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**"THE BOYS IN THE HOOD":
EXPLORING LITERACY IN THE SOCIAL LIVES OF SIX
URBAN ADOLESCENT BLACK MALES**

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Ph.D. degree in Curriculum and Teaching

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**THE BOYS IN THE HOOD:
EXPLORING LITERACY IN THE SOCIAL LIVES OF SIX URBAN ADOLESCENT
BLACK MALES**

By

David E. Kirkland

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

THE BOYS IN THE HOOD: EXPLORING LITERACY IN THE SOCIAL LIVES OF SIX URBAN ADOLESCENT BLACK MALES

By

David E. Kirkland

Achievement gaps in school literacy persist between whites and nonwhites, between higher and lower socioeconomic groups, between individuals who live in cities and those who reside elsewhere, and uniquely between girls and boys. One primary reason why these gaps exist is that educational policies and literacy programs fail to acknowledge the social dimensions of literacy learning and, by extension, shape official spaces in ways that, by situating literacy around unfamiliar social practices, exclude many students—especially urban adolescent African American males.

This dissertation concerns these gaps, as it seeks to broaden our understanding of literacy by better understanding literacy in the lives of urban adolescent Black males. Specifically, the project seeks to answer the following research questions: *How is literacy defined among urban adolescent Black males, and what purposes does it serve across multiple social spaces in their lives?* Hence, by analyzing discourse, the “socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network” (Gee, 1991), this work profiles—both documents and describes—literacy between the achievement gap as successfully practiced by six urban adolescent Black males.

The young men featured in this study consist of six friends, who live in a moderate size city in Michigan. Data for this study consists of observations and

interviews that took place for over a year. Data has been analyzed by describing and interpreting the young men's literacy practices, as revealed in the multiple social contexts they inhabit. This process has sought to make sense of and shed light on the alternative definitions and uses of literacy, as made manifest in their daily lives of the young men. It has also sought to understand in particular ways the relationship between discourses and literacy use. In hopes of informing social and educational theory about how urban adolescent Black males develop and make use of their literacies, this work finally seeks to inform a kind of pedagogy that is not only respectful of the literate lives that urban adolescent Black males but also provides pedagogical room to enlarge our understanding of literacy so that alternative literacy practices can find expression, relevance, and acceptance in formal settings.

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**Dedicated to Keshava, Elie, Nyla, Cherished, and Adjoni.
I love you!**

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Finally, I would like to thank my God, who has carried me thus far and is continuing to carry me along the way.

PREFACE

I began my dissertation research searching for some ubiquitous yet unique form of literacy, a racially affixed masculine literacy practice, which belonged exclusively to Black males. As I began reading through my data, I could not locate a literacy practice that belonged to Black males exclusively. Literacy was tool that individuals used to participate with others in valued group activities. It was a practice that no one owned, but everyone, in some culturally/socially specific way, engaged.

The lack of evidence for a Black male literacy was to me evidence that literacy could never be wholly possessed or owned by exclusive social groups. In keeping with this idea, I begin to view literacy as a shared practice (Miller & Goodnow, 1995) that all people adopt, exercise, and, in the process of exercising, reinvent for their immediate social needs. The young men that I had the privilege of studying have helped to reinforce this perspective, as this dissertation shall illustrate.

If this work makes no other significant contribution to the field, I certainly makes one. That is, literacy in the lives of urban adolescent Black males bears glaring resemblances to literacy in the lives of other literate social groups. Like other literate groups, Black men practice literacy to carry out various kinds of social work. But for urban adolescent Black males, literacy is questioned. Hence, for them, the question of literacy takes on new meaning, as being a Black male in contemporary society illicit struggle, disdain, and discomfort. Rarely are Black males given permission in formal settings to express literacy in ways that affirm them and their identities as Black males.

For me, this resolve has been by far the most relevant aspect of this work. While I did not find a set of Black male literacies, I have been able to demonstrate the bountiful

ways that Black males also employ literacy to lead socially successful lives, to respond to the conditions of inequality surrounding them, and to gain ownership over their own stories.

The critical theorists have indeed gotten this point right. Competing definitions of literacy and, by association, questions about who can be labeled literate are at the forefront of current educational debates. The debate goes beyond issues of cultural differences. That is, the educational plight that many young Black men face has very little to do with their cultural backgrounds. The practicing of literacy is similar across various cultural trajectories. The educational plight of young Black men, on the other hand, deals with power (or the lack thereof) to define what counts as literacy and the literate. Again, the issue, here, is not about cultural differences or cognitive deficits. The issue, here, is about young Black men's failure to submit to cultural domination and society's vilification of them.

Indeed, many Black males practice literacy in ways that schools and society do not accept, value, respect, or privilege. Many of them use literacy in ways that do not always make sense to us. Regardless of our understanding, their use of literacy makes sense to them. It is from their perspective, within the ways that literacy makes sense to them, that this work begins. Unable to locate a literacy practice belonging to them, locating what literacy means to them seems like the least I can do.

D. Kirkland (June 5, 2006)

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Until the lion learns to write history, the story of the jungle will always glorify the hunter.

—African Proverb

The telling of stories can be a profound form of scholarship moving serious study close to the frontiers of art.

—Joseph Featherstone (1989, p. 377)

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child/ A long way from home/ Sometimes I wish I could fly like a bird up in the sky/ 'Cause motherless children have a real hard time/ Sometimes I feel like the freedom is near/ But we're so far, so far from home. . .

—Harry Thacker Burleigh, 191? (1866-1949)

INTRODUCTION

Exploring the many ways in which literacy is practiced among urban adolescent Black males extends Gee's (1991, 2003) social literacies framework (see also New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984, 1995). For urban adolescent Black males, literacy is more than social practice. It is also dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Dyson, 2003), rooted firmly in the cultural maelstrom of being, measured interestingly by the presence of others, altered unfairly by racism and discriminations, and tangled complexly in self-reflection.

At the heart of literacy, then, is action (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor, 1992), which for Black males sometimes translates into reaction against social subordination, including racism and social isolation (Wilson, 1987). According to Smitherman and van Dijk (1988), much of modern social subordination (e.g., racism) is symbolic, rooted in discourse. According to Gee (1991), "Discourse" is the foundation of identity and literacy. Therefore, understanding the relationship between social subordination and literacy in the lives of six young Black men is the main concern of this work.

While I seek to understand the ways that key elements of social subordination, particularly racism, shape literacy and urban adolescent Black males, I also seek to understand the ways that literacy is practiced among Black males. In doing so, I aim to inform a kind of scholarship which not only respects the literate lives of Black males but also seeks to encourage a more democratic philosophy (representing multiple voices) of literacy and literacy learning. Such a perspective promises to provide intellectual space and practical opportunities for multiple modes of literacy to find expression, relevance, and acceptance in formal settings.

Finally, in my search for understanding, I acknowledge that this work has been a personal journey. On this journey, I have stared long and hard into the lives of six young men. While I can picture them perfectly as I write, I find them in their activities and in their words, some of which are written, others simply spoken. The volumes of voices that contribute to their identities, including the perspectives of others, articulate, in part, what it means to them to be literate, a distinction that yields greater importance especially in a world that constructs them as the opposite.

Therefore, this work is very much their story. However, it does not feature them alone. It is an educational drama that casts literacy events (Heath, 1983) as political ones. At the heart of the story is conflict, compromise, and hopeful resolution. Yet, taken together, the story is about young Black males who practice literacy decadently off the national stage and often struggle to gain national spotlight. The work that follows is a story about young Black males and their literacies, a story which moves "serious study close to the frontiers of art" (Featherstone, 1989, p. 377), a story which begins in a car headed south on interstate 127.

A Long Way from Home: Literacy, Black Males, and Deshawn Stevens

I am on the road to Mason, MI, which is about 15 miles south of East Lansing. For me, Mason is a long way from home in more ways than one. It is a vast shift from Lansing's vibrantly diverse urban population. Not only is it almost exclusively White, Mason is stubbornly rural and historically racist. In his autobiography, famed human rights activist Malcolm X describes growing up in Mason like he describes living behind bars. Malcolm's description of Mason seems fitting, as Mason is also the site of the Ingham County Jail, a holding facility for suspected criminals awaiting trial and convicts,

most of whom are Black and male. As one of the inmates housed in the Ingham County Jail, Deshawn (Shawn) Stevens was now “living” permanently in Mason for “allegedly” selling drugs.

Because of Shawn’s situation, the trip to Mason becomes an unexpected detour on my research journey. Shawn, a dark-skinned, lanky, and tall young man, along with five friends—whom I have nicknamed “the Guys,” have agreed to meet with me periodically to talk about life and literacy. Though Shawn is trapped behind bars, his literate life is unique and intriguing, nonetheless. Through it, Shawn’s presence lingers with me. The trip to Mason proves less than lonely.

While driving, an endless stream of thoughts surge through my flooded mind. While they do not drown me, thoughts about Shawn saturate me, allowing me to sink deeper and deeper into inquiry. I am pondering the Black male prison crisis (Justice Policy Institute, 2001) and its assumed relationship with literacy (hooks, 2004). Indeed, Black men such as Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X relished literacy. For them, it was a necessary weapon in their war to win freedom. However, for Shawn and his friends, literacy is at best questionable. For them, it represents White America (e.g., “actin’ White” [Fordham & Ogbu, 1986]), and Black males who submit to the dominance of White America commit racial treason. In sum, “academic” literacy—the modes of literacy usually endorsed by schools and mainstream society—is not, to them, a tool for freedom but acculturation.

In order to gain clarity, I raise two important questions: what does being a literate Black male mean to the Guys, and what has literacy meant historically to other Black males prior to the contemporary moment? The questions appear similar but are different

in important ways. They offer very different answers. As briefly mentioned above, “literacy” has historically been a symbol of emancipation and freedom for many Black males (Perry et al., 2003). However, many “literate” Black males, in turn, have been socially constructed as symbols of unfounded compromise, or cultural sellouts. Where literacy was once regarded by Black males, like Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X, as a means toward freedom, it is now looked upon by many young urban Black men, like the Guys, as a site of cultural conflict and social struggle.

In this way, literacy as practiced by many young Black men is sadly shaped in tension, while literacy as practiced by many Whites is, more or less, openly endorsed by schools and society (Heath, 1983). By contrast, literacy in the lives of many urban adolescent Black males is often ignored or criticized in the American public. (Political critiques of rap is a key example of this.) Given the only true difference between Black males and their White counterparts (i.e., skin color), this criticism is most likely due to the lingering presence of racism and the harmful cadences of cultural discrimination alive in American society.

Thus, the consortium among literacy, racism, and discrimination acts as an ideological deterrent to social and educational progress (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Prendergast, 2003). The images of Black males projected in school and society, like literacy, are often marred by a petulant ideology that swaps pity for disdain. This sad and dangerous deviation in thought makes the situation of learning literacy for Black males volatile, threatening, and uncomfortable.

Another way of viewing this conflict is through a historical assessment of literacy in the US. Literacy in the US has been forged solidly within the dark furnace of injustice,

brewing fervently in the heat of racial prejudice (Smitherman & van Dijk, 1988; Williams, 1991), social exclusion (Purcell-Gates, 1995), and educational neglect (M. Rose, 1989). By association, current and historic definitions of literacy have been created in the image of White elites (Heath, 1983). By contrast, literacy when practiced by African Americans rarely gets acknowledged in mainstream definitions (Dyson, 2003b; Kirkland, 2006; Perry et al., 2001) or represented in public spaces (Richardson, 2004; Woodson, 1933). Furthermore, access to a mainstream “literacy” practice (as defined through public literacy policies, literacy curricula, and classroom pedagogies) is unfairly distributed to Blacks (Cornelius, 1991). And, during specific moments in our nation’s history, “literacy” has been used to help enforce slavery and to deny Blacks access to democracy (Prendergast, 2003).

While it has worked to reinforce the oppression of Blacks, narrow definitions of literacy lend themselves to racism. Further, racist conceptions of literacy (i.e., Blacks are not literate or, at least, not as literate as Whites) interact to inaccurately position Blacks as non-literates, which reinforce notions of Black inferiority. As a result, Blacks, particularly Black males, are understood in deficit terms, outside the loci of textual expression and verbal performance.

Literacy as a racist construct diminishes the humanity of Blacks. As “pre”-literate “civilizations” have been viewed as primitive, uncivilized, or arcane (Ong, 1988). The racist assumptions about people surrounding literacy, thus, mystifies knowledge, truth, and the potential human ability, especially of Black males, to make sense of experience through spoken and written words and symbols. By situating them in the margins of literacy, society helps to shape Blacks, particularly Black males, as different, deficient, or

de-human. Given this, questions persist as to what counts as literacy and what literacies count as civilized. The road to Mason proves insightful.

Literacies of Many Voices

On the road to Mason, I listen carefully to one of my first taped-recorded conversations with Shawn. The recording allows me to resurrect, if not Shawn's presence, his voice. The audio begins with familiar greetings:

Me: How are things, Shawn?

Shawn: It's real out here, Kirk. How [a]bout you?

Me: I'm fine . . . just fine.

The recording continues. As I listen, I make a list of possible questions that I might ask Shawn about his writing.

Me: Shawn, are you writing still . . . didn't you tell me about a rap?

Shawn: I done wrote a lot of stuff, Kirk. Man, check it. I got this new rhyme that's off the chain. [Pauses, fidgeting over a few sheets of crumbled paper tucked awkwardly in his pants. It takes him about a minute to get settled before producing a folded sheet of paper, which is accentuated by broken lines of scribbled texts.]

Shawn and the rest of the guys take rap (and their writing of it) very seriously (see also Morrell & Duncan-Adrade, 2002; T. Rose, 1994). Rap is the conversational template, or genre, of their peer group. It allows them to compose, communicate, and comment on lived experiences and shared ideas (Smitherman, 1999a). My conversation with Shawn continues:

Shawn: Look, Kirk. I got this new piece [rap]. I'm telling you, it's off the

chain.

He seems enthusiastic about sharing (almost determined to share) his rap with me. He knows that I am visiting him to listen to his words. As such, he is more than eager to share them with me. This is true, but he does not write for or to me but for himself to share with me or anyone else who will listen. In this way, Shawn's writing is dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Dyson, 2003a). I am an audience, perhaps the only audience he has outside his peer circle. Yet through him, I gain valuable insight about what literacy, for a young Black male, might mean.

While intensely personal, literacy, for Shawn, is never a lonely practice. As I have mentioned, it is a dialogic one (Dyson, 1993; Freire, 1970; Newkirk, 2002). It is at once the substance of Shawn's character and the characters of many others, both known and unknown. These characters are introduced to me in vibrant images brought alive in Shawn's writing.

Shawn's writing says much about literacy in the lives of certain Black males. While Shawn practices literacy on his own accord, he borrows—like we all do—from the world around him (Bakhtin, 1986). His recitation of personal experience in animated lines of verse is, to use a metaphor, Lazareth awakened from the dead. His words keep alive the historical hymn of others. Hence, history lives through him.

Impressed and somewhat enticed by his verbal ability, I anxiously invite Shawn to “read” what he has written.

Shawn: Naw, man [scolding]. This ain't like that. You can't just read it.
 It's like poetry . . . you gotta say it.

So it seems, some of literacy, though written, is meant to be spoken after all.

I look at Shawn with a guilty grin that reveals my admiration for his knowledge about language and literacy. I am also impressed that he could scold me. Thus, my appreciation for him and his words encourage my desire to hear what he has to share. So, I patiently reply, “Then say it.”

Shawn sinks his head into the folded paper. In unison are his rising hands, which slowly ascend to his frail chest. Passionately, out of his mouth rushes a powerful noise, melodious and surprising:

Shawn (rapping): Ain't no room for the young, homie
 gotta gun, don't know me, homie, gittin it done
 having fun on these streets, can't see how I feel
 on the run like these beats, just keeping it real
 no sanctuary, they say it scary but I got a surprise
 'Cause it ain't no scaring me, gotta git mine
 been through it all, homie
 I'm a fighter, surviving like a real G
 Brisk like gun; kind of wild yet young
 ain't got no daddy, he's a bum
 on my own, on the run
 Shit is foul—sometimes I feel like a motherless child
 Done walked a mile, sometimes I feel like a motherless
 child
 . . . a long way from home . . .

Hearing this rap was my first experience with Shawn's writing. I was surprised

by his ability to roam space and time, to speak back freely to history and situate himself and his experience in the past while firmly standing in the present. Shawn's rap strikes me as multivoiced composition in a fine Bakhtinian (1986) sense, with voices past and present giving meaning to one another. (His rap could not be read; ". . . you gotta say it.")

Shawn's text is also open, or intertextual (see Derrida, 1967). It is rejoinder and revoicing, an elaboration and appropriation of other texts and sounds. Like other literate individuals, Shawn borrows words and phrases from the marketplace of ideas—from the selves of time and space—to express a self which can be "traced" to another (Derrida, 1967).

This notion of borrowing (or, to use language taken from Shawn and his peers, "sampling") is demonstrated in the title of Shawn's rap. Hence, the title of Shawn's rap is important because it is a visible link in a protracted linguistic chain of expressions. While he connects to his cultural past through his words, Shawn is made literate through his ability to name things (Freire, 1970).

Naming, nick-naming, and titling are fundamental aspects of African American language, literacy, and culture (Smitherman, 1977, 1999a, 1999b). It gives writers, like Shawn, creative authority and ownership over ideas. It also helps to situate the named within a cultural heritage and textual tradition. While literacy for Black males is personal, perhaps as important, it is a practice of borrowing both voice and identity, inventing and reinventing language, and appropriating cultural "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 2000; Moll et al., 1992). With this understanding, I asked Shawn for the title of his rap.

Shawn: “Motherless Child”

While many voices are woven into Shawn’s writing, the distance between him and us is ever-present. This idea is best demonstrated in Shawn’s rap’s title, which extends my thinking. While the purpose of this work is to examine literacy in the lives of six urban adolescent Black males, based in part on Shawn’s rap’s title, I hope to uncover the ways in which the Guys handle language and other textual resources to achieve desired social goals as they participate in valued social activities. But, in our common struggle to alleviate failure and “to leave no child behind,” even for those children we find motherless (or fatherless for that matter), crucial questions remain. How can this work respond to the distance between urban adolescent Black males and schools, as documented by national achievement data (NAEP, 2004)? In a phrase, how can this work address inequities in how we perceive of literacy?

Literacies of the Self (in Conflict/Collaboration with the Other)

Presently, Shawn exists between places, unfortunately stalled in the dark intersections of rejection and failed aspirations. While his youth revives in him some idea of hope, Shawn’s shattering dreams of beating his prison bars and of telling his story though words laced up to “tight beats” is a dream deferred. Because of this dilemma, it behooves educators to understand how Shawn is literate. Understanding the ways that Shawn is literate might enable educators to invent pedagogies that incorporate marginalized understandings of language and literacy into classroom instruction, thereby helping all students expand their literate repertoires.

Further, Shawn’s understanding of the power of language is declarative. It makes a humanizing statement about literacy and relevance in the lives of young Black men.

His writing comments on society and the social life of words. In addition, it shed new light on the condition of being Black and male in America. As such, Shawn's writing is very much personal, narrating himself; social, sharing with others; and political, critiquing social inequities.

Personal introduction only reveals so much about a person. I met Shawn hanging out with four of his friends in the hallway at their high school. However, I found him hidden in a booklet of scribbles, in the violent litter of pen strokes scattered unevenly on napkins and on the backs of unuseful documents.

As much as they are poetry to me, Shawn's "scribbles," a term he used to refer to his informal/in-process writings, are autobiographical. As I read them, I begin to understand him and the literate stories of other urban adolescent Black males like him.

The following rap written by Shawn illustrates this point:

Shawn (rapping): This is my life, full of blood and glory
 It's my story, so I gotta word for you, I will tell mine
 I'll pull a trigga at the drop of a dime 'cause
 A nigga doing time for a crime that ain't even mine
 The world came after me, ain't got no daddy but
 I gotta get fixed in the penitentiary, somewhere lost and
 confused
 Been abused, still being used by the scum of the streets
 No clever beats, just a sad song gone wrong
 Can you hear me speak but nobody can hear 'cause they
 fear me

When a nigga got a mic in his hand . . .

While it is his “story,” Shawn’s rap also reflects other aspects of his life, especially his experiences as a Black male. When he writes “nobody can hear ‘cause they fear,” Shawn makes a personal statement. He is commenting on the way that society silences the Black male voice and, more personally, his voice as a way of handling its fear of him and Black males like him. His commentary is insightful because Shawn links society’s vilification of Black males (see Chapter 1) personally as society’s vilification of him.

There are also larger-than-life qualities in Shawn’s rap. The line, “I’ll pull a trigga at the drop of a dime,” is not consistent with Shawn’s character, who according to friends “could not harm a fly.” Hence, it is exaggeration disguised as intention and as real story. While it is not meant literally, the verse is nonetheless part of his figurative autobiography—a metaphorical statement used to narrate a loaded and explosive presence lurking within him. While literally fiction, the statement is figuratively true and captures unarticulated dimensions of Shawn’s internal reality.

There are subtle differences between the second rap, which was composed while Shawn was behind bars, and the first rap, which was composed while Shawn was “free.” Both raps “exaggerate” Shawn’s life story. However, Shawn’s rap loses innocence behind bars. Shawn goes from writing about being “brisk like a gun” to being a “trigga” pulling “nigga” with a gun. While both raps proclaim, “ain’t got no daddy,” the latter exchanges the noun “homie” for the more distant pronoun “they.” In this way, the tone of Shawn’s writing matures rapidly yet disturbingly. It moves from being situated to isolated, as evidenced in the discursive trade-off between unlike terms, “homie” and

“they.” The latter rap boasts “no clever beats.” It is “just a sad song gone wrong.”

The different tones in the raps indicate differences in Shawn’s demeanor and response to life. While he is hopeful in the first rap, the bases of Shawn’s hopes in the second rap are altered by the despair of being incarcerated and disrupted by the discomfort of being alone. Between his raps, something happens to Shawn. Shawn becomes a new person, situated in another, darker world, where he struggles with a new set of issues. Shawn leaves a “foul” place and enters a threatening one, which he documents as a “world coming after him.” This does not mean that he is no longer Shawn. Rather, the shift in Shawn’s writing tells us that literacy has much to do with where individuals are situated.

For Shawn, jail was a lonely place. He didn’t receive many visitors. Shawn’s grandmother, Mrs. Ida, was the only other person besides me to visit him since he was convicted in October 2004. Shortly after his conviction, I met with Mrs. Ida. The encounter deserves mentioning.

During our brief encounter, Mrs. Ida expressed deep grief over her grandson’s incarceration. She said that Shawn’s incarceration “hurt” her deeply. It made sense. Shawn was more than a grandson to her. He was like a son. Mrs. Ida had raised Shawn since he was five years old. As such, it broke Mrs. Ida’s heart to see her “grand baby behind bars.” In addition, she did not want Shawn to “end up like his mother and father.”

In some strange way, she felt responsible for what was happening to Shawn. It was like *déjà vu*. She explained, “I didn’t do a good job raising his mother . . . I tried to do a better job with him.” When I asked about Shawn’s mother, Mrs. Ida lamented, “[Shawn’s mother] ain’t hittin on too much . . . seem like she don’t care [about Shawn]

no mo'." According to Mrs. Ida, Shawn's mother was addicted to drugs and had been since Shawn was three. This was ironic. The curse of drugs was heredity. Although Shawn was not an addict, he was, along with his mother, among its victims.

Both Shawn and his mother were lost, or at least disregarded. For this reason, they seemed to disregard one another. Shawn barely spoke of his parents. It would surprise me if his parents ever spoke of him either.

I asked Mrs. Ida if Shawn's mother knew about his incarceration. Mrs. Ida somberly answered, "Naw, she somewhere strung out on that dope." Her answer was stern and poignant, as it gave the phrase "motherless child" new meaning.

The whereabouts of Shawn's father were also inconclusive. According to his uncle, Shawn's father was in prison in the state of Washington for hijacking a bus. Another family member joked that "he probably dead, got killed doing somebody wrong or [overdosed]" Mrs. Ida's account of Shawn's father was perhaps more disturbing. According to her, "[Shawn's] daddy ain't never been there [in Shawn's life]. Don't nobody know where he [is] at." She added, "That man ain't been around since Shawn momma was pregnant . . . [Shawn] seventeen now, and he ain't even seen his daddy."

Although they are absent to him, Shawn remembered candidly the struggles that both he and his parents shared. While Shawn rarely talked about his parents, they always found a way into his conversations. They were always in the room, musing in his writing, in what he did and did not say. So I am not surprised that no one seems certain about Shawn's parents because they were lost, memorialized in Shawn's thoughts, mythologized in Shawn's words. Shawn's parents need not visit him, for they were always with him, never in a good way. They were ghosts, ghosts of his remembered past.

They forever haunted him.

Shawn wrote, in part, to free himself of his social struggles, struggles he inherited from his parents. His writing was social and political work intimately made personal. As self-recovery, Shawn's writing was also self-reflection, autobiographical in theme.

While it was real, his writing was also make-believe. Within it, Shawn constructed a place where he could consistently and simultaneously dialogue with his struggles and cope with his disappointments.

Shawn's writing was a place where he comments on the cruelties of society and society's irreverence of him. It was a place where he confronts his parents. When he wrote, they were in the room. I got to know them. Having been introduced to Shawn's parents through absent conversations with them, I clearly saw the resemblance. Shawn seemed a bit like his parents. Together, they struggled for a place in a world that had misplaced them.

It is important to reiterate that Shawn was writing solidly within the rhetorical/autobiographical tradition of Hip Hop and Black culture. According to Smitherman (1999a), rappers write about "their pain and the violence they live with" (p. 282). Working within this tradition, Shawn wrote autobiographically, what Smitherman (1999a, p. 269) calls "a blend of reality and fiction." Like rap in Hip Hop, Shawn's writings commented on "conditions of joblessness, poverty, and disempowerment" (Smitherman, 1999a, p. 269)—conditions that Smitherman contends "continue to be the norm for the Black *unworking* class" (p. 269; italics in the original). Thus, unlike the "lads" in Paul Willis's (1970) seminal work *Learning to Labor*, Shawn and the other Guys were laboring to learn where they fit into a literate world that did not acknowledge

the ways that they existed. This quest for meaning underpins the major points of this dissertation (see Chapters 3-5).

Literacies of Labor

Perhaps the most important contribution that this work attempts to make is that our social understandings of literacy require refinement. That is, individuals practice literacy to participate in valued group activities. In addition, individuals practice literacy to make known their own personal stories, which exist in relation to the interrelated stories of others. There is a key point I would emphasize. Within this conception of literacy is struggle, which deals with the question: who has authority over personal stories? Indeed, the Guys practice literacy to resist the cultural domination of others who would “write” them along the margins of history and society. While they are intimately linked to personal narratives, cultural situations, and social experiences, literacies then are intensely political (Macedo, 1997), sometimes rejected altogether and other times used to critique disagreeable aspects of human society.

Literacy, also, exists within a cacophony of voices, made available based on the social situations individuals encounter. In this way, Shawn’s words are not indebted to himself (or Hip Hop) alone. While his style and words borrow from larger cultural traditions like Hip Hop, they comment explicitly on other literary and cultural traditions as well. While some of the traditions that share resemblances with Shawn’s writing are lauded in the public sphere, Shawn’s writing has rarely garnered such esteem. Before I talk about how they are different, it is important for me to discuss how mainstream/academic and non-academic literacies (literacies based on popular and folk traditions, usually not relating to school) converged in the literate lives of the Guys.

Academic and non-academic literacies intersected uniquely in the lives of the Guys. In this way, Shawn's raps (as well as his reading of them) became peculiar to me. While he wrote with painful silence and evocative clarity, Shawn read with doleful excitement and restrained joy.

In their own way, Shawn's raps were contradictory and complex. They blended academic and non-academic literacy—a cross among the simplistic poetry of Cummings, the complicated tragedies of Shakespeare, and the sobering rhythms of Tupac. In them, Shawn is DuBois (1907), bossy and enraged in “The Song of the Smoke,” and yet, not really. He has not set out to ring “worlds awry,” although he is Black. He simply wants his melody to ring freely in places where his words might be heard. He is Dunbar (1993), lamenting bondage and pain in “Sympathy.” Then again, he is not. Indeed, he “knows why the caged bird sings” but refuses to rehearse its truncated melody of unfettered pain and dehumanizing agony. His song cannot be modified by sorrow but frustration and fear.

These ongoing tensions within his writing bear its complexity. His words are rough, nimble, and forceful. They are also curative, physical, and inspiring. They emanate from deeply within him. Again, they blend the academic and non-academic uniquely and creatively.

The sophistication of Shawn's writing is not surprising, for he himself is sophisticated. The following rap illustrates this inner complexity, as his social commentary becomes spiritual reprieve, draped in academic and beyond-academic voices.

Shawn (rapping): I live in hell until God comes, no mo' bail so I gotta run

Gotta git crunk to git away from the junk in the belly of the
beast,
So I look to the East, Bowing for my peace,
Asking God to cease the violence, it's entangling me
Got me trapped, choked [locked ?], in the devil's mean
leash,
Pain release me, free me, so I can be free,
Death do your part; its your art
I know you waiting for me . . .

In these lines, the “strangeness” of his writing becomes more familiar to me. Shawn brings together tragedy, eulogy, and majesty in the traditions of the literary canon. Hence, these are not foreign literary themes. Indeed, his ironic images of death and life can be read in multiple ways. Yet, for many who fear death, Shawn's meditation on it seems unassuming, morbid, and even blasphemous. But living life in struggle as Shawn has frees one to criticize existence in a way that gives both life and death new meaning.

As already alluded to, Shawn is not speaking out of turn. His words are kindred to the words and ideas made immortal in canonical literature. As I mentioned earlier, his words are intertextual, speaking to one another and back to other texts that are common to human experience. In this way, Shawn is much like John Donne (1999/1921). Shawn's phrase “Death do your part” not only relates to Donne's classical phrase “Death be not proud,” it, in a fine Bakhtinian (1986) sense, “echoes” it. The two phrases are not only structurally and rhetorically united. Both phrases, also, embrace the immoral character of Death with symbolic mortality. Where Donne chastises Death, Shawn

invites it. This is as far as the similarities between them go. Unlike Donne, Shawn's practice of literacy is not only questioned, it is often ignored.

In this way, literacies are ranked. Literacies like Donne's are cherished and privileged in school settings. Conversely, literacies in the lives of many urban Black males, like Shawn's raps, are dismissed and even penalized in certain settings. Where they might be equal, they are not because we have chosen too easily to distinguish them.

