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AUTHOR Cushman, M. Ellen

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ABSTRACT

Researchers and teachers often are not privy to the literacy events smuggled into the private lives of urban African-Americans. Yet, these hidden literacies, such as journal writing and reading personal business letters, often reveal deft rhetorical skills as well as intellectual grappling with the social complexities of power, race, and class. Due in part to the social stigma attached to reading and writing among many urban African-Americans, these literacy events take place in hidden, often stolen, private moments. When educators explore the reading and writing in Black communities, they too easily accept limited, and limiting, depictions of the level of literacy of people, and they too easily settle back into their own value system of what counts as reading and writing. One educator's experiences as a literacy volunteer at a community center led her to discover 38 types of reading materials and 27 types of documents requiring hidden writing, sometimes smuggled into and out of households. As she made friends and attended functions with her new friends, she noticed more and more instances of critical reading--always occurring out of earshot of outsiders and whites. Even filling out forms is rhetorical in the inner city community. And because literacy carries a stigma, books such as "Sula," "Beloved," "Coffee Makes You Black," and "Waiting To Exhale" are passed off to friends and family members in clandestine ways, tucked in paper bags or slipped into coat pockets. (TB)

SMUGGLED LITERACIES: THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF HIDDEN LITERACIES OF URBAN AFRICAN AMERICANS

M. Ellen Cushman

Researchers and teachers often aren't privy to the literacy events smuggled into the private lives of urban African-Americans. Yet, these hidden literacies, such as journal writing and reading personal business letters, often reveal deft rhetorical skills as well as intellectual grappling with the social complexities of power, race and class. Due in part to the social stigma attached to reading and writing among many urban African-Americans, these literacy events take place in hidden, often stolen, private moments (Ogbu 1984). Because we aren't often allowed access to these literacy events, we're unable to esteem the products of these events for their extracurricular value (Heath 1994, Ruggles-Gere 1994).

Gere finds extracurricular literacy includes those literacy practices that take place outside the classroom and encompass "the multiple contexts in which persons seek to improve their own writing" (80). This reading and writing in the extracurriculum has, in Gere's words again, "very real types of economic and social consequences" (88). Says Gere, "one of the clearest messages of the extracurricular concerns power" (88). Of course, the type and extents of the power in extracurricular literacies remain for us to ferret out though our access into communities. And here's the paradox. If we are to esteem and understand the literacies which take place outside of the classroom, we must have an invitation into the daily lives of people outside of the academy--no easy feat given the sociological distance between most universities and their communities, particularly inner city communities.

I have two concerns about this lack of access to extracurricular literacies. First, I think that when we do begin to explore the reading and writing in the community, we too easily accept limited, and limiting, depictions of the level of literacy of people. I'm thinking of Herzberg's recent and important work seen in the October 1994 volume of CCC. In this article, he describes an adult literacy program which bridges students from his composition classroom with learners in a shelter. During class, they "investigate the social and cultural reasons for the existence of illiteracy--the reasons, in other words, that the students needed to perform the valuable service they were engaged in" (316-7). I believe this work is necessary, important even. But I believe he settles with a description of these homeless people that undercuts the integrity of his goal --he terms these learners in the shelter "illiterate;" in fact, he uses this word 8 times in the span of 10 pages. Here is someone with incredible, laudable, access to a cite where extracurricular literacies, I'll wager, take place in stolen, smuggled moments of privacy in the daily lives of the people, but here is also an assumption of deficit from the go. This assumption is problematic not only because it blinds us to people's potential, but also because it gives us and easy out for NOT exploring past the depth of the label "illiterate" to find out what practices do exist.

