



## Writing for Their Lives: THE NON-SCHOOL LITERACY OF CALIFORNIA'S URBAN, AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

JABARI MAHIRI and SORAYA SABLO



- Mahiri, Jabari and Soraya Sablo. "Writing for Their Lives: The Non-School Literacy of California's Urban, African American Youth." *Journal of Negro Education* 65.2 (1996): 164–246. Print.

### Framing the Reading

Jabari Mahiri earned a Ph.D. in English (Language, Literacy, and Rhetoric) from the University of Illinois at Chicago and is now Professor of Language and Literacy, Society and Culture in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. He directs the TEACH Project (Technology, Equity, And Culture for High-performance schools), a research initiative that collaborates with urban schools and community partners on uses of new media for increasing student achievement and educational equity, and for improving teacher professional development. He is the Faculty Director for the Bay Area Writing Project, a Senior Scholar for the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, and he has won several mentoring awards. Mahiri has authored or co-authored six books, including *What They Don't Learn in Schools: Literacy in the Lives of Urban Youth*, as well as many peer-reviewed journal articles like the one you are about to read.

Soraya Sablo (now Sablo-Sutton) was Mahiri's graduate student at UC–Berkeley and has been teaching elementary school for five years. She now teaches at Washington Elementary School in Alameda County, California. Her students are 65% Latino and 15% African American. She says that her research and work as an educational consultant taught her "that the most successful teachers were those who found ways to bring the curriculum to life for their students. Student engagement proved to be one of the most critical factors in predicting student success."

In this article, Mahiri and Sablo look at the complex relationship between in- and out-of-school literacy practices of African American students in two urban San Francisco Bay Area high schools. They discover that although many African American and Latino students in these urban settings perform poorly on standardized tests, have high drop-out rates, and



are generally disinclined to participate in or value academic literacy tasks, many of these students had extremely rich out-of-school literacy practices. These literacy practices (poems, raps, plays, etc.) play important roles in helping students reconcile some of the serious difficulties they faced in their daily lives. However, Mahiri and Sablo found that there was no recognition or valuing of these complex out-of-school literacy practices within the students' school settings.

### Getting Ready to Read

Before you read, do at least one of the following activities:

- Think of some literacy practices you have outside of school. Are these valued by your teachers? Your parents? Your friends? You?
- Have you ever had a school experience where teachers tried to draw on your out-of-school literacy experiences to engage you in literacy learning?

As you read, consider the following questions:

- How do your background and school and community contexts compare to those being described in the study? How do you think that your attitudes about literacy have been impacted by your personal history?

This article reports on an investigation into the literacy practices of urban African American youth, many of whom were found to be unmotivated to engage in school-based literacy events because they do not see the relevance of the school curriculum to their lives or, based on prior experiences, they actually fear having to write in school. The voluntary out-of-school literacy practices of two African American high school students are analyzed and their writings critiqued. Conclusions are drawn about the complex and provocative ways these youth use literate behaviors and strategies to gain voice in and make sense of their social worlds. Recommendations are offered for using African American and youth culture as a bridge to writing development.

### Non-School Literacy Practices

An emerging line of research has attempted to explore and explain the nature of youth and adult language and literacy experiences that take place in an array of social settings outside of schools. Pioneers in this field include researchers such as Heath (1980, 1982, 1983), Scribner and Cole (1981, 1988), and Street (1984, 1993), whose work has contributed to a framework for viewing literacy in conjunction with specific practices and functions of language use inside particular social contexts. A number of subsequent studies have also operated within and contributed to this framework (Camitta, 1993; Dyson, 1993; Farr, 1994; Goodman & Wilde, 1992; Guerra, 1992; Heath & McLaughlin, 1991, 1993; Lee, 1991, 1993; Mahiri, 1991, 1994a, 1994b; Moss, 1994; Shuman, 1986; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).



Based on the findings of cross-cultural research, Street (1984) argued that literacy is ultimately political and that it has different implications within different sociocultural contexts. As he claimed, "what the particular practices and concepts of reading and writing are for a given society depends upon the context" (p. 1); moreover, these concepts are "already embedded in an ideology and cannot be isolated or treated as 'neutral' or merely 'technical'" (p. 1). These contentions are echoed by Scribner and Cole's (1988) research, conducted among the Vai people of Liberia, which illuminates and critiques the "frailty of the evidence for generalizations about dependency of certain cognitive skills on writing, and . . . the restricted model of the writing process from which hypotheses about cognitive consequences tend to be generated" (p. 58). Their findings challenged the restricted models of writing that are reflected in the formulations of theorists who narrowly define literacy and value school-based literacy as the only authentic type. As they note:

The assumption that logicity is in the text and the text is in the school can lead to a serious underestimation of the cognitive skills involved in non-school, non-essay writing, and reciprocally, to an overestimation of the intellectual skills that the essayist text "necessarily" entails. . . . It tends to promote the notion that writing outside of the school is of little importance and has no significant consequences for the individual. (p. 61)

Heath's (1983) research focused on literacy practices in different sociocultural settings in the United States. Heath found that the residents of two different working-class communities—one White and one Black, located only a few miles apart—had "a variety of literate traditions" that were "interwoven in different ways with oral uses of language" (p. 234). She noted, however, that "neither community's ways with the written word [prepared] it for the school's ways" (p. 235).

Shuman's (1986) analysis of the everyday oral and written narratives of working-class adolescent girls as part of the unofficial school curriculum provides additional understandings of the ways that school and youth cultures both intersect and disconnect. As she argues:

. . . oral fight stories, written diary accounts, written petitions, letters, and playful forms—are part of a single community's repertoire. These discourse forms represent choices among channels and styles of communication, and although they might be judged deficit when compared to standard forms, they must be examined as appropriate (or inappropriate) within the adolescent communication system. (p. 12)

In more recent work, Lee (1991) has focused on linking the oral talk of African American students to literary language and critique by emphasizing the use of rhetorical devices common to African American literature. Noting that research provides "meaningful insights into the texture and nuances of the interplay of culture and cognition," she maintains that "what is missing . . . in terms of enriching the links between everyday practice and schooling are specific descriptions of the knowledge structures taught in school as they relate to the knowledge structures constructed within nonschool social settings" (pp. 292–293).



