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From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Contexts

Maisha T. Fisher

How are high school English teachers and their students integrating out-of-school literacy practices such as spoken word poetry in urban school settings? What are the ways in which these teachers and their students are redefining literacy and what it means to be literate? “Your job is to be literate in as many ways as possible,” begins Joe as he addresses his “Power Writers” one Friday morning. Joe, a public high school English and music teacher, speaks briefly in the beginning of class so that there is time to hear from every student during “read and feed.” Read and feed is an opportunity for each student to read his or her own original piece of writing, generally poetry, and receive feedback from at least two to three peers and one “teacher.” Every Monday afternoon, Friday morning and even on some Saturdays, Joe convenes with the “Power Writers.” The Power Writers range from grades 9-12 as well as recent graduates who bring their journals and notebooks to participate in a writing class above and beyond their English classes. When Joe discusses literacy with his students, he explains that he wants each of them to become a “jedi of words” building on the concept of a “jedi knight” from the famous Star Wars film trilogy. In the Star Wars trilogy, a jedi knight is the ultimate warrior. In Joe’s class, a “jedi of words” is committed to crafting his or her writing, developing critical reading skills and learning how to be articulate in the “language of wider communication” (Smitherman, 2002)¹. The “Power Writers” not only compose from the perspectives of teenagers coming of age in New York City, one of the most complicated urban cities in the country, but also from the perspectives of being African American, Dominican, Puerto Rican and West Indian.

In another borough in New York City, Mama C urges her high school students, “Use your voice; you can’t have powerful words and weak voice.”

Although she was moved from the classroom to a literacy coach position, Mama C continues to teach a spoken word poetry class, which students renamed "The Runaway Slaves of the 21st Century," after school on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. When Mama C brings her students together, she reminds them that they "must learn history with spoken word poetry" because "one goes with the other." One of the first assignments of the academic year was to read the autobiography of political activist and former Black Panther, Assata Shakur, and write a "generational poem" that would show links between social and political struggles of people of African descent depicted in Shakur's autobiography and current issues. Mama C emphasizes how important it is for her students to be critical readers, writers and speakers of the word.

In these two writing communities, literacy is strategic, purposeful, and always linked to meaning. The foundation for literate practices in these communities is Freirian in nature. Teachers, in a very serious way, work to liberate language and prepare students to be in control of words; they do this by allowing students to be co-constructors of their learning community. The aim of this article is to unpack the literacy practices of these two high school writing communities and is guided by the following research questions: *How is literacy defined in these writing communities? What are the skills that teachers and students value? What are the practices of the teachers and the students in these two writing communities? What are the ways in which reading and writing are partnered with speaking and "doing?"*

Background and Review of Related Literature

In an effort to unpack the literacy practices of youth in diverse school settings, scholars have begun to show how young people are often engaged in literate and literary activities that may not be acknowledged in school settings, such as popular culture and media influences (Dyson, 2003, 2001, 1997), rapping and "freestyling" (Meacham, 2004; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004), and spoken word poetry (Fisher, 2004, 2003a, 2003b; Sutton, 2004). Studies have focused on ways to "bridge" these practices (Hull & Schultz, 2002) as well as create interventions that help students use their prior skills and knowledge as a tool for academic literacies (Lee, 2001, 1995, 1992). In a study of "cultural modeling," Lee examined how teachers can help their students use their knowledge of language to learn skills for literary interpretation. An important implication for Lee's work is that many African American students, and students of color, come to classrooms carrying a facility with words and language. It is with that prior knowledge, according to Lee, that teachers can cultivate the skills needed for literary interpretation.

