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### Exploring the Literate Trajectories of Youth Across Time and Space

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## RETROSPECTIVE RESEARCH NARRATIVE

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### Exploring the Literate Trajectories of Youth Across Time and Space

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Here, I offer a retrospective research narrative of four of my works, *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms* (published under Maisha T. Fisher, 2007b); *Black Literate Lives: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (published under Maisha T. Fisher, 2009); *Writing Instruction in the Culturally Relevant Classroom* (with Latrise P. Johnson; Winn & Johnson, 2011); and *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* (Winn, 2011). I revisit these texts in order to contribute to a larger discussion of how activity systems and youth participation in these activity systems provide support for youth to build and sustain literate identities in both schools and in out-of-school contexts.

In what spaces do people of African descent engage in literate practices such as reading, writing, and speaking beyond school settings? What are the salient characteristics of these literacy communities, and how can an analysis of the activities in these communities be leveraged to inform practitioners? For the past decade I have examined the ways in which literacy, and “performing literacy” in particular (Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, & Otuteye, 2005), can be a mediating tool for youth to navigate the “lively labyrinths” of urban public schools (Gallagher, 2007), formal and informal teaching and learning institutions, the juvenile justice system, and most recently in restorative justice circles in classrooms and schools (Winn, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). Informed by a sociocultural, and more specifically a “sociocritical,” approach to understanding literacy (Gutierrez, 2008), my work privileges a “historicizing” literacy that acknowledges the rich and textured lives of our youth. Throughout my program of research, the notion of youth—specifically African American and Latino students in underresourced schools—performing

original writing has been central. My work has moved beyond the traditional conceptualizations of literacy, and although this is not new, my research trajectory demonstrates the historical significance of democratic engagement in literacy teaching and learning.

Here I offer a retrospective research narrative of four of my works, *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms* (published under Maisha T. Fisher, 2007b); *Black Literate Lives: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (published under Maisha T. Fisher, 2009); *Writing Instruction in the Culturally Relevant Classroom* (with Latrise P. Johnson; Winn & Johnson, 2011); and *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* (Winn, 2011). I revisit these texts to contribute to a larger discussion of how activity systems and youth participation in these activity systems provide support for youth to build and sustain literate identities in both schools and in out-of-school contexts.

I have found that throughout these studies, youth prepare for a “performance of possibilities” (Madison, 2005) as they share their writing publicly; that is, they use classroom forums, microphones, and stages as a way to (re)present themselves to the world. Although the “official world” of writing for the youth I have gotten to know through my work has been the world of public schools and classrooms, they along with conscientious teachers have forged a collective “third space” to present their literate selves and cultivate their literate identities. (Re)presenting cannot be undermined; too many youth have been locked into a single story and, thus, a monolithic box with descriptors, such as “at risk,” “troubled,” and “delinquent.” However young people’s lives are not static, nor do their lives have to be predetermined by poverty and miseducation. These questions have taken me from Black-owned-and-operated bookstore author events and spoken word poetry venues in Northern California to urban high school classrooms in New York City, regional youth detention centers in the southeast, and most recently to schools and communities in the Midwest employing restorative justice practices and discourses to resist zero-tolerance and other punitive policies (Winn, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). Throughout my work, I explore the “table” as a metaphor for access to higher learning, as well as to social and cultural capital (Fisher, 2005a, 2005b, 2007b; Winn & Ubiles, 2011). Throughout my program of research I use a sociocritical framework to place the teaching and learning communities in my studies of youth writers, readers, and speakers and their teachers in a rich historical context. By providing context, this retrospective research narrative of four of my books demonstrates a history of Black contributions to a particular sociopolitical ideology and subsequent programs that build toward action using art, literacy, dialogue, and democratic engagement.

## AFRICAN DIASPORA PARTICIPATORY LITERACY COMMUNITIES AT WORK

My multisited ethnography of two Black-owned-and-operated bookstores and two cafés that were eateries by day and cultural centers by night launched my program of research. Collectively, these venues housed events that elevated the work of emerging and veteran poets and writers. I wrote in my research journal:

I have been to this bookstore many times before—not as a researcher, but as the daughter of a nurse and historian who committed their lives to the preservation of Black expressive thought and culture. Every trip my family took to a U.S. city began with a ritualized search for a Black bookstore and/or cultural center. Today I am walking into the local Black bookstore in my hometown, Carol’s Books in Sacramento, as a participant observer during their Poetry on a Saturday Afternoon (POSA) open

mic event. Like other open mics, POSA, is an invitation to both novice and seasoned poets to share their writing in a space that promotes reading, writing, thinking, and activism, as well as collaboration among elders and children. V.S. Chochezi and Staajabu, the mother daughter poetry duo also known as Straight Out Scribes (SOS), begin with saying “hello,” in several languages punctuated with a decidedly urbanized “What’s up!” As I attempt to blend in or even disappear behind my video camera, I find this task nearly impossible during the “Know your peeps” game. “Know your peeps” consists of V.S. Chochezi and Staajabu holding up photos of writers, scholars, politicians, scientists, activists, and artists of African descent and asking audience members to identify them. This is when my competitive spirit kicks in and I am grateful to my parents for knowing every single face. While most poets who approach the “open mic” at POSA are Black or Brown, there are also “allies” of Black and Brown people like Phil Goldvarg who is of Jewish descent. “The nation’s capital was built from the labor of Blacks and immigrants,” Phil began as a prelude to his poem, “but the Blacks were never compensated.” Other poets riffed on jazz music and memories. SOS closed POSA by reminding everyone about the plight of political prisoners everywhere. When POSA is “over” no one really wants to leave. So all of us—nested among books written by, for, and about Black people—kept the cipher going. (Research Journal Entry, February 23, 2003)

Perhaps to an outsider these spaces appeared to be merely entertainment; however, as a participant observer in these sites for 1 year, I learned that the “literacy events” in these communities were viewed by participants as a mission to produce and preserve literate traditions in African American communities (Fisher, 2003a).

In my earliest published piece on this study, “Open Mics and Open Minds: Spoken Word Poetry in African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities” (Fisher, 2003b), I introduced the educational research community to the phenomenon of exchanging writing and voices at open mic events using ethnographic research methods and in-depth interviews with an inter-generational community of poets, writers, and event organizers in the aforementioned venues. Here I defined Africa Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities, or ADPLCs, as literacy or literary-centered events outside of school and work communities that combined oral, aural, and written traditions through an exchange of words, sounds, and movements that privileged a Black aesthetic. As a scholar in language, literacy, and culture I felt slighted by the omission of the literate practices of Black and brown people and I needed new words, concepts, and frameworks to help me think about what I was observing in ADPLCs. I also found the “Great Divide” debates in literacy research to be limited in scope when thinking about ADPLCs where orality and literacy were a continuum. I further argued that ADPLCs blurred boundaries between the “speaker” and the “audience.” To be sure I interviewed poets *and* audience participants who viewed their relationship as dialectical. ADPLC participants claimed these spaces as part of their history and frequently stated, “We [Africans, African Americans, West Indians] have been doing this” or “This is what we [Africans, African Americans, West Indians] do.” I wanted to understand the historical contexts for such communities and how PLCs were manifestations of a legacy of literacy for people of African descent.

Inspired by participants at my research sites, as well as McHenry and Heath’s (1994) “The Literate and the Literary: African Americans as Writers and Readers—1830–1940,” I chose to begin where McHenry and Heath ended in 1940 leading to present-day literary movements. In this ethnohistory, I argued that the “new literate and literary”—that is, spoken word poets,

writers, and event organizers who exchanged written and performed words—were creating community institutions that emulated the efforts of Black poets and writers in the 1960s during the Black Arts Movement in the United States. The Black Arts Movement unapologetically sought to incorporate a Black aesthetic into visual and performing arts along side the Black Power Movement, which advocated self-determination and self-definition among Black Americans. Like McHenry and Heath’s analysis of African American literary societies, as well as literary movements like the Harlem Renaissance, my study of ADPLCs also demonstrated the continuum between reading, writing, and orality. My time in the field prompted more questions, such as why were qualities that people claimed to be missing in American public school classrooms—especially schools that served Black and Latino children—and literacy classrooms in particular present in ADPLCs? Was it possible for literacy classrooms to create a teaching and learning culture in which all children engaged in literate practices while creating multiethnic coalitions of concerned citizens who cared about democratic engagement? If this were possible, what would these observed practices and values look like and sound like in a school setting?

