

DESIGNING FROM THEIR OWN SOCIAL WORLDS: THE DIGITAL STORY OF THREE AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG WOMEN

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I examine the literacy work of three African American young women (through data drawn from a larger qualitative study), particularly their ways of knowing, such as double consciousness (Du Bois, 1989), and the multiple subject positions they occupy as they write themselves into a digitally created story. My analysis is guided by the following questions: What happens when we bring together what we know about African American women as knowledge producers with what we know about writing, technology and critical literacy and, more specifically, how are the contemporary digital literacy practices of African American youth informed by their historical legacies (Gadsden, 2002)? In this article, I take as a point of departure, Janks' (2000) idea that mere access to dominant forms of literacy, in this case digital, is not enough. We must also create opportunities for students to enact culturally specific forms of agency. Being fully aware of the material conditions of their lives and an external gaze of domination, the African American women digital storytellers in this paper re-present themselves and re-imagine their social worlds. The paper hopes to contribute to the fields of literacy, technology and critical pedagogy.

KEYWORDS: African American girls, literacy, new media, technology.

INTRODUCTION

In an after-school university program designed to support middle- and high-school youths' transition to college, the students were given the opportunity to conceptualize, script and perform their own media productions about issues relevant to their lives as part of collaborative action research. The following scene is from a youth-authored, public service announcement related to teen depression:

Sophie: *(Unzips her purse, gets out a mirror).* Let me tell you something. Here, take this mirror *(Gives Yolanda the mirror).* Stop putting yourself down all the time. You make it sound like you have a low self-esteem. No. Look in this, look into the mirror and tell me what you see.

Yolanda: A wall

Sophie: Look, look deeper into the mirror and tell me what you see?

Yolanda: A person, a whole wide range of emotions.

The scene captures an important moment of transformation. With support of her friend, the main protagonist, Yolanda is able to challenge dehumanising representations of herself as a young, African American woman too often proliferated in the media. She instead begins to acknowledge and affirm her full humanity. The mirror, in many ways symbolic of Du Bois' "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 1989),

reflects back to Yolanda both the dominant perspective – an inanimate wall – as well as the community’s counter-understanding of her as a complete person with “a whole wide range of emotions”.

Over the last several years, my work as a literacy teacher and researcher with African American young writers has come with new insights about the culturally rooted epistemological practices that inform their rhetorical performances and textual productions. Drawing on interdisciplinary methodologies, I have examined the process of cultural recovery and innovation youth engage in as they make explicit the unequal relations of power linked to language, race and representation. In this paper, I examine the literacy work of three, African American young women (through data drawn from a larger qualitative study), particularly their ways of knowing, such as double consciousness, and the multiple subject positions they occupy as they write themselves into a digitally created story. Concerned with social justice, my analysis is guided by the following questions: What happens when we bring together what we know about African American Women as knowledge producers with what we know about writing, technology and critical literacy? And, more specifically, how are the contemporary digital literacy practices of African American youth informed by their historical legacies (Gadsden, 2002)?

Theoretical and empirical research demonstrates that the terrain of literacy is both text and context, not one or the other; and as such, literacy is inextricably bound to other symbolic systems of “(re) presentation, for example oral practices, signs, or other visuals systems, all of which collectively constitute a communicative matrix,” (Royster & Simpkins, 2005, p. ix). Additionally, as Street (1984) and others have noted, literacy does not consist of autonomous skills but of ideological practices rooted in social participation and power relations. Paying attention to the ways and means of literacy as meaningful communication (Luke & Freebody, 2002), therefore, underscores the notion that literacy functions rhetorically as part of the socio-cultural fabric of our lives (Willis, Montavon, Hunter, Burkle, & Herrera, 2008; Steele, Perry, & Hilliard, 2004). Teasing out such layers of complexity has been central in helping researchers and scholars to make explicit the more full-bodied ways literacy occurs across different communities (Kulick & Stroud, 1993), in this case among urban, African American young women. We reach a deeper understanding of literacy in “general from views of literacy in its particulars” (Royster & Simkins, 2005, p. ix), from placing the “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of the literate practices of different groups alongside each other. This analysis is rooted in the idea that we need a more concrete sense of human variety in the use of literacy. This may be especially true for new media and technologies (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), which are too often uncritically reified as educational goals unto themselves rather than understood as socially situated and constructed.