Increasingly, research is exploring how aspects of youth culture and literacy in out-of-school contexts such as spoken word poetry and “hip hop pedagogy” can be considered literate practices (Jocson, 2004; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Fisher 2003b; Kirkland, 2002). In a study examining spoken word poetry open mics and Black bookstore events, I asserted that these Participatory Literacy Communities (PLCs) are considered educational institutions by their participants (Fisher, 2004; 2003a, 2003b). PLCs or “chosen” literacy spaces provide a forum grounded in the philosophy that “everyone has something important to say” while also fostering a culture of listening. However, there is still a need to examine how out-of-school literacy practices such as spoken word poetry and “hip hop pedagogy” can be viewed as more than tools teachers and students use in classroom contexts. Arguing that hip hop should be viewed as a *culture* rather than a *strategy* in a lesson plan, Anderson (2004) challenged education researchers to not only look at the literacy skills that can be taught using this medium but also at how young people can acquire other skills such as math, business and marketing to name a few. Making a similar point about the culture inherent in such chosen spaces, Jocson (see this issue) argues that spoken word poetry programs such as June Jordan’s Poetry for the People and community-based poetry organizations such as Youth Speaks link the writing and performance of poetry to “identity, voice and empowerment.”

The enduring question for English/Language Arts teachers, teacher educators, and literacy researchers then is how to critically examine these Participatory Literacy Communities or alternative/supplementary learning spaces, especially if we see them as a culture more than as a strategy. This article provides a theoretical framework for viewing such communities while offering findings from two classroom-based PLCs that use spoken word poetry, not as a strategy but as a movement and a way of life for students.

Participatory Literacy Communities (PLCs) are organized around aspects of literacy such as spoken word poetry, open mic events, bookstore events, writers’ collectives, and book clubs.

Theoretical Framework for Participatory Literacy Communities

Participatory Literacy Communities (PLCs) are organized around aspects of literacy such as spoken word poetry, open mic events, bookstore events, writers’ collectives, and book clubs. PLCs are *chosen spaces*; in other words, they are either organized outside of work and school settings or they are alternative and supplementary spaces for learning. PLCs are “institutions within themselves” (Fisher, 2003a). Here, institution does not necessarily refer to a physical space but more specifically to values, customs, and prac-

tices through creative expression. PLCs are grounded in three theoretical frameworks for literacy: literacy as critical (Shor, 1992; Freire & Macedo, 1987), literacy as a social practice (Street, 1982; Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981), as learned through social participation (Wenger, 1998), and literacy as Democratic Engagement (Kinloch, 2005).

In PLCs, literacy means “words rethinking worlds” (Shor, 1992). Skills are always at the core of these communities. Not only are participants aware of the importance of acquiring the language and skills needed for the Language of Wider Communication referred to earlier, but they are also committed to pushing the boundaries of literacy. The speaking or orality aspect of PLCs gives writers, readers, and speakers a forum to expose and access multiple truths and experiences while fostering a particular kind of listening.

Methods

This qualitative study in progress began during the 2003-2004 academic year at two public high school sites: Alta High (AH) in the Bronx and Community School (CS) in Brooklyn (both pseudonyms). During the fall semester in 2003, I began following the “Power Writing” class at AH and the spoken word poetry class at CS; both classes were considered extra-curricular writing classes that extended the English/Language Arts curriculum. I kept ethnographic fieldnotes during class sessions, field trips, and interviews. Additionally, I filmed class sessions towards the end of the fall semester and through the spring semester. The third phase of the data collection process included interviews with teachers and student participants; however dialogue with community members was ongoing throughout the academic year. I used fieldnotes and video footage to identify the literacy practices of teachers and students as well as the literacy goals of the communities. Some of the literacy goals I have identified include mastering language and overcoming fears around vocabulary, encouraging a literacy continuum by showing links between history and current events, and performing the word or building confidence by sharing written work publicly.

“Old Heads,” “Singers,” “Spitters,” and “Runaway Slaves of the 21st Century”: Writing Community Participants

The writing communities in AH and the CS, or the “Power Writers” and the “Runaway Slaves of the 21st Century” respectively, were consistently evolving and growing. However, both Joe and Mama C were the main teachers and “old heads” (Anderson, 1990) in these writing communities at AH and CS. In his study of urban communities, Anderson identified the central role

of men and women who were respected and admired in their communities. Referring to these figures as “old heads,” Anderson explained that the young people who listened to the stories and wisdom of the “old heads” believed “they were learning something worthwhile from someone they could look up to and respect” (p. 71). The female “old head,” according to Anderson, had “mother’s wit” and “earthy wisdom.” In many ways, Joe and Mama C were updated versions of “old heads”; not only did they possess the insight from growing up with similar struggles as their students, but they also educated themselves on the music, interests, and passions of the generation they were teaching in order to remain current and effective. Because of their commitment to learn about their students’ lives, they invited the opportunity to be “schooled” by the students rather than just imparting their knowledge.