An Outline of Chapters to Come

The discussion of Shawn's life and his literacies sets the stage for this work. Though he is literate, his practice of literacy is obscured both socially and academically. Purcell-Gates (2002) explains, "People without this social/political capital are told. . .that they cannot learn to read because of the way they talk" (p. 157). This "linguicism," or "literacism," as I call it, is like any discriminatory practice. It allows for the pollution and corruption of thought and creativity and, thus, interferes with justice.

Shawn's raps are viewed unlike Donne's poetry. Instead of seeing where they are alike (where academic and non-academic literacies meet), schools and society sanction categories to distinguish them. In doing this, literacy becomes ordered, set on superfluous scales that slide along radical lines of degree and acceptability, ranging from high to low.

The appearance of a fair system serves the needs of the privileged to justify an irrational, exploitative, and undemocratic system (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). It allows the privileged to hide behind the darkened resolve of prejudice, conceit, and meritocracy. Such resolutions misappropriate Shawn and other Black males as different, something "other" than literate. It disguises the racism that plagues institutions of education and

mystifies any notion of literacy that might serve the interests of the oppressed.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I begin by reviewing relevant literature on literacy as a social practice (Gee, 1990). Assuming that literacy is a social practice and literacy learning a set of social processes, I examine the ways that literacy is defined and situated with regards to race and gender. I draw on “dialogic theory” and notions of cultural production to extend what I see as literacy in the lives of urban adolescent Black males and to provide a conceptual template that gives me entry into the Guys’ literate lives.

In addition, I examine more closely two prominent features of society responsible for the propagation of literacy and ideology: the media and the school. Using Smitherman’s and van Dijk’s (1998) notion of symbolic racism and Ferguson’s analysis of the school’s role in perpetuating racism against Black males, I analyze the role of both media and school in projecting and helping to construct Black males as semi-literate. All the while, we get to know Shawn and his friends more intimately. Stories surrounding Shawn’s literate life become an important descriptive tool, which helps to extend a more evocative understanding of Black males and literacy learning. By putting the literature in conversation with Shawn’s life, we begin to see the limits of simply conceiving of literacy as social practice. Indeed, the practices of literacy are dialogic, multiple, and complex.

While Chapter 1 seeks to extend the notion of literacy as social practice into a more conceptually nuanced notion of literacy as dialogic practice, Chapter 2 presents a (discursive) methodology for exploring aspects of literacy both in being and in learning. This chapter extends Hymes’s (1962) sociolinguistic methodology (i.e., the ethnography

of communication) and Heath's (1983) sociocultural framework (i.e., the ethnography of literacy events) by commenting on the need to understand literacy beyond and beneath individuals' and groups' communicative practices (see Hymes, 1972; Gilyard, 1991).

Gee (1989) argues that literacy includes more than issues of language interaction roughly conceived as communication. For Gee, literacy is inextricably linked to Discourses, which mediate beliefs, values, and social practices through which members within a discourse community (e.g., peer group [see Corsaro, 2004]) acquire identities. In addition, Bakhtin (1981), also, refers to discourses as social languages, which help to determine "the norms for who can talk, about what, and with whom" (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p. 6). In this way, being literate as observed through discourse (symbolic expressions of being) can be helpful for understanding not only the ways in which literacy is practiced within a given group but also for understanding the ways that literacy gets attached to (or detached from) privileged spaces. At the end of this chapter, I describe, in detail, the study's design and its methods for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3 examines cooperative aspects of literacy in the lives of the Guys. In this chapter, I attempt to document the inherent cultural complexity and richness of the Guys' shared practice of literacy. In addition, this chapter documents the ways that cultural reproduction and production work within the limits of history to (re)constitute the material that the Guys used to practice literacy. The Guys lived between cultural spaces and appropriated material from a vast range of connected cultural contexts, usually for the purposes of group interaction. Learning literacy, then, was part of learning to participate along the hybrid axes of cultures in both history and society (see also Gutierrez & Stone, 2000).

The Guys' practice of literacy was very much a process of bending to cultural norms and revoicing their social inflections. Literacy, for them, was thus an act of social sharing and cultural shifting through which the Guys became articulations of peers and the subcultures in which they participated (Bakhtin, 1981). In this way, the subcultures (or popular cultures) of Black America and urban youth greatly influenced literacy practice and performance in the Guys' lives. This collaborative aspect of literacy was neither neutral nor politically innocent. The Guys practiced literacy within contested spaces that were marked by intense social tension.

Chapter 4 explores some of these tensions. In it, I describe how the Guys resisted dominant literacy practices and used literacy to resist dominant cultural presuppositions. The cruel reality of social subordination sets in and the option of resistance becomes a very real alternative for the Guys, who seek to respond to institutional oppression. As such, being literate by school standards was not always desirable to the Guys. While reading and writing were valued activities in the Guys' lives, reading and writing in ways consistent with dominant culture was not deemed as valuable. Instead of analyzing Shakespeare, the young men analyzed *Comic books* and violent themes in newspaper articles. Instead of writing term papers, they invented terms that they used in their raps. Literacy for them was also a political tool, which allowed the Guys to situate themselves as resistant social agents who deviated from the established norms of society, for good or for ill.

Chapter 5 examines literacy in being, or literacy on the personal side of the dialogue. I document, largely through *critical discourse analysis* (see Fairclough, 1995), the ways that personal stories and self-reflection write themselves into the literate lives of

the Guys. The Guys were in constant struggle within themselves to make sense of personal stories that were uniquely and ubiquitously theirs. In their writings, the Guys struggled to salvage a humanizing self from the tainted perspectives of others. Hence, even the young men's bodies act as resources/canvasses for literate expression.

The Guys' bodies became both literally and figuratively impossible to sever from their literate struggles with self identity. Their practice of literacy, then, was simultaneously a practice of self-reflection and personal story-telling, or to borrow from critical race theorists, "counterstory-telling" (Delgado, 1999). It was a personal practice through which the Guys understood themselves as scribes of social history and, uniquely and powerfully, as writers of their own stories.

Chapter 6 suggests implication for future research and pedagogical literacy practice. It responds to the perceived inequities in American literacy education. According to Ladson-Billings (1999), educators have responded to inequities in literacy education in three ways. The first response has been to remediate a growing number of Black males without reference to their social or cultural backgrounds. The second response has been to acculturate Black males into mainstream behaviors, values, and attitudes while simultaneously teaching them basic skills. The final response, according to Ladson-Billings, has been to facilitate learning by using students' languages and literacies as a bridge to academic achievement. While there may be some merit in any, if not all, of these responses, none of them will ever suffice unless educators move beyond bridges to revise literacy classrooms to incorporate and reflect the languages, literacies, cultures, and personalities of all its students. Without inviting them and their literacies into classrooms, our attempts to close the achievement gap will be more or less trivial.

To end this chapter and this dissertation, I provide an example of how a more democratic (i.e., inclusive) philosophy of literacy might look.

This brings us back to Shawn. It takes great effort to bring him forward, for he is found in places in which we seldom venture: a back pocket, a hidden notebook, on a burned CD, and in the moving lines of rare yet revealing conversations. His hiding places are bountiful vaults of texts, which conceal the unofficial library of his misunderstood literate community. By entering into these vaults, studying them seriously with careful intensity, we see that the perceived mismatch between the worlds of young Black males and the worlds of scholars is somewhat make-believe, conceived by good-intentioned thinkers, attempting to understand why literacy as practiced by individuals like Shawn is not quite like theirs.

Conclusion

I am passing a highway sign to my left, which tells me that I am getting closer to Mason. I glance down to my left. Scattered on the passenger side seat are pages of notes that I have written about Shawn and his friends. Surrounding me is evidence of my own literacy, which does not readily resemble Shawn's. Shawn and I are not the same. I must make this point clear. But I wondered exactly how different are we? It is a no brainer. Not much.

Considering this, I again question inequities in literacy education and, by association, academic literacy achievement. At this point on my journey, the achievement gap seems arbitrary. For me, especially due to my interactions with Shawn and his friends, there is a more salient issue at hand. It deals with how we think, especially with how we think about Black males like Shawn. Having been socialized to

believe that literacy deals solely with the command of print, I soon realize that literacy deals more realistically with the bountiful ways in which various human groups learn to interact symbolically.

Within literacy, and literacy learning, are ideologies, or the bendings of knowledge, truth, and ability in the interest of social elites (Marx & Engels, 1974; McLellan, 1986; Plamenatz, 1979). According to Apple (1995), ideologies are the bases of society, as they promote the dispositions and beliefs needed to foster communities, nationalities, similarities, and differences. But ideologies also help sanction privilege for some and oppression for others (Boweles & Gintis, 1976; Freire, 1970; MacLeod, 1996; Weiler, 1988).

Therefore, the casting of the self reflects the ideologies, the social myths and illusions, of society as much or more so than it does society itself (Boweles & Gintis, 1976). Furthermore, this “casting,” and, by association, “out casting,” of individuals into and outside of social groups, social roles, and social abilities are constructions, which play a major role in (mis)representing how we have come to think of Black males, their literacies, and their social roles.

As such, there is a fatal assumption made when we regard literacy as possession, usually owned by schools. In doing so, we disregard the linkages between language and discourse, between discrimination and racism, which Smitherman and Van Dijk (1988) remind us “are complex and varied” (p. 17). According to them, “They are part of an intricate network of social relationships in which power plays a central role” (p. 17). In this way, the mechanism of schooling becomes a single way of enforcing the perspectives of the privileged and the privileged group’s power to shape and control the production,

standardization, and proliferation of ideas.

Literacy becomes cultural ideology, working to reproduce racial oppression as a way of controlling Blacks and other minorities (Smitherman & Van Dijk, 1988, 17). Standing racial hierarchies are made legitimate by distinguishing those who can read from those who “cannot”. And “racial oppression becomes structural, rather than individual or incidental” (p. 17). Racial barriers become fixed and confused, which make literate abilities (and inabilities) indistinguishable from racial identities.

This dissertation begins to answer what Ladson-Billings (2003) terms “questions about issues of race and literacy” (p. ix). In doing so, it interrogates the interrelationship among society and its ideological instruments of projecting/(mis)representing Black males. This dissertation will scrutinize the authority of institutions like schools and the reach of media like newspapers and TV programs. Both instruments of “civil society” (Gramsci, 1971) help perpetuate gross assumptions about Black males and their literacies.

Further, it will redefine literacy with Black males in mind because removing them from any definition of literacy, theirs or ours, removes them as well from the opportunities and tools that help shape culturally-integrated identities and promote positive and prosperous social and economic selves. That is, to deny their literacies is to deny them because the building and rendering of literacy “parallels the activity of human existence, which is the building of a self” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 64).

There is much more thought and deliberation ahead, but I have finally arrived at the Ingham County Jail. The forbidding building is anything but graceful and inviting. Armed with a notebook and digital recorder, I walk slowly toward the building’s

entrance. Upon entering the building, I take a deep, long breath. The air is still, quiet and cold. The building appears vacant and uninviting. Visiting hours for inmates begin sharply at noon. I glance down at my cell phone. It is almost 11:30 am. I am early. Having learned that late visitations are not pleasant ones, I am willing to wait. While waiting, I see Shawn standing behind a glass wall. He sees me and greets me with a smile.

CHAPTER 1

Literature Review

Some of the complexity surrounding literacy in the lives of Black males stems from the nature of literacy itself. While there are many competing definitions of literacy, there can be no single, “autonomous” definition of literacy (Street, 1984, 1995a, 1995b), for “what counts as literacy at a particular time and place depends on who has the power to define it” (Bloome, 1997, p. 107).

As it stands, literacy is at an impasse. Definitions of literacy continue to change and, therefore, elude scholars, as literacy itself is constantly in flux, especially due to the development of new technologies. Many now consider literacy to be the ability to locate, evaluate, use, and communicate using a wide range of resources including text, visual, audio, and video sources (Alvermann, 2001; Reinking, 1995). As such, definitions of literacy are shaped by the prevailing social and political trends of the time. Among these are different definitions formulated to meet the needs of state or religious institutions, and of those who oppose such institutions who link literacy to empowerment (Shor, 1992).

Another perspective widely cited in the literature with increasing frequency suggests that literacy is more than the acquisition of reading and writing skills. From this perspective, literacy is also a social practice or social currency (Bourdieu, 1977), and, as such, a key to social mobility (Gee 1991). The conception of literacy as socially constructed practices drives the anthropological notion (Erickson, 1984, 1987; Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 1995a, 1995b) that literacies are multiple and socially situated (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; New London Group, 1996). This conception pushes us away from definitions of literacy as transcendent skills that can be taught in isolation, practiced, then transferred into other social contexts. Instead,

acts of literacy are always embedded in symbolic social practices, in which members of a community seek to construct particular identities, relationships, or valued activities and objects.

By contrast, mainstream society and school classrooms have their own particular social practices in which literate acts are constructed by participants to achieve the valued ends of schooling (Dyson, 1993, 2003a; Mahiri, 1998; Heath, 1983). Furthermore, school (or academic) literacy practices seldom reflect the literacy practices of historically oppressed groups (Heath, 1983, Morrell, 2004), in this case young, urban Black males. This may be true because of racism. However, it might also be true because too much remains unknown about literacy among disadvantaged groups. Hence, in order for Black males to find success in school and in society, there is an urgent need to better understand literacy practices from their perspectives so that educators can begin to rethink classroom literacy curriculum and instruction with them in mind.

This review has dual purposes: 1) to describe the anthropological framework of literacy as social practices and 2) to illustrate where this conception of literacy needs expanding, especially as it pertains to urban adolescent Black males. Hence, just as rhythm takes on new meanings in the ears of different listeners, so too do literacies, which in the narratives of Black men reveal themselves complexly both within and beyond social limits. In this way, this review seeks to contribute to an understanding of literacies as complex and dialogic, of Black males as literate and promising, and of our potential to amend school literacy preferences in ways that extended literacy to include literacy practices more familiar to young, urban Black males.

Literacy as Social Practice

Literacy is a social practice (Dyson, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, it is important to frame this study within sociocultural literacy traditions (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). This imperative assumes greater urgency because in our age of “accountability,” pundits of culturally homogenized and standardized literacy curricula invest a good deal of time, energy, and resources in the linguistic and cognitive dimensions of literacy (Kucer, 2001). In addition, the federal government has taken an overtly narrow stance in defining what counts as “scientifically-based” literacy research (NCLB, 2001).

Langer (1991) critiques narrow definitions of literacy, contrasting “literacy as the act of reading and writing and literacy as ways of thinking” (p. 13). For Langer, “...literacy can be viewed in a broader and educationally more productive way, as the ability to think and reason like a literate person, within a particular society” (p. 11). She argues:

It is the culturally appropriate way of thinking, not the act of reading or writing, that is most important in the development of literacy. Literacy thinking manifests itself in different ways in oral and written language in different societies, and educators need to understand these ways of thinking if they are to build bridges and facilitate transitions among ways of thinking. (p. 13)

Hence, limiting our understanding of literacy to language and cognition as gauged through experimental designs is to overlook the social nuances of literacy practices (Kucer, 2001). As such, this study problematizes narrow notions of literacy learning, notions that I argue work discursively to minimize what counts as literate performance and who counts as a literate person.

The research joins the work of other literacy scholars influenced by the social turn, a research orientation that looks beyond the individual to the cultural, historical, and political centers in which people live (Cushman et al., 2001). Assuming that social context is central to human development, this line of research explores how the richness and complexity of the setting, its actors, their goals, and the cultural tools available in the setting interact to expand and shape how meanings are constructed (Kirkland & Brass, 2005; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p.4). This work views literacy learning as a social process (and literacy as social practices) mediated by the use of cultural tools, particularly language, as people participate in culturally and historically valued activities.

In addition to Langer's work, three broad theoretical perspectives have led to the understanding of literacy as social practice—the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1962; Heath, 1983), Vygotskian perspectives and cultural historical activity theory (Scribner & Cole, 1981), and the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995a, 1995b). As defined by Street (1995a, 1995b), these perspectives provide a "broader consideration of literacy as a social practice and in a cross-cultural perspective" (p. i). Unlike traditional views of literacy, which attempt to emphasize the differences between "literacy" and "orality" (the written word and the spoken one), and which put forward reading and writing as decontextualized technical skills, these anthropological/sociolinguistic perspectives can be briefly described as "integrated-social-cultural-political-historical" views (Gee, 1996, p. 122). These views situate literacy historically and politically and foregrounds issues of social interaction and cultural practices/production as well as resistance and relations of power (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1982, 1983; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; A. Lee, 1996; A.

Luke, 1988).

This social conception of literacy can be refined using Bakhtin's dialogic theory (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). From a dialogic perspective (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Dyson, 2003), literacy includes a multiplicity and diversity of voices, which folds all human activity into a complex unity of differences. In this way, literacy is influenced by a collaboration of personal and social aspects that define individuals and groups by class, gender, race, etc. (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). As such, literacy is linked to efforts of both individuals and groups to redress social inequities (Auerbach, 1993). Its purpose is to test our own and others' ideas and ourselves and thus determine together what we should think and how we should live. Its characteristic forms are the expression, juxtaposition, or negotiation of our individual and our cultural differences.

Finally, this study focuses upon young urban Black males because recent scholarship (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) and national achievement data (NAEP, 2004) suggest that we do not have a very clear understanding of how to promote academic literacy achievement among them. Further, scholars like Smith and Wilhelm (2002) are beginning to accurately assess the need to understand the situation of literacy with regard to specific social groups.

Literacy and its Complexities as a Dialogic Practice

Even as a dialogic practice, literacy must be thought of as more than interaction between individuals and individual participation in groups. There are other social factors that shape literacy and "literate" individuals. Perhaps chief among them are race and gender and their political exponents, sexism and racism.

Race and Literacy

Lopez (2001) defines race as “a group loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry. . . . Neither an essence nor an illusion, [race] is an ongoing process of social and political struggle” (p. 193). Following Lopez’s definition, race becomes a persistent factor in social practices, including literacy. As such, race raises critical questions about power and desire in the nature of literacy learning. In this way, I agree with Gee (1990) that to “situate literacy in the individual person, rather than in the society of which that person is a member . . . obscures the multiple ways in which reading, writing, and language interrelate with the workings of power and desire in social life” (p. 27). In this regard, literacy is not only a social practice, it is also a cultural/political one.

Scholars like Delpit (1988) argue that learning literacy, or the learning of hidden rules and cultural codes of dominant culture, sanctions struggle and regulates mobility. To be successful in school and society, racial minorities must be able to function and move both within their own cultural communities and within the dominant society (Mahiri, 1996; Morrell, 2004; Ogbu, 1974, 1978; Tatum, 1999). From Delpit’s (1988) perspective, non-Whites may find that their racial backgrounds may result in unequal and limited access to education and other resources that can facilitate social or economic progress (MacLeod, 1995; Rose, 1991). Due to their racial backgrounds, certain individuals are marginalized in society, and their cultures, languages, and moral codes frequently dismissed as inferior social practices, even in school settings (Delpit, 1995; Dyson, 2003; Smitherman, 1977). Individuals who are relegated to marginalized social positions consistently experience a lack of privilege and power. Therefore, they often internalize this experience (Ogbu, 1978), and internalized oppression, or believing that

the self is somehow "less than" and "less worthy" than the other, which results in lowered expectations in school and for life chances (R. Ferguson, 1998).

For African Americans, especially Black males, internalized oppression—or self-hatred/disdain taught through racism (West, 1993)—influences literacy learning among Black males. In this way, Smitherman and Van Dijk (1988) maintain, “Text and talk in many ways are constitutive of the social and political dimensions of structural racism in society” (p. 12). However, racism, discrimination based on race, in contemporary society isn’t always visible (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). As such, nascent forms of racism must be distinguished from the more blatant and overt manifestations in order to fully appreciate their impact on literacy learning.

Nascent forms of racism are usually “subtle, covert, and possibly more insidious” than more developed forms (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, p. 3). As such, it is difficult, but not impossible, to distinguish the role of race and racism in defining literacy. Nonetheless, this work looks deeply at the social factor of race and the political factor of racism, both of which play a key role in all literacy learning. In this way, a critical approach to literacy is needed to render literacy learning plausible even to those who do not share activist politics (Gee, 1997, p. 273).

Literacy and Gender

Gender also plays an important role in how literacy is learned and practiced. According to Pam Gilbert (1997), the nature of literacy practices are gendered (p. 60). For example, girls are more apt to read school texts because the things that are read in school closely mirrors the things that girls read at home, like stories involving romance. This, in part, explains the gender gap between female and male literacy proficiency.

Males lag behind, in some important ways, because classroom literacy practices seldom reflect their gendered interests. Then, in the learning/making (and researching) of literacy, gender also matters along with other important social factors like race.

Parlo Singh (1997) takes Gilbert's insight further. Singh brings to bear a nuanced notion of gender that considers the various mixings of an individual's social identity as important to literacy learning. That is, not only is literacy at once gendered, it is also dependent upon and defined in relation to the political inflections of the self (raced and gendered) and, thus, the intersection of the gender marker with other relevant social identity markers.

While I emphasize the importance of race and gender here, I acknowledge that there are other important social issues to be raised within the sociocultural tradition in this regard. Heath (1983) maintains, "Opportunities, values, motivations, and resources available for communication in each community are influenced by that group's social history as well as by current environmental conditions" (p. 6-7). As such, "social history" and social environment, or the contexts of literacy practice, play an important role in how literacy is practiced.

In addition, the way one does literacy and negotiates social space is shaped by and intermittently shapes her or his race, gender, and geographic context at once. Therefore, I not only assume that race, gender, and geographic context has much to do with how one learns literacy, but I also contend that such factors are vital for understanding the workings of literacy as social practice. As such, the study of literacy should specifically contextualize literacy practices within the societal constructs with which individuals and groups are associated. In order to understand its greater complexities, literacy research

must be situated with respect to race, gender, and geography.

Framing Black Males and the Complexities of Literacy

While there is a plethora of literature available on literacy as social practice, there is relatively little literature available on how Black males practice literacy.

Notwithstanding, the literature that is available concerning Black males and literacy paints a disturbing picture that profiles gaps in achievement between Black males and other students (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). In this way, the achievement gap between White students and students of color has been well documented. While “the gap” has been widely discussed by researchers, educators have found little success in closing it. Hence, there is an urgent need to reframe the situations of literacy and achievement with respect to Black males.

Commenting on the plight of Black males, Lee (1991) contends, “Young Black males in contemporary American society face major challenges to their development and well-being” (p. 1). For example, Black male students perform well below other students in basic subject areas (Reed, 1998). Black males are more likely to be remediated or placed into classes for students with learning disabilities than other students (Milofsky, 1974). Black males are suspended from school more often and for longer periods of time than other students (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989; Lee, 1991). Given only these examples, it is not surprising that there is an achievement differential between Black male students and other students. Not only are there achievement differences between them, the school experiences of Black males are vastly different than other students (Coleman et al., 1966; A. Ferguson, 2000).

A growing body of literature on Black male school experiences shows that being

Black and male speaks almost definitively to issues of literacy achievement (Hunsader, 2002; Pollard, 1993). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP), nearly 70% of Black fourth grade boys read below grade level, compared with 27% of White children. Even Hispanic and Asian fourth graders fared better on reading exams than Black males, although English is their second language.

While there are many ways to explain why Black males perform more poorly on “literacy” tests than do other students, Jones (2002) explains, “One of the main reasons African-American youngsters do poorly in school is because of language differences between black and white children.” (p. 1). As Smitherman (1977, 2000) and others (Foster, 2001; Hillard, 1991; Moore, 1996; Piestrup, 1973) have shown, schools, and more specifically classrooms, penalize male students who speak African American Language. From an early age, it has become increasingly apparent that Black males are confronted with a series of barriers that make it more challenging for them to achieve academic and social success (Kunjufu, 1985; Moss & Tilly, 1995; Noguera, 2001).

In thinking about the dilemmas facing Black males, my interactions with Shawn have been helpful. The sociocultural battle I was waging with literacy morphed into a political one, where definitions of achievement, literacy, and even “the gap” are contested. By defining literacy in a way that does not consider the contributions and socio-symbolic practices of Black males like Shawn, the idea of literacy in the official world has been constructed egregiously against them. In this way, the literacy agenda that state and national policies like No Child Left Behind (2001) endorse pose a unique social and educational threat to Black males. Accordingly, Smith and Wilhelm (2003) warn, “Schools seem to be failing boys in literacy education. And while this failure may

be rooted in a complex amalgam of issues . . . perceiving a problem of ANY group of students obligates us to try to understand it, so we can do something about it” (p. 3).

While we must address important issues about literacy and boys, doing “something about” the multiple and disturbing issues surrounding Black males and literacy is most urgent (Ogbu, 1990). As I will discuss later in this chapter using vignettes from Shawn’s story for grounding examples, many urban adolescent Black males are by far the most threatened demographic in our population both in school and out (Gibbs, 1988; Lee, 1991). As I have noted, this threat requires immediate attention because educational policies and literacy programs have failed and continue to fail to acknowledge the social dimensions of Black male literacy learning. By extension, official spaces are being shaped in ways that, by situating literacy around unfamiliar social practices, both figuratively and literally exclude many, if not most, urban adolescent Black males from educational contexts. To deal with these threats, scholars must contend with society’s flawed definitions of literacy and its comprehensive (mis)representation of Black males.

The Statistics and the Problem of (Mis)representation

While they will never tell us much about literacy in the lives of Black males, statistics will always work as a social mechanism, which attempts to describe some bounded phenomenon. In this way, statistics can be dangerous, as the pictures they paint are usually influenced by the hands of those who wield the pen. Nevertheless, statistical pictures can also be helpful. Given this, the portrait that statistics paint about Black males and “literacy” gives us reason to be alarmed.

Of our nation’s youth, only 12% of Black males test proficiently in reading, as

compared to 40% of other American youth (NAEP, 2001). Rosa A. Smith (2004), president of the Schott Foundation, relates these national data to other statistics that describe the multiple crises confronting Black males. The Center for the Study of Social Policy (1993) reports that close to forty percent of Black males will be jobless, either unemployed or incarcerated, by 2020. In addition to exorbitant jobless rates, the US Department of Health and Human Services (2004) reports that young Black men (ages 10-14) have shown the largest increase in suicide rates since 1980 compared to other youth groups by sex and ethnicity, increasing 180%. Among 15-19 year old Black males, rates (since 1980) have increased by 80% (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). In addition, a Black male is twice as likely to die before the age of 45 as a White male (Roper, 1991; Spivak, Prothrow-Stith, & Hausman, 1988).

In education, Black males are at the bottom or near the bottom of all academic achievement categories and are grossly over-represented among school suspensions, dropouts, and special education tracks (Noguera, 2003). Given the unbelievable magnitude of the situation, Rose (2004) describes the alarming situation of Black males in both schools and society as “catastrophic.” In the forward to a recent Schott Foundation study (2004) on Black male academic (under)achievement, Rose writes: “The facts that startled us [the Schott Foundation] the most—and defined new Schott work—were the alarming data on Black male students showing bleak under-achievement on every school related factor” (p. 2). But then again, there is more to Black male literacy learning than statistics.

The achievement differential, especially in literacy, between Black males and other American youth suggests that schools have not clearly understood how to promote

successful literacy learning among Black males as a group. Moreover, the poor performances of many young, urban Black men on national literacy assessments raise significant questions about the importance of social dimensions of literacy—including racism (Tatum, 1992; Tronya & Carington, 1990) and gender politics (Thorne, 1993).

While the evidence clearly indicates that a troubling majority of Black males perform poorly on standardized measures of literacy proficiency, it would be naïve to assume that all Black men are incapable of reading and writing in proficient ways. Rather, educators must attend to fundamental issues surrounding the social construction of literacy curricula and the social practice of literacy instruction at the secondary school level. Our collective failure to ameliorate such issues (i.e., injustice in the design of public education) prevents us from helping more Black males achieve their highest potential.

This explanation bears true in Shawn's case. Upon hearing the title of one of his raps ("Motherless Child" [see Introduction]), I began to question some tenuous and unsettled explanations for racial differences in literacy achievement. Indeed, society functions as an arbiter of literacy through the ways it labels and represents (and misrepresents) individuals. In this way, Shawn was labeled by his school as an "illiterate." In their report to the School Board, his high school's steering committee and improvement team cited Shawn as an example of "the many Black male students who are slipping through the cracks." According to the report, "Deshawn Stevenson is an example of the crisis, affecting our African American male students . . . many of [whom] cannot and do not read. Their test scores in writing are abysmal and worsening . . . Hence, it is the obligation of the school to rectify this issue before we develop a

population of illiterate Americans.”

While literacy learning may be at issue here, there is another more crucial issue that deals with how schools label individuals as literate and illiterate. Labeling (and the labeled through “self-fulfilling prophecy” [Rist, 1970]) work to reinforce the valuations of a privileged class while obscuring the values and abilities of the oppressed (see Freire, 1970). For example, while looking through Shawn’s school file, I caught a glimpse of a note written by Shawn’s tenth grade English teacher, who “feared” Shawn was illiterate. The note explained that Shawn “has trouble reading and shows difficulty expressing his thoughts on paper.” But outside the classroom in the company of his friends and me, Shawn was always writing and was, perhaps, the most driven writer of the group.

The differences between my observations of Shawn and his teacher’s observations of him concerned me. First, there were no signs to me that Shawn was even remotely illiterate, so why would she insinuate that he was? The only way that I could reconcile his teacher’s conclusion (versus my own) was to assume that Shawn acted differently in the classroom than he did among his peers and me, or that Shawn’s teacher did not know him like we did.

The other issue that stuck out to me deals with the politics of accommodating social norms. As I will document, some of the Black males I studied accommodated inferior/marginal social roles at times as a way of protecting themselves from the punishment of racism. More or less, they complied with some school norms, even when those norms failed to match their social interests. In this way, a Black male who is seen as threatening will find greater opposition in a racist structure than one who is seen as less threatening (hooks, 2003). Hence, researchers must never neglect the internal

tensions faced by Black males wanting to preserve a sense of self. In addition, they must also acknowledge the systems of racism that influence the ways the young Black men may or may not perform in public spaces. Finally, it behooves researchers to understand that school literacy is used, not unproblematically, to interpret and label individuals like Shawn as “slow,” “troubled,” and, worst, (because of his resistance to the literate norms of schools and society) “illiterate.”