As the bases of literacy studies have shifted, so too has the knowledge of the material conditions and the activities of African Americans deepened. We know more than ever before about both their social and historical worlds, and we have benefited from an array of interpretive tools from several academic disciplines in interpreting their experiences (Franklin & Moss, 2000; Hill Collins, 1998; hooks, 1993; Gates, 1985). The intersection between these two scholarly areas has the potential to help us understand the contemporary literacy practices of African American youth

historically, within their legacies of resistance to stark social inequality and dehumanisation.

In this article, I take as a point of departure Janks' (2000, 2010) idea that mere access to dominant forms of literacy, in this case digital, is not enough. We must also create opportunities for students to enact culturally specific forms of agency. Being fully aware of the material conditions of their lives and an external gaze of domination, the African American women digital storytellers re-present themselves and re-imagine their social worlds as they employ technology to create counter-narratives to dominant discourses on their race, gender and community. In the next section of the paper, I review the theoretical orientations that have informed my work, including critical literacy and black feminist epistemology, as well as the context of this particular practitioner research study. I then return to the young women's public service announcement and, in the spirit of Du Bois, provide two readings. First, I briefly rehearse how it might be understood according to dominant perspectives of African American young women. I then provide a more fine-grained analysis that attends to their own historically situated and community-based ways of interpreting and navigating the realities of their lives. I conclude with some implications of this work for deepening our conceptions of new literacies and technologies.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Critical Literacy

Through words and actions, we articulate worldviews that speak to our consciousness – in Freire's (1970, 1983) terms, reading the world. This perspective on literacy stands in contrast with the skills-based approaches we see proliferating in policy mandates and programs aimed at preparing students, which often take on a remedial orientation. On the contrary, critical literacy “make[s] clear the connection between knowledge and power,” “present[s] knowledge as a social construction linked to norms and values,” “demonstrate[s] modes of critique that illuminate how, in some cases, knowledge serves very specific economic, political and social interests,” and “function[s] as a theoretical tool to help students and others develop a critical relationship to their own knowledge” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985, p. 132). Within her model of critical literacy, Janks (2000, 2010) emphasises the ways that domination, access, diversity and design need to figure in a critical literacy stance. Importantly, teaching from a critical literacy perspective involves deconstruction and reconstruction, a project that many scholars have taken up in their works with students (for example, Jones, 2006). For my work with African American youth, including the young women whose digital story I analyse in this paper, I sought to engage students in critical deconstructions of texts and provide access to the codes of power (Delpit, 1995). I also focused on the role of design and diversity by providing opportunities for the construction of new texts that can be read as a counter-narrative to normative representations of race and gender.

Black Feminist Thought

The middle school summer course that is the context of this study, and how students such as Yolanda, Sophie, and Kay took up invitations to read and write their worlds and words, is predicated on Black feminist theory, which seeks to uncover how

various socially and culturally constructed categories such as race, gender and other identity markers simultaneously contribute to social inequality (Ritzer, 2007; Crenshaw, 1991). This conceptual framing takes seriously the notion that women can theorise in powerful ways from their own social locations regardless of the amount of formal education. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (1998) articulates critical theory that privileges the viewpoint of black women. She bases this on the lived experiences of African American women, which she describes as different actors within history from various social locations. As Hill Collins states: “They may be highly educated. Many are not.” (p. 14). The author draws attention to the importance of women who do not possess any formal education but whom she considers to be intellectuals and activists. This applies, for instance, to the black activist Sojourner Truth, who fought in favour of the feminist abolitionist movement in the 19th Century and who was illiterate, her speeches transcribed by other abolitionist women. Similarly, Harriet Tubman (Larson, 2003), a poor black woman who could read the world (Freire, 1970, 1983) but not the word, was considered an important figure in leading her people from slavery to freedom as the conductor of the underground railroad. Self-reported data from the three young African American young women whose work is featured in this paper indicate that each of them are from families with little formal education beyond high school and in one case beyond middle school. Yet, as I will demonstrate in the sections that follow, they were able to theorise in powerful ways about pain, suffering and healing.