Camitta (1993) uses the term “vernacular writing” to describe the literacy practice of urban African American adolescents that “conforms, not to the norms of educational institutions, but to those of social life and culture” (p. 229). She concludes that writing is actually an important and valued activity for a number of these youths, whose vernacular writing, she notes, consists of “a range of significant and meaningful literate skills and resources that are artificially disconnected from the process of literacy education as it is officially conducted” (p. 229). Relatedly, in a community ethnography conducted at a school site prior to her 1993 study, Camitta (1987) identified music, sports, and fashions as three significant aspects of African American youth culture. That study also described a curriculum intervention organized around these themes that she, her teacher-collaborators, and co-researchers designed and instituted in the school’s language arts program. By drawing on more authentic sources to motivate these students to write, Camitta concluded, she and her colleagues were able to mitigate the discontinuity between these students’ real lives and their lives in school.

Mahiri (1994b) asserts that some African American youth have both intensive engagements and significant competencies in a variety of literacy practices in out-of-school settings, specifically settings within their home communities. He argues, however, that “a better link must be made between what schools hold as important and meaningful and what . . . youths find meaningful in their daily lives” (p. 144).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This article discusses and analyzes the voluntary writings of two urban African American high school students whose work we—the researchers and our cooperating focal teachers—believe reflect significant types and uses of non-school literacy. This study was initiated because, in our overall quest to look at ways that African American and youth culture could be used as a bridge to writing development, we wanted to learn more about the kinds of writing these students do for their own purposes outside of school. Thus, one of the key objectives of this research was to explore aspects of the motivations, functions, genres, and themes of these students’ voluntary writing and of the knowledge they bring to it.

*This study was initiated because, in our overall quest to look at ways that African American and youth culture could be used as a bridge to writing development, we wanted to learn more about the kinds of writing these students do for their own purposes outside of school.*

Five questions guided this research. Two of these questions came directly from Street’s (1993) discussion of considerations that much previous research on literacy acquisition has failed to take into account. First, it “has failed to



take account of how the people themselves 'actually think about literacy'; and second, Street maintains, it has failed to consider "how they apply their literacy skills in their day-to-day lives" (p. 3). Although Street was addressing research on literacy acquisition in previously nonliterate cultures, critical questions for the present research study were what the two focal students actually thought about their productions and performances of various kinds of texts, and how these literacy events actually functioned in their daily lives. Additionally, we wanted to know what specific genres and themes patterned their literacy practices and what kinds of oral/written connections were revealed in their choices of genres and themes (i.e., the nature of the "mix" of oral and written texts). Finally, we sought to assess the implications these voluntary, out-of-school literacy practices could have for instruction and schooling in the classroom setting.

### Researching Writing beyond School

Our basic lens for looking at out-of-school literacy production was Heath's (1982) concept of "literacy events" as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (p. 350). Street's (1993) concept of "literacy practices" widened our focus to include "both behaviour and conceptualizations related to the use of reading and/or writing" (p. 12). According to Street, "Literacy practices' incorporate not only 'literacy events' as empirical occasions to which literacy is integral, but also 'folk models' of those events and the ideological preconceptions that underpin them" (pp. 12-13). Therefore, our focus on the out-of-school production of written texts attempts to account for literacy skills and literate behaviors associated with those productions as well as the value, conceptions, and functions of those productions inside specific sociocultural contexts. Augmenting this focus, we suggest a conception of literacy in sociocultural contexts as skills applied to the production of meaning in or from text in a context. In this conception, the nature and function of skill, production, meaning, and text may vary significantly within different contexts.

Given this framework, we designed our study to explore and explain the specific nature, interrelationships, functions, and cultural/contextual connections of these constituents of literacy practice. Data were to be collected through various means including: (a) descriptive and reflective fieldnotes from participant observations; (b) personal interviews with focal student-writers, their teachers, and peers; and (c) solicited samples of students' voluntary and school-based writing, along with other associated artifacts. But first we had to identify our focal students.

### Identifying the Focal Students

Because the practices that are the focus of this research took place primarily in non-school or extracurricular settings, we needed a way to identify which



students were doing writing on their own beyond school work. Thus, we enlisted the help of two African American English teachers, Ms. Brown and Ms. Parks,<sup>1</sup> who assisted us in this aspect of the study and lent many valuable insights into the students, schools, and settings in which these practices evolve. 13

Some background on the contributions of these two focal teachers, and on the general nature and thrust of our work in and outside of the California public schools, is important here. For two years prior to this investigation, we had been working with English teachers in two urban high schools in the San Francisco Bay Area on curriculum interventions that utilize the authentic life experiences of urban African American youth. These efforts were aimed at leading teachers to explore ways to build on these students' backgrounds and competencies in order to facilitate their learning and literacy development.<sup>2</sup> Our observations revealed that while there were many similarities between the students, the school sites, and the urban settings of the two schools, important differences were evident as well.

For example, in both schools, the African American and Latino students were predominantly placed in the lower-tracked classes; most were performing well below the national norms on standardized tests. Indeed, both groups' suspension and dropout rates were significantly higher than those of students of other racial/ethnic backgrounds in their respective schools. Statistics provided to us by an administrator at one school indicated that 66% of the African American students who started as freshman would never finish there. The 1995 annual report for the other school revealed that 79% of the student body came from families that received AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children) funding, and 43% received free or reduced-price lunches. The dropout statistics for African American students at the second site were similarly stark. 14

Differences were noted in the teaching styles and personas of the two focal teachers, both of whom taught at different school sites. On the one hand, Ms. Brown, an elegant and commanding woman, was a veteran teacher with 20 years' experience. Throughout her career, she had been widely recognized for her successes in working with urban African American and Latino high school students. Despite her years of experience, however, she informed us that the school knowledge she had been positioned and sanctioned to teach was increasingly being questioned, resisted, or even rejected by her students. One of the reasons she agreed to participate in our research project was to explore ways that she could be more successful with the students she was currently teaching. 15

Ms. Parks was a dynamic young woman with only about eight years' experience as an English teacher. In explaining why she became a teacher, she stated, "I saw what was happening in the school system, and it was appalling to me that many students were having continual conflict, and I thought: I could do something about that." Ms. Parks was attracted to our research project because 16

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the students and teachers who participated in this study.