The Problem of School

While the statistics may be disturbing, it is important to examine and not neglect the function of schools in manufacturing troubling perceptions of Black males. In this way, Ferguson (2000) warns that statistics are misleading, and for many Black males, schools might be threatening. As opposed to describing them as victims of illiteracy, Ferguson describes Black males as victims of the school. By taking an in-depth look into the school lives of a group of Black males, Ferguson documents how schools create, shape, and regulate social identities, from tracking some students to be doctors to tracking others, particularly Black males, to be prisoners. She argues that the disciplinary system of schools and their practices of labeling and categorizing students construct Black males as deviant and defiant.

Complicating school's role in constructing negative conceptions of Black males (Ferguson, 2000) is the complexity of literacy and the limited nature of school literacy practices. Literacy is never stable or fixed, but is contingent and flexible, a practice that requires choice and selection (Barton, 1999). Why after four hundred years, then, do we still read Shakespeare in classrooms? This question raises serious concerns as to who has ownership over classroom texts. While they have some ownership over the texts they

read outside of classrooms, Black males, in general, have limited ownership over texts read within classrooms.

Issues of authority and ownership of texts are not only important in understanding school's domination over classroom literacy learning. They are also important aspects of literacy learning in general. In her work on literacy, Au (1997) referred to children's ownership over texts [read or written] as influential to their sense of self-confidence and command of reading and writing. Building upon Au's work, Dahl (1994) and others (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Turner, 1995) suggest that the desire to participate in literacy practices is connected to an attachment to and ownership of a given literacy task. Therefore, the story about a person's ability to read and write is always more complicated than what schools reveal.

Even though he could read and write, Shawn was labeled by his school as barely literate. In third grade, his teacher identified him as "a struggling reader." Based on her assessment, Shawn received *Title I* support in reading. While he hasn't taken a reading assessment test since entering high school, Shawn's seventh grade Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) scores bear out, at least numerically, the tension between Shawn's non-academic and academic literate performances. According to his 7th grade MEAP scores, Shawn ranked below 75 percent of Michigan students in reading.

In a recent conversation with me, Shawn expressed frustration with reading in school. To him, reading aloud was "scary," reading in school "boring," and "sometimes a chore." Even still, he admits, "I be reading stuff all the time at home. . . stuff that interest[s] me. It's not that I can't read; I don't like to [read] because the stuff they make you read [in school] ain't really important anyway." He continues by critiquing the

school's emphasis on Shakespeare.

Shawn: What am I gonna do with Shakepeare? He ain't gon git me no job.

Since school literacy practices do not always reflect the cultural practices of all students, defining literacy solely along academic lines gives schools a potentially dangerous influence not only over what counts as literacy, but also over who counts as "literate." This leaves a considerable number of individuals, many of whom are young, urban Black males, powerless in a global economy that privileges credentials and labels produced by schools (Powell et al., 1985).

This isn't to say that multiple forms of illiteracy in America do not exist and should not be dealt with. Rather, as I have argued, labeling individuals "illiterate" is based not necessarily upon whether individuals can read or write, but upon ways that schools do and do not define literacy. As I have argued, schools' definitions of literacy are at best narrow and, perhaps worst racist. Since Heath (1983) and others (Bialostok, 1999, 2003, 2004; Finn, 1999) have shown that school literacy is closely tied to the cultural practices of middle-class Whites, defining illiteracy exclusively in relation to academic norms is not only myopic; it is fundamentally problematic.

Defining literacy in narrow ways has led some to make questionable linkages among "illiteracy," Black males, and incarceration (Kerka, 1995). These linkages are disturbing because they explain "the trouble with Black males" (i.e., incarceration) based upon deficit ideologies. Based upon these ways of thinking, prisoners are not incarcerated simply because they have committed crimes or even because of personal dilemmas, political rifts, or social inequities. Instead, prisoners are justifiably incarcerated precisely because they lack the civilized abilities to read and write (Kozol,

1988).

Along these lines, Jonathan Kozol (1988) makes disturbing claims about illiteracy in his book *Illiterate America*. Since much of Kozol's argument about American illiteracy is based on a narrow, school-based notion of literacy, the complexities of literacy discussed earlier in this chapter get lost in Kozol's analysis. According to Kozol, the prison population in the US represents the highest concentration of adult illiterates. Over 60% of those incarcerated have been labeled as functionally illiterate, and a large and growing number of those incarcerated are Black and male (hooks, 2003, p. 40). While Kozol and others (hooks, 2003) relate the Black male prison crisis to the American literacy crisis (see National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983), scholars (A. Ferguson, 2000) interested in the ways that schools shape Black masculinities argue that schools (versus illiteracy) promote negative social outcomes for Black males.

hooks (2003) examines the role of the school in sanctioning "disengaged" and "prison-bound" Black males (p. 40-41). According to her, "Educational systems fail to impart or inspire learning in black males of all ages" (p. 40). Schools, then, assist in the oppression of Black males, and the American "prison industrial complex" (see Davis, 1998) is just one manifestation of that oppression.

In response to the school's role in manufacturing Black male oppression, scholars must consider issues beyond reading and writing as we continue to refine our definitions of literacy. We must also consider the ways in which schools and society sponsor oppression through their mechanistic control over how literacy is defined and disseminated in the public sphere. It is, therefore, not surprising that Kozol's idea of illiteracy gained national attention in the late 1980s, as it put literacy in the hands of elites

(and illiteracy in blackface). These conceptions of literacy, grounded in school authority, have helped to reinforce negative beliefs about Black males.

The Problem of Media Discourses

(Mis)representations of Black males and literacy raise some important scientific and sociological questions, especially with respect to the Black male intelligence and the role of the Black male in a civil society. A Black male who likes to read is often questioned, perceived “as on the road to being a sissy” (hooks, 2003, p. 40). It is not only those surrounding Black men who buy into these stereotypes. Black men, themselves, also carry such ideological baggage. According to Madhubuti (quoted in hooks, 2003, p. 36),

No one actually told men ‘you should hate yourself.’ However, the images, symbols, products, creations, promotions, and authorities of white America all very subtly and often quite openly taught me white supremacy, taught me to hate myself.

Indeed, there is a relationship between how one behaves and how one perceives her- or himself. Complicating this relationship are media discourses surrounding Black males and literacy. According to Smitherman and Van Dijk (1988),

[Discourses] are the means for the manufacture of an ethnic and racial, if not racist, consensus. In other words, discourse is not just a system or a signal of the problem of racism. It essentially reproduces and helps produce . . . racist cognitions and actions (p. 18).

It would be, however, misleading to describe media discourses as acting in singular ways. According to Lankshear and Knobel (1997), “Discourses are dynamic,

alive. Living in and through them is very much a process of constantly renegotiating them” (p. 96). Notwithstanding, the media discourses surrounding Black males are overwhelmingly negative (Wilcox, 2005). For example, Wilcox (2005) argues that the majority of news stories featuring Black males paint them in negative light, as criminal, social deviants, or lazy.

While media images of Black males are rarely blatantly racist, Smitherman and Van Dijk (1988) explain:

Our respected quality press will hardly print a blatantly racist article anymore. . . [but] . . . In everyday talk, underlying ethnic prejudices may indirectly appear in “innocent” stories. . . Although such stories claim to tell the “facts,” describe how “they” did it (wrong) again, or generally imply that “they” are stupid, lazy, welfare-cheats, criminal, or lack motivation to learn, the storyteller may, at the same time, emphasize that he has nothing against “them,” . . . Yet, the stories spreading quickly in families, schools, or neighborhoods, and occasionally greatly magnified by media reproduction, contribute to the fundamental communication and reproduction of racism in society (p, 18).

In commenting on the role of the media and its proliferation of negative Black male images, Smitherman and Van Dijk (1988) contend:

The forms of rhetoric and dramatization, their ability to focus and set public agenda [sic], and their news values do more than simply favor “negative” stories, or reflect what the elites, politicians, or institutions routinely communicate to them in press releases or interviews. The media do not passively report the facts, nor do they simply reflect the ethnocentric consensus; they help construct and

reproduce it. They magnify the attitudes of the powerful few, and reinterpret and transmit this ideology to the powerless (p. 23).

Our perceptions of Black males and literacy are, thus, given to us unfairly. This does not mean that we are passive consumers of such ideas; it simply suggests that we have not been very active in countering them. In this way, Smitherman and Van Dijk (1988) argue,

Ethnic attitudes in general, and prejudice in particular, are not individual aberrations, or pathological exceptions, but structurally rooted, shared social cognitions. The media in our information societies play the crucial role in presenting such dominant ideologies, if only by the failure to present alternative interpretations or counter-ideologies (p. 22).

Shawn's literacy story presents, for me, an alternative interpretation to the media narrative of Black males as illiterates. Further, as I attempt to situate Shawn's story in the literature on Black males and literacy, I realize that claims of Black male illiteracy are not only misleading but threatening. As such, the true crisis that Black males, like Shawn, face deals more with power, authority, racism, and de-centering than it does with reading and writing. In this way, literacy has been constituted unfairly. In this study, the Black youth studied participated in unacknowledged literacy practices (e.g., rapping, tattooing, etc.) that kneel toward the bottom of the American literacy hierarchy. They are often overshadowed by the authority of the school or ignored or vilified in the exposure of media.

Both power and prejudice are always present the contexts of literacy. According to Luke and Freebody (1997),

. . . the contexts of literacy events are not necessarily ‘level playing fields’ where all learners have comparable access to resources, whether construed as access to representational systems and mediational means, linguistic knowledge, and cultural artifacts, or in terms of access to actual financial capital, institutional entry, and status (p. 3).

Specifically, the “literate” and the “illiterate” are unfairly labeled. The events and activities that define them are “constitutive of and by material relations of discourse, power, and knowledge” (p. 3). Therefore, the image of the illiterate Black male deeply obscures the reality that many young Black men—who many believe are barely literate—are in some verifiable way highly literate. Notwithstanding, many Black males are characteristically projected as less than literate and, at times, less than human. But as Freire 1970/2001) suggests,

These men [speaking specifically of Latin American men, but African American men certainly apply], illiterate or not, are, in fact, not marginal. . . They are not “beings outside of”; they are “beings for another.” Therefore the solution to their problem is not to become “beings inside of,” but men freeing themselves; for in reality they are not marginal to the structure, but oppressed men within it.

Alienated men, they cannot overcome their dependency by “incorporation” into the very structure responsible for their dependency. There is no other road to humanization—theirs as well as everyone else’s—but authentic transformation of the dehumanizing structure (p. 339).

Using Freire’s notion of “oppressed men,” I contend that Black males are structurally oppressed and dehumanized in a way that prevents their literate identities

from being formally acknowledged. For this reason, many Black males are looked upon as illiterate, not because they do not practice literacy, but because many have chosen to disregard the literacies they do practice. To report them as illiterates/low literates, which further sanctions their oppression, makes legitimate the dominant literacy practices of schools and the inaccurate projections of the media. Hence, the relationship between notions of literacy/illiteracy works to widen a racially maintained literacy gap.

Rethinking Black Males and Literacy

As this dissertation will demonstrate, discourses (symbolic notions of being) act in no singular way. There are discourses that endorse and even help to foster the images of the illiterate Black male, and there are also discourses that challenge this image. Black males like Shawn are, indeed, literate yet in ways that we too often ignore, fail to privilege, or vilify.

A goal of this work is to highlight educational inequities between Black males and other Americans. Are students like Shawn that much different than other American youth? Dyson (1993) suggests that the literacy gap is an aberration that reflects more accurately cultural derisions in our society than achievement ones. Hence, we must be careful when making sweeping claims about the literate capabilities of any group, especially Black males, as these claims have historically worked negatively to reinforce dangerous assumptions about the cognitive and linguistic abilities of oppressed people.

Also factoring into educational inequity is the relationship between school and culture. As noted earlier, school literacy practices resemble greatly the literacy practices of middle-class Whites. In this way, the academic literacy practices of middle-class Whites help to produce more groups of middle-class Whites. Conversely, our devaluing

of Black males helps to produce more communities of devalued Black males. Such cycles have profound implications for shaping society. For many Black males the implications can be catastrophic, as young, urban Black men fill our street corners, our prisons, and, worst, our cemeteries.

Another goal of this dissertation is to comment on the humanity of a group of Black males by locating their meanings and identities in their texts and textual understandings. As I listen to and re-read Shawn's "writings," I hear noises. But these noises are nothing like the rehearsed rumblings of readings performed in classrooms. These noises are peculiar, distinct, and even musical. They are poetry and spoken word—silent but loud. They are tattoos and tags and raps, all of which are communicative genres "rooted in the Black Oral Tradition of tonal semantics, narrativizing, signification/signifyin, the Dozens/playin the Dozens, Africanized syntax, and other communicative practices" (Smitherman, 1997/1998, p. 269). Hence, Shawn's communicative performances are much like scholars communicative performances—traditional, bearing "traces" or "echoes" of cultures, societies, and histories past (Bakhtin, 1984; Derrida, 1976).

As I pointed out in this dissertation's introduction, Shawn's writing is highly sophisticated. It constitutes a collection of sounds which, all at once, sublimely reach backward and forward through both time and space, borrowing as it may the conjured reverberations of the past while supplying a new voice and a new perspective for our emerging future. Shawn's words are candescent, lively, and fresh. Yet, they are very much motivated by the appropriations, the deliberate borrowings, of old songs, catch phrases, and oral narratives, "reaccentuated" (Bakhtin, 1981) in both new and not-so-new

ways. In this way, literacy is a dialogic practice that allows individuals, groups, and communities to add to history's multiplicity and diversity of voices. It describes current events, rendering old histories anew, giving established meanings new "accents".

By framing this work within dialogic theory, which questions "the workings of power and desire in social life," I define literacies as dialogic practices mediated by the use of cultural/symbolic tools (e.g., language), which allow individuals and groups to participate in and negotiate community identities, shared relationships, historically valued activities. Following this definition of literacy, this study has at least four important implications for education and educational research.

- 1) It expands social conceptions of literacy by examining the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, and economic oppression.
- 2) It challenges linguistic and cognitive epistemologies of literacy and literacy reform, which engender the thinking behind new millennium educational reform initiatives like NCLB.
- 3) It relies upon qualitative empirical data to document and describe literacy in the lives of urban adolescent Black males.
- 4) Finally, it raises questions about literacy policy reflected in textbooks and classroom instruction, neither of which recognizes the complex literate existences of urban adolescent Black males.

In this way, the study seeks to answer questions about the ways in which the Guys can be considered literate. Specifically,

- 1) *How do the Guys use literacy to participate in valued social, cultural, and*

political activities?

2) *What do symbolic materials produced/consumed by the Guys tell us about literacy in their lives?*

3) *How do the Guys' literate lives extend existing notions of literacy?*

By answering these questions, I aim to positively shift our thinking about both Black males and literacy. I also seek to raise pivotal questions about what counts as literacy and successful school-based literacy performance.

In the next chapter, I describe the methodology I used to complete this project. I define key analytic terms like discourse, cultural production, and resistance. While you may know Shawn well by now, the next chapter introduces the other Guys to you. Finally, I present the study's design and describe the methods used to collect and analyze data.

It is sometimes helpful to say that it is not individuals who speak and act, but rather historically and socially defined discourses speak to each other through individuals. The individual instantiates, gives body to, a discourse every time he acts or speaks and thus carries it, and ultimately changes it through time . . . the individual is simply the meeting point of many, sometimes conflicting, and socially and historically defined discourses.

—James Gee, 1991, p. 3

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

“Man, I cain’t take this shit?”

“Uhm sayin. Who da fuck is Beowulf. . .I’m not gone need [to know] Beowulf to get a job. Shit, nobody I know, even my mama and she smart as hell, don’t know this shit. And she got a good job.”

“I know what you sayin. . . . This shit ain’t me.”

“Me either.”

I remember overhearing Derrick and his friend, Tony, wearily whispering in the back of the crowded classroom. They weren’t reading *Beowulf*; yet ironically, they were talking about it, about how it was not them. *Beowulf* had obviously crept into their disassembled lives. The epic story of the pre-Celtic, tragic hero weighed on the two dejected young men this day like the sad, deep irony of serious thought, laboriously resting on the concerned mind.

Derrick, a confident young African American male about fifteen years of age, folded his handsome, already solid, and resolute face in purposeful protest against the class’s choice of reading. He did not want to read *Beowulf*—didn’t see the purpose of it. Intrigued by his rude and articulate denial, my attention was eloquently caught by Derrick’s resistance and understanding of himself. Hence, it was not only his conversation with Tony that began to teach me about what literacy meant to him, it was also his understanding of himself—his being and the subtle nuances of his identity that made *Beowulf* not for him.

While we have learned much about literacy from ethnographies that analyze communication (Heath, 1983), a dialogic understanding of literacy can never be fully achieved through analyses of communication alone. Surrounding communicative dialogue are discourses [Bakhtin, 1986], which are symbolic “ways of being” or “forms of life” that integrate language, ideas, values, beliefs, and various opportunities and motivations (Gee, 1996; Purcell-Gates, 1998). As such, discourses carry with them unseen and often unheard elements, such as the intentions of others, desires and motivations, various and sometimes competing ideation, and limits (both constraining and expanding).

From this perspective, literacy is much more than the product of communicative events; it is—as James Gee has suggested—an element of discourse. Therefore, researchers of literacy who intend to more fully understand the literate lives of individuals (especially when in relation to questions about what it means to be literate)—in addition to studying communicative practices—must also explore the various discourses that arrange literate activities.

In this chapter, I discuss methodological¹ conceptions that underpin my understanding of literacy in the lives of the Guys. In doing so, I examine the multiple ways in which various “ways of being” constitute literacy and can, therefore, be used as an analytical tool to examine literacy in practice. Following the discourse theories of

¹ The methodology that I am attempting to express has emerged over some time. From January 2003 until December 2003, I studied qualitative research methodology under Dr. Anne Haas Dyson, a pioneer scholar in the ethnographic study of literacy. From August 2003 until June 2004, I conducted pilot (and practicum) work for my dissertation research. During the summer of 2004, I was awarded a generous research fellowship that helped me work out a “construct” methodology for studying literacy and urban adolescent boys. This section on methodology is the result of countless hours of study, apprenticeship, and field work and, while still in progress, represents an encouraging way to study literacy in the lives of disadvantaged groups, particularly poor urban adolescent boys.

Smitherman (1977), Laclau & Moffe (1985), and Gee (1991), this chapter will explain three notions central to my analyses of literacy in the lives of the Guys: discourse, cultural production, and resistance (MacLeod, 1996; McLaren, 1994; Willis, 1977). After explaining these ideas, I provide a detailed sketch of the procedures used to complete this study.

Traditions in Literacy Research

From a methodological standpoint, this work is situated socially (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Cazden, 1988; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Heath, 1983; Kress, 1985; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Street, 1984, 1995) and builds upon “the new literacy studies” (New London Group, 1995) dialogically (Bakhtin, 1986; Dyson, 1997, 2003; see also Chapter 1). While this work views literacy in relation to social activities, not all language and literacy research is governed by social epistemologies.

Not so very long ago, scholars, hoping to answer questions central to language and literacy learning, arrived at a complex conceptual intersection. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, complex methodologies arose, blurring the rigid lines between spoken and written language, between the individual and her or his societies (Hymes, 1964, p. 63; Florio-Ruane, 1987, p. 187). For example, the field of psycholinguistics, which emerged out of the scientific optimism of modernity, introduced “new” and innovative research practices, which put forth groundbreaking theories about language as made specific in concepts like, “linguistic competence” and “linguistic performance” (Chomsky, 1965). For researchers like Chomsky (1965), linguistic theory was to be “concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant

conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, and error (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance” (p. 3).

While Chomsky and others (de Beaugrande, 1984; Smith, 1994) maintained a psycholinguistic approach to language and literacy research, scholars from a diverse range of disciplines, looking hard at issues related to language and literacy, focused instead upon the complex social aspects of language in use (Bruner, 1985; Hymes, 1969), or the context of the linguistic situation (Halliday, 1974). Hymes, for example, extended Chomsky’s linguistic theory by providing an explicit conceptual basis for the sociocultural features of language and literacy in what he referred to as, “communicative competence” and “communicative performance.”

Extending Chomsky’s linguistic theory, Hymes noted that “linguistic performance” needed to relate “actual performance” with underlying rules of performance. That is, language, while rule-governed, is neither innately learned nor genetically “hardwired” into humans. Instead, language develops through use and in relation to the various context(s) in which it is evaluated. Hence, implicit in Hymes’s deviation from Chomsky’s linguistic theory was an equally viable deviation from Chomsky’s methodology for understanding an individual’s language and literacy practices. In his chapter in Janet Maybin’s *Language and Literacy in Social Practice* (1977), Hymes writes:

One cannot simply take separate results from linguistics, psychology, sociology, ethnology, as given, and seek to correlate them, however partially useful such work may be, if one is to have a theory of language

(not just a theory of grammar). One needs fresh kinds of data, one needs to investigate directly the use of language in contexts of situation, so as to discern patterns proper to speech activity, patterns that escape separate studies of grammar, of personality, of social structure, religion, and the like, each abstracting from the patterning of speech activity into some other frame of *reference* (p. 11, emphasis in the original).

By limiting our understanding of literacy to language and cognition as gauged through experimental designs (see NCLB, 2001), some literacy researchers and policy makers have overlooked (in the way that psycholinguists had) the social nuances of literacy practice (see Malinowski, 1936; Halliday, 1987; Kucer, 2001). In this way, language, although rule-governed, gains “accents” in use (Bakhtin, 1986). That is, language “is living and, as such, is subject to improvisation, negotiation, and change—it has a history, a present, and future” (Florio-Ruane & McVee, 2000, p. 155). People use language (both written and spoken) to participate in valued activities, settings, and interactions. Thus, language (in) use (spoken and written) is a key element in the practice of literacy (Barron, 1992, 1997; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Heath, 1982a, 1982b; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1994).

Within this social sphere in which one acquires language, there is a cultural, historical, and even geographical fragrance that complicates words and literacies. Languages and literacies are yet alive, living intensely in the vicarious situation of individuals—both mind and society (Vygotsky, 1976). Research methodologies that account for these complications in the social study of literacy problematize uncomplicated assumptions that push to homogenize and decontextualize what literacy

learning truly might be. Such a reduction (i.e., decontextualized notions of literacy) poses a significant threat to the future of literacy education.

My study of literacy in the Guys' lives moves away from any sterile or reduced notion of words detached from their situated meanings. Further, it attempts to ground more theoretically fertile notions of what language (and by extension literacy) means in a given social and cultural context. Still, there is much work to be done in order to make literacy classrooms more inviting and more culturally and linguistically representative spaces. For it is impossible, even after acknowledging the social and cultural nature of our words and our literacies, to disentangle language and literacy learning from the political and social complexities involved in their construction. It is, however, possible to resolve some of these complexities by examining the discourses that fuel their construction. Methodologically, this study is situated within the sociocultural traditions of literacy research.

Theories of Discourse

Since it has been used (perhaps overused) so much and in so many ways by educational researchers, discourse as a conceptual unit for understanding literacy is unhelpful unless defined. As such, I use discourse to refer, in one sense, to "the contribution of the folk"—one integrated social and historical group—to one's literate heritage or being (Smitherman, 1977, p. 103). In this way, discourse represents "folklore, folk utterances, songs and tales of folk expression" that make groups unique (Smitherman, 1977, p. 103). For many Black males, "being cool" acts discursively, as it greatly influences social behaviors such as clothing, talk, interests, and other behaviors that suggest one's being (Kirkland & Jackson, forthcoming; Majors & Billson, 1996).

Further, “being cool” is defined relative to the social and cultural practices of folk (i.e., rappers, famous athletes, and other popular figures [Kirkland & Jackson, forthcoming]). According to Smitherman (1977), discourse in this way comprises the cultural, social, and political history of language used and in use, which are derived from mutually understood “verbal strategies, rhetorical devices, and folk expressive rituals” (p. 103).

In another (but not altogether different) sense, I think of discourse as the nucleus of one’s social being, of meaning, and identity (Gee, 1991). To be Black and male carries with it ways of “reading” and “writing”. This notion of “being” literate lies at the heart of this study. That is, the meanings of words and symbolic practices gain value within social settings as they latch onto the “folk” they label and come to define (see Chapter 1 & 3).

The nature of “folk” is ever present but changing/amending in our thoughts, our actions, and our words. “Folk” and “folk expressions” (i.e., discourses) are forever in flux. Therefore, at the center of social (inter)action are unresolved and dilemma-filled plays of meaning and symbolic activity that individuals negotiate as a result of sociocultural choices, choices that give rise to contingent forms of expression. In this way, discourse can also be thought of as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or a social network” (Gee, 1991, p. 1).

Discourse also mediates identity and power, which embodies the conflicting values and stances of different social groups. For instance, Bakhtin (1981) suggests that discourses are tied to the idea that languages [and other symbolic resources] are socio-historical formations, rather than ahistorical structures. For Bakhtin,

Discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse [*napravlennost*] toward the object; if we detach ourselves completely from this impulse all we have left is the naked corpse of the word, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or the fate of a given word in life. *To study the word as such, ignoring the impulse that reaches out beyond it, is just as senseless as to study psychological experience outside the context of that real life toward which it was directed and by which it is determined* (p. 292, emphasis in the original).

Bakhtin's understanding of discourse helps us to see how words are socially and historically situated and emerge relative to other such words and the individuals and groups who have or still are using them. In this way, discourses are central to understanding human histories and human societies because they permeate both the individual and the group.

Individuals and the groups to which they belong are consumed by, immersed within, vast oceans of circulating discourses that transmit ideas, desires, and motivations that are born out the near or distant past. This is not to say that discourses are at all random, neutral, or acting in some trivial way in the production of human society. Rather, discourses are "populated—overpopulated—with the intention of others" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294). So while they function at a social and historical level, discourses, in fact, carry fundamental political underpinnings that radicalize the body and the mind, the read and the written.

In this way, discourses are united by a common object of study (e.g., law), a common methodology (e.g., logic), and/or set of common terms and ideas (e.g., justice).

They are tied to various elements of cultural production—the production of knowledge, of difference, and of identity. They can be ordered by their functions: for instance, discourses that constrain the production of knowledge, difference, and identity, and those that enable new knowledges, new differences, and new identities.

Understanding discourse in this way has helped me to raise important questions concerning how power is enacted/negotiated in the literacies the Guys practiced. In my observations of them, discourses can be seen as forming and maintaining sets of social competitions (privileging and marginalizing), influencing unequal power relationships that distinguish and create conflict among folk (e.g., literates and illiterates), folk groups (e.g., Blacks and Whites), and different folk practices of literacy. Discourses, in effect, sanction power and simultaneously constitute the conflicted 'nature' of the self (Foucault, 1976), the unconscious and conscious mind (Lacan, 1984), and the emotional life of the folk they seek to define, group, and govern.

Viewing discourse in this regard has allowed me to raise important questions concerning the contested conditions under which literacies emerge and are practiced. It is within this larger light that I have begun to understand how discourses mediate power, legitimacy, and authority in the Guys' social situations and at the same time shape the conditions under which the Guys' culture and cultural activities (e.g., reading and writing) were produced, practiced, and maintained.

An ethnography which observes and examines discourse becomes a significant tool for understanding and uncovering the literate behavior(s) of groups because it reveals significant aspects of literacy, like folk contributions, power relationships, and identity formations. Therefore, in keeping with Smitherman's and Gee's use of the term, I use

“discourse” broadly to refer to the presence of “folk”—values, beliefs, and assumed identities—in the literacies that the Guys practiced (see Bakhtin, 1986; Derrida, 1976). I also use the term to refer to the ways that being (e.g., Black, angry, feared, resistant and resisted, etc.) and symbolic action (e.g., tagging, tattooing, rapping, etc.) can constitute alternative notions of what it means to be “literate.” Locating such discourse(s) has provided me with a way to describe and explore un-proposed purposes and hidden meanings for literacy (e.g., “literacies as self-recovery” in see Chapter 5 of this dissertation) in the Guys’ lives. Using an ethnography of discourse (which I am explicitly defining as being neither stable nor fixed) has given me a way to give the literacies practiced by the Guys meaning, voice, validity, identity, and connectedness within this literacy research (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Theories of Cultural Production

Discourse influences cultural production. By looking specifically at a given discourse (e.g., being literate), one can observe the social and cultural forces that influence group situations and the symbolic activities that, as a result, occur. One can, then, begin to analyze individuals through the intimate social practices that promote cultural production, as such practices are themselves products of culture, time, and space (Barton, 1996; see also Chapters 3-5). Perhaps Rogoff (2003) states it best: “individual development must be understood in, and cannot be separated from, its social and cultural-historical context” (p. 50).

In this sense, culture is active, tied to discursive movements in generative social spheres where groups are present (e.g., a living room, a basketball court, a classroom, etc). Culture, itself, emerges as discourses are enacted by individuals in social spheres.

Within the social sphere individuals make meaning, compose identity, and establish commitments, either as a way of being or in the process of becoming (Gee, 2001). In addition, the discourses that constitute a given social sphere (i.e., culture) are borrowed, *reaccentuated*, if you will, by their borrowers, and employed strategically as youth and we *do* culture (Bakhtin, 1981; Dyson, 1997, 2003). Hence, one can see literacy functioning within culture through the multifaceted prism of discourse (Sperling, 1995, 2003).

Given this, we must note that culture is not static. Rather, “It is formed from the efforts of people working together, using and adapting material and symbolic tools provided by predecessors and in the process creating new ones” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 51). Kucer (2001) notes, “Culture is a particularly powerful social framework that can significantly impact the nature of” social practices (p. 181). While culture influences social practices (including literacy practices), Rogoff (2003) warns, “culture is not an entity that *influences* individuals. Instead, people contribute to the creation of cultural processes and cultural processes are *mutually constituting* rather than defined separately from each other” (p. 51, *emphases in original*).

Cultural production, then, is a cultural process mediated by the discourses that surround the activities of groups and individuals. Discourses have productive value in the making of culture, contributing to and amending cultural practices and the social landscapes upon which individuals and groups participate. From culture emerges cultural products like languages, texts, and identities—all of which revealed a great deal about the literacies the Guys embraced and the literacies they opposed.

