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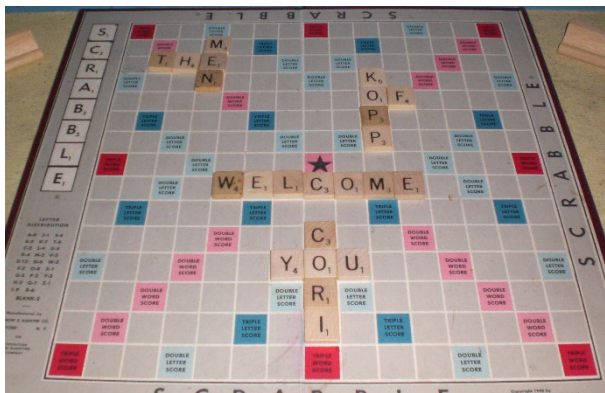
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Dispatches from Summer Camp: Literacies of Suds and Scam

Cori Brewster

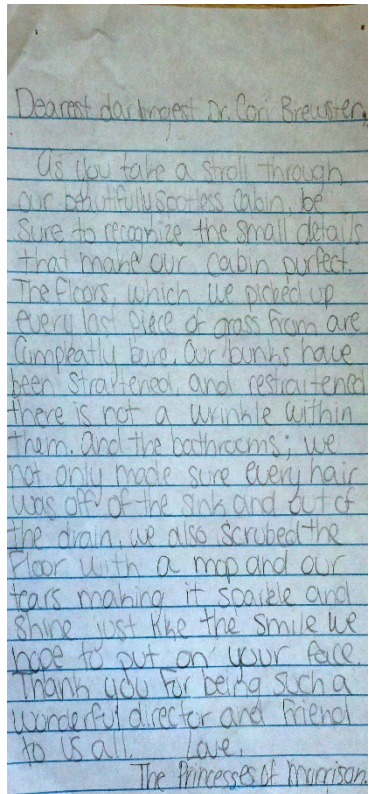
An analysis of letters written by campers and counselors from summers 2009 to 2012, this article focuses on one quirky, camp-specific practice that has changed the way I think about the multiple literacies students eventually bring to college classrooms, and about the importance of creating even the most artificial opportunities for developing writers and rhetors to play with power and convention.



When I stepped in as program director for my old summer camp five years ago, I inherited a number of moderately disturbing if dearly beloved new "traditions." Reflecting the coercive model of power favored by counselors and camp leaders past, these freshly institutionalized practices ran the gamut from the more benign to the less so: making children sing "I'm a Little Teapot" in front of the whole camp at meal times to "earn back" lost items, keeping campers from sneaking out at night by convincing them camp buildings were haunted, giving favorite campers special privileges (the ability to leave campus to fetch milkshakes for staff members, for example), and so on. In effect, it had become a culture of shaming, sucking up, and scaring into compliance, and I was now its leader.

One of the less distressing new camp routines was the cabin cleanup competition waged daily between cabins, judged mid-morning by the camp director (now me), and announced—following a palm-pounding, whole camp drumroll—every day at lunch. It at least

served a purpose. But when the letters started showing up during cabin inspection, duct-taped to girls' bunk beds, ringed in candy and pinecones and *Books of Common Prayer* at the entrance to the boys' cabin, I couldn't help but be a little bit creeped out. "To our esteemed camp leader," began the first one. "Dear the Almighty Dr. Brewster," began the next. Written by campers and counselors hoping to sway the outcome of the cleaning competition, these quasi-persuasive, increasingly servile letters soon became "tradition" too, encouraged in no small part by my decision to read them publicly at lunch.¹



As any former camper-turned-composition teacher can attest, summer camp is a complex, condensed, time-bound and time-bending rhetorical situation, and one that suggests all our dictums about creating authentic contexts for writing are no doubt entirely correct. From letters home, to group travelogues, to poetry anthologies and horror movie scripts, camps of all kinds host a wide range of literacy practices, many of them highly cherished and repeated one summer to the next.²

Quirky and camp-specific as they may be, these "extracurricular" uses of literacy deserve more attention (Gere). As Abigail Van Slyck notes, "Among social institutions, only public schools have touched the lives of more youngsters" in the United States than summer camps (xix). The self- and camp-sponsored texts produced there have much to tell us about how and why millions of students read and write outside of school, what they transfer from site to site, what kinds of writing they find meaningful, how they perceive their own agency as rhetors in different social and ideological contexts, and how we might better serve and engage them in schools (see also Purcell-Gates; Fleischer and Schaafsma; and Lewis, Enciso, and Moje).