<sup>2</sup>This research project was funded by a grant from the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy.



of her belief that the prevailing curriculum did not allow teachers to teach students what they needed to know to "survive in life." She was quite aware that preaching the value and importance of literacy alone would have little effect on her students, who were confronted with starkly different realities outside the classroom. As she admonished her students during a classroom discussion: "Just because you're not in a classroom, doesn't mean you're not being educated. . . . But that's not an argument to drop out of school, either. You know what I'm saying. You need it all."

Both these teachers realized that, to many of these students, the proclamation "you need it all" merely echoed the African American adage which suggests that Blacks need to be twice as good as Whites to achieve the same recognition, or that Black people's achievements must be held to a different standard. The teachers were also aware that many African American students in inner-city schools simply did not see the relevance of the school curriculum for their lives. Yet, as Parks's comments reveal, they recognized that education does not take place solely in the classroom. Most important to our study, these teachers also knew which of their students were engaging in voluntary literacy practices outside of school. 17

A few of their students, Brown and Parks noted, were literally producing 18 volumes of written work on their own, but were reluctant to share their writings with their teachers or in the classroom. Several of these students, both recalled, had engaged in disputes with them about the differences between the kinds of writing they produced and preferred and the writing they were required to do in class. Still others, they maintained, were prolific authors whose work completely escaped their notice. With regard to the latter group, Ms. Parks explained that every other Friday at her school several of these students participated in informal lunchtime gatherings where they gave lively impromptu performances of rap songs they had written themselves. She further claimed that students who rarely participated in her English classes during the week were highly engaged and active contributors to these Friday sessions.

As researchers observing these teachers and their classes, we became 19 acquainted with some of the students Ms. Parks and Ms. Brown identified as prolific voluntary writers. As our familiarity and comfort levels with these students increased, we began asking them about their writing. We anticipated that it would not be difficult to get them to share some of their work with us, but we were wrong. Some students summarily refused to share their work with us. Others stated that it was too personal, or that they would first have to determine which pieces we could see. Some of the students who wrote rap verse claimed that the only real file of their work existed in their heads. Despite the cooperation of a few, the resistance and caution of the majority made it clear that we would never be able to completely capture the range of voluntary writing that the African American students in this urban setting were actually doing.

Other distinctions became evident as the study took shape and progressed. 20 Although all of the researchers and teachers participating in this project were



African Americans, substantive differences were evident between the lives of these adults and the lives of the students who were the objects of our research. From time to time, glimpses of students' day-to-day realities outside of school made these stark contrasts inescapably obvious. For example, returning from travel to a conference or vacation, one of us decided to take the city bus home from the airport. This bus meanders through the students' neighborhoods on its way to the more affluent communities that are closer to the city's central business district. An inescapable sense of apprehension, rooted in the desolation of the ravaged urban surroundings, permeates this phase of the ride. During one such trip, a man got on the bus a couple of stops from the airport. He was almost immediately challenged by another rider sitting across from him, who claimed that the new passenger was staring at him. "Do you do these?" the rider said, holding up his fists like a boxer. "Yeah, I do these," said the new passenger, returning the same defiant gesture. They dared each other to get off the bus. At the next stop, they disembarked and squared off right there on the street—to the apparent disregard of most passers-by and the obvious disdain of most of the remaining passengers on the bus, which continued its lumbering toward more auspicious environs.

To the students who were the focus of this investigation, such commonplace incidents of violence—and the crime, drugs, and devastation that often accompany or instigate them—are almost as visible in the streets of their neighborhoods as city buses. These young people are intimately aware of the conditions that surround them, and, as we later found out, their writings reveal as much and more. In their own distinctive way, they engage in literacy practices to help them come to terms with these conditions and with their experiences. In effect, they are writing for their lives.

### Keisha

Keisha, a 15-year-old African American female in the 10th grade, was perhaps one of the most prolific and versatile writers that we encountered during our research project. We were surprised to find that she carried lots of her work with her wherever she went. After agreeing to share her work with us, Keisha immediately reached into her backpack and pulled out three thick notebooks full of poems, songs, and rap lyrics. Then she said, "Oh yeah, and here's my play," and pulled out a thick sheaf of papers bound together by rubber bands.

Keisha informed us that she had been writing voluntarily since the sixth grade. By her estimation, she had written more than 40 songs, poems, and plays. In addition to being prolific, Keisha was also a very thoughtful and careful writer. However, she claimed that writing came rather easily for her and noted that it took only a few minutes for her to formulate and organize the ideas for her pieces. She also explained that her inspiration came from her friends and other people with whom she had come into contact during her life.

When asked about the themes of her writing, Keisha told us that she wrote "mostly about love and society, things around me." Our reading of her work



suggests that this appraisal was somewhat euphemistic. Instead, a clear pattern of focus on the harsh realities of the everyday life of low-income, inner-city African Americans is evident in her choice of topics and themes. Striking metaphors and intense emotions also characterize much of her work. For example, one of her notebooks, titled "Words of Feelings and Desires," contained the following verse:

#### Shallow Thought

*Looking out into a fiery hell,  
seeing increasing amounts of young bystanders thrown away  
because of someone else's humiliation and agony.  
Looking into a world of animosity,  
bullets flying, babies crying  
and no one is to blame.*

According to Keisha's own analysis, the "fiery hell" in this poem referred to her neighborhood, which she described as the site of increasing gang violence. The "humiliation and agony" related to the circumstances she believed were often behind much of that violence. As she explained, when a gang member was killed by someone from another gang, the violence would escalate because, among other things, one group had been humiliated; thus, her use of the term "thrown away" rather than "killed" to emphasize the unnecessary loss of life which was a regular occurrence in her world. In Keisha's view, many of the young people who found themselves caught up in these situations were in "agony" because they were constantly losing loved ones and believed there was no way out.