Joe, who was born in New York City in 1947, was not only a teacher at AH, he was a father-figure to many of his students. AH, an “alternative school,” had 367 students: 56.9% “Hispanic,” 39.9% “Black,” while “Asian” and “White” make up the remaining population. However, the categories “Hispanic” and “Black” were one-dimensional and do not tell the story of this diverse community. Power Writers was one of the most (if not the most) diverse chosen spaces in the school. Whether students had him as a classroom teacher or not, they flocked to Joe to talk about their work and their lives. It was not uncommon to see Joe sitting in the middle of five or six students of various grades and ethnic backgrounds listening to Joe’s lessons on history, music, and even life experiences. Students delighted in these opportunities. Joe taught Power Writing on Mondays and co-taught on Friday mornings with Roland, a documentary filmmaker, poet, and board member of the historical Nuyorican Poet’s Café. Joe and Roland were also joined by Amy, the executive director of Early Stages. Early Stages, a non-profit organization, began their relationship with AH by providing free theater tickets to students and eventually brought Roland, their artist in residence, in to work with Joe. As one student explained, Joe represented the “wisdom,” while Roland offered “guidance” and Amy brought “love.” Amy worked on editing student work and documenting the group in various ways.

Mama C was a central figure at CS; she was a literacy coach and had an opportunity to spend time in the English classes. CS was also considered an “alternative school” with a “community-based” focus. CS was a high school with grades 9-12 and had approximately 670 students. There were approximately 89.2% “Black” students, 8.8% “Hispanic” students and the remaining “White” and “Asian” students. Similar to the category “Hispanic” at AH, “Black” was not monolithic; “Black” was referred to African American, West African and also West Indian. Mama C, born in the 1950s, was a

Brooklyn native and considered her life experiences growing up in Ocean Hill/Brownsville and attending The East, a Black community school based in Brooklyn in the 1960s and 1970s as a critical part of her foundation. Mama C also wrote and published her own novel set in Ocean Hill/Brownsville which many of the English teachers used in their classrooms. Mama C shared her students with Ms. T, a CS English teacher and performance poet. Over time, I shed the title of “guest” as Joe and Mama C began to consider me a “co-teacher.” I did not begin the academic year viewing myself as a poet; however during the course of the year I began to write poetry, read my work aloud for class, and receive feedback from students and co-teachers. I considered Joe and Mama C my teachers as well. Following in the “old head” tradition, they used their lived experiences in collaboration with “book learning” to inform their teaching. Students could and often did access me by office, home phone, or cell phone (which they preferred), and e-mail to share good news and new poetry.

There were approximately 50 active students in the AH Power Writers and an intimate group of 5 at CS. It is important to note that these numbers varied throughout the academic year. Some students came to the Power Writing class at AH as “spitters” or rappers while Joe considered others “singers” whose work and style were rooted in the blues tradition, while CS student poets aligned themselves with Black historical figures involved in the liberation of Black people in the context of the United States. Mama C was often referred to as a Harriet Tubman or a Sojourner Truth.

Writing in Rhythm: Singing at AH

On my way to Joe’s class at AH, I am always struck by the signs on many of the apartment buildings reading “*No loitering, no drinking, no loud talking, no game playing, no roller skating, no bicycle riding, no ball playing and no sitting in front of the building*” while parents run in and out of the apartment building doors clasping the hands of small children. After passing these restrictive declarations, I make my way to Joe’s class where students do not receive a long list of what they cannot do but rather the encouragement to seek a range of possibilities through literacy. It is December in New York City but once inside the school it feels as if it were near the equator. Monday classes are small and Joe encourages the newer poets to attend these smaller sessions so they will have more opportunities to share their work. However, the more experienced poets are also expected to attend and give the newer poets support. In addition to poets that have been identified, Joe often invites students who are wandering through the hallways or who seem to be

displaced during the after school hours. On this particular day, Joe focuses on the work of Dee. Although Dee is new to Power Writing, Joe welcomes her and encourages her to “sing” her work. Singing in this context is a metaphor for maximizing your voice through creativity with words:

Dee begins to mumble her piece with her hands over her face and run her words together. Her poem was inaudible.