### FREEDOM DREAMING WITH YOUTH POETS

As a researcher, I believed if I could amass the practices of participants in ADPLCs or “chosen spaces,” as well as the reasons why people participated in these literacy-centered activities, then I could use this knowledge to reimagine the literacy classroom as an engaging and compelling space for all students. Through community nominations, I learned about the work with two classroom teachers, Poppa Joe and Mama C, who invited secondary school students to use poetry as a tool to tell their stories, define themselves, and explore their histories, as well as their present selves:

I arrived in New York City at 1:56 in the afternoon (in spite of the fact my flight arrangements were booked for the day before!) and went straight to Poppa Joe’s Harlem brownstone with bags in tow since there was not enough time for me to check into my hotel. Joe, poet and teacher, graciously invited me to be a “worthy witness” in his writing class for one year and I returned to New York City to follow up with the youth poets he cultivated. When my cabbie pulled up to Joe’s vintage brownstone he was standing outside grinning with his reading glasses in hand. After helping me with my bags, he excitedly ushered me to his refuge from the city—an urban garden in the middle of concrete and brick—behind his home. From three bamboo stalks given to Joe as a gift from a friend, Joe recreated countless clones that guarded his well-lit sanctuary. Joe’s cell phone rang; it was his former Power Writing student, Ramon, who was now a Posse Scholar at a small liberal arts college. Ramon made a special trip to see us before beginning a summer job as a camp counselor. When Ramon arrived, Joe began to tell Ramon stories about his backyard and the struggles to make it beautiful and relevant. “During the 80s, the apartment building behind my house was plagued by crack cocaine,” Joe began, “When the rains came, my yard was flooded with thousands of crack vials and needles.” In order to begin cultivating his garden, Joe had to remove the broken glass and drug paraphernalia. Ramon and I were lost in time listening to Joe’s account until he reminded us that we needed to make our way to the “Boogie Down” Bronx to meet up with the Power Writers. Today was not an official class meeting day; however, the Power Writers just wanted to get together and catch up with each other since a few alumni were in town. When we arrived, 15 student poets eagerly waited and suggested we meet outside since the weather was pleasant. Joe recreated his classroom across

the street from campus in the middle of brick, concrete, cinder blocks, and iron bars, in the same way Joe grew a garden in the middle of concrete and crack cocaine on his block. One may ask what concrete and crack vials have to do with teaching writing; however Joe's objective was to cultivate the land where most could not imagine that anything beautiful or worth salvaging could exist. (Research Journal Entry, May 22, 2006)

Both Poppa Joe and Mama C could be framed as “freedom dreamers” or members of the Black radical tradition who dared to dream out loud about creating a world without racism, sexism, and classism (Kelley, 2003). Poppa Joe and Mama C were deeply committed to supporting Black and Latino youth in their efforts to create and sustain literate identities by providing opportunities for them to read widely and deeply, write for a variety of purposes, exchange writing, and provide and receive feedback on writing as evidenced by the writing classes they cocreated with their students.

In these classes, Power Writing and the Spoken Wordologists, Poppa Joe and Mama C offered apprenticeships in writing much like the tradition of reading and writing workshops that were organized by poets and writers during the Black Power and Black Arts Movements that took place in living rooms and around kitchen tables when there was limited access to formal buildings or institutions. Poppa Joe and Mama C essentially created ADPLCs in the public school context as modules in traditional English classrooms, individual courses, and/or after-school (and even weekend) groups. When I first wrote about this work, I found the communities of practice framework useful; however, I also argued that the framework “does not suggest the sense of intimacy that I regard as a key feature of PLCs . . . the relationships in these communities” (Fisher, 2007a, p. 143). It was during this part of my inquiry that I realized that I had to find a way to bring history into focus when thinking about sociocultural activity theory. Gutierrez's (2008) concept of “sociocritical literacy”—that is a “historicizing literacy” that privileges the lived experiences and legacies of participants—provided the much needed space to analyze the activities of both classes against the backdrop of a history of Black poets and writers.

To understand Poppa Joe, then, was to know his background as a young poet in the Black Arts Movement who was adamant about being called a “Black Puerto Rican” to underscore his Africanity. Mama C's experience as a child coming of age in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn and being the beneficiary of the Black Panther Party's free breakfast program informed her desire to cultivate a socially, culturally, and politically informed student body who could use their written and spoken words to organize against injustice. Activity in the context of Poppa Joe's and Mama C's classrooms was inextricably linked to a legacy of learning by doing, which, I would argue, is a part of African-centered pedagogy found in Independent Black Institutions during the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. Working with Poppa Joe and his Power Writers brought me back to the importance of both *historicizing* and *humanizing* the lives of youth poets and writers whose lives and families are often constructed through a “damage-centered” lens (Tuck, 2009).