Hill Collins (1998) also claims that many black women look for affective relations with black men, yet many end up living alone. Therefore, they look to each other to create their own communal spaces for healing through an ethics of care approach to sisterhood. Hill Collins focuses on black women as agents of knowledge since they are the people authorised to discuss a theoretical knowledge based on their own experiences. To this end, she argues for the need to resist forms of hegemony and find or create spaces and paths towards healing and wholeness. Historically, black women’s survival has rested upon their ability to create communal, gendered spaces for physical, emotional and spiritual healing as a response to domination and alienation. Bell hooks, in *Sisters of the Yam* (1993), writes about her experiences in creating a communal space for self-healing and communal affirmation inside of her classroom. She describes how she invites her black female university students, who are suffering from depression, disconnection and other social problems, into what she calls a healing circle – place where black women come together to support each other’s growth, challenges, and healing.

Black feminist theory draws on Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness,” first fully articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1998), which advances a nuanced and powerful social theory of race and racism. Du Bois understands racialised identity dialectically. This philosophical term “dialectic” refers to a relationship that simultaneously embodies both opposition and interdependence, that develops over historical time, and that links the micro and macro dimensions of social life. Du Bois’ project represents the historical evolution of double consciousness during social interaction that operates both at the intrapsychic level and at the structural level (Winant, 2004). And it expresses both the conflict, exclusion and alienation inherent in the dynamics of race and racism, and the interdependence, knowledge of “the other,” and thwarted desires that characterise these phenomena. Du Bois (1998) argues that “double consciousness” both afflicts and transfigures the black soul,

dividing its experience and self-awareness. At the individual and experiential level we already have a fully-fledged dialectic. Black feminist theories and Du Bois' concept of double consciousness as a conceptual and analytical orientation provides modes of understanding the literacy practices of African American youth.

THE STUDY

The data from this article was part of a practitioner research study of a middle-school writing course that occurred over the span of two summers. There were twenty African American students in the course, sixteen girls and four boys, and each of them chose to take a follow-up writing course the second summer. I was the teacher researcher, which included designing the curriculum and interacting with the students. The course was part of a preparatory summer program for students, developed to give them access to culturally responsive and intellectually rigorous curriculum. I intentionally sought to disrupt the deficit orientation that many such enrichment programs bring with them – for instance, a remedial curriculum that would teach basic skills in order to prepare students for more advanced work.

My major goal with the course was to provide a space for students to critically engage texts as readers and writers. Gates (1985) posits, writers have both a “need and [a] right to contest the unifying force of hegemonic discourse” (445). Thus, my intent as their teacher was to position students' vernacular voices as one of authority and privilege and to provide them with opportunities in the classroom to openly contest dominant academic discursive practices. I asked students to take critical postures towards their own language uses as well as towards the discourses dominating school and society, such as mainstream news media. In doing so, students focused on familial rhetorical and compositional tropes that would inform their culturally based personal narratives. Students used the Internet to search for African American literature and narratives rich with cultural and linguistic history, storytelling steeped in black folklore and rhetorical rhythm, sermons and speeches. Students concluded the course readings with selected narratives by artists, such as Sister Souljah. We also interrogated our own lenses that we brought to reading and sharing the texts. After a critical look – both rhetorically and substantively – at the writings, students worked in groups of three to compose a digital video response.

METHODOLOGY

Teacher researchers work in inquiry communities to examine their own assumptions, develop local knowledge by posing questions and gathering data, and – in many versions of teacher research – work for social justice by using inquiry to advocate for educational opportunity, access and equity for all students (Campano, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Often drawing on biographical, autobiographical and narrative forms of data collection and analysis, teacher researchers work from the constructivist assumption that it is never possible to divorce the self either from the research process or from teaching (Hamilton, 1998); in fact, the educator's “emic” perspective provides a unique vantage point from which to generate knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Research emanates from the day-to-day practices of systematically investigating and theorising classroom life and practice. The duality of roles in practitioner research enables a view from within the context. It also potentially creates

a more equitable distribution of power, becoming a collaborative venture with others, such as fellow teachers and students. This perspective counters more positivist views of research that positions the more distant and neutral researcher as the only one able to only observe and study the practitioner context.