Theories of Resistance

I could not investigate literacy in the Guys' lives without attending to their opposition to literacy practices associated with dominant culture. To do this, I needed a way of accounting for the Guys' resistance. In this regard, the work of Paul Willis (1977) has been helpful. For example, Willis (1977) explains that culture and cultural practices can be more clearly understood by observing the symbolic elements of certain social groups. He implies that one must visit the place of interaction, of social nutrition and discursive activity, seeking out meanings, origins, and meaningful social patterns in order to wholly understand literacy as it is enacted in social situations. According to Willis, in order to understand cultural products (e.g., tattoos, raps, etc.),

we must go to the cultural milieu . . . and accept a certain autonomy of the process at this level which defeats any simple notion of mechanistic causation and gives the social agents involved some meaningful scope for viewing, inhabiting, and constructing their own world in a way which is recognizably human and not theoretically reductive (p. 172).

Willis argues, "The cultural level is marked by a sense of contestation, resistance, and compromise" (quoted in MacLeod, p. 20), and itself implies "the active, collective use and explorations of received *symbolic, ideological, and cultural resources* to explain, make sense of and positively respond to 'inherited' structural and material conditions" (Willis, p. 112, emphasis added). In accounting for the "symbolic, ideological, and cultural resources" used in the production of culture, Willis encourages researchers to focus closely on the symbolic tapestry which enables social, ideological, and cultural existence. Things that stimulate existence (i.e., discourses) also stimulate resistance.

In addition to accounting for culture as a dynamic social unit, Willis observes that culture itself comprises complex and contradictory practices, which warn against “a too reductive or crude materialist notion of the cultural level” (Willis, p. 171). The “lads” in Willis’s study (1977), produced culture, which did not conform to the roles defined for students by school rules or comply with the standards and norms of the school itself. This “counter-school culture,” as MacLeod (1995) would later term it, for Willis, seemed to reject the widely accepted practices of the school in lieu of practices valued by peers.

Building upon the work of Willis and others, Giroux (1983) develops his theory of resistance by examining nonconformity and opposition in marginalized youth. According to Giroux, resistance in these groups can be seen as “a response to the educational system, a response rooted in moral and political indignation” (p. 136). Giroux suggests that we carefully analyze these *resisting* discourses (in addition to *producing* ones) for “radical significance.”

For Giroux and others (MacLeod, 1991; McLaren, 1994), not all discourses that produce reproduce existing social conditions. There are in fact those that oppose reinventing the norms of society. These resisting practices stem from a critique of social oppression (Freire, 1970) and social isolation/exclusion (Purcell-Gates, 1996). There is logic to resistance. According to MacLeod (1991), “The logic of resistance runs counter to the social relations of schooling and calls for struggle against, rather than submission to, domination” (p. 21).

In this way, production is one side in this cultural coin flip. There is also opposition, which suggests counter-cultural production or resistance. That is, nonconformity itself is instantiated in the folk—in their “ways of speaking, listening (and

not listening), writing, reading, feeling, valuing, believing, etc.” (Gee, 2000, p. 204). By analyzing literacy in this way, I see literacy as being not just one thing. Rather, literacy necessitates a complex amalgam of dispositions. A complex study of literacy must account for the many situated, sometimes contested social practices that lead to thought, action, reaction, and rebellion within and to literacy. Theories of discourse, cultural production, and resistance help to set the stage for much needed study of literacy in the regard.

Design and Methods

I designed this study, wanting to know more about literacy in the lives of the Guys. I continued to visit Derrick’s classroom on a weekly basis. I also followed him and his friends to the hallways of their school, sometimes to their jobs and homes, and anywhere else they would let me go. This was the initial design of the study: accidental encounters made systematic by my curiosities and their letting me “hang out” with them to get to know them in the back of an English classroom.

In the scheme of things, a more organized study emerged. Though things did not start off very organized or very well conceived, the lack of order opened up “multiple worlds” (Dyson, 1989) in which the Guys practiced literacy to me. I would later make better sense of literacy in their lives within these “multiple worlds”. Between worlds, the phenomenon of literacies in the Guys’ lives seemed to have no true beginning, middle, or ending. The Guys practiced literacy everywhere. For me, it did not make sense to disentangle the multiple settings in which literacy was practiced, for each context was in some important way connected to the next. Focusing on literacy practices (as opposed to contexts of literacy practice), I was able to locate multiple literacies within such settings

and began to understand the complex ways in which literacy functioned in the Guys' lives across their "multiple worlds".

Multiple Worlds

I finished the study where it began, somewhere in the periphery of six young men's lives, however, no longer seated in the back of an English classroom. Though I ebbed closer and closer to their literate center, I found that the young men's literacies had multiple and sometimes competing centers. As such, this study of literacy took place in multiple settings within two distinct locations: a high school and a neighborhood. The study was beginning to take shape.

The high school was a complex nexus of many settings, including two English classrooms, hallway lockers, and a lunchroom. I point these settings out because they were key settings within the high school where the Guys' practice of literacy was most visible. The English classrooms, in particular, were the most distinctive settings.

I remember entering Mrs. Crankshaw's classroom on a moody Monday morning. The walls were comfortably decorated with quotations from "great" American authors—many of which featured the faces and biographies of dead White men—and goofy cartoon caricatures, which illustrated the "eight" parts of speech and other popular rules for English grammar. The classroom, you can say, was a small world in itself, enriched by its own scenery. It was a pervasive and overpowering space, which created a highly intriguing cultural/political landscape—one that privileged a narrow set of cultural ideas steeped in western tradition and Eurocentric ideologies.

The neighborhood, which was also the neighborhood of the school, was also a complex site. It, too, was composed of multiple settings: the homes of two of the Guys,

the workplace of another, and various other venues in which the Guys and I periodically met. I spent the bulk of my time for this study within the neighborhood, mostly at Sheldon's home or at a nearby restaurant. The Guys and I usually met at one of these sites to talk. Sometimes they would perform, spitting their latest raps, schooling me on the latest "Black talk" and the meaning of their tattoos. In Sheldon's living room, they would let me watch as they competitively played *Madden 2004* and *NBA Live*.

For more formal conversations, I would treat the young men to lunch at a nearby neighborhood deli, at which Tony worked "folding" sandwiches and cutting bread among other things. I parked my car in front of Sheldon's home, so that I could walk with the young men to the deli, which was located about two blocks away. On the walk, I listened to the young men's verbal "play," which usually included boasting or "capping" (what Smitherman [1977, 1999] calls "the Dozens"). When it was required, I participated in their play but never as an expert, always as a learner. These were memorable journeys, as they factored significantly in what I learned about literacy in the Guys' lives.

Although their social world did not seem as vast then, as I think about it now, it was huge and complicated. The Guys learned and practiced literacy in multiple social settings, which contributed to their knowledge of themselves and of the larger social world surrounding them. The arbitrary binary that many researchers set between "the school" and "the home" seemed contrived and limiting to me.

Attempting to understand literacy in the Guys' lives, I learned that there was no single or isolated context in which this could be accomplished. To isolate any given social context too neatly and too narrowly in literacy research neglects the influential role of other contexts in shaping literate behaviors. As stated earlier (see Chapter 1), literacies

are hybrid and dialogic in nature, constitutive of the situation of the multiple spaces we traverse in a given lifetime. The dichotomy of constituting all learning between the school and the non-school world is a big mistake. Individuals, indeed, develop a literate repertoire based upon the many contexts in which they inhabit. Hence, schools, neighborhoods, and other “social spaces of practice” (Gutierrez & Stone, 2000) are mutually informing, as they provide literate experiences—experiences that allow individuals to absorb and produce more fully culture and society (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, the universe of literacies is immense, perhaps too immense to travel. In order to limit the scope of this study (to make it manageable), I studied literacy in the lives of the Guys, specifically, in their school and in their neighborhood.

The Guys

This study profiles six friends, who live in Lansing, Michigan. Lansing is one of Michigan’s largest cities, with a population well over 100 thousand residents. Like other cities, Lansing presents a burgeoning urban context, enriched by cultural and linguistic diversity and distinguished by the academic and social struggles of its adolescent Black males. Like other nearby cities, Lansing’s Black male population is at or near the bottom of all achievement categories and hold the highest jobless rate in the area.

While this project stands on its own, I met its participants during a study I conducted about three years ago at the high school. That project examined literacy in one of the above mentioned English classrooms. The purpose of that study was to identify what literacies urban youth learn in secondary English classrooms. I also wanted to see if students would employ out-of-classroom (versus out-of-school) literacy practices to scaffold classroom literacy learning. Some of the students, in fact, did use a variety of

literacy practices borrowed from a variety of places to meet the literacy demands of their English classroom.

Specifically, four of the Guys (who were taking the class) found ways to participate in classroom activities in spite of and in relation to their social identities. For example, Derrick critically responded to an official classroom text in the language of his peers.

Derrick: I don't think Paris (in Homer's *Iliad*) is right. He sold his whole family out for a female and then acted like a punk when Agamemnon and Menelaus came for her [Helen].

Derrick's rendering of Paris's personality in the *Iliad* is striking, not because it reveals a level of unacknowledged complexity in Paris (i.e., he "acted like a punk"), but precisely because it acknowledges Paris's known complexities in language that is meaningful to him. Derrick's response suggests that he understood the text, personally connected with it, and was able to make valuable meaning of (evaluate) it.

My understanding of literacy in the lives of the Guys, at this point, only began to acknowledge the (false) dichotomy between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices. The Guys were learning academic literacies in-school when they were motivated and could appropriate academic literacies in their non-academic lives. Within this light, a good deal of sociocultural research on classroom literacy has focused on how non-academic resources (vernacular languages, popular (con)texts, multicultural identities, etc.) can be used to help them learn academic/classroom literacies (Cazden, 1995; Moll, 2000)

By chance, I stepped outside the classroom and observed how some of the young men used classroom material in their peer spaces.²

Tony: [Boastful] Nigga, I'm Achilles.

Derrick: [Teasing] Nigga, you ain't Achilles. You a ho like Paris. Pause.

Silence. Laughter.

Outside of the classroom, these young men—some of whom sat quietly and seemingly inattentive inside the classroom—effortlessly discussed and critiqued the *Iliad* as part of their everyday verbal play, making use of its characters in their own signifying manner. In the above example, the classroom text blended complexly with the cultural language practices of the young men. For example, Tony's use of "Achilles" presents the boasting of AAL discourse style (see Smitherman, 1977, 2000). Derrick's teasing of Tony, comparing him to "Paris" as a "ho" presents another feature of AAL discourse style—the dozens (Smitherman, 1977, 2000). Hence, the participants of this study transported literacies back and forth across many contexts, not just from home to school.

From my experience working in a Lansing high school, I developed a profound interest in the intellectual mobility and resilience of urban youth. As a way to explore the complex workings of urban poverty, Blackness, and masculinity in the practice of literacy, I purposefully selected Shawn, Derrick, Keith, Jose, Tony, and Sheldon to participate in this research. It must also be noted that these six young men, who I called the Guys, were all friends.

² I acknowledge that I was an adult participant in the situations that I observed. Not just that, I am an English teacher. Yet, the boys saw me as someone that they could trust, someone who sat in the back of the room with them. While they may have not revealed everything to me, their conversations with me and around me were always candid and, to my knowledge, filled with honesty.

Shawn was perhaps the most vocal of the group. He also struggled the most in school, which was a place that Shawn did not enjoy very much. He along with his two siblings—a younger sister and brother—lived with his grandmother in a small three bedroom house on Lansing's lower Westside. He was athletic. Shawn loved to play basketball, but since he did not do well in school, Shawn never played organized sports. Instead, he was “pursuing a rap career” because as he saw it, he was “a rapper.”

Derrick, a dark-skinned, tall, husky young man, was also a rapper. Along with Tony and Jose, the young men formed a rap group called “Grind Season.” Like Shawn, Derrick was not a stellar student, and like so many young, urban Black males his age, he never read an entire book. He, too, was athletic. He was the captain of his school's football team and key member of its wrestling squad. Unlike his friends, Derrick kept a journal and wrote poetry. Because he was quiet yet not shy, this is where I found many of Derrick's most intimate thoughts and ideas.

Keith was funny, or should I say, liked to have fun. Along with Sheldon, Keith took playing video games very seriously, as he boasts: “Cain't nobody beat me in *Madden*.” More reserved and quiet than his peers, Keith was an above average student, a secret that he liked to keep to himself. Like three of his friends, Keith read comic books and, like all of his friends, was into Hip Hop magazines like *Source* and *Vibe*. Keith was the only one of the Guys who lived with both of his parents. The rest of the Guys with the exception of Shawn lived in single mother homes. (One of the single mothers was a girlfriend.) Shawn lived with his grandmother.

Tony was the youngest of the group and the most timid. Shawn was a big brother to him, as their relationship was guided by respect and admiration as opposed to equality

and camaraderie. Tony was an average student, in most classes on the fringes of failing. He adored Hip Hop and carried an unofficial history of the cultural art form in head. Though he was very thin with a caramel brown complexion, Tony adorned his body with art. He had more tattoos covering his body than all the others with the exception of Shawn. He liked to read the horoscope.

In contrast to Tony, Jose was a thick guy, who admitted to not liking to read. His displeasure in reading was probably more aimed at school texts than it was at texts in general. Jose, too, read comic books, as his collection of X-men and Batman comics and Yu-Gi-O cards suggested. He also wore ink on his arms and had bands of ink around his wrists with his relatives' names on them. Jose was very family oriented, and his friends were an extension of his family nucleus.

Sheldon, Derrick's cousin, was meticulous, especially in the things he was interested in. He was an above average student, possibly following the example of his mother, who was a college student at the nearby university. She surrounded Sheldon with books from her classes. She also received the local newspaper, which Sheldon read almost daily. As was in his nature, Sheldon wrote about things. He took notes on the video games that he and his friends competed in, incidents in the newspaper, for school, and for play. I asked him what was he going to do with his notes. He simply replied, "I'll write a book one day."

As mentioned earlier, my relationship with the Guys emerged in the back of an English classroom, where Derrick, Tony, Jose, and Sheldon, anticipating my Monday morning visits, would "save a seat" for me. As I began to realize that my explorations into literacy would take me beyond their English classroom, I asked the young men if I

could go with them “outside” into the hallways and then to their homes. They agreed to take me; I agreed to go. While navigating the multiple contexts that constituted their “out-of-classroom” worlds, I met a few of the young men’s friends. Two of them, Deshawn and Keith, agreed to meet and talk with us. They, subsequently, joined the project.

Although the young men were friends, they were by no means the same. They were academically diverse and varied in age from 16 to 18. Three of them worked part-time jobs, one had been recently released from jail, and another lived alone with his older girlfriend.

In addition to spending time with the Guys, I spent a good deal of time with people closely associated with them from their school and community. Among them, two English teachers from the Guys’ school helped me to gain valuable information for this research. In the Guys’ neighborhood, I interviewed Marcus Graves, a deli owner, and Tony’s boss. I interviewed Betsy Kennedy (Sheldon’s mom) regularly, Ida Stevenson (Deshawn’s grandmother), and Silvia Smith (Derrick’s mom). In addition to these individuals, I got to know some of the Guys’ family members—brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews.

All participants have given me permission to use the information that I gathered from them. Of course, the names of all participants and places have been altered to protect participants’ identities. To maintain the integrity of the work, I use pseudonyms that have all been selected by the participants themselves and have attempted to reflect their cultural heritage and racial backgrounds. Finally, I selected the Guys to participate

in this work because they shared at least four common traits of interest to me: their race, their friendship, their maleness, and their urban testimonies.

Researcher's Role

The promise of research is not necessarily in deep ideas, but in the heart of deep ideas, which connects the sometimes impossible questions we ask to the sometimes impossible lives we lead as researcher. I began this dissertation with a story to illustrate that research is much more than our work. And yet the story that I am telling illustrates many other stories that intersect with the lives of many Black males, including myself.

As researchers, we sometimes straddle the tight rope of certainty, taking extra care with every step we do and do not take to protect both the integrity of our participants and of our work. It may or may not have been beneficial to share snippets of Shawn's and Derrick's stories, but it is important to me (and of course to them) not to reveal the Guys in tragic terms. That is, it would be problematic for their stories to be received in sympathy, while their educational oppression is explained by their "poor backgrounds" or as a result of their "dodging bullets." There is much more to us than struggle and much more to our struggles than us.

I am in very much part of the Guys' stories, hoping to reduce the catalectic impulse that many of us might have to rush too quickly to ask questions about how culture and upbringing of urban adolescents Black males contribute to their failures. My hope is that my role as a researcher in conjunction with what you have read will allow us to raise more salient questions as to the structural and discursal roots of common struggles over knowledge, literacy, and their representations.

In the spirit of counterstorytelling, I exist in this work to reiterate the humanity of urban adolescent Black males, a demographic who, through false media representations and the like, come to our minds dehumanized. Not only are they steeped in complexity—complexities that enter the classrooms with them, the lives of these young men reveal the shared vocation of individuals, who work Michelle Fine's (1994) hyphen, as a way to reinvent space and opportunities for more possible lives.

In this way, I am situated very much in my work and acknowledge the ways that having been an urban adolescent male of color contribute to my knowledge and curiosity about literacy in the lives of all urban youth. By this, I am acknowledging that researchers are never truly absent from their work; hence, we must find ways to write ourselves in our research to make known how who we are informs what we do and do not see and say.

As a researcher in a classroom setting, I had to abide by the teacher's rules. But as a teacher, my role was complicated, as I wanted access to the intimacies of students' talk, which was sometimes negative toward their teacher. When I heard the young men talking about their teacher, allowing myself to hear it became dangerous. While their comments in class about their teacher might have revealed volumes about the nature of their resistance to school, any flirtation with such information may have set me at odds against the teacher, who was allowing me, as a guest, to sit in her classroom. There were clear lines drawn between the teacher and young men who sat with me in the back of the room. To elect their voices over their teacher's even tentatively might have given the young men reason to believe that I sided with them.

The truth is, I sided with neither the teacher nor the young men who sat with me in the back of the room. This is not to say that I was by any means a neutral participant in the classroom, objectively observing the Guys interact, using some fabricated set of social heuristics based on changing regularities. At best, I sided with the research and the fundamental questions that guided my being there.

Guided by reason, much of my decision-making was subjective. At points, I looked more closely at a predetermined set of things (practices, artifacts, events, activities), which was stimulated by both my compassion for the young men, my positioning as a Black male, and my training as an educational researcher. I admit to deliberately looking for “things,” like literacy practices exclusive to the Guys. I never found these, but in my looking, I may have created—based on my own personal, cultural, political, and intellectual agenda—some regularities that were not there (see Appleman, 2003). In the search for meaning, I had already defined, at least in part, and have had substantial help in defining the situation which I now—in some self-involved way—wished to understand.

This is not to say that my work was not systematic and that my presence in the field yields the work no true value. Instead, as a qualitative researcher, my imagination and insight, agenda and professed plans were all governed and grounded by my participation in the field. In fact, “being there” as it were allowed for a kind of personal testimony that was grounded in experience. This experience has given me authority to write this dissertation.

In spite of my presence, the science in this study is evident. When we consider the will of the scientist to search for questions to answers that bear no sufficient resolve,

she or he must begin to imagine what may be in the midst of what is and to transform what she or he thinks into substance from which new thoughts can arise. Hence, in the field, I am in the middle of a puddle, wet—perhaps dripping wet, but trying not to get too muddy. I was, in effect, an eyewitness—a primary source—to all the things I am reporting.

Gaining Access

This study developed from a conversation I had with Mrs. Crankshaw at a statewide English conference. Mrs. Crankshaw attended a session I presented on Hip Hop and literacy. After the session, she approached me asking what she could do to incorporate some of my suggestions in her classroom. We talked, and as we continued, the conversation evolved. We began talking about her students, particularly her male students of color who were passing her course. We exchanged information and then a few emails. Soon I was visiting her classroom to observe her students learn and her teach.

Within her classroom, I sat quietly in the back of the room, never lonely, almost always in the company of four of the Guys who, too, seemed distant from the rest of the class. Toward the end of the school year, the four young men began to “save a seat” for me, which in some way prevented me from sitting anywhere else in the classroom. As the school year progressed, I focused more on the young men and their conversations within class. Over time, I would focus on these four young men exclusively.

They took me beyond their classroom, and with their blessings, I followed them into the school’s hallway, meeting some of their friends. From the hallway, I was invited

into the lunchroom. By the time school ended, I was invited to their homes, where we would sometimes sit, chat, and play *Madden* and *NBA Live*.

During the summer of 2004, I was awarded funding to continue collecting data on the Guys. During that time, I spent more time with them off school grounds, in and around their neighborhood. By this time, we were no longer strangers. I was no longer the curious observer who sat in the back of their English classroom. I was now a familiar presence. They welcomed me not only in their social worlds but in their homes. (One of the mothers even cooked me dinner once.)

Data Collection Procedures

I think of the Guys in at least two ways: as constituting six individual cases and as one peer unit (ie., one case). Based on these two distinctions, I gathered data in two ways. First, I met individually with the young men twice a week at their homes for approximately four hours per meeting for about six months. During our meetings, I documented their literacy practices (their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and other textual practices) and talked to them about school, reading, writing, books, and other things that I felt dealt with literacy in their lives. During my visits, I also attempted to put together their personal literacy stories. These were events from school and home that expressed in concrete ways how they saw themselves in relation to the larger symbolic world. This helped me to identify the literate discourses (i.e., being rappers and rapping) that circulated in their lives.

I also collected data with the Guys as groups. In talking with the Guys as a group, I addressed specific questions about themes that emerge out of our interactions and their stories. For example, if the boys commented on “being poor,” I probed for what it means

to them to *be poor*, asked what do poor people read and write, and investigated what opportunities and motivations were in place for poor people to participate in the larger society as literate individuals. From these questions, I gained insight into how notions of being, specifically being Black and male, influenced the Guys' idea of literacy.

I also observed the Guys together, in their everyday worlds, to see how they used (or refused to use) texts and how this use (or disuse) was governed by being Black, male, etc. For example, if we were at a local store, at the magazine/newspaper section, I would listen to how they talked about the texts. I began to ask questions like: What did they read and refuse to read? How did they comment on the texts? How and where did they see themselves in these sources? What observable discourses, specifically, were operative in their practice of engaging and discussing symbolic materials? On a few occasions, the Guys and I went for walks and ate at nearby restaurants where we had conversations, some of them tape-recorded. The young men and I continued interactions like these until the project ended.

As a matter of procedure, I took detailed and extensive notes on what I perceived as important to understanding the practice of literacy in the Guys' lives. I carefully speculated on how their activities constituted literacy practice and cultural, social, and political work. Usually within an hour of leaving the Guys, I rewrote my notes as formal data entries into a field log (Emerson *et al.*, 1995). In addition to documenting their literate performances, I frequently talked to the young men (both individually and as a group) about their interpretations of my notes and the ways that their literate actions may or may not have influenced my interpretations of them. All conversations that I had with them were recorded. With their permission, I transcribed important episodes of these

conversations, and whenever possible I spoke with at least two of the young men about a common episode to gain multiple points of view.

I have received academic information about the boys, including their entire school records, which I obtained with the permission of the young men's parents from their high school. Whenever possible, I collected a list of other artifacts (from September 2003 until June 2005) that were helpful for understanding literacy in the young men's lives. During the same time period, I collected samples of the young men's schoolwork, including term papers, vocabulary tests, journal notebooks, etc. I collected texts that the young men personally read and wrote (e.g., magazines, personal letters, raps, tattoos, books, etc.).

The Guys' parents and English teachers were like second pairs of ears and eyes for me. They relayed information to me involving the Guys' interest in downloading Hip Hop lyrics and reading sports magazines for classroom projects. They also commented about times when the young men would use these texts to respond to school-related tasks. The English teachers and I talked regularly about the Guys since September 2003.

Data Analysis Procedures

I organized data by themes (i.e., patterns that emerge around particular discourses, definitions of literacy, and functions of literacy [Emerson *et al.*, 1995]) and by site (i.e., school [classroom, lunchroom, hallway] and neighborhood [home, work, playground, etc.]) to identify "theoretically rich" literacy practices and products, where differences between academic literacy and non-academic literacy practices seemed evident (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 88). After establishing my initial codes, I engaged in more focused coding, which concerned "breaking down fieldnotes even more finely into *subcodes*" to uncover

tensions, “new themes and topics and new relationships” hidden within discourse that might tell us specific things about the young men’s literate lives (Emerson *et. al.*, 1995, p. 161).

Based on these emergent themes, I generated as many ideas as possible about the nature of literacy in the Guys’ lives. During data analysis, I sought to answer the project’s guiding research questions:

- 1) *How do the Guys use literacy to participate in valued social, cultural, and political activities?*
- 2) *What do symbolic materials produced/consumed by the Guys tell us about literacy in their lives?*
- 3) *How do the Guys literate lives extend existing notions of literacy?*

I organized data based on certain distinctions. For example, if data emerged around the notion of “identity formation,” I arranged data in that way. Subcategories would include *reading practices associated with identity*, *writing practices associated with identity*, etc. when a participant read in order to be part of the larger group, I examined what it meant to be part of the larger group, identified what the group read/did according to the young men’s testimonies, and explored if other young men shared the same motivations for reading as did the Guys.

To further probe this theme, I asked questions about what literate opportunities did being part of the group afford? What opportunities did it prevent? What sense of belonging did members secure from being part of the group? When one is part of the group, what other things does one resist being? The answers to these questions became the basis for the assertions I provided in the chapters to come.

Finally, after arranging data by subcodes, I generated as many ideas as possible about the relationship among literacy, masculinity, and urban life. From these hypotheses, I rearranged data into two categories—confirming and disconfirming (Erickson, 1985). Hypotheses based on sufficient data were kept; hypotheses that were not supported (and sometimes refuted) were rejected or used to organize other sets of claims. After developing a set of assertions that could be verified through data and grounded in evidence, I used my supported claims to answer my research questions. The goal of data interpretation for this project was to generate theory that grows out of or that is directly relevant to understanding literacy in the lives of the young men I studied.

Conclusion

Where this work is concerned, I am obliged to side with Erickson (1984): “In substance, my work is an attempt to combine close analysis of fine details of behavior and meaning in everyday social interaction with analysis of the wider social context. . . In method, my work is an attempt to be empirical without being positivist; to be rigorous and systematic in investigating the slippery phenomena of everyday interaction and its connections, through the medium of subjective meaning, with the wider social world (p. 120).” In the chapters to come, I use my assertions to stimulate awareness about how many urban adolescent Black males practice literacy in their everyday lives.

I used discourse as an analytic tool to help me put together an altogether unique story about literacy, a group of Black males, and the politics of learning. The story itself becomes a larger claim, which comments on endemic inequities in how we define literacy and label the literate. In the next three chapters, I present my findings.

CHAPTER 3
“I Guess We Be Homies for Life”:
(Per)Forming Literacy, (Re)Producing Culture, and Appropriating Popular Media
in Peer Play

- Derrick: Let's do it. I guess we be homies for life, livin good.
Can't tell me nothin 'cause my guys done did good, livin hood. . .
- Shawn: I guess we be homies for life, rockin beats strong, days long.
I never trip, Pimp, 'cause my homies up next about to flip, rip a
beast song.
- Tony: Keep on. . .
- Shawn: The niggas done done it again.
Slipped out the streets and we at again.
- Tony: Grippped back. . .
- Shawn: Bendin the pen, been in the pen, dying for sins.
- Tony: Let go the paper . . .
- Shawn: 'Cause we lockin those ends.
I guess we be homies for life—so fuck a friend.
- Tony: We brothers.
- Shawn: Don't need nobody else 'cause these niggas with me to the end. . .
And still we be homies for life . . .

The Guys' linguistic play is characterized by an expanding sense of their symbolic possibilities, which are encouraged through their shared experiences with one another (Dyson, 1993; Stern, 1985). In this way, the Guys brought to social situations a repertoire of literate material or “familiar ways of using language” (Dyson, 2003) and

texts.¹ These familiar ways of using language and texts helped the Guys to engage in cooperative literacy practices, as evidenced in the above rap. It also helped them to reproduce existing cultural norms and produce new and dynamic, hybrid notions of community.

As the rap powerfully demonstrates, these literacy practices—writing, rapping, and multi-voicing—were a sophisticated, marked, and shared array of linguistic creativity, verbally pitched in dynamic rhythm and literate playfulness. This playfulness (of cultural and eclectic creativity) with language (and other symbolic material as I will demonstrate later in this chapter) illustrates a key feature in the Guy’s literate lives. In their play, literacy, as it were, was deeply embedded in the Guys’ imagined, experienced, and emerging worldviews.

While, in many ways, they used literacy to write (about) themselves into the promiscuous and often misleading “transcripts” (Scott, 1990, p. 14) of the printed world (see chapter 5), the Guys also practiced literacy (e.g., rapping) as a way to personally connect with peers, navigate peer experiences, and most importantly establish peer commitments (i.e., obligations that bind individuals to groups through literate practice). These peer commitments helped the Guys establish a set of common literacy practices that privileged popular culture. The Guys also expanded their literate universe beyond the popular media, as literacy became a tool for their own cultural production. In this chapter, I write about popular media and literacy in the interest of the group—both of which become tools for performance and play, cultural reproduction and production.

¹ Language and text is realized in spoken, written, and ascribed (or worn—as in tattoos and clothing) forms. This is important because it extends the binary discussion between written and spoken language beyond the two forms of language.

Pop Cultural Reproduction: Literacy, Peer Commitments, and the Making of the Guys

While personal stories offered them an invitation into literacy, peers offered the Guys a context/community in which to practice it (figure 3). Within the context of friends, literacy, for the Guys, became alive, escaping the limits of time and space. And strangely, cultural norms and social practices became re-inscribed, replicating important features of popular culture². Hence, as a living thing, literacy helped to create the Guys' collective identities, while maintaining the norms of the (pop) cultures surrounding them.

This maintenance of popular culture was important in establishing allegiances, which also mediated participation and membership in the group. For example, the Guys appropriated existing and valued cultural materials, specifically, from popular media to characterize a range of things, from their patterns of talk to their clothing. Embedded within larger social systems, popular media became a local tool that the Guys used to participate with this larger literate community. In this way, the Guys' practice of literacy reinforced features of popular media that the Guys used in their everyday lives. For example, Derrick and Shawn both explained: "we wear earrings everyday 'cause they make us look good." For Derrick, they also helped to make him look cool or, to use his words, "'bout it like other popular rappers." Shawn explains that wearing accessories like earrings is part of "being Black and Hip Hop." According to him, "This is what we do. We wear do-rags, sport Hip Hop gear, whatever it take to let people know where we coming from."