Here I want to focus on just one small, mildly embarrassing selection of my own camp's rhetorical practice: the dozens of pandering cabin cleanup letters I came to collect over my four summers back at camp. Fine reading in themselves, I think they have something to say as well about the movement of youth literacies across domains and contexts, about the value of small-time agoras, and about the kinds of critical rhetorical space well worth supporting and continuing to explore.³

Dear the Almighty Doctor Brewster

Dearest darlingest Dr. Brewster,

As you take a stroll through our beautiful cabin, be sure to recognize the small details that make our cabin perfect. . . . We not only made sure every hair was off of the sink and out of the drain, we also scrubbed the floor with a mop and our tears making it sparkle and shine just like the smile we hope to put on your face. Thank you for being such a wonderful director and friend to us all. [All spelling original]

To the Lovely Dr. Brewster,

We understand that your job is extremely demanding. To show how much we appreciate you, we have made a bed in the south side of the cabin specifically for you, so that you may rest before continuing on with making camp so wonderful. Please enjoy the sounds and styles of Mozart while taking in the pure Episcopal aesthetics of this cabin.

To our Esteemed Camp Director,

Here inside Kopp Cabin, we value the magic of friendship above all other material ambitions. We don't clean up our cabin simply for competition's sake; instead, we use it as a tool to demonstrate our teamwork, ingenuity, and problem solving abilities. The ponies represent the power of our friendship, along with the statue of Jesus (the best friend any of us have). We love and tolerate

everyone, including our rivals in this competition. We wish them the best of luck. Please enjoy listening to the songs of camaraderie while touring our cabin this fine morning.

Cori,

Today our note is not to bribe you or just to be sweet; our letter is just to take detail to the minor details we have done to make you feel more at home. Every morning we wake up at 7:15 to read the bible scripture of the day to get a better understanding of why we are at this camp and get closer to God. We have also put on a playlist of music that we hope will please you. We hope the 80s music will make you feel right at home in our humble cabin of Robertson.

Dear Cori,

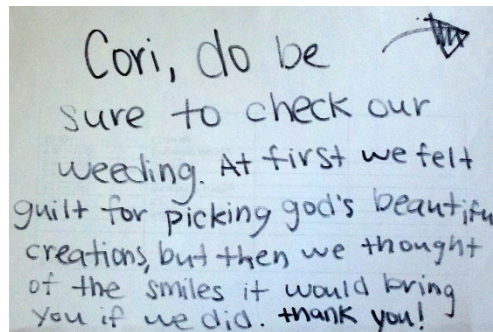
The men of Kopp know what you have come to expect from us ... Greatness! Today is no exception in the area of cleaning. However in keeping with the theme of simplicity we won't be doing anything elaborate and we hope that is alright on this day of reverence to god. Again we thank you for taking the time to tour through our humble camp home.

P.S. The girls stole our vaccum, so what you see is all duct tape. No electricity.

Our Humble Camp Home

Aside from cobwebs and their own dirty clothes, the biggest housekeeping challenge campers face is the grass they track in from the lawn. The shrieking, dust-blowing fleet of vacuums have all been donated, and the cabin that gets the one with the most suck has a clear advantage—though having sequestered enough of the camp's precious duct tape can easily make up for that.

Far from the rustic lakeside getaways pictured in television and film, the camp these letters come from sits on 100 acres at the edge of a small Northwest town. Earwig-ridden as it may be, it's not wilderness, nor is it particularly well funded or well equipped. There are no horses or tennis courts, no ropes course or climbing wall; the darkroom is too expensive to restock, and archery is available only if a counselor happens to have been certified previously somewhere else. On occasion, a loose cow breaks up a tag game or a neighborhood dog runs through the dining hall, but there's no fear of bears and no need for any real outdoor skills.



Still, it is beautiful and much beloved. Campers spend most of their time socializing their way through inventive, inexpensive small and large-group activities—arts and crafts, talent shows, movie-making, Capture the (rubber) Chicken, dressing up and following along with 1980s Richard Simmons workout tapes—cultivating their own weirdities in between planning chapel and doing service projects related to the summer’s theme.