DIGITAL STORIES: PROGRAM FOR EMOTIONALLY AFFECTED TEENS (PEAT)

In this article, I focus on one of the narrative scripts that the students co-constructed. The narrative was authored and performed by three of the young women in the class: Yolanda, Kay and Sophie. According to the self-report survey data administered at the beginning of the program, Yolanda, Kay and Sophie all had varying levels of writing skills and varying levels of technology expertise. The three students also reported that they were bi-dialectical, meaning that they were comfortable writing in both the language of wider communication and Black English. Students brought rich perspectives, talents and practices to the research setting that revealed the cultural influences in their lives. Though Yolanda and Sophie required additional time or different approaches than others during the course, they all provided insightful, clear perceptions and emotionally intense opinions in their video responses.

In the midst of an inquiry about local community-based problems, Yolanda, Kay and Sophie authored and performed a narrative titled, “Program for Emotionally Affected Teens (PEAT).” The storyline in the public service announcement is centred on the idea of creating a community-based intervention for teens under emotional duress. The script opens with a young African American woman who is making negative comments about her body in the mirror. She later talks to two friends about her level of stress and the struggles she is experiencing, and the friends provide support and tell her about an organisation where youth can talk through their problems in a group setting with friends, family and a counsellor. The three girls wrote, performed and video-recorded the script. My analysis is taken from transcripts of the video and scripts they created.

A dominant reading of the students’ text would position the African American young woman’s experience through a deficit lens. The script might be understood as locating the teen’s depression within her individual psyche, while ignoring the social and historical causes of her suffering. As such, there might be speculation about the role of the teen’s home culture and parenting as causes of her condition rather than a broader structural critique.

Examining the scene through the lenses of critical literacy and black feminist epistemologies, however, surfaces counter readings which are rooted in the students’ own cultural and historical legacies. In the sections that follow, I closely unpack the script. It is divided into three sections, which reference three salient shifts in their text that reflect broader community experiences: pain, counter-pain, and community affirmation and transformation. In the analysis, I also pay attention to the various positions and roles enacted in Yolanda and Sophie’s script. Positionality involves students’ attempts to locate and articulate the social, political and historical realities in their lives (Royser & Simpkins, 2005). African American young women often come to classrooms having learned competing and often conflicting perspectives on the world, having been taught to see and analyse their worlds in a dialect, and “having

been taught that there are normative experiences and that they are those of white, middle-class, Western men and women” (Brown, 1989, p. 921. Through their critical conversations in class and their script, the girls expressed their awareness of false representations of their realities that positioned them negatively. They sought in the public service announcements to design alternative representations that reflect more fully their lived realities.

Part 1: Pain

Yolanda and Sophie’s public announcement opens in the following fashion:

(A young woman leans on a tree outside what looks like a school building. A song plays. The woman looks sad. She walks toward the building slowly, enters the hall, and comes up to a bench. She throws her backpack and purse on the bench, spilling the entire content of her purse. She sits down, rubbing her temples as if in pain.)

Yolanda: Never no aspirin when I need it. *(She gets up and slowly walks into the bathroom. Looks at herself in the mirror disapprovingly.)* This is um oh so chubby *(grabbing her stomach)*, arghh...It’s just so stupid. How could I look this bad! *(She sits down on a chair, covers her face with her hands. Cell phone rings. She answers the phone.)*

Yolanda: Hello.

Sophie: Hey, what’s up? You sound dead.

Yolanda: I wish I was. I have been stressing the whole lot lately. Feeling like I’m getting real fat and losing my hair. I am feeling sad and everything.

Sophie: You do? Yolanda I guess you can say that. Well, I’m gonna be in the exit hall nine in a little hall down da way, please, come meet me here in about five minutes. I will call Kay too so we can work through this, alright.

Yolanda: Ok.

In this scene, the central character in the film (Yolanda) occupies several subject positions: a high school student, a teen with a depression problem, and a friend. Her interlocutor, Sophie, acts both as a friend and an informal counsellor to the protagonist. The linguistic presentations of these multiple subject positions are stylistically different. Yolanda’s speech as a friend is marked by a non-standard grammar (for example, “Never get no aspirin when I need it,” “Never no aspirin...”). A similar interplay of linguistic styles occurs in the speech of Sophie, “I’m gonna and “down da way”. The multiple subject positions is reflected in the different dialects and rhetorical moves.