JOE [to Dee]: You have to be like a “singer.” So out with it.

DEE [much louder]: My life is a mess.

JOE: Much better.

DEE: My life is a mess/I can't do nothing/I can't see nothing/And I also can't stand nothing/I live in a world where people will do anything for money/I live in a world where girls give they bodies up to men or boys/I live in a world—I live in a world—hold on.

[Dee finds her place again and continues]

DEE: I live in a world where lots of crackheads are/I live in a world where I can't go out my house without people or kids acting stupid/I live in a world where you can't go no where without people putting a gun to your head/I live in a world where people don't give a shit about they family or nobody around them/So when I say my life is a mess, I mean my life is a mess.

[Everyone applauds long and deeply]

ELLA: She's a mini-me.

JOE: Huge leaps. The one leap is to be true to yourself. And the other leap is to be true to the world around you and not be afraid to say what you see and feel. And I wish the larger group was here because the way you played us with [Joe covers his mouth and begins mumbling in an attempt to characterize Dee when she first recited her poetry and then mocked her feeding]. “I liked it” but you didn't tell us why you liked it . . . look at you now . . . look at that long poem. That was a long poem. It had meter. It had certain strengths. That made me say “Yeah, yeah, yeah, I can feel you.” And everything you said was true. We can play with the descriptions . . . but the poem itself, the form right now—anyone who heard your poem before or who didn't hear the poem would understand exactly what you are saying. That's a tremendous piece of work.

Ella, one of the veteran student poets, referred to Dee as a “mini-me” because Ella was revered by her peers as a writer who could capture the details of their community through her poetry. Joe, who also served as the school’s athletics director in addition to his teaching, took the lead on feeding Dee, a member of the girl’s basketball team, as he often would with newer members. When Dee joined the Power Writers in the fall, she was reluctant to read her work aloud; she was in a self-contained learning disabilities class during the school day, and Joe wanted her to have an opportunity to interact with other students. Dee was, however, still expected to feed other poets and engage in the community until she was comfortable reciting her own work. Dee would often respond to student work with “I liked it” or “It was good.” Everyone teased her in a loving way that made her laugh and smile but she continued with her three-word responses. Joe encouraged Dee to spend some time thinking about her life and experiences and then challenged her to write about them. “My life is a mess” was Dee’s first “long poem.” Dee chose her own form and used “I live in a world” to open most of her lines, reaffirming her authority not only to bare witness in her neighborhood but also to exercise her responsibility to report her observations and understanding of this complicated living space to a larger audience. When Joe provided feedback he focused on Dee’s ability to be “true” to both herself and her world. Joe also noted the “leap” she took in being fearless and she did this reporting of a world “where a lot of crackheads are” and “where you can’t go nowhere without people putting a gun to your head.” This truth-telling is also visible in June Jordan’s work with student poets in Northern California (See Jocson, this issue). One of Jordan’s tenets in her Poetry for the People class is “Poetry for the People rests upon a belief that the art of telling the truth is a necessary and a healthy way to create powerful, and positive connections among people who, otherwise, remain (unknown and unaware) strangers” (Muller and the Poetry for the People Blueprint Collective, 1995, p. 16).

The Power Writing community forced student voices and experiences out of obscurity and fostered awareness among each other. Dee’s return to her premise “My life is a mess” at the close of her piece attempts to address any possible non-believers; “So when I say my life is a mess/I mean my life is a mess.” In other words, this is a true account of my life and experiences told through my first-person narrative. Joe acknowledged her form by responding, “We can play with the descriptions”; Dee’s “I live in a world” scaffold could essentially be used by other student poets and even though the details might change.