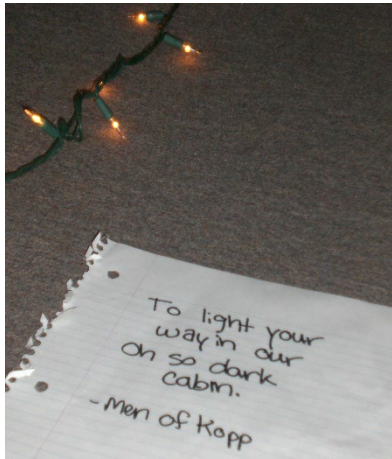
Like many aging Christian overnight camps, the camp mainly serves children and teens from the middle and lower ends of the economic spectrum, providing full or partial scholarships to nearly all who attend. Most campers are rural and white, generally reflecting the demographics of nearby counties and the mainline churches that fund the camp. Many campers are the children and grandchildren of former campers; others have been referred through church, friends, foster care associations, programs for military families, and social workers. For some, it is one of many recreational activities that will fill their summer months. For others, it is their sole reprieve from work or taking care of siblings and older relatives. There are 80-year-old 10-year-olds, raised by grandparents on rural ranches; kids who translate for family members, parent alcoholic adults, and pay household bills; and indolent middle-class teenagers, children of doctors and priests and civil servants, for whom cleaning toilets is a novelty performed at camp once a year.



Thirty to fifty campers attend each one-week session, with many high school campers returning later in the summer to serve as volunteer counselors-in-training for younger camps. Generally, all campers know each other by the end of the week, and most older campers claim their camp friends as their closest, having returned to reconnect with one another year after year. Campers and counselors live 15 to 20 per cabin in A-frame style buildings constructed in the late 1960s, with electricity, indoor plumbing, wall-to-wall carpeting, and wireless internet—though camper phones and computers must be checked in upon arrival at camp. Despite explicit rules against graffiti, generations of names and dates are scrawled behind doors and rafters all over camp. As at many summer camps, there is an overwhelming sense of history, ownership, and belonging; there is also a strong belief among older campers, fueled by that same sense of ownership, that the rules don't matter if nobody gets hurt and you don't get caught.

#1 in Cleanest, and #1 in Your Heart

Cabin cleanup has always been part of the daily routine, as far as I know, though it was done with little ceremony when I was a camper, as a matter of course. Showers were dirty and needed to be mopped. Done. Toilet paper needed to be restocked. Done. The heap of clothes on the floor was becoming impossible to walk through. Folded, put away, done.⁴



Cabin cleanup is still done for practical reasons today, of course, satisfying the county health inspector not least among them. But it has also become sport, a rhetorical exigence, the public reading of cabin cleanup letters providing a highly anticipated opportunity for grandstanding, literary performance, and servile display. Like most things at camp, it is taken simultaneously very seriously and not, a game played for the sake of the win, cabin solidarity, and an end-of-week root beer float party, not to mention the pleasure of hearing one's cabin's superiority with mop and pen affirmed in front of the whole camp over lunch.

Most days, the difference in scoring comes down to an empty paper towel dispenser or a stray sock beneath a bed. Campers of all ages do a pretty good job. When they don't, it's generally because they choose to do nothing—their cabin is losing, so what's the point?—or because they've tried to Febreze away the stink rather than mopping the bathroom floor. The letters they write do not factor into who wins and who doesn't, nor do the "gifts" that often accompany them. Instead, the letters serve mainly to fan the flames and antagonize the opposition. To be sure, the letters aren't really to or about me.

Dearest Dr. Brewster,

We, the Men of Kopp, sincerely apologize for the horrid condition in which we left our cabin yesterday. It was completely unacceptable. To make up for this atrocity, please feel free to also inspect the counselor's section. We wish to show you that even the counselors in this cabin appreciate cleanliness. Because, as is apparent, cleanliness is next to Cori-ness.

Dearest Doctor Brewster,

Because there is a surplus of girls in Morrison this year, our cabin will be extra sparkly. Enjoy our gunk-free drains, toilets you can eat off of, and mirrors you can see your gorgeous face. Help yourself to a hard candy on our pillows. This cabin will smell amazing because we shower. We appreciate your smiling face and helpful hands.