Two other poems, "Dreams" and "Black Reign," are also representative of Keisha's prolific literary output: 25

#### Dreams

*I have so many dreams to remember,  
so many moments to cherish.  
My life had no light until . . .  
you, burning upon the sun;  
To kiss you is a dream come true,  
a moment to cherish.  
To have the pleasure of being  
around you is a blessing.  
When you simply speak,  
I am speechless.  
When you smile,  
I am paralyzed with life.  
There isn't a word in the world  
to express the way I feel for you,  
not one.  
But you, you are like the ocean  
that glimmers in the night,*



*like the birds that cry in the morning*  
*I wish I could hold you forever,*  
*but I dream you will stay with*  
*and hold me*  
*with incredible strength.*  
*Your features are so beautiful*  
*they would blind the*  
*normal eye,*  
*but not mine.*  
*You are a dream and I*  
*want to have you*  
*and dream over,*  
*and over,*  
*again.*

### Black Reign

*Mysteriously she wanders*  
*through the night,*  
*trying to find*  
*a way out of the clouds*  
*of darkness.*  
*She's lost in the rain*  
*without a doubt, she's*  
*lost in a love*  
*of which she's been bought.*  
*She's so lost she cries,*  
*to let out the hurt*  
*through her eyes.*  
*The rain is falling and*  
*constantly moving her*  
*in the wrong direction.*  
*After she cries, the sun appears,*  
*then she sees the rain disappear.*  
*The bells start to ring,*  
*and the birds begin to sing.*  
*She realizes she's thy Black Queen,*  
*and she shouldn't let*  
*anything stand in her way*  
*for she is thou Black Queen*  
*with thy Black Reign.*

In both poems, Keisha shows competence in the use of sophisticated descriptive techniques to paint provocative mental images. For example, in "Dreams," she begins by acknowledging the difficulties inherent in expressing feelings of intense emotion ("There isn't a word in the world to express the way I feel for you"), but goes on to capture some aspects of those feelings using metaphor and hyperbole (e.g., "you are like the ocean that glimmers in the night, like the



birds that cry in the morning,” “your features are so beautiful they would blind the normal eye, but not mine”). This poem also reveals her skill in employing other rhetorical devices such as oxymorons (e.g., “When you smile, I am paralyzed with life”).

“Black Reign” demonstrates other aspects of Keisha’s emerging literary aptitude. For example, the poem cleverly links the images of rain and tears. The rain, which “is falling and constantly moving her heart in the wrong direction,” is likened to a flow of tears so copious that they prevent a distraught person from thinking clearly. The “night” and the “clouds of darkness” are subsequently linked to the confused emotions that prevent the subject of the poem from seeing the “sun” or the light of reason. Keisha additionally uses the homonyms “rain” and “reign” to enact the counterposing themes in this poem. Once the rain is gone—that is, once the subject has finished crying and can see her situation clearly—then she is once again able to reign or take control of her life. 27

This tension between chaos and the desire for control, so evident in Keisha’s work, was reflective of her desire to make sense of and rise above the circumstances of her own life, which were similarly chaotic. The first stanza of one of her songs, “Jus’ Living,” sheds some insight on her personal story: 28

#### Jus’ Living

*Jus’ livin’ on the eastside taking a chill,  
watchin’ young brothas being shot and killed.  
Coming up fast, clocking Kash,  
niggaz be having dreams, getting shot,  
but it can’t last.  
But at the same time they doing the crime,  
sitting behind bars without a nickel or a dime,  
can’t come out and kick it,  
but I’mma wicked old fe-mac and that’s how I’m living.*

Keisha’s four-act play, which also bears the title “Jus’ Living,” echoes similar themes. The play offers an intricate plot, well-rounded characters, and complex thematic considerations. For each scene, Keisha provides precise directorial notes and even specifications for appropriate background music. This suggests that Keisha apparently thought out every movement and emotion that she wants her characters to feel and her readers/audience to see. 29

The play begins with the narrator setting the scene and tone: “It starts as an early morning in Oakland, California. A mother and her two sons, Robert, 16, and Rocheed, 15, struggle to survive in the heart of the ghetto.” Readers soon learn that this family is living in the midst of gang violence and drugs. The mother, Ms. G, wants to move her family to a better neighborhood but is unable to do so for financial reasons. Robert, being the “man” of the house, attempts to get a job to help his mother out. When he is not successful finding employment because he has no work experience, he turns to what appears to be a more viable option: selling drugs and “gang-banging” or becoming involved in gang-related illegal activities. As one of his friends advises, “A job?! . . . You 30



betta get yo' grind on, fool!"—that is, seek work on the black market rather than routine employment.

"Jus' Living" depicts the intense peer pressure Robert faces as he grapples with the decision to join or not join a gang. On one hand, it shows how grinding and gang-banging in poor communities are viewed not only as quick ways to make cash but also as a respected route to manhood. When Robert begins to have second thoughts about this type of lifestyle, his friends press him ("I thought you was a real old school gangsta"), and Robert opts to join and to live with the consequences. The play continues, noting that to be initiated into the gang, Robert must participate in the drive-by shooting of Dino, a rival gang member. In retaliation for Dino's murder, the rival gang comes to Robert's neighborhood with the intent of killing him. However, in an effort to protect her son, Robert's mother gets caught in the cross-fire and is killed.

As in her poems and songs, "Jus' Living" reveals Keisha's adeptness in the use of sophisticated rhetorical devices. For example, she uses foreshadowing to provide subtle clues to the drama's tragic ending. For example, at one point Ms. G says to Robert: "You and Rocheed always act like ya' handicapped and always looking for me to do everything. Well one day I ain't gon' be here, then who you gon' be danging and telling it ain't no milk?" Later, when Robert informs his friends of his decision to start gang-banging, his brother's girlfriend, Shyra, responds with "Why you gon' do yo' momma like this?" Although she is suggesting that Robert's gang association will bring disgrace to his mother, Shyra's comment prefigures Ms. G's death.