At this stage in Dee's development as a writer, Joe was less concerned with issues of grammar and profanity in her work because he wanted to call attention to the fact that she was finally beginning to "sing." With that foundation, he began to build a relationship based on respect and honor with Dee and the other students present. Dee used "they bodies" and "they families" which Joe would usually flag as "Bronxonics." In this context, D's poem would not have the same meaning for her if she said "their bodies" or "their families." Joe used the term Bronxonics to describe the words and styles of Bronx-based English, not unlike Ebonics, that many of his students use in their neighborhoods and families from all ethnic backgrounds. When Joe would call out "Bronxonics," students always smile and laugh knowingly. Increasingly over the semester, students began to point out Bronxonics among each other. Joe brought Bronxonics to his students' attention if he believed they were unaware of the "standard." However, Joe encouraged Bronxonics when it was used strategically and purposefully in their work. Joe believed students used Bronxonics "to be real" and considered the language students spoke in their respective neighborhoods to be a dialect:

Language is a very lush gumbo. American English is a gumbo. And if we interpret gumbo as a very exotic and spicy stew with ingredients from the entire possibility it had then we have to accept that...there is an English that is quote unquote standard which allows information to be transmitted but that does not deny the fact that there is information being transmitted all the time in other Englishes. (Joe, April 2004)

Joe's understanding of "Englishes" informed his pedagogical practices; he knew that his students were constantly using words and language in innovative ways and that "information was being transmitted all the time" whether or not it was in the "standard."

"The struggle continues": [Re]Reading History at CS

All the students at CS know where Mama C's office is located; if she is in her office, the door is always open and a chorus of greetings continuously floods through her door. At the beginning of the fall semester, she hung an announcement for her spoken word poetry class outside her office door:

Can you spit
Without even tryin'
Are words flyin'
From your lips
Like you've been studying scripts,

And practicing flips
Taking people on trips
Filling up mad notebooks
And running out of Bics
If so—Join the Spoken Word Masters
Come prepared to be heard.

Using poetry to attract students' attention, Mama C strategically used the term "spit" in the first line of her poem to show that she valued students' relationship to hip hop culture and music in particular. In this context, "spitting" was closely linked to freestyle rapping or being able to extemporaneously put words together. The most important aspect of being a "spitter" was having a great facility with words. In her announcement, Mama C acknowledged the importance of the spoken word in lines 3-4: "words flyin'/From your lips." Additionally, she emphasized the role of the written word in lines 5, 8, and 9: "Like you've been studying scripts/Filling up mad notebooks/And running out of Bics." In her closing, Mama C finished her poetry announcement with the most important aspect of the writing community, "Come prepared to be heard." Mama C understood that many students did not often have opportunities to share their ideas with an active audience. Therefore, students would have to "prepare" to be "heard" in a way that was unique in an academic setting. Mama C believed that hip hop "saved" young people. She explained that hip hop music encouraged young people to listen to each other in a particular way and appreciate language and words; "Hip hop saved us. The music fostered a culture of listening. In hip hop, young people are always waiting for the line."

Mama C's spoken word curriculum included tracing the oral tradition of West Africa to the Americas and the ways in which these traditions are manifested in spoken word poetry and hip hop music. Introducing history and showing the continuities was one of Mama C's strategies for getting her students "fired up" about writing:

The spoken word is an opportunity [for students] to learn their history which is a must for me and a must for them. It never ceases to amaze me that I have to teach it all over again every year like I've never done it before. Every year, no matter what kind of school I'm in, no matter what the forum is, I always have students who don't know their history so I have no choice but to tell them. And I get fired up when I'm giving it and I always make them see the connection between the past and the present and then I dare them to look into the future and change it.

Typically, Mama C will begin a session with a challenge or a charge for students. Mama C began the academic year by introducing *Assata: An*

Autobiography by Assata Shakur. Assata Shakur was a community activist and Black Panther in the United States. Her autobiography juxtaposes her life as a young Black girl being acutely aware of inequity and her passion as a young adult to protect the rights of people of African descent. During her involvement in the Black Panthers and organizations specifically aimed at ceasing police brutality, Shakur and many of her peers were targets in J. Edgar Hoover's counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO)². In 1984, Shakur was granted political asylum in Cuba after escaping a maximum-security prison after being charged with the murder of a New Jersey State Trooper. After providing this background information, Mama C addressed the group: "Don't just come to visit. This is a spoken word group. We don't do bling bling poetry—only conscious work. How many of you heard of Assata Shakur?"