Love,

Gods girls in Morrison

Dear Cori,

After allowing the girl campers to tour our fortress we realize what a strategic disadvantage we have going into today's competition. To compensate for our shortcomings we took the fullest advantage of the many books the Remington Room has to offer. Needless to say we have spent the night studying strategy and tecquiques to achieve victory today. We invite you to peruse over our straightened shoes, bottles, cubbies, sleeping bags and morals. Here at Kopp we appreciate the time you put in to ensure we are keeping clean. I therefore invite you to take our gift of snickers and starbursts to enjoy whilst you look around.

--Kopp Angels

Dearest Miss Cori Brewster,

We are deeply troubled. We have cleaned and we have cleaned. Every corner, nook, and cranny sparkles from our extensive cleaning efforts. We used the last ounce of our energy to perfectly straighten and align our beautiful beds. Yet despite our extremely hard work we still feel as if there is something missing in our sparkling cabin. As we pondered where this empty feeling may come from, we suddenly came to a realization. It is you, Cori Brewster, that we are missing. Our perfectly clean cabin is missing your essence. So please, stay awhile. Take your time observing our humble abode and leave your essence behind, so that our hearts may finally feel full again.

With love and admiration,

The half-empty-hearted girls of Robertson Cabin

Dear Cori

It has come to the attention of all the campers of Kopp that in this cabin cleanup competition we are loosing! In our cabinwide cleaning meeting last night we brainstormed many ideas to pull our marvelous cabin into its rightful place as leader once again. Most of the campers were very perplexed as to how our spotless cabin could be slipping and falling behind the mediocre Robertson and tied with dingy Morrison cabins. Today our strategy as decided by all Kopp campers is to impress you with our attention to detail. From our wrinkle-less sleeping bags. Our neatly folded and organized bunk organizers and our perfectly manicured floors, complete with lined up shoes under every bunk. We feel that we in fact are the best and we are thoroughly displeased with our current scoreboard equals.

Dear Cori—

First off the Morrison cabin would like to sincerely apologize for our lack of spotlessness in the cleaning genre. Today however we would like to show our true colors, we all have worked our fingers to the bone and our backs out of place. We don't need the honor of having first place in this challenge. We only want the satisfaction of knowing we have your divine approval. We have not left hand sanitizer like the other cabin (we will not name names), since we know you are as germ free as the halls, rooms, and restrooms of the Morrison cabin.

Love always, the true angels (Morrison girls)

To the lovely Dr. Brewster,

We are completely appalled at the horrid condition by which we left our cabin yesterday. We not only disappointed ourselves, but we also disappointed you. We are, however, shocked at the gall the women had yesterday by attempting to bribe our favorite and most impartial camp director.

Kopp Angels

Dearest Cori,

When we played Giants, Wizards, and Elves, one team won. For they did not yell one of the three creatures, but they yelled Cori. They won not because you are the scariest but because we all know what you say is law. So when you said this morning for us to go clean, us Morrison girls did just that. We were sweating over our chores. We only want to be the cleanest and #1 in your heart.

#1 in cleanest, and #1 in your heart, love the Morrison Girls

As the letters above demonstrate, sucking up is perhaps the most common rhetorical move. Which cabin has stooped to which new low is a regular topic, as is the deferential acknowledgment that my judgment would never be clouded by flattery or bribes, even as flattery and bribes are continuously offered in both writing and conversation.

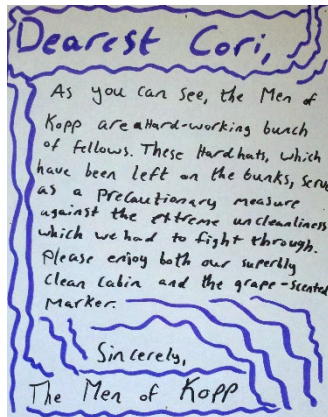


In perverse fealty to the Episcopal mission of the camp, writers and speakers also often attempt to cast their cabin's cleaning efforts in relation to the day's scripture or to the broader camp curriculum, which has centered over the past several years on the [United Nations' Millennium Development Goals](#). This is always done at least half-mockingly, however, and the versions of what camp is

about and what I value reflected back in camper and counselor letters generally fall somewhere between the absurd, the ostensibly blasphemous, and the appalling. To my knowledge, there has never been a whit of Bible study in the cabins, for example, though religious texts are routinely mentioned, quoted, or used as props in elaborate displays accompanying the letters.⁵ Nor have I ever encouraged the girls to gender themselves “princesses,” but a focus on appearance (mine and theirs) pervades many of the letters I receive.