² Literacy in the Guys' lives was as much about meaning making as it was in the mainstream world. In this way, the Guys were helping to re-establish existing cultural purposes for literacy and, therefore, helped to reproduce existing cultural norms. This is not to say that the purposes for literacy in the lives of the Guys were predetermined. As I will explain in a later section of this chapter, the Guys also extended the purposes of literacy to suit them and the cultures which they helped to produce.

In a conversation with Shawn following this exchange, I asked, “why does wearing earrings let people know you down?”

Shawn: All the rappers, ball players, anybody who is anybody stylin like that. See we get what we wear from TV [using TV to allude to the popular media], rap videos, magazine. We part of that. That’s why big companies like Nike and nem be targeting young people to sell they stuff. So they be paying these brothas cheddar to sport they gear. If the dude wearing the gear is ‘bout it and you and yo crew feelin it, then you start wearing it too. Same thing with language. It sends a message to everybody else that you ‘bout it too. That’s all. You want people to know who you is.

In this sense, “gear” appropriated from popular media acts as language. Like language, it is filled with the intentions of others (Bakhtin, 1986). Moreover, Shawn and Derrick used their clothing, which was usually appropriated from popular artists and athletes, to foster visible connection to these intentions and to communicate their “coolness.” This practice of literacy, for them, served the purpose of communicating important aspects of a group identity that was rooted firmly in the popular media.

Not only did it serve the purposes of communicating aspects of group identity (e.g., the Guys viewed themselves as a rap group “like D-12”), literacy in the lives of the Guys was established upon peer commitments, which too involved appropriating popular media. The commitments to one another that the Guys held helped to bind them in ways that made the literacies they practiced hard to disentangle from the group. Within the groups, literacy was practiced playfully, spontaneously, and creatively, as part of the

young men's verbal interactions. Aspects of popular media were never far from such play, as popular media characters, topics, scenes, etc. almost always found tribute in the Guys' interactions. For example, the Guys played a game they called "What You Be Like." Derrick explained the rules to me:

Derrick: When it's your turn and we say "What You Be Like," you have to tell us about something you be like. Only thing is, it got to be fast or funny, or you out.

Shawn: Let me show him. Y'all ask me what I be like.

The Guys: What you be like?

Shawn: I be like Eric Benet. I be plugging Halle Berry [smiles].

The Guys: [Laughs]

...

Shawn: Kirk, what you be like?

Me: I be like Nikola Tesla, enlightening people [smile].

Keith: Who the hell is that [laughs]?

Shawn: You not suppose to use somebody we don't know. Use somebody famous, like from TV.

Sheldon: Dog, he not one of us. That dude don't even watch TV [smirks].

This episode is telling in at least two ways. First, it demonstrates how the bonding (i.e., the collective play) of the Guys was built around popular media. Hence, popular media was a site where the Guys gathered and borrowed symbolic material with which to play. In this way, the popular media was a place of shared knowledge and

shared cultural resources for them. They, therefore, maintained and remade aspects of it in their literate routines and practices.

Second, the episode speaks to how cultural knowledge mediated the group's interactions. This idea is understood most easily in the context of Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital. Bourdieu argues that cultural resources gain value only in specific cultural contexts (p. 164). Hence, knowledge of popular media in the context of the Guys was a valuable asset, as it allowed each one of them to participate in a range of literate activities that were privileged (and made sense) among the others. By contrast, not knowing popular media was dangerous, as it outcasted individuals like myself who instead invoked a great but less familiar inventor.

In so many ways, literacy as expressed in the lives of the Guys put self-identities in constant dialogue with group identities. That is, the literacies that helped to make known the subjectivities of each individual participant (see chapter 3) also exposed important symbolic threads that helped to connect each individual participant to the larger group (the Guys). If we regard literacy as a dialogic practice (as I am doing), then literacy in the lives of the Guys can "only be understood as part of a greater whole" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 426).

In keeping with this idea, we can understand literacy as intertextually linking the Guys to one another as a group and to the common commitments (i.e., forms of contentment, company, and command) that the group made possible around common sets of texts (i.e., popular media). As literate individuals, the Guys appropriated available symbolic, textual, and cultural material from locations such as popular media to fashion their friendship and to maintain their common ties and shared histories.

When we listen to them, we begin to know them, not individually, but as a unit. To this point, the following sections give examples of the literacy practices that helped unite the Guys around a set of shared material and experiences, which rarely get talked about in discussions of literacy.

Keith: Yup, in my white T (shirt)³.

Sheldon: You a fool, Bone [a nickname for Keith]. . . I got my own.

This brief episode speaks to two related ideas. Each comes from my understanding of how the Guys practiced literacy. First, valued popular material and language, especially that found in Hip Hop culture (Dyson, 2003; Fisher, 2003; Kirkland, 2006; Morrell, 2004), was constantly up for grabs among the Guys. Keith's rehearsal of "yup, in my white T" was language taken directly out of a popular Hip Hop song. For Keith, the statement/phrase communicated his appreciation for not only for Hip Hop, but for Hip Hop's expressions.

In this way, there is relationship between the individual "utterance" (e.g., "Yup, in my white T") (Bakhtin, 1981; Dyson, 2003) and the greater symbolic universe (Hip Hop culture) of which the utterance is a part (Bakhtin, 1981). Drawing upon this relationship, Keith uttered "Yup, in my white T," as it connected him to the larger social world of Hip Hop. His appropriation of the form "white T" also linked him more explicitly to his peers as they too rocked white Ts (e.g., Sheldon saying, "I got my own"). I must note, this practice of appropriating symbolic material for larger communicative purposes is situated deeply in embedded histories and shared understandings.

³ This is a line made popular by the Franchise Boys from their hit rap song "White T".

Material like a white T (like a trendy hairstyle, a new term, etc.) comes to life somewhere in the situation. As implied in the example, a white T⁴, among other examples, was used to link the Guys (e.g., Sheldon's admission "I got my own) to larger, more valued, and uniformed group commitments. These commitments encouraged appropriations (hence reproductions of popular culture in the peer space), as wearing a white T connected the Guys' peer world to the more trendy popular one.

Like wearing earrings, a white T communicated certain values and beliefs that the Guys held. According to Sheldon, "All my boys wearing them."

Me: Why?

Sheldon: I don't know. I guess it is the cool thing to do. Franchise Boys be wearing them. They hot right now. I'm saying, why can't we wear white T's?

Me: I never said that.

Sheldon: Naw, I ain't talking about you. It's like, why do they wear suits?

Me: Who?

Sheldon: White people. This us. . . This is who we are.

A second important idea comes into play. As Sheldon's commentary on the white T explains the white T significance to him, we learn that white Ts were appropriated by the Guys to express a range of things: group affiliation, race, and power. It was in this way that I began to perceive how membership in the group and its concern with popular media were important to understanding literacy in the lives of the Guys. Hence, the symbolic use of the white T united the Guys not only to the larger world of Hip Hop, but

⁴ I analyze the Guys use of the white T to illustrate the ways in which popular culture influenced the Guys and their practice of literacy. Hence, white Ts are just a single example of the many resources the Guys borrowed from popular culture to do themselves and to practice literacy.

more importantly to one another. It also helped to affirm them and the valued practices they together embraced.

It is no coincidence that both Keith and Sheldon understood the significance of the white T with regards to the larger group. When asked why white Ts were so popular among them, Keith commented, “That’s what Black guys wear these days.” In appropriating the white T, these Guys were also appropriating the Black race. Hence, literacy in their lives existed in the middle of a power struggle over self-identity, where one could choose Blackness by choosing to wear a white T-shirt.

In addition to understanding the significance of the white T in the power struggle over self-identity, it has been equally important for me to understand how the Guys used the white T symbolically to forge their commitments to one another. In this way, wearing a white T afforded a sense of being, of solidarity, and most importantly a way to articulate a common (hi)story. It is within this story (in this case, the story of a common Black body masked in white fabric) that the individual narrative of the Guys became a corporate one.

Shawn: These my brothas [talking about Derrick, Sheldon, Keith, Tony, and Jose].

Keith: We been knowing each other since we was in what?

Jose: [Interrupted] I met him [pointing to Tony] in third grade.

Keith: We been knowing each other for a long time . . . [interrupted]

Tony: Since elementary school.

As their common stories came together, the narrative of the Guys’ friendship became a practice of collaborative storytelling, as illustrated in the above example. The

story begins with Shawn's declaration: "These [are] my brothas." Adding to the story, Keith continues: "We been knowing each other. . ." Jose adds: "I met him in third grade." Tony concludes: "Since elementary school." Hence, their story was being created in a rich array of voices, where the Guys would sometimes complete one another's sentences.

Co-authoring or collaborating in the narrative structure of storytelling was common among the Guys, who always told stories. Where one person would introduce a topic, another would continue it until a story evolved. Like other practices of literacy in their lives, this literacy practice usually drew heavily upon aspects of popular media.

Keith: They need to make a TV show . . . for us. Instead of calling it "Girlfriends," they can call it "My Nigga-a-a-a-s" [grins]

The Guys: [Laughs]

Derrick: Keith, you will be the dingy one [laughs].

Keith: The funny one [smiles].

Sheldon: I'm the one getting all the girls.

Shawn: Naw nigga. You be the married one, cheating on his wife 'cause you got married in high school. Y'all know how that nigga be fallin in love [laughs].

Keith: Naw, it'll be a cross between "Girlfriends" and "Making the Band." We gone be a rap group, getting our ass beat by Diddy [laughs] . . .

This practice continued until the topic was exhausted, a new topic introduced, or until the group went their separate ways. It usually ended with some final summarizing point or possible point of contention.

Shawn: Now you gone too far. I ain't gone get my ass beat by nobody.

Derrick: Let me finish it. [interrupted] . . . We gone be like the Five Deadly Venoms [a popular 1970s martial arts film]. We gone be kicking the ass [laughs].

After Derrick laughs, the group laughs and moves on to another topic. Though incomplete and undecided, the story was collaboratively constructed and jointly abandoned. It might be picked up at a later time, its themes used in a rap, or maybe it will be revised altogether. Yet as it stood, the collaboration made cooperative sense, a story about the Guys that rendered meaning only in the context of them.

In this way, no one person held possession over the group's story. Instead, stories like the one above evolved creatively, constructed by multiple members of the group, using multiple voices from the group. When the Guys told stories like those above, their telling necessitated a literate practice and imagination that privileged group collaboration and playfulness, as is also evidenced in the examples to come.

Another way to see the Guys performing literacy and appropriating (con)texts was in their complex expressive language practices (see Miller & Goodnow, 1995). In such practices, the Guys borrowed, interpreted, and recasted symbolic material from the varied kinds of voices that filled the garrulous landscape of their everyday lives. I must reiterate that their expressions were marked by sensitivities to nuances of popular media made manifest in popular music, comic books, and magazines. Folk tales about the group

emerged out of such practices. These tales also borrowed from a range of sources, including song lyrics, popular magazines, and comic books. Below is a rap written by Jose, which gives an example of how the group was expressed by its individual members through their appropriation of popular media⁵:

Jose: (rapping) They call me Professor X, about to flex this cool groove
rhyme.

The X-men got my back; the niggas done come at the nick of the
time.

I'm like Pac in his fury. A judge. You know the verdict. My guys
the jury; sure we won't budge . . .

In this example, Jose uses and blends at least two popular media icons: Professor Charles Xavier from the X-men comics and Tupac Shakur. While he uses popular media to help write his raps, he also uses popular media to construct a group of which he sees himself a part. Where he views himself as powerful, "like Pac in his fury," he views the group as equally powerful, like himself or like a courtroom "jury," capable of issuing a "verdict." Further, to make sense of himself and the group to which he belongs, Jose symbolically fuses three existing public domains. He takes us at once to the fictitious world of a comic book (a world of mutants and warlords), the arduous world of a rapper (Tupac's "furious" world of violence and ineptitude), and the resolute world of public jurisprudence (a common courtroom). Hence, the Guys were being made (while helping

⁵ Group identity, as this chapter suggests, was a key thematic in the Guys practice of literacy. From creative storytelling to exaggerated storytelling, the Guys often practiced literacy to conjure stories about themselves. In these stories, they either reproduced elements of popular culture or "wrote" themselves within popular culture altogether.

to make Jose) between multiple situations that existed somewhere in the hybrid realities and fictions of inter(con)textual being and the popular media.

Also evidenced in Jose's rap was the presence of borrowed voices. Like the rap that starts this chapter, Jose's rap, while a solo verse, was marked by other people's phrases and voices. It is not plagiarizing to adopt other people's words. Rather, the act of adopting the voices of others into one's symphony of ideas composed a text that allowed Jose to give new meaning to himself, his friends, and the material he appropriated. "They call me. . ." was a popular introductory phrase commonly employed in rap music and attributed to the lyrics of the Sugar Hill Gang. The term "flex" (as in flexing muscle) is symbolic of masculine strength. The phrase ". . . got my back" is a borrowed folk expression, which gained popularity in Black culture through Hip Hop. Hence, Jose's collection of terms and phrases was a rich and dynamic array of voices that had been scattered through time and space. In his rap, Jose brought these phrases together, giving them one distinct voice.

The myriad of voices that helped to constitute Jose also helped to constitute his Guys. For example, Shawn's "Cool G Rap" borrowed not only from popular media but also from Jose.

Shawn: [rapping] This is that Cool G Rap
 Got the track in the back that
 Make you want to clap to that
 Cause I'm cool like that
 I said I'm cool like that
 So call me the Ice Man

One of the X-men, pops

Ready to drop a bomb

I move Hip Hop

I said I'm cool like that . . .

Shawn's rap, while different in style and composition, mirrored Jose's rap in that is borrowed from other people's voices. "I'm cool like that. . ." is a popular Hip Hop phrase made famous by the group Tribe Called Quest. As you recall, Jose used X-men in his rap, like Shawn, to illustrate exaggerated characteristics of himself and his peers. Also, the /k/ sound was present in all but three lines of the verse, giving Shawn's rap a music that added melody to its many voices.

There was something naturally musical in the way the Guys practiced literacy. In the Bakhtinian (1981) sense, the Guys were exercising literacy outside of the authority of formal structures like school. Instead, they practiced it in relation to their vernacular voices and folk traditions, which gained value in particular, pedestrian situations. Hence, as the Guys practiced literacy, they did so jointly as a matter of social nature and mutual obligation. The voices that Jose and Shawn practiced were theirs to borrow. Yet, they did not belong to an individual, but to the group for play and performance and for the reproduction of popular media forms that the group absorbed, accepted, and accentuated.

Nevertheless, contextual overtones surrounded literacy in the Guys' lives. These overtones imbued the literacies they practiced with a social connotation, which was embedded in the values and unsanctioned authority of other people's voices. This transformation of old symbols to produce new meanings is basic to all symbolic activity (Dyson, 2003; Hanks, 1996).

In this section, I have demonstrated the ways in which literacy mediates group performance and peer play among the Guys. I have also shown how the Guys drew richly on popular media to establish common bonds within such activities. In the next section I write about how the Guys expanded my notions of literacy, as literacy for them was also a tool for cultural production. In addition to borrowing literate forms, the Guys were producing and participating in new literacies and new ways of performing and playing.

An Expanding Universe: Literacy and Cultural Production

Lines between personal and collective practices usually blur as literacy gets enacted in social (i.e., peer group) situations (Dyson, 2003). As illustrated earlier, stories of the self merge profoundly into stories of the group. Sociocultural bonds converge within these stories to (re)constitute the fabric of the group and the material (e.g. “White T’s”) that the group uses to practice literacy. For example, the Guys existed between cultural spaces and appropriated material from a vast range of connected cultural contexts, usually for the purposes of interacting with one another.

In this way, literacy learning is very much a process of cultural reproduction—bending to cultural norms and revoicing accepted notions of what it means to be. On the other hand, literacy learning is also an important part of cultural production. As individuals participate along the hybrid axes of an expanding cultural universe in both time and space (see also Gutierrez & Stone, 2000), they learn to behave literately to mold culture into unique arrangements so that some aspect of society is contoured distinctly to fit individuals who are like themselves. As such, literacy functions as a mediating force between self and society, weaving within the fabric of life constant revisions of culture so

that culture, itself, is not only reproduced, but simultaneously and altogether produced anew.

The literacies the Guys' practiced were instrumental in the production of the Guys' culture. Though it is a contested term having many meaning, I am defining culture here as the integrated patterns of group knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors that depend upon a group's capacity for learning, practicing, and transmitting language and literacy to its members. The literacies the Guys practiced carried with them the customary beliefs, social forms and formats, and material traits of the social groups. It instantiated the sets of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes every human group and its members.

As they practiced literacy, the Guys became articulations of their peers and the hybrid cultures in which they participated (Bakhtin, 1981). Within these peer groups and hybrid cultural communities, multiple lines of being intersected in complex ways to greatly influence how literacy was practiced and how culture was produced. In their practice of literacy, the Guys were producers of cultures, helping to expand an ever-evolving cultural universe. Perhaps Derrick explains this point best in his discussion of taking "the game to another level":

Derrick: We be taken these words [when we rap] and be creating something new. We ain't trying to be like other rap groups. We trying to take the game to another level. We trying to change the game.

Derrick's statement about "changing the game" speaks to a key function of literacy within the group. For the Guys, language—written, spoken, or ascribed—was at times meant to create "something new." With this, a common goal of literacy for the

Guys was to influence culture in a way that allowed the group to move beyond the restraints of the “other” so that they could “change the game.” These cultural aspects of literacy were, therefore, neither neutral nor politically innocent (see Chapter 4). The Guys practiced literacy at the cultural level in a way that added to this level. This isn’t to say that they did not coalesce in the reproduction of existing cultural norms (see MacLeod, 1996); it merely suggests that they also molded (or at least intended to mold) culture by innovatively playing with words and their meanings. I use an excerpt from Derrick’s poem—which he called “the new spoken word” to illustrate this point:

U turn
left b Hind
Legs sprawl ing on top of Black back
Mountains
Rivers that Run Deep
Like Sheba’s Queens and she Loves
Open pours
inside empty cups that run over
hope like Escalades
that phaint in Darkness
that phreeze in Night
That phuck in morning, morning
Uprising
Lite skin white men
Blues is my brothers

Black is my Berry

Sweet is my juice

So U turn back to me

I re turn back to U

I die daily 4 U

In his poem, Derrick boasted an interesting sprawl of cultural and linguistic markers. Lines like “Blues . . . brothers” allude to popular media characters (e.g., Dan Aykroyd’s and John Belushi’s “Blues Brothers”). The lines “Black is my Berry/Sweet is my juice” is borrowed from a popular folk phrase in Black culture: “the Blacker the Berry, the sweeter the juice” (Smitherman, 1999, p. 176). Embedded in the poem are literary allusions from respected texts like the Bible (e.g., “Sheba’s Queen” and “cups that run over”) to classical Black literature like Langston Hughes’s poem “the Negro Speaks of Rivers” (e.g., “Rivers that run Deep”). Derrick also appropriated modern linguistic conventions, like the creative spelling of words like *you* (U) and *for* (4) and sounds like /f/ (“ph”). While these examples point to how Derrick’s poem was situated within existing cultural norms, deeper analysis suggests that it also extended those norms.

Derrick explained his use of “ph” in the words “phaint,” “phreeze,” and “phuck” as giving words new meaning. As Smitherman (1999) explains, liberties with language are common features of Hip Hop and an emerging feature of popular media. This is important because, as mentioned earlier, Hip Hop culture and the popular media greatly influenced the practice of literacy in the Guys’ lives. Where popular media and Hip Hop push the cultural envelope, so too did the Guys. According to Smitherman:

One of the least understood communicative practices in AAL is the manipulation of EAL's [i.e., "European American English"] semantic structure. Often inappropriately dismissed as "Black slang," this rhetorical maneuvering amounts to linguistic appropriation, what late linguist Grace Holt (1972) called "semantic inversion." . . . It is a process whereby AAL speakers take words and concepts from EAL lexicon and either reverse their meanings or impose entirely different meanings (pp. 279, 280).

Keeping Smitherman's explanation of "semantic inversion" in mind, an explicit connection can be made between "semantic inversion" and Derrick's use of "ph" to spell terms traditionally spelled with "f." In his own words, Derrick explained his revisions of the terms *freeze* and *fail*:

These words ain't new. But they is new when I use them like this because, to me, they can mean different things. It's like the difference between fat and phat. Fat spelled with an "f" means big like out of shape. Phat spelled with a "ph" means that it's nice, like that phat watch you got on. It aint out of shape. It's nice. So I use the "ph" in the poem to make old words mean new things. "Phaint" don't mean to fall out; it means to get away from—to fall below the radar screen of everybody. But you still operating correctly. Yo game is still on point, but you just ain't putting it out there for everybody to know 'cause everybody ain't got yo back. "Phreeze" don't mean to be cold; it means to get free, to move quietly

away from what haunts you. Being a Black guy you gotta creep in the night 'cause if you let them know what you doing, they gone get you.

In the traditions of Black folk (Collins, 1996; Gilyard, 1991; Labov, 1972; Richardson, 2003; Smitherman, 1977, 1999, 2006), language and symbol gets played with (in this sense inverted and spelled differently) to create a unique, new voice, which liberates speakers from the limits of dominant cultures (and by extension dominant vocabularies). In this sense, culture is expanded, or enlarged, in such a way that perspectives, which seldom find place in of public transcripts, can be voiced and put into parlance. Then, as groups come to practice literacy and play with language and symbol, cultural seeds are planted, giving the intentions and perspectives of its tillers room to grow outwardly in society's fertile "landscape of voices" (Dyson, 2003, p. 12).

I am sitting in Sheldon's living room with the rest of the Guys with the exception of Shawn, who by now is serving time in jail for an alleged drug offense. The Guys are huddled around a television set, playing *Madden 2003*. Sheldon has a notebook filled with scribbles, part of his contribution to the Guys' culture of video game play. It contains a list of strategies and notes he has documented for playing *Madden*. (Sheldon regularly jotted notes in his notebook to give him an advantage. His note-taking stimulated Tony to take notes as well. Hence, note-taking became a practice within the culture of their video game play). As a serious player, Sheldon researched strategies for play *Madden* from the Internet and video game magazines. Sheldon's interaction around playing *Madden* became a spark in his literate life, which ignited bountiful literate activities for himself and his peers. Looking at Sheldon's notebook, Keith glanced at him and asked, "What you got?"

Sheldon: These my notes.

Keith: You better take notes. You can't beat nobody without them
[laughs].

Sheldon: [admittedly not the best *Madden* player] I bet I beat you.

Tony: [pulling a crinkled sheet of paper out of his pocket] I got notes
too.

Keith: Y'all niggas take this game too serious.

Sheldon: You just mad cause you can't read and write.

The Guys: [laughs]

The evidence of literacy was prevalent in every aspect of the Guys' lives, found in a pocket full of notes and in the marked-up pages of a hidden notebook. It was promoted in the lure of competition, exercised intensely as the Guys gathered together to perform and play. None of this is new, however. We know that males engage literacy as a competitive practice (Newkirk, 2003). Young African Americans engage it as part of their group play (Dyson, 2003) or within particular "participatory communities" (Fisher, 2003). Surrounding the Guys' practices of literacy were literate artifacts, however, like Sheldon's and Tony's notes. Beyond the notes was the instantiation of a new cultural enterprise: an integrated pattern of group knowledge (what's found in notes), beliefs (note-taking can improve video game play), and behaviors (the act of taking notes) that depended upon a group's capacity for learning, practicing, valuing, and transmitting new knowledges and literacy practices.

In this sense, the video game culture of the Guys was active, tied to group's interests and produced within the group's symbolic activity. The video game culture (and

the literacy practices associated with it) emerged as literacy within the group was enacted to help chart meanings, compose identities, and establish performances, either as a way of being or in the process of helping one become (Gee, 2001). In addition, the literacies that constituted the video game culture were not only borrowed; they were altogether produced anew, accentuating, if you will, new found strategies for group play (Bakhtin, 1981; Dyson, 1997, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). Hence, one can see literacy as a function of cultural production, operative in group play (Dyson, 2003; Sperling, 1995, 2003).

Given this, it is important to note that culture is not static. Rather, “It is formed from the efforts of people working together, using and adapting material and symbolic tools provided by predecessors and in the process creating new ones” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 51). As such, “Culture is a particularly powerful social framework that can significantly impact the nature of” social groups and literacy practice (Kucer, 2001, p. 181). However, where they cannot fit into existing cultural locations, social groups, like the Guys, carve out new cultural sites where they might find belonging. Video game culture, for example, was a site mediated by literacy practices that surround the group’s video playing activities. From it emerged cultural products like notes, which revealed a great deal about the literacies the Guys practiced and the literacies they also opposed.

Conclusion

Following my discussion of cultural production, it is important to note that reading and writing, while important, were but small parts of how the Guys practiced literacy. In a similar way, raps and tattoos, while also important, were but small parts of how the Guys invented themselves and expanded the cultural universe in which we all live. As such, the Guys used literacy—reading and writing, raps and tattoos—to inform

their sociocultural (inter) actions. These practices and texts were extensions of the contexts and characters present in the Guys' social worlds where they encountered units of meaning that brought their symbolic play to life.

In the lives of the Guys, literacy was based on encounters with meaning, captured in multisensual formats, produced in a variety of human environments. Therefore, literacy can never be said to be learned passively nor does an active explanation capture its complete, holistic complexity. One is an active participant in her or his learning of literacy, but never actively participates alone. There are contributions, immutable, which occupy and actively assist, as well, in the learning of literacy. Literacy learning, like video game play, where music, mood, pairings, and even the room influences movement and inspiration, is contingent, based upon the cultural vibe of the very moment.

There is a complex combination of forces at work in all literate activity. In this way, literacy learning is an interactive process, which requires the participation of various elements both beyond and surrounding the individual. The individual comes to be seen as not only an agent in literacy practice but a partner, whose actions depend, in part, on the actions of others.

Finally, literacy is practiced in tension. Some might even argue that the achievement debate surrounding the academic literacy performances of urban adolescent Black males is at the heart of this tension. As I have attempted to demonstrate, it is not always the case that low-performing Black males lack literacy. As this chapter suggests, many Black males are like the Guys; they may well be, in fact, highly literate. The experiences of the Guys, if properly elucidated, raise questions about how we define literacy.

While we are hell bent on changing them, getting them to submit to our purposes for and definitions of literacy, many young, urban Black men, like the Guys, battle, instead, to retain their identities and own purposes for literacy. In their struggle over intent, a common goal surrounding literacy emerges: to resist social and cultural domination. The next chapter examines the ways in which the Guys practiced literacy to resist cultural domination or resisted literacy to maintain a sense of self.

CHAPTER 4

Literacy and Resistance in the Lives of the Guys

Literacy is precisely situated at significant points of contestation (Hull, 1993; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1987). Notions of literacy are confronted with issues of content, purpose, value, authority, inequalities and imbalances of power. These issues paint literacy with new and imposing challenges, which make non-mainstream literacy practices as relevant and as likely to have an impact on mainstream culture and education as academic literacy practices (Morrell, 2004).

As such, literacy operates as a dynamic, shifting, and sometimes subversive part of society, making a difference in the way people see themselves, their world, and their likelihood for social action (Freire, 1987). Consequently, literacy can be seen as a site at which contested forces like race and gender are mediated and dominant ideas and forms resisted or altogether rejected (Giroux, 1983). In this way, literacy in the lives of the Guys had much to do with rejecting dominant literacy practices and resisting dominant notions of what it means to be literate. Resistance, here, can be thought of as a contrary action or condition to withstand the force or effect of symbolic/cultural domination either by rejecting dominant cultural forms (e.g., academic literacy) or by articulating critiques (through various symbolic modes) of dominant culture.

For the Guys, literacy served as a key location for the propagation of resistance, where language was “recontextualized” (Dyson, 2003) in terms of political struggle for social justice and civic enfranchisement (Giroux, 1983). Certain types of literacy were rejected altogether, and silence acted as political voice of disruption and as a possible site of displeasure. At other points, silence acted as a cooperative voice, which ironically articulated the group’s unwillingness to contribute to the unjust project of cultural

domination. In this chapter, I examine the tenuous dynamics of literacy as practiced or rejected by the Guys and explore the social critiques necessarily present in their literacy products.

Realizing Resistance: Situating the Politics of Literacy Practice

An interdisciplinary range of scholars have used the term resistance to discuss the contested practices of literacy and to shed light upon the contradictions of society and the conflicting locations of groups within society (Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1996; Smitherman, 1999; Willis, 1977). According to this body of work, resistance is made manifest in social struggles, highlighted by a rejection of social values and meanings embedded within the principal literacy practice (i.e., academic/official literacy [see Dyson, 2003; Morrell, 2004]) prevalent in dominant society.

The intersectionality of language and race also plays a major role in linking literacy and resistance. For example, Smitherman (1999) argues, “The Black Experience is a narrative of resistance, of an on-going struggle to be free, perhaps the motive force in African American history” (p. 34). Since literacy is inextricably interwoven within a group’s culture and history (see Chapter 3), literacy in the lives of African Americans would shape or help shape “narratives of resistance.” Smitherman (1999) argues, for example, that rappers, writing within the “racialized rhetoric of rap music” (p. 271)—which “is embodied in the communicative practices of the larger Black community” (p. 271)—employ rap as a form of literacy to resist social and cultural domination. According to Smitherman (1999),

. . . in their quest to “disturb the peace,” [rappers] deliberately and consciously employ the “antilanguage” of the Black speech community, thus

sociolinguistically constructing themselves as members of the dispossessed. Even when the message in the music does not overtly speak to racial resistance, the use of the Black speech community's syntax covertly reinforces Black America's 400-year rejection of Euro-American cultural, racial—and linguistic—domination (pp. 274, 278).

Like Smitherman's description of rappers' use of language as a tool for resistance, resistance within (and to forms of) literacy privileges distance rather than proximity to grand social narratives and the people whom they embody. Resistance to and within literacy become part of a larger, lingering struggle of the suppressed, who are active in maintaining a struggle against cultural absorption and for symbolic and emerging aspects of cultural heritage. As such, resistance in literacy critiques dominant narratives, challenges the dominant literacy paradigm with alternative paradigms, and reshapes social events and literacy practices in ways that affirm the histories and perspectives of suppressed social groups.

This shifting and reshaping of literacy and the role of language in social space works to invert power relations, if only temporarily, by exposing, evading, and/or subverting the fallacious accounts on which social hierarchies are founded and sustained. Resistant literacy practices become necessary for group survival and the group's social viability, as they serve to offset the ideological technologies of reproduction while preserving a group's sense of itself and its possibilities for social (re)action and social (ex)change. Resistance in literacy, in this way, merges the existential realities of Black male bodies (i.e., fight, struggle, invisibility, and durability) with alternative social realities that are altered frequently and profoundly from the perspective of Black males,

who themselves render radical examinations and revisions equally of history, language, literacy, and society.

