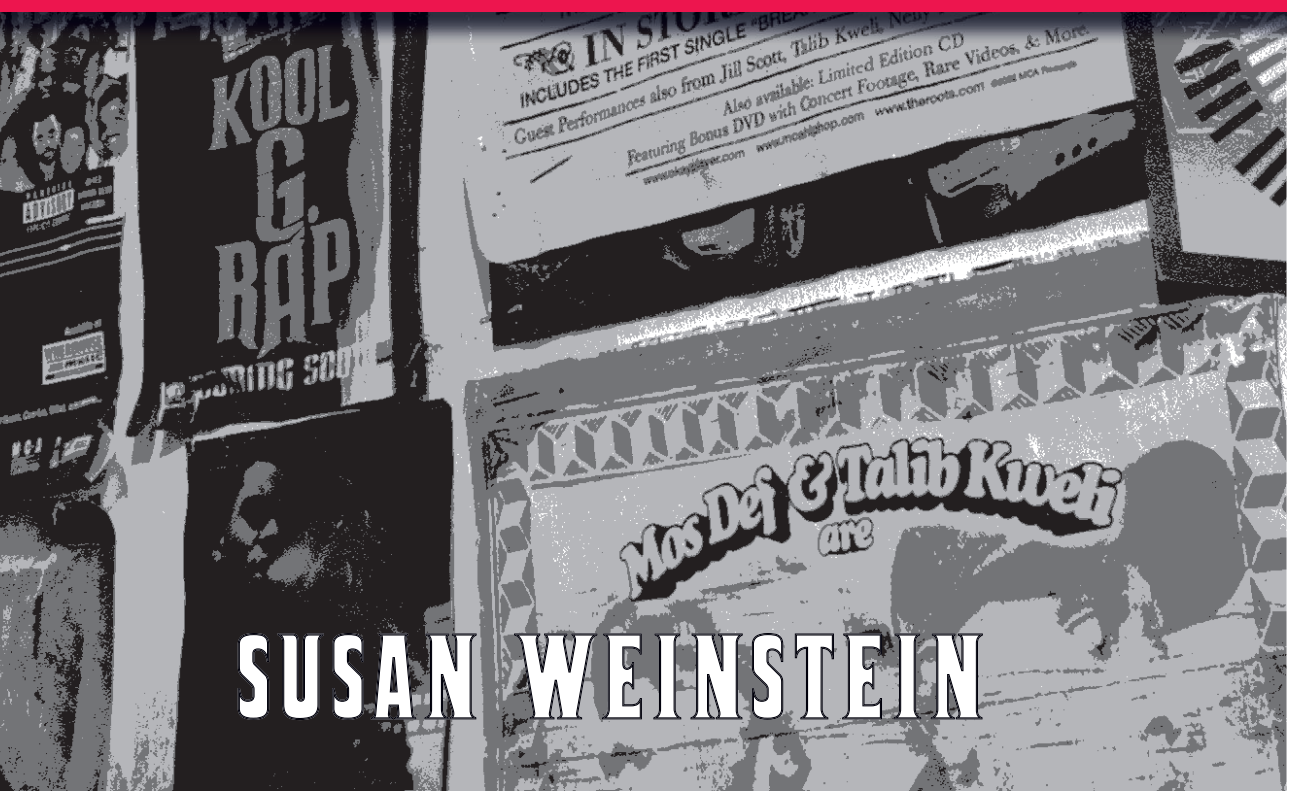




FEEL THESE WORDS

WRITING IN THE LIVES OF URBAN YOUTH



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FEEL THESE WORDS

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Feel These Words

WRITING IN THE LIVES OF URBAN YOUTH

SUSAN WEINSTEIN

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To my students

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literate identity, and academic achievement” in the *International Journal of Learning* 12(3), pp. 143–147. Finally, some of the data from this research appeared in *very* early form as “The writing on the wall: Attending to self-motivated student literacies” in *English Education* 35(1), pp. 21–45.