"Jus Living" is a remarkable dramatic piece. The real drama, as we later learned from interviews with Keisha, was the extent to which this play's scenes were collateral to scenes from Keisha's life. As she later informed us, her own older brother was very much like the character Robert in her play, and Robert's mother was based on her mother.

## Troy

Troy, a 17-year-old African American male in the 11th grade, had been composing and performing rap verses and songs since sixth grade. He told us that he aspired to become a professional rapper some day. When we met him, he was performing his raps individually and as a member of a group called Realism. When asked approximately how many raps he had written, he replied: "Too many to count." Troy shared some of his compositions with us orally and, when we requested it, he also brought in transcribed lyrics for a few of his favorites.

Like many rappers, Troy stored a lot of his songs in his head, but he was able to recall and recite an amazing number of raps—his own and others by professional rappers—on demand. Although he engaged in a mix of oral and written literacy practices, Troy considered himself a writer. He signed all his work "writer/lyricist, TROY." As a result, to more fully understand and position Troy's compositions within the framework of this study, we as researchers had to revisit our notions of what constitutes writing. The fact that the texts stored in Troy's mind could easily and consistently be transformed into oral



and/or written texts led us to define their creation and performance as literacy events. Just as a writer can compose and store a text in a computer and afterwards select among several options and formats to print or reproduce it in another material form, we concluded that Troy composed and stored his texts in the microprocessors of his mind and selected among several options—oral, audiotape, or written text—for their material reproduction. In the process of producing meaning in these texts, Troy's raps evidenced a number of literacy skills and literate behaviors that reveal how literacy is actually construed and used in the context of urban African American youths' everyday lives.

One of Troy's favorite compositions was an autobiographical rap titled "Family Fam," which he shared with us in its complete written form (below) as well as the audio-taped version<sup>3</sup>: 36

### Family Fam

*Can't nothing take me from my ken folk my blood,  
even when I sold drug I still got love.  
never was there any discrimination,  
when I had the homelessness, at my lowest,  
just reality conversation.  
they pushed into my brain that crime is slavery, Troy,  
but, ain't no freedom in having no money, just hate.  
I be gettin' all emotional when I be broke,  
you don't feel me doe,*

*It may look like I'm havin a good day,  
but that's a cover-up for my quick-to-flash skanless way.  
they took their time wit me and said that I needed peace,  
but that's impossible when we ain't even got a piece,  
of bread to split-n-half and be happy,  
a brotha ain't even got no pappy,  
hurt from bein' nappy.  
never been spooked of the streets so,  
I got two families that love me doe.*

*But the house where my momma stayed at is the spot 4 real,  
eat fat, still have skrill, automobile,  
and better chances of not gettin' killed.  
I will, lay my head for any one of my family members,  
even get my leg chopped off by white boys yellin' timber.  
I love each and every best friend of mine,  
that other family that I have on my flowamatic grind.  
kan't nothing take me from my ken folk my blood,  
cuz, even when I sold drug I still got love.*

<sup>3</sup>We realize that focusing solely on the written text version of Troy's raps limits our ability to adequately portray aspects of other forms of their production. Indeed, having to describe this type of literacy event within the medium of the written word—that is, via the confines of a scholarly article—is somewhat limiting. Mahiri (1996) details many of the problematic links between rap and written representation.



“Family Fam” exemplifies one of the central themes running through most of Troy’s lyrics—namely, the tension between the realities of life in the inner city and the survival strategies one has to adopt in order to cope with them. This particular rap describes the tensions between the biological family’s desire that their young adopt more traditional life choices and the designs of the peer group to lead youth toward a “skanless” (scandalous) life on the streets. It begins by describing the unconditional love of the former, “my ken folk my blood,” who stood by the rap’s protagonist even when he “sold drug.” The lyrics also offer a hard look at, and perhaps come to terms with, the lifestyle of youth in gangs. Although it goes on to note that the author listened to the advice of his family and knew that they were right (“they pushed into my mind that crime is slavery, Troy”), his “reality conversation,” or talk with and among his peers, was just as influential. Ultimately, the rap claims, the latter convinced him that poverty was also a form of slavery, and the young man began to sell drugs because there “ain’t no freedom in being broke, just hate.” Later in the rap, Troy revisits these contradictions with a skillful play on the homonyms “peace” and “piece.”

The structure of this rap does not follow the *AB AB* rhyme scheme found in many raps; indeed, some lines do not rhyme at all. Notwithstanding, “Family Fam” demonstrates Troy’s prolific use of highly figurative African American language styles such as call-and-response and signifying (Kochman, 1981). It also reveals his mastery of other rhetorical devices reflective of African American language styles along with an expert knowledge of contemporary African American slang terminology and its use. As Troy explained, “skrill” was a combination of the terms “scratch”—a somewhat dated slang term for money—and “mill” or million; the term could also refer to a meal ticket, he indicated.<sup>4</sup> For example, he uses the slang term “doe” (for “though”) to emphasize his points in a way that simulates elements of African American preaching style (“you don’t feel me doe,” “I got two families that love me doe”). In effect, “doe” redirects readers’ (or listeners’) attention to and intensifies the importance of the thematic points made in the preceding lines of their respective stanzas. Additionally, Troy’s use of a second-person reference (“you”) in these two lines is reflective of the dialogicality, or multivoicedness, Duncan (1997; this issue) suggests is an essential part of African American youth discourse. This technique drives home the meaning of Troy’s words to persons outside of the two families who feel for and love him—persons who may not know or understand the particular “family values” of these two groups.

As we came to know more about Troy personally, we found out how closely this rap paralleled his life. One of the most telling lines is the one in which he describes his mother’s house (“the spot 4 real”) as a safe haven where he could always get a hot meal, access to a car, and some spending money. In one of our many conversations, Troy shared how important his own mother’s home was to him, noting that her house provided him a refuge from the temptations he faced in real life to sell drugs and commit other crimes for money.