Pain and suffering is a normal reality for women of African descent (Canon, 1995; hooks, 1993). Not merely a social construction, many African American youth live with the grim reality of mental anguish and the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977) of negative media representations. Black feminist scholars (Canon, 1995; hooks, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991) often point to the matrix of racial hegemony and patriarchy that is rooted in the fabric of American life, which positions women of colour in dehumanising ways. Yet these scholars also emphasise the power and healing that comes with African American women being able to name their pain in a communal way. In the above excerpt, Yolanda and Sophie begin their opening vignette by naming pain and making it visible in a larger communal conversation. In fact, they are naming their experiences by talking and testifying (Smitherman, 1994), a culturally rooted rhetorical practice that situates this pain within historical legacies. It is

important to note that Yolanda and Sophie reference not an individual process but larger structural inequalities.

Part 2: “Counter-pain” and Healing

The script continues:

(Yolanda lies down on a bench. Kay walks up to Yolanda and sits down beside her.)

Kay: Yolanda What? Yolanda, sit up. What’s wrong?

Yolanda: I just feel so out of it.....I’ve been stressing a lot. I am getting fat and losing my hair. I gotta take care of my little sister when I get home. And my mamma working overtime. Just so many problems right now.

Sophie: So what are you trying to say?

Yolanda: I am trying to say, if I could kinda escape from this world.

Sophie: *(Unzips her purse, gets out a mirror).* Let me tell you something. Here, take this mirror *(Gives Yolanda the mirror).* Stop putting yourself down all the time. You make it sound like you have a low self esteem. No. Look in this, look into the mirror and tell me what you see.

Yolanda: A wall, a person.

Sophie: Look, look deeper into the mirror and tell me what you see?

Yolanda: A whole person a whole wide range of emotions.

In this scene, the informal and formal speech is addressed to different audiences (three girls). The performance engages the viewer in several roles, ranging from a voyeur of the private monologue scene, to an invisible observer of the interaction between Yolanda and Sophie, to a directly addressed and thereby disclosed viewer participant at the end. Whatever the viewer’s position, the viewer’s gaze has a subjugating power over the characters: the actors are subjects of the story and are subject to be seen by a third party outside of the film frame. The subjugating power of the gaze operates on behalf of dominant discourses, by inscribing subjects in the existing social hierarchies. In one remarkable instance, the viewer’s gaze and the protagonist’s gaze coincide: when during the monologue scene Yolanda looks at herself in the mirror and judges her body, she exemplifies the physical manifestation of the disciplining power of the discourse on beauty.

Black Feminist Theologian Katie Canon (1995) refers to her grandmother in a rural southern black community as the “gatekeeper in the land of counterpain”. I argue that similar to the description of Katie Canon’s grandmother, Sophie is enacting a counterpain stance when she diagnoses, treats, and works toward overall wholeness. The three African American women express their own perspectives and interpretations and, by doing so, they engage in complex discursive practices that mirror the complex social, historical and cultural identity markers that have been sources of pain for African Americans women. They engage in a “communal healing discourse,” speaking in the creation of a plurality of voices and in a multiplicity of discourses they speak to the pain in each other’s lives. Therefore, through their characters and narrative personae, they weave in competing and complimentary discourses. I am not suggesting that African American female identity is fixed, but that oftentimes society views them as one-dimensional by stereotyping them. It is the case that their identities are complex and informed by interactions across time, space, and history (Royster & Simpkins, 2005). Although some might argue that the

identities created by the three young women do not necessarily run counter to images of Black females in society, I would argue that upon a closer look, their digital story begins to capture the nuances and attempts to reposition African American women as a communal network of support, healers and resources for each other. I suggest what their digital story does is makes visible the racial and gender specific support system that African American women often provide for each other to sustain their sense of community as a response to historical oppression from male dominance and racial alienation (for example, Hill Collins, 1990; Morrison, 1994; hooks, 1993). In other words, it is evident that the young women in this story are adept at using counter-discourses rooted in their local culture to create rich micro communities for self-love and emotional healing. Such support systems within and outside of their group identity markers become essential in educational contexts where students of colour are so often “othered” (Carter, 2007).