Seven hands went up but no one volunteered to share what they "heard." Mama C's goal was to set a tone for students' writing; she did not want what students characterized as "bling bling"³ or bragging about material items such as money, clothes and cars. "Conscious work" was an expectation in this community of writers and having a sense of history was at the core of this type of writing. Mama C gave some background on Shakur's life and discussed how COINTELPRO destroyed many Black organizations in a way that students would understand the implications:

MAMA C: So a Black person joins the organizations and act like they were down but they were really snitches for the government.

[Students looked at each other in disbelief]

Since it was the first session since the reading assignment, Mama C did not worry about students' shyness around speaking up but she did point to Naja's t-shirt which read "The struggle continues" underneath a picture of The Black Panthers and used it as an opportunity to challenge students in a writing assignment. Additionally, we ceremoniously read sections of the text aloud as we passed one of the books among us.

MAMA C: Consider all the cases in your lifetime and negativity you've heard about Black people. Maybe you believed it as well...Use your writing as revenge. We write from our hearts. Passion guides our writing. I don't want you to walk around angry. Don't hate people. Hate racism. Write a poem about this story I just told you or about Assata Shakur. The theme is "fired up!"

Rising to the challenge, Naja began writing in her journal which she titled "Poetry in Progress." Naja titled her piece "The Greatest Threat" play-

ing on J. Edgar Hoover's reference to Shakur as the "greatest threat" to United States security. Naja began her poem with a call to her classmates:

The Greatest Threat

WHERE ARE MY RUNAWAY SLAVES OF THE 21ST CENTURY?
Chorus: RIGHT HERE
Let me school you on this piece of history
The Greatest Threat
To the threads that sew us into a classless stature
Where being human doesn't matter
Where laying next to "your brotha' in a body bag
Is on the regular
It's like century old shackles that start to make your skin sag
It's the pounding in your chest
A bullet shot
Or 2 or 3
WHO SHOT YA, ASSATA?
My African queen
Whose jewels have been tarnished and twisted
Yet your feet
God has kissed your feet
You've escaped
The slave masters who have yet to master
The magic of your magnificent departure
RUN BUTTERFLY RUN
Until our pain crusts over and festers
Shout out the fallen ones for they need to know salvation comes not from a gun
And don't worry I'll read to your grandbabies
I'll read so poetically and profound
I'll read as if you were me
SO PURR ON BLACK CAT
Cuz one day you'll roam back
Into the psyche of those stricken with un-remembrance
And then you and I shall dance
As if the African soil tickles our toes again
We won't be ENSLAVED then
Or RUNAWAY LOYALTY of the 21st Century
We'll be free

As Naja read her piece, Mama C shook her head back and forth with awe. Some students gave each other high-fives while others immediately began writing feverishly in their journals. Naja's poem was also a pledge to continue the activism:

And I wrote the piece to [Assata Shakur]. The piece basically it starts off, “Where are my runaway slaves of the 21st Century” and that’s basically calling for all the revolutionary poets out there. Because in *her* book, *she* said she was a runaway slave of the 20th Century so I said we were the runaway slaves of the 21st Century. Then I just started talking to Assata telling her I understand that you can’t come home and I will read to your grandbaby. I think the line was ‘I will read to your grandbaby as if you were me...’ I said “God has kissed your feet.” I talk about how she escaped prison in the poem and how they still haven’t figured out how she could do it. It was the magic of her. Basically that’s what my poem is about. (Naja, April 2004)

After Naja shared her poem, the class adopted the name “Runaway Slaves of the 21st Century” in Shakur’s honor. Getting students “fired up” was a strategy that began with Mama C but continued among the students. Mama C referred to these poems as “generational pieces.” Although Shakur’s involvement in the Black Panthers and other organizations took place in the 1970s, there was still relevance for many of the CS students. During the course of the academic year, a young African American man was fatally shot by a police guard on the roof of his apartment building where young people frequent to access the outdoors without being on the streets. Students could effortlessly recite countless injustices by police in their communities. The class was indeed an opportunity to use the “passion” to serve as a “guide” for writing as well as students’ writing to be a purposeful message to each other.