<sup>4</sup>Kochman (1981) notes that within African American language styles, new words and phrases are often created in this fashion as users of the language constantly experiment with ways to better express themselves.



## Thinking about Voluntary Writing

The question of how and what Keisha, Troy, and their peers actually thought about literacy can be examined on two levels. As we noted earlier, many of the students we observed at these two school sites resisted or refused to participate in most of their in-class writing assignments. One example that characterized this resistance occurred when Ms. Brown was attempting to get her students to develop good thesis statements by joking that her previous students used to “just eat them up.” One of her current students joked back that it was easy for her because she had lots of college degrees, but that he personally hated working on thesis statements. In response to her food metaphor, he replied, “Yeah . . . we’re not that hungry.” This got a big laugh from the class and caused additional corroborative responses from other students. Indeed, discontent and frustration with writing in school were often voiced by students in both Brown’s and Parks’s classes. However, these same students clearly valued the out-of-school writing of their peers, voluntary writers like Keisha and Troy. Thus, it is erroneous to conclude that writing, in and of itself, was unimportant or “uncool” to these students; rather, they resisted what they viewed as the unauthentic nature of many of their experiences with academic writing.

By contrast, the literacy practices of our focal students were found to fulfill a number of related and authentic functions in their day-to-day lives. Engaging in literacy practices helped them make sense of both their lives and social worlds, and provided them with a partial refuge from the harsh realities of their everyday experiences. Writing was also an important aspect of their processes of identity construction. Their literacy activities gave both these youths a sense of personal status as well as personal satisfaction.

In their writings, both Keisha and Troy probed for meaning and sought to bring order to the mercurial flow of their lives. Like so many adolescents living in their community, they had seen more violence and pain than many adults will ever see. When those experiences are combined with the difficulties that nearly every teenager faces while growing up, it becomes difficult to understand how they coped at all. Yet, they tried to come to terms with their worlds by actively conceiving and critiquing the nature of their experiences through their own poetry, prose, plays, songs, and raps.

This idea of writing as refuge—of textual space as a sort of safe haven from trauma—deserves further exploration in the case of Keisha and Troy. For Troy, writing was akin to the refuge of his mother’s house: a “spot 4 real.” This reality must be contrasted, however, to the chaos brought upon the mother’s house in Keisha’s play, and to the fact that Troy’s poem spoke of intense divisions between his two families. These conflicts, so evident in written form, attest that ultimately for these two youths, there was no spot in their lives that could guarantee refuge. Nonetheless, for Keisha, the time she spent writing was time spent away from the streets. Her writing gave her a constructive way to avoid and address the violent and drug-ridden forces rampant in her neighborhood by exposing the futility of those lifestyles in her texts. Similarly, Troy’s voluntary writing, rehearsing, and performance of rap gave him constructive alternatives to a life on the streets. For both, writing outside of



school provided a shelter within which they could freely express their feelings without encountering the anxiety that often results from school-based, teacher-sanctioned responses.

Other researchers have explored and documented the ways that literacy practices can function as a refuge for students like Keisha and Troy. McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994), for example, offer the case of an inner-city youth named Rosa, whose realities included poverty, an abusive father, and a gang- and drug-infested neighborhood. They note that rather than languish in despair or withdrawal, Rosa became very active in the drama group at a boys and girls club in her community. She would spend about half her free time there writing and rehearsing scripts about her experiences of growing up in a difficult environment, and the other half performing and directing these dramas at other youth centers, churches, and schools. Like the focal students in our study, Rosa used her writing to validate and give voice to her perceptions and feelings in a constructive way. 44

Carroll's (1995) interviews with African American male authors reveal other examples of writing as a refuge for troubled youth and of its constructive functions. A poignant example can be found in the text of her interview with Nathan McCall, the author of *Makes Me Wanna Holler* (1994), an autobiographical work in which he describes the youthful gang involvement that led him to prison. As McCall relates, it was in prison that he began writing: 45

It made me feel better sometimes to get something down on paper just like I felt it. It brought a kind of relief to be able to describe my pain. It was like, if I could describe it, it lost some of its power over me. I jotted down inner most thoughts I couldn't verbalize to anyone else, recorded what I saw around me, and expressed feelings inspired by things I read. (Carroll, 1995, p. 182)

For McCall, the product of a neighborhood much like that of Keisha and Troy, the idea that naming and describing his pain through writing could bring "a kind of relief" yielded a profound insight. Further, writing helped him to become critically aware of his experiences. As he maintains in another part of the interview: "[I]t felt different when I had to take it [a thought or feeling] to another level of understanding and actually put it down on paper. Before, I didn't have to make a commitment to thinking about it" (Carroll, 1995, p. 143). We found that our two focal students used literacy in a similar fashion. However, rather than keeping their perceptions and pain bottled up for years and then retrospectively writing about the problems of doing so, they were expressing themselves more immediately in their voluntary writing during their adolescent years. 46

Through their writing, much of which, like McCall's, was autobiographical, Keisha and Troy were also actively engaging in a process of identity construction. Without question, their senses of themselves are reflected in the experiences and scenes they portray in their poems, plays, stories, and songs. Sometimes this depiction is capsulized in a flat claim such as Keisha's poetic statement: "I'mma wicked old fe-mac and that's how I'm living." Other times it is conveyed in a rap line that reveals a telling behavior such as Troy's claim: 47



“but that’s a cover-up for my quick-to-flash skanless way.” Notwithstanding, these two students’ writing identities in and outside of school were clearly and disturbingly different. Despite the strength and confidence with which Keisha and Troy defined themselves as writers based on their voluntary literary output, neither student was willing to embrace a similar identity based on their in-school writing. This disparity was of particular interest to us as researchers, and we discovered that it was linked to the role their voluntary writing played in helping the two students gain a sense of personal satisfaction and status. When interviewed, both Keisha and Troy indicated that they enjoyed their voluntary writing far more than did they their school writing assignments. Moreover, Keisha noted that while her family and friends outside of school praised her writing for both its style and content, her teachers often demanded that she alter both the style and content of her writing significantly. The latter, she claimed, made her feel highly uncomfortable about the prospect of conforming to school-based literary standards.