Part 3: Community Affirmation and Transformation

The script concludes in the following fashion:

- Sophie:** Let me tell you something. I’ve got some research. I’ve been doing some research, ok, about this program for teens, PEAT, for my employer, and that stands for the Program for Emotionally Affected Teens.
- Kay:** No, but it is for all of our benefit
- Yolanda:** Whatever. What does this program do?
- Kay:** It’s for kids in school who have low self-esteem, I am gonna give you a number of the coalition so you can call up the program....
- Yolanda:** I don’t wanna talk to no counsellor type people.
- Sophie:** That’s the only way we can get you together and where you need to be. Yolanda I feel already like ...
- Kay/Sophie:** Listen to us!
- Yolanda:** Ok, I am listening, I am sorry. We are gonna see a counsellor.
- Sophie:** Are you sure you wanna do this?
- Yolanda:** No, I ain’t sure but I’m pretty sure you all care so much about me that you not gone let it rest. Alright now. *(Brightens up, smiles, and hugs Sophie and Kay.)* What would I do without you!
- Yolanda:** The program that we chose is for me to go to is a community centre called emotionally affected teens. Because so many of us go through stress related to this society.
- Sophie:** We are trying suicides and overdose on drugs, anything to escape our harsh reality, when all we need to do is talk. And this program helps teens be a part of a group instead of being all down alone by themselves. Teens nowadays discourage themselves into thinking they can’t do anything. So we hope to inspire them. The number you can call for this program or know someone who is interested in attending this program here is the number. We encourage you, we encourage you to call for just one reason:
(All start singing)
- All:** *(Hugging and singing)* We are family. I have all my sisters and me.

In this scene, Sophia expresses her solidarity with Yolanda when she suggests that they work in “coalition”. Further, Sophia’s assertion “we will get you where you need to be” signals community as transformational. The group expresses a final act of solidarity by singing Sister Sledge’s anthem “We are Family” and affectionately

hugging and kissing each other. This is significant because it evokes a community ethos as a central theme within their public service announcement. This idea suggests that pain should be shared among individuals within the community and that leadership is expressed through service to others rather than being served. Reflecting on the entire scene, there was never an indication that the students view pain, suffering and recovery as the sole burden of the individual. There was always evidence that transcending the pain was an act of shared sisterhood.

Similar to the Black church experience, the girls publically express or “testify” about the goodness of friendship and sisterhood (Smitherman, 1994). A communal ethos emphasises egalitarian versus hierarchal ways of existing in community. It reflects an African-centered worldview (Karenga, 2002). Pan-Africanist theorists (Karenga, 2002; Du Bois, 1989) suggest that the communal ethos is part of the transnational identity that travelled with the enslaved Africans during the middle passage and found its way on to the shores of the new land. Part of the assimilationist project in America has been to erase empowering aspects of the African identity such as the communal ethos. This is inherent in Du Bois’ claim about the dialectical nature of the African American identity, when he suggests that there are “two warring souls” that create the double consciousness. The notion of the communal ethos has continually shaped the diasporic identity of African Americans as witnessed in art, literature and music. The slave narratives and black women’s literature are examples of written texts that document how struggle has been viewed within a collective paradigm. The three young African American girls’ sensibilities toward a communal ethos suggest that this counter-narrative was transmitted through local institutions such as their home, church and community. Resulting from the structural inequality related to race, class and gender, these girls all live in local micro-communities that have been extremely isolated from the mainstream society. Yet, I would argue that while economic isolation has had a negative impact on these girls’ all-black, deeply impoverished neighbourhoods, ironically that same isolation has allowed black culture to flourish. The institutions, traditions and cultural dynamics within these communities – such as the black church, black language and black family have remained largely intact despite globalization. One wonders if the stories of three suburban black girls would reflect a similar sense of collective agency and survival.

This section of the script reveals how the young women have found themselves to be moral agents in a “real-lived” African American tradition that includes the oral-aural culture tradition vital to every day life. People of colour have always theorised from the concrete experiences of their lives. And I am inclined to say that our theorising often takes narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, and in the play with language.

AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE WRITING IDENTITIES: CULTURE AND CURRICULUM

These young writers in the summer program had an irresistible desire to express their identities through whatever medium was available at the time. This flexibility suggests that they were operating not just aesthetically but also rhetorically, habitually focusing on issues with socio-political import and that have immediate relevance to their lives. The young women wrote about the world around them, raising for scrutiny the experience of living as people of African descent. They chronicled relationships of

people in culturally definable places and under conditions that made visible the personal and communal dimensions of their experiences. By occupying varied subject positions, they offered multiple perspectives on their experiences, focusing readers' attention instructively on dimensions of this experience that establish the unique viewpoints of African American women as a gendered, racialised, and economically defined group.

Opportunities for students of colour to design specific texts in their own voices is too often subordinated in schools, which emphasise standardised and narrowly defined skills-based instruction. Perhaps because those who have the power to determine the ideas that are deemed important, some of our most daring and potentially radical students have been influenced, even co-opted, into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to their own interests and identities. At least so far, the creative writers I have worked with have resisted this domination through language. As students wrote and theorised from local knowledge and inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009), the classroom became a more liberatory space that moved beyond access toward diverse ways of knowing and creating (Janks, 2000). For these African American young students, literacy was a form of affirmation as well as understanding, a collective response, "We are family," to the writer to whom there is often no response. The students authored and designed an alternative world in a school context, one which reflects their home speech communities and values. Therefore, an important aspect of their design involved (re)centring their racial and gendered selves into their digital stories. As such, they were not only reading the word and world through a dialect lens, but also reimagining epistemologies. This was most evident in their rhetorical tropes and ways of forming community and enacting agency. We know from history that writing, language and culture become endangered unless there is a positive affirmation of them. When we honour the ways of knowing and reading the world from oppressed communities, we honour their literate legacies (Gadsden, 2002; Campano, 2007). It ensures that their tradition has cultural continuity and survives.

To allow students to create their own narratives on the basis of their history and culture is to acknowledge and encourage their authorship outside or in the margin of the conventional classroom norms of writing steeped in white cultural traditions. Drawing on multiple voices, genres, grammars and media for formulating and expressing the meaning of their experience, these three African American students created narratives that referred to their various subject positions within the dominant discourses (for example, as teenagers conforming to popular culture ideals of physical beauty and body image) and in the margins of these discourses (for example, as community members empowered by their history of survival and resistance to slavery). As these students' history, culture, and stories become recognised as legitimate texts, their identities as black students in a white educational setting are also validated. Thus, students' identity construction in the classroom is interconnected with their author function. It is through creating, owning and experimenting with narratives that the young authors are able to push discursive boundaries of the classroom and establish their own space of meaning and experience.

CONCLUSION

Many teachers reject authoritarian models of education. Many strive against fitting students coherently into the status quo. Many share the democratic goals of critical literacy. This educational work means, finally, inviting literacy practices that question the way things are and imagine alternatives, so that the word and the world may meet in history and in the service of the arc of social justice. While trying to think about these issues in my teaching, I have come to understand that this is more than an intellectual endeavour and more than a question of whether or not students have access to particular power codes, although this is certainly part of the project. It is also about coming to believe in the possibility of a variety of experiences, a variety of ways of understanding the world, a variety of frameworks of operation, without imposing consciously or unconsciously a notion of a white norm. By acknowledging the different ways that students enact literacy practices in making sense of the world, we support critical and culturally responsive technological ecologies that impart knowledge, skills and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and allow students to write their history, culture and values. In essence, a critical literacy framework allows students to deconstruct the grand narratives concerning their social, historical and political realities with the hope of locating their own stories and finding their own voices.

Those of us who are interested in critical uses of technology in literacy studies must grapple with the idea of using the medium to enrich and empower our students to empower themselves. We must be aware that these tools can either re-inscribe existing power regimes in which many are silenced and the few are heard, or they can become tools of authentic cultural production with real possibilities to reflect cultural identities. My analysis of the scripts is just one humble attempt to make visible young women's individual and collective agency in a program designed to honour their identities and cultural ways of knowing. Much more literacy scholarship needs to be done in this area.

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