In many ways my book *Black Literate Lives: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Fisher, 2009) allowed me to contextualize the practices that I observed and analyzed in Poppa Joe's and Mama C's classes. Using ethnohistory methods, which are a combination of ethnographic methods including participant observation, oral histories, and documentary source materials, I examined the trajectory of Independent Black Institutions. ADPLCs, both in schools and in out-of-school contexts, served as alternative and supplementary knowledge spaces. That is,

participants valued being relevant in the larger landscape of the world and wanted to be relevant in localized contexts. Historiographies of literacy teaching and learning are essential to disrupting deficit-centered inquiry about what counts as literacy and who gets counted as the literate.

### STILL WRITING IN RHYTHM

In my ethnography of the Power Writers, *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms* (Fisher, 2007b), I examined the ways in which Poppa Joe fueled his Black, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Central American, and West Indian students' "desire to be different" from the monolithic labels imposed on them by others. Poppa Joe hoped to instill that the desire to pursue literate activities individually and as a writing community was a noble pursuit, and that being a "fighter" could be reimagined as fighting with knowledge and writing. I began to think of Power Writing as more than a class; Power Writing was a value system, a worldview, and Poppa Joe's new movement. This movement moved young people's rich histories from the margins of school to the center in order to propel them out of deficit theories and predetermined lives.

Poppa Joe's "Power Writers," or student poets in his Power Writing class, were culturally, linguistically, and socially diverse, representing the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Columbia, Belize, and the United States. These student poets used the Power Writing circle to build community while reading original compositions aloud in an open mic format, much like the venues I observed in Northern California, and engaging in giving and receiving feedback. In the context of these literacy communities, Poppa Joe and his guest teachers taught by modeling. I asked how classroom teachers adapted literacy practices found in out-of-school settings in urban public classrooms. Using spoken word poetry and an open mic format in class known as the "read and feed" process, students not only presented ("read") original compositions, they also learned how to give critical and specific feedback ("feed"). Most important, I found that teachers in this context were able to build a "literocracy" to foster positive peer interaction in the exchanging of writing. My concept of "literocracy" is embedded in an understanding of literacy as a social practice (Heath, 1984; Scribner & Cole, 1981), literacy as critical (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor, 1992), and literacy as democratic engagement (Kinloch, 2005). I believe this research has important implications for literacy instruction; poetry, drama, and similar activities that are traditionally viewed as "extracurricular" are no longer a luxury—they are imperative. *Writing in Rhythm* demonstrated that the 21st-century English Language Arts educator has to be more than knowledgeable in his or her content area; he or she must be a "practitioner of the craft" using written and spoken words to help students in urban public schools write (and sometimes rewrite) their life stories and use writing as a way for social change.

### CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOR WHOM?

In my coauthored book *Writing Instruction in the Culturally Relevant Classroom*, Latrise P. Johnson and I explored English classrooms in which teachers committed to creating a culturally, socially, and politically relevant curriculum (Winn & Johnson, 2011). I met Latrise in the same way I met Poppa Joe and Mama C—in her English classroom, where I witnessed her getting ninth graders excited about reading, writing poetry, creating poetry anthologies, adapting short



stories into plays complete with music soundtracks, and using technology in meaningful ways. All of Latrise's students were African American, and most were male growing up in a blighted neighborhood in Atlanta. Every student that other teachers designated as "at risk" or "underperforming" viewed themselves as a reader, writer, thinker, and participant in Latrise's classroom. When she began her graduate work, we designed a study to examine the ways in which teachers thought about culturally relevant pedagogy in the context of literacy or writing classrooms. The more I learned about Independent Black Institutions and the efforts of poets and artists who created Black community schools during the Black Arts and Black Power Movements, the more I believed that their work was the foundation for culturally relevant and socially relevant teaching.

In our examination of culturally relevant practices in writing classrooms, Latrise and I found that many classroom teachers were familiar with culturally relevant pedagogy and could even define it, yet struggled how to operationalize their definitions. For example, teachers wondered if they should focus solely on Black authors or books with Black protagonists because the majority of their students were Black. In one chapter, Latrise and I chronicled the frustration that one teacher who defined herself as Latina experienced when she selected Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* for a curriculum unit. This teacher hoped to be able to share aspects of her lived experiences with students, yet students suggested they were not interested in this text because they assumed it would not have anything to do with their lives. My coauthor and I chronicled teachers who used the material of students' lived experiences, such as disproportionate contact with law enforcement and police brutality, as resources for rich dialogue and their struggle to translate the dialogue into writing. Latrise and I hoped that *Writing Instruction* could give teachers an idea of where to go, because many teachers desired to work in a similar way as Poppa Joe and Mama C, but needed more examples of how to map this kind of practice. One of the limitations in *Writing Instruction in the Culturally Relevant Classroom* is the lack of a more nuanced discussion of what Paris (2012) refers to as a "culturally sustaining" pedagogy or a pedagogical stance that seeks to value a multiethnic and multilingual experience. A culturally sustaining pedagogy, for instance, would have invited this teacher to support a community of Black youth in learning why and how it is imperative to read, write, and think about a variety of literature that challenge monolithic notions ideas of race, class, and gender and engage in literate practices that continued to push these boundaries.