My second concern about this lack of access to extracurricular literacies is that we too easily settle back into our own value system of what counts as reading and writing. In other words, because we don't often know what types of non-academic literacy are valued outside of the

classroom, we slip into believing that our values are their values, that schooled literacy is esteemed by everyone. Brian Street, a sociolinguist, argues that instead of academics speaking of a literacy, we should be examining "literacies--the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing" (1). He finds, "the rich cultural variation in these practices... leads us to rethink what we mean by [literacy] and to be wary of assuming a single literacy where we may simply be imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practice onto other peoples literacies" (1). Without adequate access to extracurricular literacies, we risk superimposing what we value as good reading and writing onto other types of literacy taking place outside of the classroom.

To address these concerns, let me offer and incomplete taxonomy of the types of reading and writing which take place in the private lives of urban African-Americans. I'll then focus in on a few examples of these literacy practices, framing them in terms of the educational and social values people in this neighborhood attach to them. I've found that these people often appreciate certain literacies because these literacies educate others in the politics of being black (their term), and because these literacies teach strategies for integrating with dominate, mainstream institutions. Because these literacies point to a counter-hegemonic ideology, they take place in private, hidden, often clandestine moments away from the influence of outsiders.

I originally gained access to this inner city neighborhood as a literacy volunteer in a community center and soon became close to a number of families on the block. This neighborhood center is operated by a philanthropic organization which staffs the center with two or three social workers during the day. When I first entered this community, I was told by the social workers, in no uncertain terms, that most adults and teens were illiterate. These assessments were based in part on the type of advocacy work that the social workers performed. In an interview, one social worker said "we speak on behalf of these people, We read their letters and forms aloud to them and write their responses." Advocacy, then, includes an effort to do the work of literacy for those people who, supposedly, could not do for themselves. Often this judgment of illiteracy was also based on the amount of schooling the person received: "She's illiterate. She only has an 8th grade education." The assumption here is telling--education and literacy are coupled, so that when schooling stops, so does the development of literacy skills, an assumption Gere challenges with her examinations of extracurricular literacy.

At first their assessments were dauntingly accurate; daunting because I hoped to study the literacy of urban, African-Americans, and accurate because, aside from the school work the kids were bringing into the center, I really had few observations of reading and writing to challenge this assessment of illiterate. But, as I began to gain access into the homes of the people on this block, through the invitation of the teens and children, I came to recognize a variety and richness in the literacy taking place there--hidden and smuggled. I came to recognize, more importantly, that these social workers' assessments revealed less about

the types of literacy in the daily lives of these people, but more about the social worker's lack of access to this literacy.

For example, here's a brief list of the types of literacy that were embedded in these people's everyday living. In your handout, I've included a sample of these. I've found at least 38 types of reading materials and 27 types of documents requiring writing hidden, sometimes smuggled into these households. In line with Heath's pivotal work on African-Americans' literacy, I've found that discussions surround these literacy events. In fact, many of these literacies generate critical discussions where people analyze the political nature of these pieces. This list is just an indication of the variety of literacies of these, so called, illiterate people.

A few of these literacy events remain hidden because of social stigma attached to reading by the teens. Some of the teenagers believe that reading in front of others stigmatizes them as "smart' and "above the others." They don't want to be termed "higher ups," so they choose not to read unless they know they won't "be found out." So for example, books such as SULA, BELOVED, COFFEE MAKES YOU BLACK, and WAITING TO EXHALE, are passed off to friends and family members in clandestine ways, tucked in paper bags, slipped into coat pockets, and stuffed deep into purses. However, these teens will openly write short stories, letters to God, raps, poetry, and personal journals because writing doesn't have the same stigma as reading. Lucy Cadens, one of the most important woman on this block, believes that her teens might be more willing to "write in front of others because you can still keep it to yourself. But for reading, you hold that book up, and everyone knows what you reading." For this reason, many of these literacies remain hidden or are smuggled into houses.

Other of these literacies, though, take place out of the sight of whites because of their political nature: they deal with being black and poor. People in this neighborhood value these political literacies highly, but these literacies are often guarded events, guarded against "outside," or "white," perspectives that might threaten the ways and extents to which these literacies are explored. I've found in these smuggled literacies that a critical consciousness, not only exists, but serves an important social and educational value.