Another way to view resistance is productively, as having a potential for human agency and effecting progressive and deliberate social change in a contested world (Freire, 1987). Hence, resistance for the Guys was a response to being resisted as Black males in mainstream society. Further, resistance to them, as justified by negative portrayals of Black men in society (see Chapter 1), characterized the Guys as intimidating, angry, and violent (hooks, 2003; Noguera, 2003). I speak more explicitly to this point later in the chapter.

The knowledge produced by the Guys in their practice of literacy, however, has always been regenerative and potentially emancipatory, as their practice of literacy allowed them to respond to being resisted. Through literacy, the Guys created knowledge and understanding they purposefully used to solve their own life problems, which usually stemmed from inequities laden in society. As their literate products and conversations with me indicate, the Guys were making sense of the world in a way that positioned them as critics as opposed to critiques.

As I continue their story, I must point out that the narrative of the Guys' literate histories mark some of the most overt forms of Black male resistance to social domination I had ever witnessed. By calling attention to their forms of resistance, I attempt to open a space in which interested readers are more likely and able to make sense of the incongruous perspectives of such young men while continuing to challenge what it means to be literate.

Two Types of Resistance

There is an ongoing body of work which constructs Black males as “oppositional” to mainstream culture and society (Kotlowitz, 1991; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu, 1974). However, the term “opposition” can be thought of in the dialogic sense (see Bakhtin, 1986; Dyson, 2003), as it fits within the reciprocal perspective of social physics. That is, for every (re) action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Using this idea, we can view “oppositional” practices as moving bidirectionally [see figure]—as sustained reactions to “equal and opposite” “oppositional” actions.

Therefore, another way to view resistant Black males, especially the Guys, is as being resisted. For example, the Guys were often made objects of fear and humiliation, which promoted, in them, emotive responses (or reactions) of resistance, usually articulated in despair or anger. These dispositions noticeably lead to the Guys’ textual preoccupations and deep interests in the themes of death and violence (themes that are prevalent in the Guys’ raps, tattoos, and other writings). Later, I provide examples, which more than likely shed light on some of the Guys’ everyday experiences to illustrate these points.

bell hooks (2003) writes that Black males, while rarely loved, are often feared. Hence, as Black males, the Guys were made objects of fear, which itself worked as a meta-narrative that pronounced to them society’s rejection of them. The dehumanizing gazes and gestures that the Guys and I received while walking through a mall, for example, worked to shape us as subhuman—not as dependent children to be cared for, but as vile beast or suspicious creatures to be feared. In the eyes of certain mall-goers, we were very literally like the “boogey man,” physical manifestations of a lingering socially constructed fear of Black men that society perpetuates. I use examples #1 and #2

from my fieldnotes to illustrate this point.

Example #1 (from fieldnotes, 05/04/2004):

The Guys and I were in a mall, casually walking away from the foodcourt. We had just wrapped up our group session, and Derrick and Tony wanted to “walk around the mall to look at some clothes.” We were moving along, in a random direction, walking slowly up a wide corridor as we passed a middle-aged White woman. Upon seeing us, the woman gripped her purse firmly. I could visibly see veins suddenly popping out of her hands, as they convulsed, collapsing tightly onto her shoulder strap. She tucked the purse under her arms, glanced at us, glanced away, then back at us again, and hastened her pace. . .

While it is pure speculation on my part, in the presence of certain mall-goers (in this case, a middle-aged White woman), the Guys and I presented a threat (or at least upset her casual, “peaceful” reality). We had to be averted, run away from, so that our Blackness, even at distance, could not be seen. The woman carrying her purse perhaps perceived us as a threat and, therefore, constructed us as criminal (thinking that we would steal her purse). Her racist reaction to us was not, however, because she was White. Rather, she resisted us most likely because we were Black males. The following example describes a Black couple’s reaction to us in the same mall on the same day.

Example #2 (from fieldnotes, 05/04/2004):

We were still at the mall, walking and playfully chatting through the mall’s wide-open lanes. A middle-aged Black couple, who were walking toward us on the same side of the mall, looked at us squarely. Still staring

at us, the man grabbed the woman by the hand and, obtrusively, pulled her to the other side of the mall with him. With quick feet, the woman followed, as they both retreated down the corridor opposite us . . . As distance grew between the couple and us, I glanced back to see if the couple was still walking. Indeed, they were walking. They were walking down the lane still moving in the direction opposite us. However, they were no longer on the opposite side of the mall. Having gained some distance from us, they crossed back over to the side of the mall that we were on . . .

The dehumanizing gazes and peculiar reactions that we received at the mall were nothing new for the Guys and me. We had become accustomed to being looked at oddly, even by other African Americans. According to Shawn,

People always looking at us like we gone kill them or something. We don't want nothing from them. We minding our own business. . . We don't cringe up when they come around us.

The societal loathing of Black males is institutional, propagated by schools and mainstream media (for further discussion on this, see Chapter 1). This is nothing new. Black males attending urban schools have long reported significant incidents of distrust that stem from society's psychic fears of them (A. Ferguson, 2000; R. Ferguson, 1998). In addition, many Black males attend schools where their entering and leaving are always under special suspicion. To enter school, many must pass through an uncaring system of metal detecting devices, and upon leaving, they are escorted out of sight under the watchful eyes of security patrol people, surveillance cameras, or police officers.

Being feared sometimes lends itself to anger. For Black males, the longing for humanity, to be embraced as human subjects instead of repulsive objects, results in their resentment of a fearful mainstream that projects them as unpleasant bodies of anxious concern. Their reaction to resentment becomes a leitmotif in their literacy products. Multi-sensual expressions of anger became an accessible text to which the Guys could easily and readily relate and, therefore, produce and consume. To illustrate this point, I turn to a conversation I had with the Guys following the mall incidents discussed in the above examples:

Derrick: People be thinking that rappers all mean in stuff. They ain't mean at all. They just got a complaint. I mean. You Black. You living in a world where don't nobody want you [around]. What you gonna do? Join hands and rap kumbaya.

The Group: [Laughs]

Shawn: [Interrupting the laughter]. Naw, D right. This shit ain't fair. We gotta go through this shit everyday. We got a right to be mad and let people know we mad. Damn right, rappers sound mad because they got a right to be mad.

Derrick: I wouldn't say they got a right to be mad, but they do got a reason.

Shawn: Naw. They got a right 'cause, I don't know about you, but I get tried of being treated like I'm some kind of, kind of. . .

Derrick: Crook. I see what you saying.

Sheldon: It pisses me off too when White people be gripping they purse when you come around, when they follow you around the store,

start walking fast to they car when you and them come out the store at the same time. I'm saying.

Me: How does that make you feel?

Tony: I feel like I'm the boogey man, yo. They scary. Scared of me. So that make me stronger than them.

Keith: I feel like. . .man. . .I ain't even good enough to be around, like the stinky kid in school. [Laughs.] Naw . . . for real . . . I ain't gone lie . . . that make me mad.

Sheldon: I be mad too.

Jose: I don't care, man [puts his head down and laughs].

While anger was not a unanimous (at least not everyone admitted to being angry) reaction to being feared/resisted, it was the overwhelming sentiment shared among the Guys. Even as Jose didn't care, his gesture of putting his head down suggests a level of degradation. Where Tony felt "stronger than them," he also felt like the "boogey man," which in anyone's terms is less than empowering.

Perhaps, Derrick's discussion of violence in rap puts it best: "they [rappers] just got a complaint." The Guys' complaint, indeed, was a reaction to, and in dialogue with, the presuppositions of others, who, even while walking through the mall, articulated from safe distances their disdain for them. Whether it is simply a "reason" or a "right," the Guys' anger certainly provides an example of how mainstream resistance (fear) worked to foster counter resistance (anger) on the part of a group of young Black men.

Like anger, violence was also a response to the resistance the Guys endured. I am not talking outright about physical/actual violence, but textual violence. Hence, violence

too became an accessible text, both produced and consumed by the Guys. The following set of conversations takes place individually with the Guys. I talked with Sheldon about newspaper articles he liked to read:

Me: How often do you read the newspaper?

Sheldon: I read it every day. My stepfather gets one.

Me: What do you like reading the most?

Sheldon: I don't know. Most people like the sports section. I read that too, but I be mostly reading about what happening around here [locally].

Me: Like what?

Sheldon: See this article [pointing at the newspaper]. I knew this guy. He went to school with me. He killed these girls at the park and was shooting at [a local restaurant]. Reading the newspaper is more interesting when you know the people in there, especially when it is about something violent.

Me: Why violent?

Sheldon: Violence is exciting. Violence shapes my world. It is something I know a lot about.

Violence was a theme, which seduced Sheldon's imagination. In his own words, "Violence is exciting. . .It is something I know a lot about." When asked about what he likes to read, Tony shared Sheldon's sentiments about violence. To him, violent comic books were not only interesting and relevant; they were in some strange way therapeutic.

Me: Tony, what do you like to read?

Tony: I don't like to read [Laughs].

Me: I know you read something.

Tony: I'm almost done with high school, and I ain't never read a book all the way through. I don't like reading.

Me: You write raps, don't you?

Tony: Yeah.

Me: Do you read them?

Tony: Yeah, but that's not reading, like reading books. I see what you saying. Rap is poetry. So when you on yo flow, I guess you be reading it. But it ain't like that.

Me: [Interrupts] Okay, I understand that. Do you read magazines?

Tony: Yeah, but I read comic books.

Me: See you read. How long have you read them?

Tony: I always liked comic books.

Me: Which ones?

Tony: I like the classics: X-men, Batman is my favorite, Superman, Spiderman, Spawn. The video game books like comics too.

Me: What makes comics interesting?

Tony: The struggle. It's like life. You gotta struggle to make it, to overcome your enemy. Life is action packed.

Me: Like a comic book?

Tony: Yup. The action you get in comics is in yo face. It's entertaining to see people struggle. And I think violence is like sex; it sells.

That's why it's around us. It make me feel better.

This notion that violence was not only entertaining but therapeutic 'disturbed me. In addition, violence was counter to what I had known about Tony, who, among the Guys, was the only one to never have had a fight. To me, it seemed like Tony was living vicariously through the experiences of the characters in the comics he read. He was attracted to the violence because it represented a fracture in the battle between good and evil. It was a place where the underdog could fight back (as was the case with X-men), attempting to reclaim a sense of worth from a world that robs individuals of dignity and humanity. Hence, for Tony, violence was struggle, a form of resistance that celebrated his own longing to overcome the obstacles of social oppression.

My conversation with Shawn was a bit different because it was about his writing interests as opposed to his reading interests. Notwithstanding, the theme of violence was ever present, as it powerfully showed up in Shawn's writing.

Me: Tell me a little about what you write about.

Shawn: Like what? I only write raps.

Me: Well. I don't know. Whatever you want to tell. Tell me about your raps.

Shawn: I write about a lot things in my raps: about how I'm feeling, about my life, my journeys, my struggles. I don't know. I just be getting things out, and usually people like me, they relate.

Me: People like you?

Shawn: Yeah. Young Black men like me, other rappers. We catch hell out here. You know it. So we got to document what's happening.

Ain't nobody else gone do it. It ain't easy out here for us, and people need to know about it. When life make you mad, make you want to beat up against the wall, you gotta get it out. Or you gonna beat somebody head in. So instead of knocking somebody block off, we write. So the anger, frustration, violence—all that—come out in our raps.

From the personal testimonies of these three young men, violence is seen both as an attractive part of reading, for it is—to them—relevant. The violence expressed in texts, however, was also a response for them to the lingering remnants of anger they failed to conceal (e.g., “. . .the anger, frustration, violence—all that come out in our raps”). When reading violent stories, the young men gained a sense of enjoyment and escape and entered a space where struggle against social norms was not only allowed but also elucidated. When writing, making violence visible in verse served a similar function. As Shawn pointed out, writing violent lyrics takes the place of the physical frustration that accompanies being feared and oppressed.

Being resisted stimulated resistance from the Guys. In order to be useful, resistance must be understood within this dialogic frame. That is, even while they were resistant, the Guys were being resisted. As the Guys used literacy to resist cultural domination, they also resisted literacy (Tony: “I don’t read”) as a way of opposing the value and status imposed upon dominant literacies by those who have long resisted them.

In this sense, we can view the Guys’ resistance in two ways—as rejection and critique. The Guys employed resistance (social rejection) sometimes overtly by not appropriating dominant functions of literacy like reading “books”. They also employed

resistance (as critique) within the literacies they practiced like writing violence in raps.

We now turn to an analysis of the Guys' resistance in and to literacy and dominant society.

Narratives of Resistance: Literacy as Social Critiques and Silent Struggles

Literacy in the lives of the Guys sometimes acted as a form of resistance, privileging radical literacy practices—"the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it . . ." (Foucault, 1977, p. 154). Shawn's "Fuck the Police" (figure 5) tattoo was an example of this kind of resistance. While the phrase was appropriated from Black people's historical struggles with law enforcement and Hip Hop artists' (most notably NWA) articulation of this struggle, Shawn's tattoo gives evidence to how the Guys positioned language and literacy to resist mainstream domination. Hence, literacy became a tool to criticize institutions, like law enforcement, which made such domination possible.

Shawn's tattoo was not the only example of social critique produced by the Guys. Such commentary usually showed up in all of their writings. For example, in the following excerpts taken from Derrick's journal, another example of social critique and commentary is presented. Derrick's personal stories, like Shawn's brash "Fuck the Police" tattoo, were narratives of resistance.

Excerpt #1:

What is a man with no blood in his vain and no water to drink?

Good people have no reason to do good things for no reason

because in one's mind it is the right thing to do. Evil deeds can

only be put in one's hands but it is that person's choice to do it or

not. I can't say that all weak minded people are evil and vice versa but we all must make choices in our lives. Everyday choices are laid out before us to test the soul mind and body. Yes, the choices are laid out before us to test the soul, mind, and body. Yes, the choice will always be as long as you have time. In my mind, I have no choice. I do what I must to be strong. My choices are here, so I will choose now!

While the excerpt expresses Derrick's personal thoughts about life, a deep reading suggests that it issues deep criticism about an unjust world. In the excerpt, Derrick struggles to make sense out of the sometimes difficult choices individuals must make in order to survive. He questions, "What is a man to do with no blood in his veins and no water to drink?" The statement is profound, for it introduces a critique of society, which Derrick characterizes as a place in which "Good people have no reason to do good things for no reason." He reasons, "Evil deeds can only be put in one's hands. . ." These statements appear to defend evil, which goes against popular ideas where good always wins. However, Derrick is critiquing evil by questioning a population of individuals who see themselves as "good" but fail to "do good" unless they have reason. Hence, the society Derrick exposes is one where the black and white treatment of good/evil is made complex. This allows Derrick to, also, render complexly the choices of individuals, which, too, are neither black nor white.

While Derrick's writing is revealing, it also tragic and ironic. In a world where "we all must make choices in our lives," Derrick sees himself with "no choice" at all. This tragedy of irony was a crucial part of Derrick's social critique. It presents a counter-

narrative, which exposes a less than romantic society. In the following excerpt, Derrick continues to shed light on a disparate world, far removed from our conscious and everyday thoughts.

Excerpt #2:

A bullet flies. It hits me, collapsing my lung. My mouth opens wide, but the song is unsung. Why did this happen? What wrong have I done? More shots rain out—hollow tips from his gat. I've been shot too many times. Is there a chance of coming back. Out of about 13, one hits my heart, as my body is thrown back. My whole plan falls apart. This was no work of nature, more like a work of art. And I heard him say as I was going to the bottom, "I got what I wanted, now I'm glad that I shot him." I love him and the bullets both the same, but I hate that I am an immortal in so much pain. All too tired of the strain with the bullets in my body, I still had to get up. Living life with these sheep man, I want to give up. I can't follow your shepherd cause he is a corrupted one. He give you all the bullets, but didn't give a gun. You tried to be the man, so you tried to put me out. But you can't stop me; it's just sad to see how you show so much stupidity. You should have lived life by thinking critically. Keep your head up. Don't try to follow me. Try to be someone different. Live independently. The fact that you tried to hurt me didn't hurt me. It's the fact that you're hurting yourself trying to hurt me that hurts me.

In this excerpt, Derrick's preoccupation with death and dying is clear. There is the violence of gunshots and the vivid story of "collapsing lungs." But like the first excerpt, this example criticizes crucial aspects of society (e.g., "I can't follow your shepherd cause he is a corrupted one"). Derrick presents a dog eat dog world, where, "to be the man," you would have to put someone else out. Derrick considers this competitive existence as stupidity, as it offers no joy. Simply put, it offers only tragedy, which is profoundly captured in Derrick's other statement of irony: "The fact that you tried to hurt me didn't hurt me. It's the fact that you're hurting yourself trying to hurt me that hurts me."

In addition to using literacy to critique society and offer these tragic and ironic counter-narratives/narratives of resistance, the Guys resisted dominant manifestations of literacy by resisting to read and write in formal, academic ways.

Shawn: I don't like to read, Kirk.

Jose: Me neither.

Me: Why?

Jose: It's boring

Shawn: Naw. It's the stuff they have you read [in school].

Me: Like what?

Derrick: We reading Macbeth in my English class. Hell, when I do read it, I don't know what he saying. I know it ain't important.

This part of our conversation suggested that the Guys were voluntary resistant readers because academic reading lacked relevance to them. As the conversation continued, their resistance to reading gained greater justification, as academic reading not

only lacked relevance, it also presented a perceived threat.

Shawn: Yeah, they be trying to get you to read all that White stuff, like that gone make you smarter. It's gone make you Whiter.

[Laughs]

Tony: That's why I don't read. In my class, we don't even read about Black people. What I'm gone read for. I just be quiet and put my head down.

Shawn: Nigga, that's cause you can't read [laughs].

Tony: I can read better than you

[Laughs]

Keith: Cain't none of y'all read. Y'all been hooked on phonics since y'all was three and y'all asses still hooked on phonics [Laughs].

Me: Keith, do you like to read.

Keith: Not in school. I hate to read in school.

Beyond their joking, the Guys' resistance to academic reading suggests that academic reading served the purpose of cultural domination, to "make you Whiter." The Guys were suspicious by the perceived lack of cultural representation in their choice of school texts [e.g., "In my class, we don't even read about Black people"]. This lack of selection silenced Tony, as he admitted to resisting reading texts that did not represent Black people. For them, reading in school for school purposes made reading a bad experience. To this point, Keith admits: "I hate to read in school."

Our conversation continues, now with the focus on writing in school.

Me: How about writing? Do any of you like to write in school?

Derrick I know you write.

Sheldon: I don't like writing for school. . . I just B.S. my way through my papers [Interrupted].

Derrick: It's not the same writing for a class. You can't be you. See my man [pointing to Shawn]; he got his own style. In school, they don't let you be you.

This last example also illustrates the ways in which the Guys were reacting to being resisted (e.g., “. . . they don't let you be you”). Hence, their resistance to academic forms of literacy was more or less a response to being resisted. It was also their way of battling/dealing with the forces of irrelevance and cultural domination, forces that they confronted daily in school and out.

Inherent in this form of resistance (i.e., rejection of academic literacy) was the societal labeling of the Guys as low literate (see Chapter 6). In this sense, the Guys resistance to academic literacy helped to reproduce structural relations of oppression (Weis, 1982). Ironically, in resisting dominant manifestations of literacy, the Guys rejected this promise of mainstream inclusion, and of their own volition, cemented their existing peripheral social positions. However, they continued to practice literacy—beyond the authority of the school—in their own ways.

Conclusion

As they practiced literacy, the Guys contested cultural domination. They employed literacy to call attention to, to critique, and to reconfigure the relationship between and to put into dialogue society's racist points of view and their own. In this way, their practices of literacy were sometimes at odds with the norms of society. When

the reality of racism set in and the option of resistance was a very real alternative, the Guys sought social asylum from institutional oppression in silence or in critique.

Being literate by school standards was not necessarily desirable to the Guys. While reading and writing were valued practices, reading and writing for detached academic reasons were not deemed as valuable. Instead of analyzing Shakespeare, the young men, on their own volition, analyzed *Source Magazine*. Instead of writing term papers, they invented terms and used them in their raps. The practice of literacy, for them, was a political act, through which they could situate themselves as social agents capable of deviating from the established norms of society, for good or for ill.

Despite their opposition to school, the Guys were, nonetheless, affected by the “official script” (Gutierrez & Stone, 2000) or norms of school, or what I refer to as the standardized literacies of society. Notwithstanding, they operated mostly within a counter narrative, which articulated the positioning of these young Black men against the status quo. Reading and writing from the margins, the Guys articulated social criticism through a practice of literacy that allowed them to engage in a battle in which nothing less than the freedom of identity and expression were at stake.

This spirit of resistance was, for them, an important symbol of hope, whereby change became visible through struggle. It is in this production of resistance that students like the Guys gain the possibility of promise and teachers interested in critical pedagogy gain a valuable resource for progressive change (Folds 1987, Woods 1990). It is, then, no surprise to me that the Guys employed resistance to offset the numbing effects of cultural domination. Their resilience, while collective, was personal. In the next chapter, I look more closely at this personal aspect literacy in the lives of the Guys.

CHAPTER 5

Discourse and Literacy: (Re)Forming Identities and Re(Dis)covering Selves

Two years ago, something tragic happened in my life that required me to go through a great deal of soul searching and life changing.

It was a warm October day, and the rays from the Sun had awakened me. Everything was well, and my cousins were getting ready for school like any normal day. It just seemed as if life just changed in a blink of an eye. This was my tenth grade year, and it was also the day before the city playoff between my school and its cross town rival.

While I was on my way to school, I got a call from my mother, telling me that my little cousin Clarence had been hit by a car on his way to school. Well actually he was waiting on the bus and this car jumped the curve and hit him. When the news hit me, it seemed as if my heart dropped into my stomach. I tried to be strong and hide behind my football body, but this didn't work. As each hour ticked by, I tried to tell myself: "It's just a broken leg or arm. He'll be ok." But doubt always stood in my mind . . . death.

Later on that day, I tried my hardest to participate in practice, but my mind wasn't with the team that day. After practice my uncle came and picked me up and drove me to Saint Robin Hospital. When I arrived there, I could hear blood curling screams that sent tingles down my spine. There, I learned the worst news. My cousin would not live. The doctors told us that he had a fractured skull and many broken arteries. All we could do is pray and leave it in God's hands.

That next day, God called my cousin home. From that point on, I dedicated my next football season to him. I wore his birthday day as my jersey number: #26. I also dedicated my first two tattoos to him. Since he was young, I feel that it's my way of making sure he lives on.

R.I.P.

Clarence Duolley

(Written artifact, 10-03-2003, Derrick Todd)

In so many ways, the dominant group determines not only what gets said and heard in public discourses (Scott, 1990, p. 14), but controls what happens to subordinate groups and how their identities and realities get projected in public spaces (Freire, 1970; Smitherman & van Dijk, 1988). As political theorist James Scott argues in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), discursive and social sites, like literacy, shape and take shape within "a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate" groups (p. 14). Hence, literacy practices have, in part, served conflicting

public roles, usually made acceptable when serving the interests of the social elite and unacceptable when encouraging the perspectives of the socially marginal (Besnier, 1995; Cope & Kalantzis, 1994; Luke, 1996; Macedo, 1999). However, the purpose of literacy is not always public and its function is not altogether conflicting.

The literacy practice in the lives of some young men are in fundamental ways intimately personal (Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2003), connecting the richness of cultural heritages to the ascribed complexity of social circumstances. These practices allow for the manufacturing of personal narratives and the recasting of personal experiences, which otherwise might get lost in the distances of forgotten memory and the politics of far-reaching oppression. For many urban adolescent young Black men, it is the personal aspect in the dialogic of literacy that is vital for both life and liberty, as it affords them some agency, or control, over how they are perceived and perceive themselves in relation to a larger society. This has held true in the case of the Guys.

The Guys' astute aesthetics of effervescent tattoos to the painful poetics of fastidious raps are deeply personal, motivated only in part by larger symbolic forces (Bourdieu, 1991; Smitherman & van Dijk, 1988). Such forces, or discourses, delve deeply into the corral of consciousnesses—both selves and others—and contribute to the shaping of social beings. As such, there is a dialogic tension at work in the practice of literacy, which can be clearly seen through the Guys' tattoos, raps, jersey numbers, (video) game play, and everyday language use.

While chapter 3 and 4 examined the role of the collective/political in the practices of literacy, this chapter examines how the Guys practiced literacy to negotiate and articulate personally authored aspects of themselves. Artifacts of literacy (like those

mentioned above) reveal how the Guys perceived themselves and the multiple and oftentimes tenuous realities (and harmful fictions) that they endured. Discourses, realized as a complex nexus of distinctive possibilities, rendered the Guys' personal identities visible. While such identities were produced, evocatively exercised in thoughts, they were volubly voiced and made known through the Guys' human testimony.

As such, the Guys read and wrote, sometimes using their flesh as canvass, about the deep things affecting and sometimes afflicting them. Literacy practices offered them personal reprieve from hijacked identities, formed on the bases of prejudice and dissent. Both literacy and identity for them, while publicly contested, functioned privately as a way of helping the Guys reflect upon personally valued narratives and burgeoning ways of being.

This chapter starts with them, in the literate stuff that both shaped and defined them. Throughout the chapter, I attempt to document how literacy, not only influenced major aspects of their social belongings, but also their personal beings. For when they practiced literacy, the Guys were not only shaping symbols, they were also shaping themselves. Hence, the Guys practiced literacy as much to cope with the sometimes hard to deal with circumstances related to their intra- and interpersonal beings as they did to gain social acceptance and belonging.

Authoring Selves: Forming "I"dentities in Texts and Personal Reflections on Literacies

The practice of literacy is a critical site of identity formation for individuals (Gee, 1991, 1996). This relationship between literacy and identity can be more clearly understood in what Bakhtin (1979) characterizes as an "act." In this case, the individual

who performs an act or deed holds a unique place within the architecture of her or his being (Bakhtin, 1979, pp. 40-41, 53-54). Since the individual holds such an important place in identity formation, and because uniqueness is both given and yet to be achieved, the individual must actualize (or “articulate”) her or his uniqueness (pp. 41-42).

In this way, the individual embodies a distinct view of the world, her or his own sense of meanings, relations, and intentions. Identity as a result determines and is determined by both cultural and personal formations. It is a material production of (and social practice in) a particular time and place. It has the worldview of the individual it identifies embedded in it, juxtaposed against the multiple worldviews operative in dominant society.

In the Bakhtinian (1981) sense, identity is forged through dialogue (as opposed to contestation) between the self and the society. In this way, dialogue centers on the dynamic relationship between self and society, where self occupies a relative core and, thus, requires society (or the other) for existence. In Bakhtin’s (1986) broad concept of dialogue, all human experience is a complex web of interrelations with other selves.

Writing Raps, Producing Selves

The Guys, while molding language and other symbolic material as they practiced literacy, were being molded by the literacies they practiced. Writing raps, which helped to establish them as central participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in a larger (Hip Hop) community of literate peers, also gave the young men an opportunity to write themselves onto the foreboding tapestry of uncharted human experiences. In a conversation with them, the Guys were adamant about the powerful role that writing (and reciting) raps played in their making:

Shawn: Kirk can't feel my flow [referring to me].

Me: Why can't I feel it.

Shawn: 'Cause you don't hear me. You don't write raps (which was true).
And you be reading stuff about rap, but that don't make you a rapper. [Smiles]

Keith: You boogie, we hood. [Laughs]

The Guys: [Laughs] Aw man.

Me: So, I can't get down.

Shawn: You can get down. [Laughs] All I mean is this stuff make us, us. I be writing it for my life. Just like you writing your dissertation for yours, to understand us or something about Black males. I be writing my raps to understand me, to understand what happened to me. I live in my pen and paper. You don't live in it like us.

One of the Guys: You live in your computer.

The Guys: [Laughs]

Shawn: It don't make you like it make us.

What is more interesting than the way that the Guys were constructing me was the way that they were actively constructing themselves. While Shawn was directing them more globally (e.g., "it makes us"), his comments suggested something more personal (e.g., "I be writing my raps to understand me"). It is this aspect of the conversation that was most important. At one level, Shawn revealed himself as misunderstood. Writing raps was a practice of discovery/recovery, where he found himself and began to

understand essential aspect of life, for which, in his words, motivated the things he wrote about.

The conversation continues, as other young men chimed into the discussion.

Sheldon: I know what he [Shawn] saying. [Directed at me] He saying flow (or rap) is a way that we tell about ourself . . .

Jose: [Interrupts, stutters] Y-Yeah . . . I know when I write (Jose doesn't like to write raps and, therefore, doesn't write raps often), my stuff come from my heart [Interrupted]

Shawn: [serious] And from my life . . . the streets . . . the hood . . . all the things that make you, you. You use' em, and remake yourself . . .

At this point in our conversation, the Guys, while musing over what rap personally means to them, concurred that the writing of rap served personal and intimate purposes. For Sheldon, writing rap was a practice, or "way" to "tell about ourself."

Adding to Sheldon's understanding of writing raps, Jose contended that the personal tellings privileged in rap were intimate, concerning things that "come from" the "heart," that, in Shawn's words, "make you, you." Further, there seemed to be agreement among the Guys that the writing of raps was consistent with the authoring of selves. This point was made clearer as the conversation continued.

Derrick: [Laughs] You be giving yourself a verbal make-over.

The Guys: [Laughs]

Derrick: [serious] You know, you brag and stuff, write and rewrite who you are. That's why rappers, in stuff, [fidgeting with a straw] they

always talking about who they be . . . this and that. They trying to demonstrate who they are.

Shawn: [Pointing his hand toward Derrick] Sometime you gotta stretch the truth when you doing that because we more than the truth. If you listen to society, all rappers and the Black man are drug dealers, thugs, and basketball players. That's it. That's their truth. We got ours [our truth]. It don't be all lies all the time just like theirs ain't always lies. There is some real to it. But your truth is real to you, too, and the tighter your line [rap?] is, it can be just as real to everybody around you.

In this part of the conversation, the Guys displayed a complex understanding of authoring. That is, authoring was contested and contingent, based upon who had the authority to make truth claims (Foucault, 1976).