The following sections provide further context and analysis, beginning with a brief description of how these kowtowing epistles are made.

The Composing Processes of Camp Counselors



Most of the letters included here were written by camp counselors and signed by campers, though there are several composed by individual campers as well. The process and amount of time given to writing them vary widely depending on the age of the campers and the preferred styles and levels of investment of individual counselors. Two of my college-age male staff confessed that they actually compose their cabin’s daily letter on a laptop and then write it out by hand to make it look “more real.”

Their typical process goes something like this:

1. Discuss possible themes with fellow counselors and campers, considering available props, cabin clean up topoi, and the camp director’s response to letters past.

2. Draft and revise the letter on a laptop, either individually or in consultation with other counselors, while campers do the actual chores.
3. Use spellcheck.
4. Copy corrected letter by hand onto a piece of neatly de-fringed notebook paper.
5. Attach to clipboard.
6. Circulate around cabin for camper signatures.
7. Chase down campers who have left the cabin without signing the letter and acquire requisite signatures.
8. Attend to presentation and delivery of the letter (typically, placing the letter in the center of a larger display surrounded, for example, by pinecones, playing cards, sticks of gum, My Little Ponies, or *Books of Common Prayer*).
9. Choose theme-appropriate music and put on loop, ensuring that it continues playing throughout cabin inspection. Alternately, guess what the camp director's favorite band or genre might be and just play that.
10. Wait for verdict and public reading of letter at lunch.
11. Listen carefully to other cabins' letters, assessing their strategy and rhetorical ploys.
12. Discuss the next day's strategy with campers during the nightly cabin meeting.
13. Get up the next morning and repeat.

Though not all counselors take the competition quite this seriously, the elementary and middle school-age campers overwhelmingly do, and this fawning camp genre is one they become incredibly and disturbingly well-versed in even if they do not write their cabins' letters themselves. "Have you checked the cabins?" ... "Did you like our letter?" ... "Did you find our gift?" ... "Did we do better than the girls?"

I can't help but be reminded here of Jay Robinson and Patti Stock's admonition that "No one becomes literate who does not see some opening, however small, toward active participation in a literate world that is part of the reality in which he or she lives" (qtd. in Fleischer and Schaafsma xxii). However fleeting the cause may be, however ultimately ridiculous the reality constructed, participating in the production and public delivery of cabin cleanup letters provides developing writers a memorable and thus meaningful opportunity to "see themselves, even for a moment, as actors in/creators of their worlds" (Fleischer and Schaafsma xxii).

Power Addressed, Power Invoked

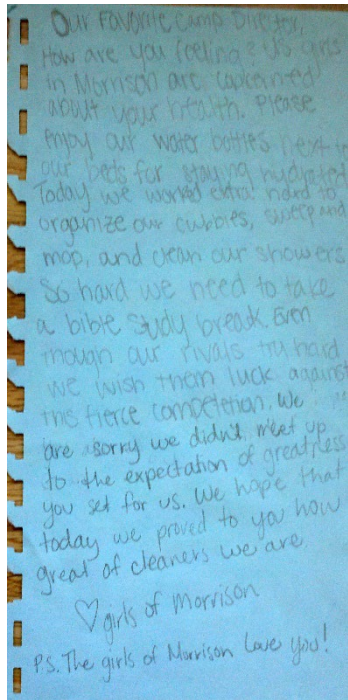
Trivial as these camp compositions might seem, then, I think they provide a useful window into youth literacy development and practice, and an important if idiosyncratic reminder that literacies, identities, and contexts are not just fluid but mutually constitutive, as Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Jay Robinson, and many others have pointed out.



As Orellana explains, much literacy research over the past thirty years has focused on ways in which literacy is valued and practiced in particular domains (home, school, church, and so on), and on how people navigate divergent, sometimes conflicting norms and expectations between them. But "the ways in which sociocultural researchers tackle this question may perhaps reinforce a problematic notion of contexts," she argues (126):

That is, when we focus on the movement that people do between social spheres..., we may inadvertently suggest that such spheres are clearly delineable, fixed, and largely immutable. This approach treats contexts as neatly separable, and in turn separated from the individuals who shape them and give them meaning....