For instance, the public face of philanthropic institutions often provides grist for their critical mill. When reading pamphlets and flyers of public service agencies, a group of individuals will generate a metanarrative of what information is omitted or skewed to the favor of these institutions. In this city, the Rehabilitation and Improvement Program, RIP, buys dilapidated buildings, refurbishes them, and rents this housing to inner city residents. When RIP held a 25th anniversary dinner in October of 1993, a few of the most respected African-American women who rent from RIP homes were given two tickets. Lucy Cadens invited me to come with her. We were seated at a table reserved for RIP residents, in the back corner--the only table with residents (all African-American). They looked at each other and around the room of well-dressed, white sponsors and one said: "This is an insult." Another

imitated RIP's notorious apartment manager: "And here's our table of token niggers. We need your money to help these poor folks." The women chuckled a little and someone mentioned that it was free food, so they settled at the table with a mumble.

As the dinner was served, one woman picked up the program RIP had printed for the occasion, leaned in, and read aloud to our table, "RIP initiates, stimulates, and aids in the improvement of housing opportunities." Another shot back: "Yeah, there was a whole bunch of improvement when they evicted forty blacks over on sixth to buy up the block." Another agreed, "that was way back in '68, right?". Lucy remembered, "oh, yeah old sixth Ave. All sorts of people were told to get out, and they end up renting the new places to whites." But this critique was silenced by the glare of the white people sitting at the next table. At that point, Lucy, who invited me, wiped her mouth and threw her napkin on the plate of food she half finished. "We're going to the bar," and she and I walked to the back of the ball room. Lucy continued this line of criticism with me out of earshot of the whites. She leaned into the bar and half read the program and half listened to the speech of the President of the Board of Directors. From the pamphlet she read, "fosters a sense of community in neighborhoods," just as the president said: "we're in the people business, smiling faces, warm beds, family times, we're about people." Lucy shook her head-- "hypocrites. Their idea of community is them telling you how to live your life. They give you a place to live and tell you you can't have anyone visit, or sit on your stoop. They act like they own your life." Throughout the evening, as various presenters spoke, Lucy would recast their speeches from her perspective, often telling me what history was omitted and what was slanted to present the best image of RIP, an image built upon the subordination of their African-American renters.

And this isn't an isolated incident of this type of critical reading of literacy and speech. This awareness takes place in small groups around kitchen tables, in living rooms, and while watching TV. In all of the cases, a pattern emerges: someone reads a few lines of a letter, newspaper, sign, pamphlet, or advertisement and then the group rereads it discursively, with a critical metanarrative that ferrets out the historical, political, and social roots of the domination they face in their daily lives. This practice is very similar to Friere's idea of "reading the world through the word." His method of facilitating awareness in people is imported to American classrooms by composition teachers and education scholars. Interestingly, these pedagogies are often based on the deficit assumption that students lack this consciousness or that the consciousness that they do have is "False." By characterizing their students as dumbly silent (Brodkey 1992), unreflective (Crowley 1992 and Clifford 1992), yearning and/or resentful (Bizzell 1991), these researchers assume a lack on their students' part. As this example suggests, though, critical consciousness exists in the everyday extracurricular literacy of urban African-Americans.

The social value of this practice manifest itself in a few ways. Those people with the best insights during these hidden literacy events receive

kudos from the group: such as a "ain't that a shame?" or a "I heard that," a "oh you know," or simply, "word." With these explicatives, the metanarratives aren't simply agreed upon, but are, more importantly, legitimized as solid, insightful, valuable. Likewise, if someone is off target with a critique, they're comment will be challenged with a "it ain't only that," or a "Nahn, that ain't it at all," or a " got to consider." A read that is completely off mark, will be received with silence and down turned eyes. The silence in effect tells the person that he or she was so far afield, the others just "ain't hearing it.".