### RESTORING JUSTICE. RESTORING EDUCATION

One of the most intense moments that I experienced with the Power Writers was one day when Poppa Joe did not feel as if his students were focused or taking their work as writers seriously. Poppa Joe took several minutes to remind students that the only numbers the United States wanted them to remember was their commitment numbers or prisoner numbers. I must admit that I was trying not to think about jails and prisons at that time—especially jails for children—but it was increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that so many youth we worked with had altercations with law enforcement and/or witnessed families', friends', and neighbors' typically negative experiences with police officers. Was it possible, I wondered, to teach reading, writing, and thinking in a way that could potentially disrupt and dismantle the school/prison nexus for poor Black and Latino youth? *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, my multisited ethnography of a women's theater company in the southeast, focused on how literacy-centered



activities, such as playwriting and performing, can serve as mediating tools in the “betwixt and between” lives of girls entangled in the juvenile justice system. Participants in my study, African American girls ages 14–17 used playwriting and performing to reintroduce themselves to an audience who understood them only as (and limited them to) labels such as “at risk,” “troubled,” or “delinquent” (Winn, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). This multisited ethnography journeyed through regional youth detention centers in the urban and rural southeast, a multiservice center for youth on probation, a public theater, and back to regional youth detention centers where formerly incarcerated girls returned to perform plays written by their peers for incarcerated youth. In addition to my effort to understand the role of playwriting and performance in the girls’ lives, I also examined the lives of the educators who “dare teach” these girls.

Although some of my initial findings from this work focused on the ways in which girls used theater arts as a way to reintroduce themselves to family, peers, and society, I also learned how theater arts builds community and supports marginalized youth as they build and sustain literate identities. *Girl Time* also explored the pedagogical portraits of teachers who worked with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls, and how they attempted to support girls in developing literate identities. The voices of these youth and their teachers have been missing in teacher education, yet they provide valuable pedagogical strategies for teaching freedom in confined spaces. These culturally sustaining and liberatory pedagogical strategies have significant implications for all students, particularly students who are underserved in urban and rural schools.

An unexpected, but welcomed, part of my journey with *Girl Time* was revisiting my commitments as a scholar and citizen of the world. Archival work for *Black Literate Lives* reminded me of the ways in which Black scholars and academics during the 1960s and 1970s made bold statements against the overincarceration of Black people. Whereas terms such as “mass incarceration” and the “prison industrial complex” did not exist at that time, scholars like Angela Davis urged Black intellectuals to resist becoming comfortable on the “outside” (of prison walls; Winn, 2010c). Leaving my own comfortable nest as a social constructivist, I have moved closer to an activist or equity-oriented scholarship because I can no longer feign neutrality after bearing witness to so many Black and brown youth in jails for children. Moving forward in thinking about ways to address and disrupt the relationship between incarceration discourse and schools, I am currently examining the role of restorative justice in school contexts using a humanizing research methodology (Paris & Winn, 2013). More specifically, I am interested in circle processes that are being used as an alternative to punitive discipline policies that include isolation and suspension.

Youth participation in restorative justice practices can disrupt systems of racial and educational inequality that lead to lower income African American, Latino, and Indigenous youth being disproportionately isolated, suspended, and expelled in middle and secondary schools. In response to a trend in public schools toward zero-tolerance discipline policies, restorative justice practitioners employ “circle processes” to support youth in schools and surrounding communities who have experienced harm, as well as those who caused the harm, in a restorative dialogue. Circle processes acknowledge the disproportionate numbers of African American, Latino, and Indigenous students who are treated as second-class citizens in their classrooms and schools by providing opportunities for youth to exchange narratives of lived experiences that push beyond monolithic views of race, class, and gender that often lead to social polarization. Through dialogue, open-ended questions, and consensus building, youth from all backgrounds are invited to exercise their rights as engaged citizens to help create community responses to inequality. Learning of these restorative processes—encounters through dialogue, narrative, and reconciliation—will shape

the future participation of young readers, writers, speakers, thinkers, and activists. My decade of scholarship has taught me we must not only examine how youth create and sustain literate identities, but also what is the relationship between literate identities, and notions of engagement, citizenship, and belonging.

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