Troy informed us that he too enjoyed lots of praise and affirmation for his rap work in the settings in which he performed or otherwise shared it. However, he also hinted at possibilities for establishing connections between the kinds of writing he did on his own and the written work requested by the school: 48

I mean, I could write in school, you know what I’m sayin’. The essays, they don’t be all that cool, but, you know what I’m sayin’, I can be creative with anything I write, ’cuz I’m a writer, period.

Despite the mild affirmation, this statement characterizes the gulf students like Troy and Keisha see between their voluntary writing and school writing. For them, there is something in the nature of in-school writing that is definitely not “cool.”

Perhaps the essence of what is not cool about school-based writing is most directly relevant to our third research question, which addresses the specific genres and themes students like Keisha and Troy choose, and how these youths perceive the limits on their expression imposed by schools in contrast to their voluntary writing. As Rose (1989) maintains, writing instruction in schools often “teaches [students] . . . that the most important thing about writing—the very essence of writing—is grammatical correctness, not the communication of something meaningful” (p. 211). Rose cites the example of one of his students, who was an avid listener of rap music and in whom he had observed a considerable appreciation for linguistic complexity; yet, for this student, he claims, “[t]he instruction of language use he confronts strips away the vibrancy and purpose, the power and style, the meaning of the language that swirls around him” (p. 212). Relatedly, most teachers’ assessments of Troy’s “Family Fam” would no doubt focus almost exclusively on the rap work’s nonstandard style and fail to examine his use of a number of intricate comparison/contrast strategies and complex interwoven thematic considerations. A great deal of research has challenged the viability of teaching that emphasizes disconnected drill work and other kinds of writing assignments focused on discreet components of the process that are often divorced from their contexts and the more holistic 49



considerations of meaning in texts (Applebee, 1984; Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Poplin, 1988). However, the classroom continues to have difficulty accommodating certain culturally specific genres and provocative themes that form the axis of meanings that turn in many students' lives.

Unlike the adolescents in Camitta's (1993) study, who identified music, fashion, and sports as significant themes from African American youth culture for incorporation into the school curriculum, Keisha and Troy used literacy to focus on issues such as violence, crime, drugs, and relationships—topics that normally do not get addressed in the school curriculum. The incorporation of such sensitive issues into the official school curriculum could be extremely problematic. For instance, how could a teacher frame a discussion around drug activity when there might be young men such as Troy in the classroom who believe drug activity is a viable and necessary survival strategy? Teachers would also have to deal with contradictions raised by researchers like Sola and Bennett (1994), who note the contradictions inherent in discussions of the poverty and crime that might be prevalent in some students' lives. According to Sola and Bennett, "schools cannot easily offer ethnic minorities something meaningful, because that would require those who govern the schools to acknowledge the marginality of minority communities as well as the political and economic reasons for that marginality" (p. 136). In other words, beyond recognition that these issues are difficult or even painful to discuss for both students and teachers, the dominant ideology surrounding schools acts to ignore or dismiss them.

Even further, Fine (1992) suggests that this ideology works to "silence" students' authentic voices, issues, and concerns. She defines silencing as "the practices by which contradictory evidence, ideologies, and experiences find themselves buried, camouflaged, and discredited" (p. 117). In the Harlem, New York, high school where she conducted her research, Fine notes how teachers resisted "naming" issues like drugs, racism, poverty, and abortion that they felt would be too political for the classroom. Instead, she claims, they engaged in a "systematic expulsion of dangerous topics" (p. 123). Especially in low-income schools, Fine alleges, "the process of inquiring into students lived experience is assumed, a priori, unsafe territory for teachers and administrators" (p. 118).

These practices of silencing devalue the lives and concerns of students like Keisha and Troy. They also deny such students the opportunity to take a critical look at the conditions of their communities in the context of their schooling. Therein lies part of the irony in the thematic considerations and functions of literacy practices for writers like Keisha and Troy. At various levels and in powerful ways, their voluntary writings critically examine the state of their surroundings. Moreover, these youths evidence considerable skill in the specific kinds of literacy practices and processes needed to encode and decode culturally significant information and themes as well as values and beliefs.

Key characteristics of our focal students' literacy practices relate to our fourth research question addressing the nature of the mix of their oral and written texts. Although Keisha's compositions were more traditionally formed written texts, they also presented interesting oral-written connections. As she informed us, her poems achieved their fullest effect when spoken rather than read. Similarly, she claimed that her plays were more meaningful when



performed. On a personal level, she indicated, she used her poems and plays as pretexts for conversations with her family, friends, or boyfriend around the various issues raised in her works.

Troy's focus, on the other hand, was first and foremost on the creation of oral texts. For him, the spoken version of the rap is the ultimate product—a product intended and designed for aural rather than visual consumption. When he did write down his raps, he claimed, they were still formed as writing to be spoken rather than read. Notwithstanding, as we have earlier argued, the production and performance of rap are viable and valued literacy practices that reveal Troy's mastery over some of the processes through which culturally significant meanings are coded. These practices further identify Troy as a producer and not merely a consumer of culturally relevant texts that are appropriate for his audiences in both informal conversation as well as formal performance form. In effect, Troy-the-rapper is a living text, displaying his compositions through the software of sound, in real time, on the variegated screens of urban streets. 54

### Changing Life in Schools

Our focal teachers, Ms. Parks and Ms. Brown, recognized that life in urban schools was changing dramatically. They were also aware that these changes would require them to change as well, and they were struggling to do so. Despite the best intentions of teachers, however, the question remains: Are the nation's schools capable of making the changes required to effectively link learning to the cultural identity and backgrounds of diverse groups of students? More specifically, is it realistic to suggest that teachers incorporate the non-school literacy practices of urban African American students into the curriculum, despite the difficulties involved? As the present study reveals, these students' voluntary out-of-school writing has important implications for schooling. 55