Again, these readings always occur out of earshot of outsiders, and whites. In this way, the group of African-Americans protects their criticisms from being countered, which could stunt the development of ideas. It also preserves the metanarrative as something to share, a talk that unites their perspectives against those of outsiders. They confirm each others' realities this way too--often they'll ask someone for a "read" on a situation, in order to confirm or clarify the feeling that they have been downtrodden. Somewhat ironically, the very value system that maintains the secrecy of this counter-hegemonic "reading," also contributes to the social worker's or outsider's assessment of them as illiterate.

Another extracurricular literacy in this neighborhood centers on integration with mainstream institutions. By integration, I mean the strategic negotiation of dominate mainstream institutions in order to gain resources. These literacy events usually take place when a family member needs to apply for social assistance from the Department of Social Services. I was particularly fortunate to be privy to the literacy events surrounding Jolinda's application for WIC, food stamps, and welfare. Jolinda, in her early thirties and pregnant; her older sister Lucy, the woman mentioned earlier; and their eldest sister, Vivian, sat around Vivian's dining room table to fill out Jolinda's applications together. Jolinda read each line of the form aloud to her older sisters, and they collectively decided what information needed to fill the blanks. Jolinda read: "they want my name. Should I use Johnson?" [her married name].

Vivian answered: "Well, you don't want them checking on Sam's income, right?" Sam and Jolinda were separated, but Sam was still occasionally sending her money for their two kids. Lucy thought it would be best to use her maiden name as well. "If you still married, even if you separated, they're going to use his income to decide how much you gonna get." Jolinda agreed and wrote down her maiden name. She came to the slot for address. At that time, Jolinda had been living with Lucy, even though Lucy had too many people living with her and risked being evicted because of it. Lucy said: "I don't want them running over to RIP and telling them you staying with me. I'm already pushing it with Tony there." Tony was Lucy's boyfriend who was living with her, even though he wasn't on her lease. If Jolinda filled this black with Lucy's address, the case worker likely would have told the landlords at RIP that Lucy was breaking her lease. The town is small enough that an extended information network exists between social service agencies, so that they all try to keep track of who is getting what kinds of assistance from

which agencies. Vivian spoke up: "Just say you live with me. We'll say I'm charging you rent while you look for a place on your own." Jolinda wrote Vivian's address and they agreed to call Jolinda at Lucy's when any mail arrived there for her.

And so the application process went--each blank filled only after considerable discussion. For Jolinda, the experience was educational--her older sisters had applied before. They contributed their extensive knowledge of strategies for gaining more resources from the Department of Social Services. The system of welfare, as it is represented in their forms, was demystified and uncovered for Jolinda. Some might view this application as needing only the most rudimentary literacy skills. fill the blank. However, filling in the blanks of these forms required a knowledge of the ways in which social workers assign funds. It requires strategic maneuvering through the options of which information to include and which to eliminate. In other words, Jolinda was being educated though the reading, writing and the discussion surrounding it, of the ways in which she could make her application more persuasive to the case workers who would be judging the 'need' based on these applications. In this community then, filling out forms is rhetorical-- you present only that information which best persuades the caseworker to offer you the maximum allowance possible. In fact, the people who are best ale to fill out these forms are sought for their collaboration, asked for assistance, and are greatly appreciated for their knowledge of which information illicits which responses.

You know, I have to be honest with you. I don't really have a conclusion. Sure, I could tell you how important these literacies are to the people who use them; or I could even remind you how we need to work at gaining more access to extracurricular literacies like these; or I can say that the social and educational value of all literacies is contingent upon the context of their use. But that just doesn't feel like enough. Even though these literacies are damn interesting, that still isn't going to change the status quo, where some literacies, such as computer literacy, are the coin of the mainstream realm. So the best I can do for a conclusion of this paper is to just ask you a question: How can we create a classroom where filling in the blank and reading a program are equally important to writing essays and surfing the web?