me, beat me, break me, build me, slap me, shake me, pleasure me, politicize me, portray me, sing to me, look for me, lament me, school me, seize me, to enthrall, enrapture me, rape me, rake me, remind me, remember me.

## My Deeply Female and Spiritual Plane: A Postlude

As I stated earlier, a social justice educator must constantly engage in deep reflection. So much of myself I've repressed and beat back strictly for the comfort of others. And before I can realized it, major portions of my psyche, personality, testimony, and energy had slipped away. Of course, the difficult task of reconstituting the fragments that remain began as I read authors who challenged my sense of self and the world. In these fantastical worlds, I could escape the reality of my own existence. Writers like Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Terrance Hayes, and Jericho Brown satiated my curiosity and imagination in ways my teachers and parents could not. My relationship with language continued and grew along with me, as I moved from one grade to another, year after year. But it also began to change. No longer was a reading and writing for escape or exile. I began, in earnest, to engage language that reflected who I was. In her seminal essay "The Uses of The Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde writes, "There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (1984, p. 53). While Lorde addresses women specifically, I include myself as well. I recognized my own "deeply female and spiritual plane," and this revelation situated in how literature works for me and so many others.

Perhaps poetry promises a sense of possibility and existence without binary modalities or the totalizing effects of modern life, society, and culture. Poetry works in so many levels because it does not—in form or as genre—insist on fatalist ways of reading or knowing. And perhaps, alas, this is why people have such a "hard time" with poetry and why they often report it being "confusing." Simply, poetry refuses to yield its pedagogical possibilities if the is committed to binary thinking and hegemonic reading strategies. Inflexibility in the reader coaxes nothing from a poem; indeed, it becomes more recalcitrant. Poetry threatens an individualistic and sometimes collective epistemic ruptures. These ruptures are often affective and helps educators develop "promising tools and technologies for non-dualistic thought and pedagogy" (Sedgwick, 2002, p. 1). The epistemological and ontological concerns of literature are useful to the individual and the collective. Literature has the capacity to alter how teachers and students see the world. And this insight is invaluable to sustain social justice projects.

Lorde taught me, through her essay and poetry, that the sensations I felt when I read and wrote were erotic. Unfortunately, in my community, a little black boy who prefers to read and write rather than play war or football is deemed queer. But I have spent years engaging my own erotic and queer life and how it impacts my scholarship and creative work. Here, queerness signals difference, a deviation from normalcy, without foreclosing dialogue of sexual object choice (Cohen, 1997). Adrienne Rich (1993) tells us, "... most often someone writing a poem believes in, depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an 'I' can become a 'we' without extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images of strangers." This "delicate, vibrating range of difference" is also what excites me as a teacher and writer. And more importantly, I use my (queerly) erotic life to see beyond the veil, to borrow W. E. B. DuBois' phrase, to stave off the banalities of life, to dare see a future where my own trajectories, transformations, and tendencies inform me about what it means to be a father, a writer, an educator, a scholar, a human being, and a stalwart advocate for social justice.

### Note

1. I conceptualize and formatted this chapter as originally conceptualized by Dr. Gause for the final assignment of our "Social Justice in Higher Education" course. He wrote, "Let's look at the assignment from a musical perspective: One of many examples ... Prelude: The Poem sets the tone for your journey. Interlude: The events that takes place between the musical events ... which should be your writing, the thinking that goes into your writing, and the events that shape your writing. Postlude: The concluding musical piece, final notes, final chapter of the movement ... which could be your reflections on this journey towards social justice. You should be able to take the information in the syllabus regarding the Critical Reflective Essay and combine it with your midterm to come up with a final paper that would be worthy of

publication. I employ you to take the opportunity to stretch your thinking and include not only the work, texts, writings, videos, and presentations done by your colleagues. ... you should also reflect on other research, scholarly writing, and essayists from various perspectives. Doing this would actually create a book chapter that would be engaging and dynamic" (C. P. Gause, personal communication, October 31, 2013).

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# **Leadership, Equity, and Social Justice in American Higher Education**

A Reader

Edited by C. P. Gause



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