We acknowledge that merely including more culturally relevant topics and issues in the curriculum does not constitute fundamental change. Further, we realize that our finding that culturally relevant material was not often addressed or included as a part of the in-school literacy activities at Keisha's and Troy's schools is only part of the problem. Researchers such as Gordon (1993) and Bartolome (1994) have warned against the pitfalls of attempting to use culturally relevant curriculum materials as "the solution to the current underachievement of students from subordinated cultures" when this approach is "often reduced to finding the 'right' teaching methods, strategies, or prepackaged curricula that will work with students who do not respond to so-called 'regular' or 'normal' instruction" (Bartolome, 1994, p. 174). After explaining why including culturally relevant material will not result in any magical transformation in the classroom, Gordon calls for a more liberatory education in which "students do not learn to read and write; they read and write in order to learn. They learn how to make problematic commonsense understandings and to question what is not being said as well as what is stated" (p. 457). In essence, Gordon suggests that students must learn how to take an active part in the construction of knowledge. Our findings suggest that their writing can be a valuable tool in this process. 56



This is where our earlier-noted conception of literacy as skills in the production of meanings in or from texts becomes instrumental. We contend that whether the literacy activity is reading or writing, meaning is actively produced, not merely consumed. One bridge, then, between the voluntary writing of students like Keisha and Troy and school-based writing assignments can be found in efforts to help teachers gain insights into the nature of their students' out-of-school literate behaviors and literacy skills. Teachers need to be shown how the behaviors and skills students demonstrate in the construction of their voluntary texts correspond to some of the behaviors and skills they need to develop and display in school. 57

If the education urban African American students receive is to be a liberatory one, the specific kinds of materials to which their literacy skills are applied is also significant. Further, these students' writing must name and link the issues that schools have difficulty addressing, including racism, poverty, gang violence, and drugs. However, Sola and Bennett's (1994) as well as Fine's (1992) work, noted earlier, suggest that schools and other institutional power structures inherently have difficulty addressing these critical issues because they also expose the contradictions in these institutions with respect to their roles in contributing to these issues. As Macedo (1994) notes: 58

Terms that encapsulate the drug culture, daily alienation, the struggle to survive the substandard and inhumane conditions of ghettos: these constitute a discourse black Americans find no difficulty in using. It is from this raw and sometimes cruel reality that black students can begin to unveil the obfuscation that characterizes their daily existence inside and outside the schools. (p. 120)

Similarly, Fine (1992) maintains that naming these issues can "facilitate critical conversation about social and economic arrangements, particularly about inequitable distributions of power and resources by which these students and their kin suffer disproportionately" (p. 120). The paradox is that the very issues that could be used to facilitate the discourse and development of students like Keisha and Troy are also the issues most often resisted in the discourse in schools. Consequently, teachers who really want to affect the lives and learning of these students must develop a pedagogy that works to resolve this paradox.

Clearly, Keisha and Troy are already naming and, to some extent, linking many provocative issues in their voluntary writing. If, however, their writing and naming, and that of other African American inner-city youth, is only able to offer them temporary refuge or relief from the problems and pain of their realities, then it is only functioning like another of the mind-numbing drugs available on the streets of their neighborhoods. Therefore, in utilizing this material from these students' authentic experiences, teachers must help them refine and profit from it in other ways. They must develop pedagogical strategies for a critical literacy that help and inspire these students to truly understand first how their reality is constructed by forces beyond their immediate neighborhood and school, and then to gain control of an agency in their lives. 59



Ms. Parks and Ms. Brown were developing such strategies. Yet, in addition to recognizing their students' unique writing skills and being open to a wider range of possible texts as suitable for classroom use and review, they were gaining much, much more. With their reassessment of the goals and methods of writing instruction came increased sensitivity to the nature and importance of the meanings urban African American students seek to communicate in their voluntary and school writing. By examining and assessing the writing these students do on their own, the two teachers gained significant insights into how youth struggle to manage the complex situations in their lives. They also learned how those situations could connect to and motivate African American students in urban settings to write more both in and outside of school. Their efforts and openness to let their pedagogy be informed by the voluntary writing practices of students like Keisha and Troy should be commended and replicated in other settings.

## References

- Applebee, A. (1984). *Contexts for learning to write: Studies of secondary school instruction*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Arwell, N. (1987). *In the middle: Writing, reading, and learning with adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman-Boynton/Cook.
- Bartolome, L. (1994). Beyond the methods fetish: Toward a humanizing pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64(3), 173-194.
- Calkins, L. (1986). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman-Boynton/Cook.
- Camitta, M. (1987). *Invented lives: Adolescent vernacular writing and the construction of experience*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Camitta, M. (1993). Vernacular writing: Varieties of literacy among Philadelphia high school students. In B. Street (Ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy* (pp. 228-246). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carroll, R. (1995). *Swing low: Black men writing*. New York: Crown.
- Duncan, G. (1997). Space, place, and the problematic of race: Black adolescent discourse as mediated action. *Journal of Negro Education*, 65(2), 133-150.
- Dyson, A. (1993). *Social worlds of children learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Farr, M. (1994). In los idiomas: Literacy practices among Chicano Mexicanos. In B. Moss (Ed.), *Literacy across communities* (pp. 9-47). Cresskill, NY: Hampton Press.
- Fine, M. (1992). *Disruptive voices: Transgressive possibilities of feminist research*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Goodman, Y., & Wilde, S. (1992). *Literacy events in a community of young writers*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gordon, B. (1993). African American cultural knowledge and liberatory education: Dilemmas, problems, and potentials in a postmodern American society. *Urban Education*, 27(4), 448-470.
- Guerra, J. (1992). *An ethnographic study of the literacy practices of a Mexican immigrant family in Chicago*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The University of Illinois at Chicago.
- Heath, S. B. (1980). The functions and uses of literacy. *Journal of Communication*, 30, 123-133.
- Heath, S. B. (1982). Protean shapes in literacy events: Ever-shifting oral and literate traditions. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Spoken and written language: Exploring orality and literacy* (pp. 91-117). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.