These are ideas that keep us from seeing how the worlds, and the boundaries between them, are themselves forged by the people that move within, across, and between them... I am arguing that individuals are inseparable from their contexts, that contexts and people are mutually constituted, and that when people move between discourse communities they bring their contexts with them, fundamentally altering the nature of the new spaces into which they move. (126)



Summer camp is an identifiable literacy "domain," to be sure, and one that can be examined, as I have to this point, through the lens of literacy events and practices carried out there (see for example Barton). But like all domains, it is also an accretion of participants' past experiences, education, and rhetorical performances, and one that is constantly being reenacted, reread, and remade.

More than most social locations available to young people in the U.S. today, camp provides a space to play dress up with the strange trousseau of tropes and conventions each new group of language users inherits from rhetors and contexts past. It's difficult not to notice, for example, the traces of medieval *ars dictaminis* in campers' pious salutations, or the play with power, authority, and relationships this mock-feudalistic genre affords (see Lanham; Perelman).

References to scripture in camper and counselor letters, likewise, both recall and remake literate conventions recalled and remade across multiple times, places, and institutions. As one letter from the girls' cabin attests:

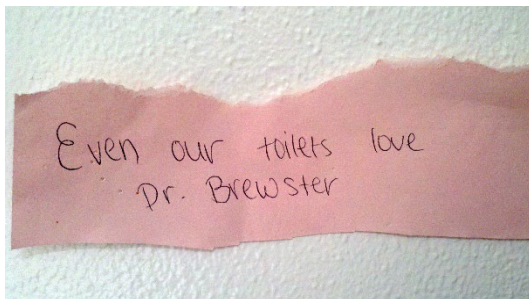
We have rested well with clear minds and settled hearts, due to our triumphant victory yesterday. Today we are refreshed, and with joy in our hearts and God in our mind we have once again defeated the dust and dirtiness of Morrison cabin. As we think about the mess that has been created in Morrison over the summer we are reminded of Jeremiah 51:51:

'We are put to shame for we have heard reproach; dishonor has covered our face, for aliens have come into the holy places of the Lord's house.'

We consider the aliens in the scripture to be the dirt and dust of Morrison. With hope in our hearts we have worked nonstop to rid our cabin of any 'aliens.' We only hope you will find our cabin so spotless that you to can look at Morrison cabin as the 'holy place of the Lord's house.' [sic]

Another letter, from a middle school boy, injects scripture similarly to support his argument that the boys' cabin still has a chance to win by the end of camp: "This week we read the Genisis in bible study to show this is just the beginning. Please read this to every one for every one should know it is just the beginning" [*again, all spelling original*]. His use of scripture is hardly distinguishable from (and certainly no clumsier than) biblical references made in speech after speech at the 2012 Republican and Democratic National Conventions, or in many other contemporary sites of public address.

At the same time that they invoke rhetorical conventions past, in other words, letter writers also actively appropriate devices and identities associated with the shifting domains they are party to, and often simply subject to, outside of camp. Composers bring what they know about language together with what they know about church and the presumed expectations of priests and parishioners, about school and the presumed expectations of college professors, about persuasive strategy and methods of playing to an audience, and about humor and its presumed limits when attempting simultaneously to poke fun at and suck up to adults in power.



Unlike so much of the institutionally-sponsored writing they do at church or at school, however, successful composition at camp is based not on pliant imitation of convention but on the ability to mess with it, to parade knowledge of other domains' rhetorical devices out before an audience who can appreciate the ability to manipulate these devices to one's own ends. It's a sophisticated game, in sum, and one that draws value in my book as much for keeping adolescents engaged in writing as for providing developing rhetors practice using language to push boundaries, play with power, and re-fashion the contexts in which they live.

Dear the Almighty Dr. Brewster.

We are appaled at the inability to properly clean our cabin that we showed yesterday morning. So today we decided to do something spectacular. Not only did we properly fulfil our chores and set our beds in the most efficient manner, but we also decided to make you a little gift. We know that cabin judging is a tiring job, so for your convenience we built you a "throne" out of our spare luggage. So please, take a seat, it's really quite comfortable.

With lots of love – the girls of Morrison cabin.