“Poetry brought me back to school”: Implications for Teaching and Teacher Education

In many of the student interviews that have been conducted, students cite these writing communities as their impetus for attending school. These writing communities are more than spaces for literacy learning, they are socializing units to help students build a greater autonomy in school and out-of-school contexts. For example, a number of AH alumni continued to attend Power Writing class. Two AH students who graduated mid-term during the academic year of this study, received scholarships to private liberal arts institutions and used the Power Writing Community as a support network as they prepared for their transition to college. At CS, Naja did not have a class during the last period of the day; however she remained on campus to attend the spoken word poetry class.

Teacher education and research in the teaching of English has to consider the ways in which classroom teachers like Joe and Mama C have used

out-of-school literacy methods to “hear” their students and be sure that these young people are “heard” by others. Using an open mic format rooted in community-based spoken word venues, these two writing communities offered a neutral space where students were encouraged to maintain a non-judgmental attitude toward their peers. Spoken word poetry, like Mama C’s characterization of hip hop, fosters a “culture of listening” and valuing words. It is a movement of words that continues to grow. What began as a grassroots effort to share poetry and writing in coffee houses and small performance spaces is becoming a culture for young people are listening for the words that incite and inspire. Both writing groups were expected to share their work publicly in order to sharpen their reading, writing, and speaking skills. Reading publicly not only exposed students to other writers and poets, but it also showed them how they were part of a larger network of wordsmiths. In these Participatory Literacy Communities, literacy was a practice; for example, the “read and feed” system in Joe’s class depends on everyone making contributions by a) sharing their writing and b) actively listening in order to give constructive feedback to other members of the community. While acknowledging the literacies students engage in everyday outside of school, these writing communities also provide opportunities for students to learn and master the “standard” while understanding the standard does not belong to any one class or ethnic group, but in fact, belongs to them as well.

A part of this socializing network that cannot be underestimated is the opportunities students had to interact with their teachers and co-teachers.

Literacy in these writing communities depended on relationships between peers and adults with mutual admiration and respect that helped expose these young writers to words, styles, and trajectories that they could access while building their own literate identities.

The inclusion of intergenerational perspectives helped students find purpose in literacy while situating themselves in a historical continuum for literacy learning (Fisher, 2004, 2003a, 2003b). Additionally, Joe and Mama C lived the subjects they taught; they are readers and writers beyond the school walls and are intimately involved in the workshop process. Many prospective teachers enter teacher education programs with talents and skills often overshadowed by the focus on standards. Classroom teachers need time to cultivate their writing craft as well so they can model writing and take risks side by side with

students. Joe, Mama C, and invited guests also read their work to their students anticipating feedback. Literacy in these writing communities depended

on relationships between peers and adults with mutual admiration and respect that helped expose these young writers to words, styles, and trajectories that they could access while building their own literate identities.

Author's Note

This article is dedicated to Joe and his Power Writers and Mama C and her Runaway Slaves of the 21st Century who taught me how to “sing.” I would like to express my gratitude to my friends and colleagues Maria Torres-Guzman and Dale Allender of the National Council of Teachers of English for guiding me to these two brilliant teachers. And finally, I would like to express my gratitude to JoBeth Allen for her valuable feedback on previous drafts of this manuscript.

Notes

1. Smitherman employs Joshua Fishman's (1972, 1980) “language of wider communication” to refer to “the language of literacy and technology.” See Fishman, J. A. (1972). *Language and Nationalism*. Rowley: Newbury House.

2. Hoover's program was created to discredit and harass Black organizations that were considered radical and revolutionary. Shakur begins her autobiography with scenes of being brutalized by FBI agents after she was shot three times by New Jersey troopers in May 1973.

3. Like many other words that have emerged from hip hop music, the term “bling bling” has been appropriated by popular culture and media. However the term was first introduced by the Louisiana-based rap group Big Tymers who recorded a song titled “Bling Bling.” This term was originally a reference to the way light reflects on diamonds, new cars, and other material possessions symbolizing wealth and even an excess of money. Now the term is commonly used to critique materialism in the hip hop community.

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