The agency over self that the Guys gained in writing raps was, perhaps, not theirs alone. Rather, the ability to fashion raps that opposed society's other "truths" belonged—in part—to the sociolinguistic traditions to which the Guys belong. In keeping with important semantic and discursive features of African American Language (AAL), or Ebonics, things like meaning and voice ceremoniously got played with and complexly performed. Meanings were multiplied and inverted (Smitherman, 2000), as living in "the hood" or "the streets" become privileged markers of status and being. The bragging, an AAL mode of discourse (Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 2000), was admittedly practiced, as the Guys both "bragged" and "stretched" the truth in their "verbal make-over[s]." Even the Guy's discussion of rap was saturated with the richness

of AAL. Their verbal play extended into put-downs (e.g., “you boogie”). As a perceived outsider, I got signified on because I couldn’t “feel” Shawn’s “flow” due to my “reading stuff about rap,” which, to them, didn’t make me a rapper.

Clearly operating in AAL, the Guys were mediating possible selves with existing cultural tools (e.g., rap and AAL) as a way of achieving desired personal goals of reclaiming their identities. The point, here, was that self-authoring was not divorced from the “landscape of voices” that Dyson (2003) talks about in her study of “the Brothers and Sisters” (see also Bakhtin, 1981). Like “the Brothers and Sisters,” the Guys borrowed and revoiced, hence, “recontextualized” symbolic, social, and ideological options from their “landscape of possibilities” (Dyson, 2003).

The rules for verbal play and performance in rapping and writing raps were not without limits, however. According to the Guys, where “stretching the truth” was allowed, stretching the truth too narrowly ran the risk of transgressing boundaries of acceptable verbal play. In this way, hyperbole was privileged over understatement. The following conversation illustrates this point:

Shawn: . . . you don’t lie to make yourself look bad, and you definitely don’t lie and don’t make your lie look like a lie. [You lie] Only about what you can do better than the next man, and, then, you blow it up. Like you say [he begins to flow]—I can put my fist through steel/kill the will of those niggas who be frontin on me/pulling bills by the mill/gotta breezies sweatin me . . .

Tony: [Quietly whispers] That’s what’s up.

Shawn: That’s what’s me, nigga. [Laughs]

Shawn's acknowledgement that rap stretched the truth seems ironic against his final statement, "That's what's me." This irony can be resolved when we understand Shawn as constructing himself, not as someone who can put his "fist through steel," but as someone capable of authoring complex and exotic metaphors that demonstrate his confidence and strength. Compared to someone who can put a "fist through steel," Shawn believed that he can achieve the extraordinary and, therefore, authors himself as extraordinary, "pulling bills by the mill[ions]" with women "sweatin" him.

The use of hyperbole as opposed to actual ability was like shouting as opposed to using a normal vocal pitch. Like shouting, one uses hyperbolic statements to be heard, especially in the midst of dominant ideologies that work to silence urban Black males (Baker, 1993; Kunjufu, 1996). Rose, in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), argues that "rap music, more than any other form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, 'legitimate' ... ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality" (p. 102). It is a place where the voiceless are heard and the ghetto storytellers can paint authentic urban histories (Smitherman, 1999). It is also a place where the invisible are made visible.

Baker (1993), in "Scene . . . not heard," characterizes Black males struggles to be heard. He argues that Black males, whose authentic selves desire voice, are rendered silent participants in the "scene" of American violence. This silence is further complicated by the challenges that Black males face in their struggles to effect, or inflect, versions of history with sounds and symbols of their own voices and narratives of their own experiences. In this way, as Shawn notes, Black males are unfairly projected as

deviant and, worst, rarely find social opportunities to negate such inaccurate representations. It is, therefore, telling that writing rap—as literacy practice—was used by Shawn and his peers to not only rewrite/disrupt histories, but to rewrite/reclaim selves.

Body Language: Literacy, Identity Formation, and Flesh

Part of literacy as self-authoring is the act of reclaiming selves, which involves reclaiming stolen, lost, and sometimes distorted bodies. Throughout history, bodies have been rendered and received, and Black male bodies have long been the site of struggle and contestation. bell hooks, in *We Real Cool* (2003), maintains that the Black male body is a place of antimony, given its public presentation of strength lacking dignity. During chattel slavery, European regimes stole Black bodies—some of them female—and quite literally manipulated them for their own desires, intents, and purposes. In this way, the body is important to understanding self-authoring, but it would be careless to discuss it without acknowledging the flesh, as the flesh reveals the story of Black bodies through embedded wounds and scars.

Spillers (1994) makes a distinction between “body” and “flesh” which is useful in terms of understanding the relationships between literacy and self-authoring, to which the Guy’s tattoos speak. According to Spillers, this distinction is central to understanding captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body,” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of literacy (Spillers, 1994, p. 457). In the case of Black Americans, if we think of the “flesh” as a primary narrative, we mean its tragic darkness, complicated by its “seared, divided, ripped-apartness” and other types of iconography that reveal the Black body (Spillers, 1994, p. 457). For example, in portraits

of African captives, we witness brutal bruises, wounds, and scars that narrate the bondage of Black bodies.

What Spillers terms the “flesh,” in other words, is what Shane White and Graham White (1998) discuss as the surface of Black bodies, on which “in freedom, as in slavery ... the struggle between black and white was often cruelly etched, and on which the record of that struggle may be read” (p. 126). White and White cite, as an example, the story of an ex-captive named Sandie. Sandie mutilated his body and threatened to commit suicide in front of White witnesses who were attempting to return him to bondage after documents attesting to his freedom had been burned in a fire. White and White recount how many years later Sandie, by then a successful farmer who was distinguished for his physical strength, still bore the signs of his struggle for freedom on his body, or, in Spillers’s terms, on his flesh (pp. 125-26).

Like narratives of the flesh, in general, and especially those inscribed on Black flesh, Sandie’s scars could not give true hearings to the “scenes” of violence that produced them (Baker, 1993). Although a person’s flesh may be “traced by language,” such texts are always subject to dissolution by ideas and obscuring forces (Foucault, 1977, p. 148). As Foucault (1977) contends, the body manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors. These elements may join in a body where they achieve a sudden expression, but as often, their encounter is an engagement in which they efface each other, where the body becomes the pretext of their insurmountable conflict (p. 148).

In the Foucauldian sense, the body (i.e, the flesh) is a site of sociocultural inscription, where a sort of hegemony of norms gains purchase. It follows that such

inscription can be rewritten, fostering resistance to the establishment of such norms. Subcultures, like the Guys, employ the lyric-laced pen and the tattoo needle for this rewrite.

The Guys tattoos, for example, coined tales that, according to Shawn, “belonged” exclusively to their making. Yet, having tattoos, regardless of their “deeper meanings,” afforded the Guys entry into a wider world where having tattoos is also “cool” (see also Bilson & Majors, 1996; Kirkland & Jackson, forthcoming). Notwithstanding, the tattoos that marked them (both literally and figuratively) were theirs, containing their personal stories, which helped to constitute their social identities. Using personal materials to etch tattoos, the identities of the Guys were self-authored and, using their bodies as tablets, made visible, as they were recorded in both pain and ink.

The tattoos of Derrick and Shawn were of special importance to me because of the explicit linkages they made between their identities and their body art. This art gave evidence to the will of the Guys to rewrite themselves on a canvass of flesh, even when that flesh was publicly ridiculed (hooks, 2003; Platt, 2002). While this art physically demonstrated the personal dimensions of literacy in the lives of the young men, the Guys’ tattoos also figuratively demonstrated how the young men used words and flesh to construct themselves through icon and stories that, because of them, became alive.

Derrick: My tattoos mean a lot to me.

Me: Can you tell me more about what you mean by “mean a lot”?

Derrick: Yeah. I mean, every tattoo that I got has a story. See this one here [showing me a tattoo he has on the left side of his chest, where his

brother's nickname, "Boss," prominently and permanently appears over the image of a bulldog].

Me: I do.

For Derrick, having a tattoo etched in his brother's name was meaningful. That, in itself, is revealing. It suggests that tattoos can carry personal or affective functions (e.g., "every tattoo that I got has a story"). In addition, tattoos also connoted a sense of being or personal meaning for Derrick (e.g., "My [as a personal possessive] tattoos mean a lot to me"). This latter function was more clearly illustrated, as our conversation developed.

Derrick: To a lot of people, this is just my brother's name on me, but I put it on me after he got killed because Boss was more than a brother to us [speaking of his other siblings and himself]. He was like my father, my best friend, my punisher. Everything. He protected us, feed us when we was hungry. Did everything for us.

For Derrick, to inscribe his flesh with his brother's name was an act of power—keeping his brother alive through his body. The tattoo was a personal story, literally, kept close to Derrick's heart. His body became the living moment of his brother's memory. Derrick authored himself as memorial, especially to a brother who was meaningful to him. He continued:

Derrick: When he [Boss] died, I couldn't take it. I wanted to be where he was, so I started doing stuff, acting reckless. I was always fighting, trying to die. My momma came to me one day and said, "I know you hurting." I was. I just broke down right there. .

.started crying. She started crying, screaming, “Why?” I didn’t know what to tell her. I wanted to know why, myself, man. Why did God have to take my brother? He was a good guy. I didn’t know why he had to go. But seeing my momma crying was like, man . . . [pause] . . . I had to be strong. I had to be strong like my brother for my mother and for my sister and brothers just like Boss was strong for me. That’s what I’m saying.

At this point in our conversation, the notion of deep meaning was more clearly revealed, illustrated in tears and voiced in screams. The meaning of the tattoo was made manifest, as it became less of a memorial and more of a symbol of stolen strength, or will appropriated (e.g., “I had to be strong. I had to be strong like my brother . . .”). By bearing his tattoo, Derrick was self-authoring. He was constructing himself according to his image of Boss, as strong “like Boss was strong for” him.

According to Platt (2002), strength and survival are common themes inscribed on the bodies of many urban Black males. For example, Platt explains in his book *Only the Strong Survive* (the title is telling) that basketball superstar Allen Iverson’s tattoos (“soldier,” “strong,” and “survive”) narrate how he has overcome his lived struggles. According to Platt, many urban Black males are like Allen Iverson, finding ways to write (about) their struggles and triumphs through their tattoos. Pratt argues that tattoos serve this personal function of narrating a complex existence, which lies at the ironic intersection of Black nihilism and the audacity of Black hope (West, 1993). For Pratt, tattooing is a way of documenting pain, speaking of and back to a difficult past, and surrendering that pain in the ascribed strength of symbols. For one to remain, one must

be strong, no matter how tough a situation might be. The story is a common trope in African American folklore (Baker, 1993) as well as in Hip Hop (Platt, 2002)—one of continual progression: “By strength, I’ve come a long way. By being strong, I can go a little farther.”

Strength is also the permitted illusion of a self that many Black folk, especially Black women, deploy to mask their inner vulnerabilities (see Morgan’s [1996] critique of the “strong Black woman”). For Derrick, the tattoo of Boss’s name was helpful in allowing him to deal with the deep feelings of pain and regret associated with his brother’s untimely death. In his words: “This one right here [pointing to his tattoo of Boss’s name], this one did something for me.”

Derrick: It helped me cope [stops, smiles] and is helping me cope with my own struggles ‘cause I loved that dude and he gone. But he ain’t gone, see. He in my heart; that’s why I got his name right here [pointing to his chest] written on my heart . . . I take him wherever I go. He alive in me.

Me: I see why your tattoo means a lot to you.

Derrick: I don’t know. [Pause.] I want to be like him [Boss]. Having his name on my chest helps to remind me of what I want to be.

Me: What’s that?

Derrick: A better man.

Using Boss’s name, Derrick wrote himself, who he wanted to be, and his brother’s memory—all at once—in flesh and ink. His brother, who he perceived as “a better man,” presented for him a dialogic unity, a combination of self and other. Through

his brother, Derrick inherited, if you will, a renewed sense of himself. The tattoo labeled this aspect for (and of) him and allowed Derrick to appropriate and revoice the “living pulse” of language that defined Boss beyond, even, his name.

The use of tattoos as a tool for self-authoring was not exclusive to Derrick. Shawn also made use of tattoos to formulate significant aspects of who he desired to be and to articulate aspects of his identity that he, himself, had authored. By locating himself in his tattoos, personal aspects (such as self-contained stories, meanings, and perspectives) contributed to the complexity and power of Shawn’s self-authored identity. While his tattoos recontextualized material from diverse social worlds, they uniquely blended these worlds, which afforded him his very own uniqueness. For example, Jose referred to one of Shawn’s tattoos (a black fist enveloped in flames) as “sweet,” commenting, “I ain’t seen no one else with it . . . I’m gonna get one just like that, but I gonna put my name in mine.” In a similar way, Derrick taunted, “I know it’s Shawn. You can tell him by his tattoos. Ain’t nobody got ones like he got” (which probably wasn’t true).

While Shawn acquired many tattoos in a span of five years (he received his first tattoo at the age of twelve), his discussion of one in particular helps to demonstrate the ways in which he used tattoos to author his spiritual identity.

Shawn: I got this one [a tattoo saying “Vengeance is Mine thus saith the Lord]” ‘cause it remind me [Tu] Pac [Shakur] [who had a tattoo of a cross on his back, which framed the label “Exodus 18:11”].

While the Guys’ tattoos served multiple purposes, usually helping to author multiple aspects of their identities, they practiced literacy usually to etch crucial aspects

of their identities as young Black men. Literacy, to them, was about projecting, maintaining, and attempting to understand oneself, which was defined in relation to both their personal and social experiences.

Personal Carnivals: Appropriating Race in Identity Formation

Jose: There is a difference between the tattoos that Black people and White people get. White people be getting thorns and skulls and demonic stuff. We usually get stuff that means something to us, that displays our Blackness, like Tupac's [tattoo of a] black panther.

Essential to the Guys' sense of being was their appropriation of race. Race—defined as “a group loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry” (Lopez, 1995, p. 193)—played an important role in both how the Guys' authored themselves and in the literacy practices they used to contribute to their authoring. According to Fine (1997), race “is a critical and defining feature of lived experience that young and old people of all colors reflect upon, embody, challenge, and negotiate” (p. 251). This is clear in Jose's assessment of the differences between “the tattoos that Black and White people get.” Hence, how one inscribes their flesh reveals important aspects of how one establishes oneself as raced.

In understanding the role of race in self-authoring, it is helpful to explain race, using Bakhtin's (1984) notion of “carnival.” Race, like carnival, is a general sense of the world, a way of life, as opposed to a spectacle seen by people. We live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people. As a form of being, race is specifically an expression of limits. One is limited to being something and never

everything at once. When one becomes a mixture of multiple races, one becomes none of those races at all, but something altogether new and different. In this way, there is no other life outside of race.

As such, race is not only a marker of the individual. Rather, it is an invitation to become a part of a complex unity, a bodily collectivity. In this sense, race is carnival, where “the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed (through change of costume and mask). At the same time the people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 255).

In a similar way, critical race theory abandons the innocence of authoring, recognizing the affixed normality, hence, invisibility of race in everyday social and personal expressions of literacy (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). Race is undeniably an element in the symbolic/personal construction of the self, “negotiated as a social process rather than as a biological determinant” (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, p. 8). In this way, critical race theorists set forth the premise that race is a permanent feature in one’s construction (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1995). The permanence of race in one’s construction means that racial identities influence every aspect of the self, including the literacies one chooses and does not choose to practice.

While they practiced literacy to reclaim/reinvent their identities, the Guys also practiced literacy to affirm their race. In this way, the Guys struggled constantly within themselves, to make sense of racial identities that became uniquely and ubiquitously theirs. As mentioned, even the young men’s bodies acted as resources—canvasses—for

racialized expressions of literacy. The body became both literally and figuratively impossible to sever from the Guys' literate/racial identities.

Early in this study, Sheldon made this point clearer for me.

Sheldon: I be reading all the time, but as a Black [male], I can't be reading that stuff they be reading in school, like with my boys. I got a rep[utation] to protect [laughing] . . . you know it's hard. I still gotta read, though, 'cause I don't want no body to think I'm a dummy. But you gotta keep it on the low 'cause you don't want no body to think you like White [people] either.

Sheldon's admission of his public/private struggles with race and literacy, to me, seemed problematic at first because I inaccurately interpreted his comments as suggesting that reading was equivalent with Whiteness. That is, Black males had no inheritance in the practice of reading, as he personally felt obliged to abandon the practice in the presence of peers.

Beyond not being cool, I initially interpreted Sheldon's comments as meaning reading was not being Black. I, later, understood that Sheldon was not critiquing reading at all. Rather, his critique had more to do with ways of reading, especially with ways that schools promoted reading, which according to Heath (1983) also deals with personal choices and social ways of being. In a similar vein, Ferguson (2000) maintains, "To perform the act too realistically [of schooling], to appear to adopt whiteness not as a guise but as identity, is seen as an expression of self-hatred and race shame" (p. 213). In a similar way, hooks (2003) points out that intelligent Black men "have learned to act as if they know nothing in a world where a smart Black man risks punishment" (p. 33). In this

way, publicly rejecting reading was a way for Sheldon to protect himself. Based on what, when, where, and how he read, Sheldon's very construction as a Black male would be questioned. Choosing Blackness, Sheldon also chose to be critical of more school-based/standardized reading practices, which he (and scholars like Heath [1983]) associated with Whiteness.

- Me: What kinds of things do you guys like to read?
- Keith: I don't know. I read a lot of stuff, man . . . [interrupted]
- Tony: As a Black man, I gotta read. What you trying to say?
- Me: [Smiling] I just want to know what you read. . .that's all.
- Tony: But you trying to say that Black boys don't read.
- Me: I'm Black.

Here again, race is collapsed into literacy. Viewing themselves as raced, the Guys have also constructed views of literacy that are equally raced. Within these views, there are larger tensions at work (e.g., "As a Black man, I gotta read" . . . "you trying to say that Black boys don't read"). Implied in the example was an internal struggle, which likely stemmed from external messages concerning the negative relationship between Black males and reading. Hence, the external (or "othered") notion of Blackness that society perpetuates was at odds with the internal/personal understanding of Blackness that Jose had appropriated.

Using race as both personal and social expression, the clearest way for Jose to seal off negative connotations of Blackness was through what Bakhtin (1984) calls *parodic*, or a deliberate displacement and subversion of the ideological constraints of the system. In this case, Jose wished to displace and subvert the ideological system that

mystifies and constructs Blackness in the realm of illiteracy. Jose's personal view of race, then, built its own world versus the official world—a place in which Blackness could both reject the official reading practices of schools and still affirm its own needed/required (e.g., “As a Black man, I gotta read”), valued, and meaningful reading practices.

In some strange way, I became part (or coauthor) of Jose's self-authoring. My role was as the dominant “other,” which did not sit well with me. Disregarding my own privilege and authority, Jose's statement (“. . . you trying to say Black boys don't read”) reminded me that my authored self was quite different than theirs. Nonetheless, I tried to reason, too, through our shared racial identity that we were not very different. After all, “I'm Black.” My insistence on making my Blackness known to them was in concert with Jose's racialized personal discourse (e.g., “As a Black man”). I had, too, appropriated Blackness to construct a self that I personally valued and eagerly wanted the Guys to value too. Our conversation continued, now, with the focus on me.

Keith &
Sheldon:

But you different.

Me:

How am I different?

Keith:

I bet you be reading all the time.

Me:

I bet you be reading all the time, too. Is something wrong with that?

Shawn:

No. It ain't nothing wrong with reading. I'm saying. It just the stuff people be reading. Like in school, they want us to read this book about some crazy ass White boy who live on a farm [talking

about *Of Mice and Men*]. Personally, that ain't gone do me no good.

Me: Why?

Shawn: Because, I'm Black, and that shit don't apply to me.

Here again an emphatic enunciation of Blackness is put forth. This time it was Shawn (perhaps the most emphatic of the young men), who reasons—because he was Black—reading *Of Mice and Men* did not apply to him. What was most important was his construction of himself, he did not use being Black as a reason not to read (e.g., “It ain't nothing wrong with reading”). Rather, he argued that structures, like schools, made literacy practices like reading foreign and socially uncomfortable. In this way, the Guys did not always resist reading per se. They, instead, embraced Blackness, which found little place in schools.

As our conversation continued, the Guys embrace of Blackness was made clearer, as they revealed the things they did, in fact, read. Hence, text, though arbitrarily, are raced and gendered. As such, there becomes acceptable norms of reading and writing when one chooses (and is extended) Blackness as a social characteristic. In this way, to be Black (and male) means to read things acceptable within that discursive field. Further, it means to reject texts that do not find value and acceptance within the given discourse community. Our conversation continued.

Me: Derrick, you are smiling, but haven't said anything.

Jose: [with an X-Men comic book in his hand] I know I read.

Derrick: That's the point. We all read. [Laughing] At least I hope we all read. None of us want to be call a dummy 'cause we can't read. I

know I be reading stuff all the time, stuff like magazines, the newspaper . . . [interrupted]

Me: What part of the newspaper?

Derrick: [smiles] The sports section.

Me: Do you read any other stuff?

Derrick: Yeah. Comics and horoscope.

Shawn: I be reading stuff like that too, stuff that interesting, like about those dudes that got shot at 7-eleven. I think I knew one of them. He use to go to my school.

Jose: I read Black magazines too.

The Guys: Oh yeah. . . yeah. . .me too.

Jose: Like *Vibe*, *Source*.

Tony: I be on *King*.

Jose: They [not sure of who he is talking about] don't get it. This the stuff that makes us, us. It's what we interested in. So we do be reading, but y'all don't call the stuff we be reading, reading.

Me: I do.

Here, the Guys revealed a litany of texts that they engaged in their personal lives. As their social worlds connected, their personal choices in reading intersected. In this way, being was ever instilled in their reading selections (e.g., "I read Black magazines" . . . "me too"). It was being Black that became an affirmed choice, an identifier, for the Guys. Subsequently, being Black was at work in their self-authoring and in the ways that they chose to practice literacy.

For them, the practice of literacy was simultaneously a practice of personal and racial negotiations, where even the body, while inscribed with ink and various shades of brown pigmentation, acts as texts. Literacy gained intimacy in the writing of selves.

Conclusion

While intimately connected to and dependent upon the social landscape surrounding them, literacy in the lives of the Guys offered a similar personal narrative, which commented on their personal commitments and curiosities about rendered texts. It spoke to how they saw themselves specifically in a narrow personal world and globally in relation to larger social landscapes. Literacy products like tattoos, raps, magazines, and newspaper articles about sports and violence bore witness to social innovations, involved competitions, and personal struggles whose distinct and ever-evolving patterns, structures, and meanings shaped the idiom of contemporary Black masculine cultures, and by association, Black males like the Guys more generally.

In this way, the Guys were constantly striving for subjectivity (i.e., self-identity, a sense of themselves, and their own individual possibilities for action), while society was at work reproducing itself and its versions of valued literate practices. The body was a site to transgress such pursuits. It became apparent that the body was no longer an objective arena. It was the subject of great tensions, an object acted upon by self and other, by the individual and the society. In keeping marginal certain acts of literacy, society reproduced the self-other dichotomy that lies at the heart of most social fragmentations (e.g., racism, nationalism). While literacy for the Guys facilitated the entry of knowledge and information that had previously been suppressed or hidden in the public domain, literacy in school became personal transgression, narrowly conceived,

which took away the Guys' ability to tell stories and write (about) themselves—a practice of literacy I argue is of vital importance for marginalized student groups.

In the next chapter, I explore the implication of this research for future studies and pedagogical practice.

CHAPTER 6

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings presented in this research have offered a critique of reform initiatives like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and curricula that embrace narrow notions of literacy and neglect the situativity of literacy practice. Specifically, accountability and standardization, which is the basis of such items, assume that all children are the same, learn the same ways, and should learn the same things (McNeil, 2002). Writers and advocates of such material also misinterpret issues of power, assuming that access to academic literacy and holding students accountable for academic literacy practices alone will even the educational playing field.

However, literacy is defined on a distinct social and cultural battleground, upon which an ongoing war for equity and civic enfranchisement is continually waged. Schools factor into this struggle significantly, as questions about literacy teaching, literacy learning, and literacy assessment are constantly debated. While the struggle to define literacy more justly continues, literacy in the lives of the Guys gives us many reasons to expand notions of literacy in ways that consider nontraditional forms of these symbolic practices in our teaching and researching.

In this chapter, I briefly summarize the study's major research findings so that the link to their implications is made clear. Following this summary, I offer implications for future research (complex literacy studies), teaching (a cooperative literacy pedagogy), and teacher education. In doing so, this chapter also comments on the relationship between educational researchers and teacher practitioners. In it, I argue that educational researchers must collaborate more directly with teachers and teacher educators, as our research seldom influence classroom teaching practices (Cuban, 1996; Cuban & Tyack,

1996).

Summary of Findings

This study advances three key findings about literacy in the lives of the Guys. For organizational reasons, I have divided findings consistent with three important levels of literacy practice: sociocultural, socio-political, and personal. While I have disaggregated findings along these seemingly simplistic lines, I acknowledge that literacy in the lives of the Guys was a complex and dynamic practice, which took place on multiple levels of literacy at once. This complexity made literacy in the Guys' lives far more complicated than the following summary can ever suggest. With this in mind, the following summary is intended to act as a resource to help make the information reported thus far in this study more immediately accessible to readers.

Literacy at the Sociocultural Level

A key finding of this dissertation exemplifies the social nature of literacy practice. By suggesting that literacy is a by product of the social and cultural demands of the group, I have argued that the Guys practiced literacy as a way to establish and affirm commitments to their social and cultural domains (i.e., to one another, to particular aspects of popular and youth culture, and to the Black cultural heritage). The process of establishing and affirming commitments was indelibly complicated work, which usually involved collaborative literate activities like joint story-telling, cultural reproduction (which involved the veneration of popular media) and appropriations (which involved the necessary use of popular media in peer play), and various forms of cultural production. Within this process, literacy was practiced to generate group identities, produce shared understanding/social contracts with the groups to which the Guys as a group belonged,

and render visible the wider social world. Hence, the practice of literacy was necessarily tied to social bonds that were created as a result of the Guys' symbolic performances. In this way, literacy in the lives of the Guys was not only practiced to manufacture meanings for communication. It was also practiced to manufacture deep social and cultural commitments and generative symbolic bonds (e.g., White Ts) for social assignment.

Literacy at the Socio-Political Level

Another aspect of literacy in the lives of the Guys was its inherent political nature. The Guys practiced literacy as a way to resist social and cultural domination, whereby their commitments were strengthened. This form of "resistance" was evident in two distinct ways. First, the Guys utilized literacy as a way to critique elements of society they deemed inequitable. Second, they resisted forms of literacy associated with dominant culture as a way to protest the malignancy of the uneven distribution of relevance to tasks like classroom reading and writing. It must be noted as they wrote their own "narratives of resistance" (sometimes penned in the quiet stains of ink and silence), the Guys too were being read as objectionable texts and, as a result, resisted by virtue of their masculine Blackness.

Literacy at the Personal Level

Finally, this study reveals the personal nature of literacy for the Guys, which was as much about finding one's self and having the power to write one's own story as it was about affirming social and political commitments. This personal aspect of literacy is important as it gives the individual some place in her or his practice of literacy. Hence, while the Guys were evolving within their social groups (as their social groups too

evolved), they were also writing (about) themselves in ways that rendered them visible, capable, and most importantly human.

Complex Literacy Studies: A Direction for Future Literacy Research

Literacy in the lives of the Guys expands at least two popular literacy paradigms: new literacy studies and critical literacy studies. Specifically, the findings of this study suggests that the focus which new literacy studies gives multiple literacies may be limiting in that it fails to account for other complexities involved in the practice of literacy. While the contexts and contents of literacy practices have been rightly complicated within the multiple literacy paradigm, this study suggests that individuals blur both context and content in their practices of literacy. That is, the separation of literacy practices (i.e., for home/for school) might be misleading because literacy (as evidenced in the lives of the Guys) is a fluid practice that involves a dynamic/interdependent interplay of situations and events.

The Guys expanded “literacies from school” into their home lives and carefully weaved literacies from other places into their school lives. Further, the contents of literacy (i.e., literate forms) were also made complex in the lives of the Guys. For example, some of the Guys’ writings sent messages that blended the sacred and secular (e.g., Derrick’s poem in Chapter 3).

There seemed to be a collaboration/symphony of literate resources at work when the Guys practiced literacy. This made literacy more than multiple (conceived as sets of isolated practices). Literacy in the lives of the Guys was composed of intertextual/hybrid practices that finely wove into singular places the complex symbolic strings of multiple contexts and forms. It was a place where multiple literacies met and coalesced,

joining forces to construct complicated texts far more complex than how we currently conceive of literacy.

The multiple literacies paradigm allows us to discuss literacy with regard to forms (e.g., digital literacy) and contexts (e.g., school literacy) alone. This uncomplicated view of literacy is misleading because alive within these isolated descriptions of literacy are other forms of literacy and active in our description of the isolated contexts of literacy are understandings of literacy derived from other contexts. In order to account for this messiness, scholars must move toward a more complex study of literacy, which takes into account the complex ways in which literacy is practiced.

Literacy in the lives of the Guys also offers a critique of critical literacy paradigms based on deficit assumption of the individual. From this point of view, critical literacy is something to be given to the poor and distorted masses, to the oppressed, who themselves need access to a way/method for thinking and rendering the inequities of society visible. Further, the oppressed are so because they lack critical literacy and are, therefore, disempowered to serve their own personal, social, and political interests. While this view has seemed flattering to many as a benevolent attempt at redressing centuries old mechanisms of social oppression, as the Guys' literate stories suggests, it is perhaps as problematic and misleading as more traditional notions of literacy. With this said, I must note that the Guys practiced literacy in critical ways without the assistance of some "benevolent" aide.

Freire's (1970) concept of conscientization is useful for critiquing a certain aspect of critical literacy. According to Freire (1972), conscientization emphasizes the social, political and economic conditions (and contradictions) of oppressed individuals. Its goal

is to help them better understand themselves and their potential to initiate action and redress social inequities (Freire, 1972; Marjoribanks, 1991). By exploring literacy in the lives of the Guys, we learned that the Guys were “conscientious,” as they used literacy, actively to shape themselves and their social groups and to critique abounding social inequities. In a sense, literacy gave the Guys some agency over their shared cultural space, identity, and place in society. De Charms (1976) work on people as either “origins” or “pawns” supports this notion that people would rather look at themselves as controllers of their own behavior than as social puppets. In this way, the Guys practiced literacy not as social puppets, but as “conscientious” performers, capable of responding to inequities in society.