P.S. Please excuse the Bibles that we have left on our pillows, as we are used to, in our spare time, brushing up on our Bible knowledge.

A little embarrassing, yes. Fleeting and juvenile and solecistic, absolutely. But as small, soft-soaping steps on the road to socially invested, context-shifting, critically literate practice—I'll inspect another toilet for that.⁶

Cori Brewster is Associate Professor of English/Writing at Eastern Oregon University, where students rarely pick up after themselves and the closest thing to fan mail comes from textbook publishers. She is interested in rural literacy sponsorship, apocalyptic rhetoric, and access to high quality higher education for all students. She'd also love to hear about reading, writing, and rhetorical practices at your camp: cbrewste@eou.edu

Notes

1. One reviewer asked what led campers and counselors to begin writing these letters in the first place. I suspect it had everything to do with counselors' discovery that I have a PhD in rhetoric; if I were a seamstress, they probably would have started sewing me gifts and decorating their cabins with scrap fabric. Anything to simultaneously suck up, poke fun, and try to gain an edge.⁶

2. I recently read an obituary of a longtime girls' camp director, for instance, who responded to advice-seeking campers every day under the guise of "Dear Squirrely," clothes-pinning handwritten notes to a string and reeling them up to Squirrely's office atop a tree. It's hard to get much more camp than that. [↗](#)

3. Needless to say, I didn't set out as camp director to study camper and counselor writing. But, as Marjorie Faulstich Orellana points out, "even when we do not name our different identities, or overtly invoke them, they shape our ways of thinking, doing, and being in each context, and . . . in so doing they reconstitute the contexts themselves" (126). Like the letters themselves, my analysis here is largely organic, growing out of firsthand experiences that have changed the way I think about the multiple literacies students eventually bring to college classrooms, and about the value of even the most artificial opportunities to play with power and call developing writers' attention to social and rhetorical conventions that limit agency and hem us in. My thinking in this regard has been strongly informed by critical sociocultural studies in literacy, as outlined in particular by Cynthia Lewis, Patricia Ensco, and Elizabeth Birr Moje and the contributors to their 2009 *Reframing Sociocultural Research: Identity, Agency, and Power*. [↗](#)

4. For a fascinating discussion of the history and ideology of camp cleanliness rituals, see the chapter "Good and Dirty? Girls, Boys, and Camp Cleanliness" in Abigail Van Slyck's *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960*. Of particular relevance is Slyck's discussion of sanitation advice for camp organizers at the start of the 20th century: "Differences arose . . . when it came to the campers' roles in camp sanitation. To encourage campers to take to heart the importance of camp sanitation, [Henry W.] Gibson [author of *Camping for Boys* (1911)] advocated forming a board of health. Made up of an equal number of boys and camp leaders, this group would make a thorough round of daily inspections. . . . Gibson also envisioned this board organizing a series of talks on 'Sanitation and Health,' and even suggested as possible topics 'Flies and Filth' and 'Johnnie and the Microbes.' If camp organizers followed Gibson's advice to the letter, they would also have all the boys in camp write essays on these lectures" (153). [↗](#)

5. Another reviewer asked me to explain why there had never been any Bible study in the cabins at a church-sponsored camp. As an insider to this camp myself and an atheist—like so many of my own friends from camp—I'm not sure I can answer that question. Because that had never been the expectation? Because cabins have traditionally been the province of campers and counselors, not directors or priests? Camp cultures develop and change over time, depending on the values and imperatives of leaders, campers, and staff. The relatively progressive, inclusive Episcopalianism practiced by many in the sponsoring diocese—and by many of the volunteer priests and chaplains—recognized that campers and their families held a range of beliefs, from evangelical Christians, to lifelong Episcopalians, to those who did not attend church at all. Unlike other camps I've visited, it was never about conversion, memorization of Bible passages, or inculcation of a rigid set of religious practices; the emphasis was on community and living justly together, which cabin life gave plenty of practice in on its own. [↗](#)

6. Many thanks to resident staff for sharing their keen composition strategy, and to all the campers and counselors who have penned these fine works. The adoration is and always has been mutual and much appreciated, even if you are all just faking it. Special thanks too to Kevin Roy for the fine camera work, and to Donna Evans for reading and responding to early drafts. It is a privilege to know and learn from you all. [↗](#)

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