Freire's (1970) model of a critical pedagogy is helpful in understanding how to operationalize these finding for classroom practice, as it is rooted within social praxis, reflection and political action working together to break down oppression and the structures and mechanisms of oppression. It must be noted, however, that oppression is not exclusive to individuals alone. To be oppressed, individual's (or groups') interests must be suppressed as well. Practices like literacy must at the same time favor the cultural practices and work in the interests of the social elite. It must also project the narratives, beliefs, and values of this “elite” group in a way that simultaneously takes for granted the sociocultural contributions of the oppressed.

Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) fiercely critiqued what they depicted as a school system which served to justify and perpetuate inequality. Bowles and Gintis argued that schools (in addition to other institutions) functioned to validate preexisting economic inconsistencies in society. By making certain forms of knowledge legitimate

(and thereby making other forms illegitimate), schools got students to buy into an unfair and fallacious “meritocratic” school system and accept asymmetrical social positions.

In a similar way, Freire (1970) questioned the role of literacy in school and society and sought to promote a (critical) literacy pedagogy that could help oppressed individuals become empowered and think critically about schools and the hidden consequences of their own actions. For Freire, the key to promoting education was in a practice of teaching literacy that gave individuals a process for (ex)posing problems and a method for working toward real and liberating solutions.

While Freire believed that individuals needed access to the technologies (i.e., method) of social critique and cultural criticism through direct instruction, (as mentioned earlier) literacy as practiced in the lives of the Guys suggests that individuals already have access to such technologies without having direct instruction. The Guys’ literate stories suggest that many of the critical literacy practices advocated by Freire are being performed daily in the lives of “oppressed” individuals. To their benefit, these practices occur constantly without the explicit help of schools. The Guys’ literate stories suggest two important things. First, they are not lacking literacy, but respect. Second, they are not lacking critical literacy, but formal opportunities to practice it. To construct them as lacking reifies deficit assumptions about Black males that work to reinforce existing social hierarchies and power structures.

Another problem with this form of dialogue is that educators run the risk of taking the stand that they are empowering students. Empowerment does not emanate from the educator to the student. This is a paternalistic view of teaching perpetuates another form of oppression, which Freire calls “colonizing.” The educator/oppressor assumes to know

what the student/oppressed needs and provides it for him or her. But what is actually being provided is a benign form of oppression.

The Guys were never passive objects of their oppression. They not only practiced literacy to critique social inequities, but to establish a view of themselves that drastically differed from the predominant view of Black males prevalent in society (see Chapter 1). It is not that oppressed individuals need to learn critical literacy. Rather, they must be allowed to practice literacy critically in schools and classrooms. The way that they have learned to participate in literate communities must also be affirmed and validated by schools, who are key sponsors of literacy (Brandt, 1999). Such revisions of literacy pedagogy are important. “Sponsoring” the ways that the Guys practiced literacy will not only be encouraging, but potentially transformative.

This speaks to another point that I have tried to make in this dissertation. That is, the Guys were being prevented from practicing literacy in mainstream settings as themselves and on their own terms. Significant issues of race and racism also played an important role in how the Guys practiced literacy. Specifically, race factored into the literacies the Guys practiced. In their practice of literacy, the Guys continually defended their choice to “be Black.” Racism, I argue, prevented other people from seeing the Guys as literate/human. Further, racism was the basis for social opposition to the Guys and their preferred practices of literacy.

In order to improve literacy education, literacy classrooms must become cooperative places, tolerant and respectful of racial differences. They must also act against racism by embracing an activist philosophy of determined and sustained social struggle and accommodate multiple literacy practices, including those literacies practiced

by the Guys. This need for reform is the basis for my Cooperative Literacy Pedagogy (CLP). Hence, CLP is vastly needed in literacy education because there is little evidence suggesting that standards and skills based literacy curricula are working to improve literacy learning among the most disadvantaged groups in our society. Instead, standards and skills based literacy curricula I contend help to reinforce narrow definitions of academic literacy that exacerbate the achievement gap. In this way, now more so than at any other time in history, the definition of literacy and the direction of literacy education must change. Literacy classroom must be amended to become more inviting places for students who have traditionally struggled in such settings (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Reforming Literacy Education: A Tale of Two Classrooms

During this study, I spent considerable time in two English classrooms at the Guys' high school. One was a tenth grade American Literature class, and the other was an eleventh grade British/World Literature class. Because of my interactions with them, I have distinguished the classes by their teachers. The tenth grade class was taught by Mrs. Crankshaw, an older White woman who had taught in the school for almost forty years. The eleventh grade class was taught by Mr. Kegler, a young White male who was in his first year of teaching. The following vignettes offer glimpses into their classrooms.

Ms. Crankshaw Classroom

I will never forget the day that I walked into Ms. Crankshaw's tenth grade English classroom. It was a clumsy day. I arrived to her class about five minutes late. Helplessly organized, somewhat frigid, and severely unaware, I reeled into the shrinking room, which seemed to become more crowded with my every move. About a week before my coming to her class, I had spoken with Ms. Crankshaw, who assured me

during our brief conversation that I could slip into her second hour class at any time without being noticed. Yet, when I stumbled through the constricting door, I felt the needles of over sixty eyes piercing through my skin. Derrick's stare perhaps penetrated me the most. He sat defiantly yet comfortably in the back of class, where, after a few visits, he and his friends would reserve a seat for me.

As I entered the classroom that Monday morning, I passed a cacophony of assorted scenes. As I ventured along the front of the room, the anticipation of learning was alive in many of the students' faces. However, as I drew nearer to the back of the classroom, to the secluded place where the Guys had sat since the beginning of the school year, the joy of fervent faces gradually faded away. The path leading to the rear of the room gave way to a gallery of images, which were displayed on the classroom walls. The walls had been comfortably decorated with quotations from "great" American authors, many of which featured the faces and biographies of dead White men, and goofy cartoon caricatures, which illustrated the "eight" parts of speech and other popular rules for English grammar. Mrs. Crankshaw's classroom, you can say, was a small world in itself, enriched by its own scenery. It was a pervasive and overpowering space, which created a highly intriguing landscape—one that privileged a narrow set of cultural ideas steeped in western tradition and Eurocentric ideologies.

In every way, Mrs. Crankshaw's English classroom embraced tradition. A slender White woman in her mid-fifties, Ms. Crankshaw had taught high school English for almost thirty years. Before moving to the high school, she briefly taught reading at one of the local middle schools, where she began her teaching career. Colleagues who worked with her described Ms. Crankshaw as "energetic" and as "someone who knows

how to teach English well.” Others thought that over the years Ms. Crankshaw had “lost her way with the students.” Many of her students even admitted that she was “not cool,” which meant she was somehow “out-of-touch with them.”

Nevertheless, Mrs. Crankshaw defended the English literary tradition and affirmed the English literary canon as if they were gospel. Her argument was that “students needed to be familiar with ‘great’ works [of literature] so that they could be successful in school and in life,” for success in Ms. Crankshaw’s eyes was defined by the acquisition of a narrow set of English language skills and through familiarity with classical texts.

In addition to holding traditional views, Ms. Crankshaw espoused a dualistic interpretation of students, which to me seemed blisteringly simplistic. She explicitly labeled students who performed well in her class as “good” and those like Derrick, who struggled, as “bad.” In her words,

You have good students, children who come from good homes where they are taught to love to learn and value hard work. You also have bad students. These students don’t want to learn. All they care about is taking the easy route and getting by. It’s not their fault though. Their parents are involved in their education. Like other students, they do what they learn at the home.

For Crankshaw, the “bad students” seemed somehow culturally or at least socially predisposed to resist learning. Simply put, they were lazy and indolent and came from impoverished backgrounds. By contrast, students who did well in school and in her classroom were viewed as value-driven and hard-working.

Mr. Kegler Classroom

A year after sitting in Mrs. Crankshaw's classroom, I followed Derrick, Jose, Tony, and Sheldon into Mr. Kegler's eleventh grade English classroom. Mr. Kegler is a new teacher at the Guys' high school, only a year removed from student teaching. While his lack of experience poses practical dilemmas, his newness to the field invites energy and surprised creativity. Derrick thinks he's "cool." In his words, "Mr. 'Keg' listens and tries to make class fun." To his credit, Mr. Kegler refuses to blame the Guys for their difficulties in his class. Instead, he searches diligently for ways to engage them in the city-mandated curriculum.

Another interesting trait of Mr. Kegler is his awareness of what he does not know. Because of this, the two of us developed a collaborative relationship, where my research findings influenced his pedagogical decisions. For example, I remember the day that Mr. Kegler came to me for help. He felt that he was not reaching his Black male students. He had several of them in his classroom and all but Sheldon was failing. He wanted to try new and exciting things that would hopefully engage them but was somewhat restricted by the city-mandated curriculum, which did much to restrict teacher autonomy.

Such curricular menus had become attractive in Lansing because Lansing, like other cities, struggled to uplift its failing students—many of whom were Black males. In the wake of NCLB, achievement became a lucrative affair and, in some ways, tended to count more than learning. NCLB placed a huge amount of pressure on schools to compete. This competition meant privileging narrow conceptions of language and literacy that could be easily measure by standardized tests.

I arrived at Mr. Kegler's class during the second nine weeks of school. Mr. Kegler was teaching out of the second quarter of the city-mandated curriculum. The

schedule dictated that the class read and discuss “with understanding” Homer’s *Iliad*. Fearful that *the Iliad* would bore his students, Mr. Kegler asked me for suggestions for making the text more relevant to students, especially the Guys. He knew that I was a certified English teacher, who had known the Guys now for over a year. He had hoped that, because of the time that I spent with them, I would have ideas on how to teach them. He was also committed to teaching for social justice, which meant disrupting traditional approaches to English language arts and affirming the cultural heritages of his students in his classroom.

To offer assistance to Mr. Kegler, I peered deeply through my notes and thought even more deeply about the relationship between literacy and the Guys. It was through my collaboration with Mr. Kegler and my being uncomfortable with Mrs. Cranksaw pedagogy that my CLP emerged. For me, Mrs. Crankshaw, while a good-intentioned teacher, represented the stagnation of the teaching enterprise.

Researchers have long lamented how teaching as a field has been resistant to change and how research has rarely influenced how classrooms are taught. Mr. Kegler, on the other hand, represented possibilities for transformative classroom adjustments. That is, researchers could work with teachers, as an ongoing part of practice, and teachers interested in social justice could work with students, using research finding that serve students’ interests. Thinking about ways to bring this relationship to life in the stubborn, unamusing classroom situation has been a complex but enlightening. It has, for me, marked a pedagogy in which a text like the *Iliad* would no longer be as foreign and irrelevant to Derrick and his peers as *Beowulf* once was.

Researcher-Teacher Collaboration: Toward A Collaborative Literacy Pedagogy

Researchers for social justice in education have dual duties. First, they must produce knowledge and insight, which interrogates social inequities, serve the interests of liberty and democracy (as both equal representation), and challenge an unfair status quo. The second duty is to translate this knowledge into language that practitioners can understand and employ in their teaching practices.

As mentioned earlier, the duties of teachers are also multiple and complex. Teachers are charged with planning and delivering instruction, managing classrooms, and reporting achievement outcomes to students, parents, and administrators. Teachers interested in social justice are also charged with three other things: 1) evening the educational playing field by helping disempowered students transform their social situations, 2) working against discrimination and social injustice by making classrooms more equitable places, and 3) developing practices that serves the interests of all students. Since researchers and teachers work for social justices from different angles, their duties instantiate a commitment to cooperative practice, which I am defining as a fundamental aspect of CLP. By cooperative practice, I refer to researchers and teacher working together as allies for social justice.

CLP combines two qualitative research methodologies: critical ethnography and action research. CLP employs critical ethnography and action research to capture the complexities of development, which I argue are social, cultural, and political. In this way, CLP stresses the notion that all education and, by extension, educational spaces are fundamentally contested. Action research, by association, provides a systematic, inquiry-based, scientific process conducted by participants (mainly instructors), who follow a process of examining existing practices, implementing new practices, and evaluating the

results all in collaboration with a researcher. The goal of CLP is to gain insight into students' localized social spaces and develop reflective/representative teaching practices to help transform those spaces and challenge existing barriers to improvement (Mills, 2003, p. 4).

Through collaboration, researcher-teacher teams will be able to navigate complex roles in research that is reflective of students' interests and teaching that is reflective of research. As such, CLP advocates for research and teaching which: (a) document and respond to the nature of student oppression; (b) document and build upon students' processes of empowerment, defined by their journeys away from oppression; and (c) interrogate and disrupt the historical, political, economic, and educational factors that violate human rights, especially the students' right to learn.

Below I provide two examples of CLP, which grew out of my interactions/collaboration with Mr. Kegler. The aim of the examples is not to deliver programmatic advice on how to implement CLP in English classrooms. Rather, the focus is to examine ways in which CLP theorizes literacy for the secondary English classrooms. The articulation of student voices is a primary goal in CLP theorizing of literacy education, as it permits students to inscribe their own values onto academic literacy practices.

The Comic Book Unit

Mr. Kegler and I, seeking to engage the Guys in classroom literacy activities, developed a comic book unit¹. Recall from this study's findings that comic books were

¹ Prior to our collaboration on the comic book unit, Mr. Kegler's class painfully read *Macbeth* within the first four weeks of school, followed by a consortium of poetry written during the Elizabethan era. Derrick, Jose, and Tony failed the unit exam for *Macbeth* and hadn't read any of the poetry or short stories in their British literature textbooks.

key texts that the Guys used to practice literacy. Mr. Kegler and I reasoned that the difference between the comic books that the Guys read at home and the texts they did not read in school were at best minimal. The difference could be summed up in a single phrase: comic books as opposed to classroom literature were responsive, if not directly relevant, to the Guys' interests.

We further agreed that comic book texts are literary texts that can be used to stimulate critical classroom dialogue (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004). Comic books are rich in story lines that reflect contemporary issues. As such, comic books could be analyzed for social issues, character traits, and other sophisticated literary tropes. It is possible to approach comic book texts from a variety of literary angles (i.e., apply anti-racist, feminist, Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic or postmodernist critiques). As Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2004) have argued, "Once learned, these analytic and interpretative tools developed through engagement with popular cultural texts can be applied to canonical texts as well" (p. 89).

Mr. Kegler agreed to adapt the class's reading of *the Iliad* using a comic format. As such, we designed an entire comic book unit, in which the students would read a variety of comic book texts to become familiar with reading comic books, analyze and write comics themselves, and finally read *the Iliad* in comic book format. Upon hearing about the comic book unit, the students expressed rare excitement about participating in the project.

Using the *Iliad* as the central text, the comic book unit had three objectives:

(1) To utilize our students' interest in comic books to produce student interest in reading the *Iliad*;

(2) To allow students to perform sophisticated/familiar literacy practices within the classroom; and

(3) To improve students' exam scores in Mr. Kegler's classroom.

Following the above objectives, we brought comic books (*X-men* and *Batman*) into the classrooms. Students read these comic books as serious literature and discussed issues from the texts that dealt with human intolerance to difference (in *X-men*) and human's preoccupation with revenge (in *Batman*). The classroom discussions led to more thoughtful analyses of racism and the role of revenge in the US invasion of Iraq.

By reading *X-men* and *Batman* comics in class, students became more familiar with how comic books were written, as they presented an accessible template for writing stories. We had students use this template to re-write *the Iliad* in comic format. Students were grouped, and each group was given a section of the epic poem to translate and illustrate in comic form. After the sections had been converted into comic book texts, the sections were collected and compiled into a larger comic book text of the entire epic poem, *the Iliad*. The completed comic was, then, distributed to the entire class, read, and discussed, again, as serious classroom text.

A few of Mr. Kegler's Black male students, including Derrick, found ways to participate in the classroom activities associated with the comic unit. Because of the level of concentration translating *the Iliad* involved, the Guys read and comprehended not only his section of *the Iliad*, but the entire text. At the completion of the project, the Guys read the entire epic poem *the Iliad*, though in comic book format.

Derrick's reading of the text, in particular, was sophisticated. He critically responded to the text in language consistent with his peer world. Prior to this project, I

never saw Derrick participate in any classroom discussion, but during a class discussion about the character of Paris, he participated.

Derrick: I don't think Paris (in Homer's *Iliad*) is right. He sold his whole family out for a female and then acted like a punk when Agamemnon and Menelaus came for her [Helen].

Derrick's rendering of the character of Paris from the *Iliad* is striking, not because it reveals a level of unacknowledged complexity, but precisely because it acknowledges Paris's known complexities in language that is accessible to the Derrick's vernacular imagination. He understood the text, personally connected with it, and was able to make valuable meaning out of (evaluate) it in ways that explored human ethics in textual experience.

When I stepped outside of Mr. Kegler's English classroom to observe the Guys, I noticed how Derrick and some his classmates used *the Iliad* for interactions outside the class.

Derrick: [Bragging] Nigga, I'm Achilles.

Tony: [Objecting and teasing] Nigga, you ain't Achilles. You a ho like Paris.

Outside of the classroom, the Guys—some of who sat quietly and seemingly inattentive inside the classroom—effortlessly quoted *the Iliad* as part of their verbal play, making use of its characterizations. While the Guys certainly practiced literacy outside the classroom, some of them, in particular Derrick, found rare interest in a canonical text, which is a big deal to me. If we recall, academic reading was not appealing to the Guys.

And this failure to appeal to the Guys created great distances between academic literacy and the Guys.

While I agree with premise of the comic book unit, I must point out some its limitations, which link to the projects limitations more generally. There are critical issues laced in the fabric of what it means to be literate. Outside of the classroom, the Guys talked candidly about engaging a school-related text (Remember, reading academic literature, for them, had been tantamount to “actin white”). Hence, reading and writing were ways of “actin.” For the Guys to approach *the Iliad*, they had to operate within a discourse of extreme maleness.

This discourse alone set up fences around possible literate activities that the Guys could otherwise engage, like reading romance novels (Gilbert, 1996). The Guys could talk about *the Iliad* only as long as they discussed it in Black Talk and as long as everyone around them agreed that “Paris was a ho” and Achilles, “da man.” Hence, there were certain gender and racial rules that governed how they practiced literacy and other social activities. These rules work with other sociocultural rules to limit literacy to lines of race, class, and geography, both sanctioning and denying literate opportunities.

Notwithstanding, our desire with the comic book unit was 1) to make Mr. Kegler’s classroom’s experiences more relevant to students, 2) to meet the demands of the city-mandated curriculum, and 3) to motivate students in critical discussions of themselves and others. We also wanted students to critique characters and themes in the texts and connect their readings of the texts to larger readings of the world. In this way, the unit was consistent with the basic tenets of CLP in that it was collaboratively constructed, based upon research findings and situated in the experiences of students. The

Guys not only engaged in a familiar and sophisticated reading of canonical texts; they also were able to find themselves in a relevant classroom experience that had been uniquely adjusted to suit them.

The CCW Unit

Mr. Kegler and I designed the Classroom, Community, and the World (CCW) unit to build upon the Guys interest in Hip Hop. The unit dealt with various theories of Hip Hop (Kitwana, 2003; Morgan, 1999; Pugh, 2004), specifically theories related to the unit's theme, "The Classroom, the Community, and the World." In it, we approached Hip Hop as a Black cultural aesthetic, which commented on the human experience from multiple scholarly perspectives.

The conceptualization of the CCW unit was not confined to Hip Hop theories alone. The unit employed other critical literacy frames, which Appleman (2000) maintains "can help secondary literature classrooms become sites of constructive and transactive activity where students approach texts with curiosity, authority, and initiative" (p. 9). In particular, the unit employed three approaches to literature that Appleman outlines: Rosenblatt's (1968) reader-response theory, feminist literary theory (Showalter, 1989), and Marxist literary theory (Appleman, 2000). In bringing these perspectives to bear on Hip Hop texts, students made meanings that dealt with multiple aspects of our humanity. Specifically, they were able to build understandings of the texts, of themselves, and of others. Not only did the critical analytical lenses make visible what the students brought to the texts, it gave them language to articulate this interaction, which was rooted in a familiar literacy practice: cultural and social critique.

Hip Hop texts, it seemed, were far more amenable to critical analysis, perhaps, because they presented a textual genre itself rooted in critique. Along these lines, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) contend,

Teaching Hip-hop as a music and culture of resistance can facilitate the development of critical consciousness in urban youth. Analyzing the critical social commentary produced by [Hip Hop] may lead to consciousness-raising discussions, essays, and research projects attempting to locate an explanation for the current state of affairs for urban youngsters. The knowledge reflected in these lyrics could engender discussions of esteem, power, place, and purpose or encourage students to further their own knowledge of urban sociology and politics. In this way, Hip hop music should stand on its own merit in the academy and be a worthy subject of study in its own right than necessarily leading to something more “acceptable” like a Shakespearean [sic] text (pp. 89-90).

M. A. K. Halliday’s (1980) “three aspects of language study” also helped Mr. Kegler and I shape the CCW unit. According to Halliday (1980), a child learns language, through language and about language. Hence, the process of learning is as much about learning context as it is about learning content. Then, to teach Hip Hop content divorced from the context to which it belongs diminishes its educational value. In this way, the CCW unit required students to learn Hip Hop by reading lyrics and listening to music from several artists. Texts ranged from Run DMC’s “Walk This Way” to NWA’s “Expression,” from “Queen Latifa’s “U-N-I-T-Y,” to Lil’ Kim’s “Heavenly Father.” They also learned about Hip Hop’s contexts by exploring its linguistic heritage, social and political history, and its cultural evolution in general.

Learning Hip Hop. While they were exposed to several Hip Hop texts, the students in Mr. Kegler's class more closely examined two songs ("Dear Momma" and "Changes") by posthumous rap artist Tupac Shakur. These texts were looked at closely to answer the question, "what is Hip Hop?" To do this, students looked at the Hip Hop texts to determine what things in the texts did. For example, they identified a list of literary concepts ranging from metaphor to alliteration, and from chiasmus to irony. As they analyzed the texts, students used their knowledge of such terms to assess the texts' literary merit. In addition, students developed their own "rules for writing raps." Based on these "rules," they also composed their own raps.

Student raps varied in style and in substance. In spite of their differences, all student-produced raps emanated from known Hip Hop traditions. Some student-produced raps were overtly political like the raps of KRS-1, Public Enemy, and Mos Def. Other student-produced raps were comical like the raps of DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince and, more recently, Kanye West. Still others were a sober reflection of city-street life, reminiscent of the raps of N.W.A., Notorious B.I.G., and the Game. The objective here was not to use rap to scaffold academic literacy skills. Rather, the objective was to have students learn Hip Hop by having them practice it. Listening to, reading, and writing raps was our way of accomplishing this.

Learning about Hip Hop. The CCW unit also promoted students' learning about Hip Hop—its history, its language, and its culture—by introducing them to texts that encouraged these perspectives. To learn about Hip Hop's language, students read Smitherman's (1999) "The Chain Remain the Same: Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation" (pp. 268-283). Our objective was not to dismiss the importance of learning

Standard English, but rather to present material that might help students appreciate their own languages and the linguistic *franca* of Hip Hop music. According to Smitherman (1999), “It is critical to keep in mind that the racialized rhetoric of rap music and the Hip Hop Nation is embodied in the communicative practices of the larger Black speech community” (p. 271). Hence, the language of Hip Hop has deep roots, especially for urban students, many of whom are Black. Since Black language has been devalued and vilified in our society, it was important for us to establish the legitimacy of Black language in Hip Hop so that students would not feel that they were reading “inferior” texts.

In addition to language study, students read excerpts from Light’s (1999) *Vibe Magazine’s History of Hip Hop* and Kitwana’s (2003) *The Hip Hop Nation*. These texts were used to help students explore Hip Hop’s evolution over time and to help introduce them to the cultural and historical study of Hip Hop. In this way, students learned that, just as it has legitimate linguistic roots, Hip Hop also has legitimate historical and cultural roots. By exploring the deeper characteristics of Hip Hop, students gained contextual knowledge about the Hip Hop texts they were exploring. This knowledge was crucial in helping reform students understanding of themselves, which was vital to getting them to engage in more sophisticated textual analysis. As such, students began to understand how they could learn through Hip Hop about the world. As they learned about it, students began to associate Hip Hop with other valued products that they consumed, appreciated, and critiqued.

Learning Through Hip Hop. Finally, the CCW unit encouraged students to learn through Hip Hop. In the course of the unit, we explored, analyzed, and evaluated many

themes related to human experience. In this way, students built understandings and interpretations of the many dimensions of human experience and developed an awareness of how texts, including Hip Hop texts, speak to one another and to various conditions that define individuals and the world.

In a class discussion, Derrick and Jose commented on the Black mother/son relationship, comparing Tupac's "Dear Momma" and Hughes's "Mother to Son." Sheldon explored femininity in popular Black literature and songs, deconstructing beauty in Walker's "Everyday Use," TLC's "Unpretty," and Aguilera's "Beautiful." In this way, Hip Hop was used to sanction ideas that relate to much more than Hip Hop. Specifically, the Guys were learning how to critically analyze texts, through which they could make sense of their world.

During the course of the CCW unit, the Guys produced texts and participated in classroom discussions as experts. Not only did they read a wide-range of texts, they were also able to demonstrate an understanding of these texts, of themselves, and of others. The following examples illustrate this point:

Tony: I can relate to what Tupac feels in his rap 'Dear Momma.' It come[s] from the same place that make[s] Hughes write his poem—the heart. This is where we all share a universal love for momma. She [is] the same to all of us. She [is] momma. No matter where she is, who[se mother] she is, she got [has] the same name: Momma.

Mr. Kegler: But Hughes does not call the mother in his poem Momma.

Tony: They [are] still alike . . . (stutters), re-related. Hughes's poem [has] a mother talking to her son, you know, giving him some advice. [Tu]Pac is a son, saying thank you for what his mother [has given] him. Don't Hughes got a poem called "Thank you" too?

Mr. Kegler: That's a short story, "Thank you, M'am." Go on.

Tony: I don't know. . . (Pauses) Whether your momma is like Langston Hughes's mother or like Tupac's momma, she [is] a symbol of love to us all."

What is distinctive about this example is that Tony was making observations about a perceived relationship that he believed existed between two texts. While I had seen him do this outside the classroom, I had never seen Tony do this within the classroom. This might have meant that by using familiar texts in the classroom, Tony was able to practice familiar textual practices that he did otherwise use in school. Even when challenged by his teacher, Tony maintained that the texts were "still alike." His insistence that his interpretation of the texts was valid is telling. It suggests that Tony was able to identify a relationship between the texts as real, support it, and label it (e.g. "She got the same name: Momma").

Much of scholarly analysis is about authority in making truth claims about texts and supporting such claims with evidence. The text did not serve as a source of information for Tony. His was not an efferent read. Rather, Tony used the texts as a tool for thinking about and examining the Black mother/son relationship. According to Wade and Moje (2000), these kinds of connections and interpretations of texts constitute

engagement. According to the NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts (1996), this level of engagement represents learning.

In his essay, Sheldon provides an interesting interpretation of the mother character in the texts “Mother to Son” and “Dear Momma.” According to Sheldon’s essay:

The symbol of the mother in both of the texts [“Mother to Son” and “Dear Momma”] has a lot of importance for how we think of women today. There is a hidden tension: she is a savior and a survivor . . . but a sinner and a saint. Women in our society have usually been boxed up between paradoxical extremes, which never allow us to see who she really might be—always more than what we think she is—more than a friend, more than just a mother, but, like Lil’ Kim said—a woman, a phenomenal woman.

For Sheldon, the description of mothers as saviors, while celebratory, was restricting. His analysis of the mother character was similar to the feminist literary criticism of hooks (1992) and others, who find it limiting to describe women as sinner or saint, Mammy or Jezebel. As such, there was enveloped sophisticated analysis alive in Sheldon’s writing.

Taken together, these examples describe the meanings that the Guys were capable of making when given an opportunity to seriously read familiar texts. In this way, texts become meaningful for various reasons and, indeed, we derive meaning from texts based upon the connections that we share with them. The issue here, then, is about the relationship, the explicit connection, between the reader and the text. Divorced of this connection a text can render little meaning to a reader. Hence, the interpretations that the Guys produced were as much about their relationships with Hip Hop as it was about their

ability to read and comprehend Hip Hop texts. Because it was relevant and because they were able to connect to it, the Guys produced meaningful reflections and engaged in critical discussions about “the word and the world.”

Following the unit examples provide, we can view CLP as responding to “many dimensions of human experiences,” specifically the often neglected experiences of young, urban Black men. However, the messy politics of literacy persists. We live in a culturally and linguistically intolerant world where everyone is pressured to bow to narrow notions of literacy and English. Notwithstanding, this work suggests that CLP is effective in helping students meet both social and cultural goals and in helping teachers practice pedagogies that are committed to the promises of research. Using CLP, Mr. Kegler and I redefine academic literacy in a way that incorporated literacy in the lives of the Guys. As such, the Guys learned academic literacies in ways that we desire for them.

Conclusion

Based on this research, literacy research needs to continue in the lives of urban adolescent Black males. In my own work, I observed the Guys using digital technology such as cell phones, computers, video games, mp3 players, and pop-cultural texts such as comic books, movies, and song lyrics to mediate communication and foster participation in a very sophisticated social network not always valued in classrooms. These uses of technology do not factor very much into this work.

In witnessing the pedagogical potential of these often unacknowledged sources of literacy, I have encouraged students and teachers alike to think critically about how such sources might be used to enhance urban teaching and learning. My goal has been always not only to promote intellectual engagement with critical texts and issues of urban

education but also to help others become more discerning readers of and transformative teachers within the world around them.

I close this dissertation with a brief summary of points. Literacy in the lives of the Guys was informed by three things: specific African American cultural traditions, the human vocation to make known their personal struggles and stories, while struggling to secure a sense of self, and the subcultures to which we all ascribe. From this, I locate the debates about literacy within a dialogic theory of literacy practice that enables us to understand the complex dynamic between power and resistance to which critics' responses to Black males and literacy learning call attention.

By operationalizing literacies in more inclusive ways, I do not mean to deny that some Black males often become complicit in their own containment via resistance to academic purposes for literacy. But I do mean to promote hearings of literacy, especially those rarely heard, which—when practiced by the Guys, work to resist co-optation by the keepers of literacy who would use literacy standardizations to further the project of constructing Black males as delinquents, rather than as politically and intellectually astute agents for positive social and cultural transformation.

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