A number of popular song lyrics are quoted throughout this book. In several cases, I have stayed within Fair Use guidelines. For the lyrics that I quote at length, I have secured permission from the relevant music publishers, as follows:

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- contains sample of "I Just Wanna Stop" by Ross Vanelli

Introduction

I always thought the stories I had in my head
were definitely better than those I've read. (Robbie)

Who wrote these rules?
Who formed these schools?
Teaching us Lincoln freed the slaves,
That Columbus discovered America . . .
(José)

I was master of the darkest art/since my birth
no time to focus on the afterlife/I'm bringing hell to earth
not because I'm a menace/but a talented individual
young, black, and gifted . . .
(Jig)

— —

I was a teenage writer.

I was also (a long time ago now) an unmotivated student attending a massive public high school of about 5,000 students, doing well in English but not much else, cutting more and more days as sophomore year turned to junior turned to senior, more interested in friends, music, and my own personal and family problems than in school assignments and grades.

I share this history because it has a lot to do with why this book exists. Given my background, it seems perfectly reasonable to me that someone can appear to be disengaged with school and with formal concepts of learning, yet be passionately involved in creative intellectual work. Despite the many differences between me and the nine writers in this study¹—differences of cultural capital (if not socioeconomic status), race, (in some cases) gender, and geography—in significant ways, I *was* that teenager, less alienated than some of The Writers, certainly, but

more alienated than others. I get that what they present of themselves in the classroom—if they make it to the classroom at all—doesn't scratch the surface of who they are.

In this case, "who they are" are nine teenagers and young adults from Chicago: Jig, Mekanismn, Crazy, TeTe, Patricia, Marta, José, Robbie, and Dave.² There are connections and interconnections among some of them: Jig, Crazy, and TeTe are siblings; these three plus Mekanismn are part of a rap crew called The Maniacs; Patricia, Marta, José, Robbie, and Dave are all poets; and Mekanismn, Crazy, Patricia, Marta, José, and Robbie all attended an alternative high school on the south side of Chicago where each of them was, at one time or another, my student. The connection all nine share is that they fit into categories of youth too often represented—by the media, politicians, even the school systems that are supposed to serve them—as deficient in the kinds of characteristics and skills that both reflect and are supposed to lead to middle-class status. That is to say, each of The Writers is either African-American or Latino, all come from low-income families, and most of them have some difficulty writing formal academic essays and/or using standardized English in speech and in writing. To judge them as unskilled in reading and writing based solely on these measures, however, is to mistake form for content, the mastery of one grammatical system for an overall proficiency with communication, and a lack of interest in certain forms of literacy for a lack of interest in literacy generally. That such youth are immersed in various literate worlds exposes the narrowness of the definition of literacy within which our schools function, and requires an interrogation of the reasons that it is exactly the languages, the forms, and the styles of socially marginalized kids like these that don't count.

Each of The Writers composes in at least one of two general categories: poetry/narrative (I combine these under the general umbrella of "traditional" imaginative writing) and rap/hip-hop. Through interviews and observations, it has become clear that The Writers are motivated not by some romantic muse or inner voice of inspiration, but by the people, contexts, and situations that surround them. Some are influenced by the similar or complementary interests of family members. Some write in a kind of dialogue with published writing and/or recorded music. Some write as a way of verbalizing resistance to personal and societal issues. And many write with, for, and to their peers, bouncing rhymes off each other, sharing their poetry, and encouraging one another to keep writing.

In her article, "To be part of the story': The literacy practices of gangsta adolescents," Elizabeth Moje (2000) defines what she calls the "alternative" or "unsanctioned" literacy practices of a group of young gang members with whom she works. Moje's important study is an early

attempt to describe such literacy practices among this general demographic. Now, though, I hope to challenge the commonsense notion that academic literacies are the universal norm against which other practices are considered alternative. Instead, I argue that for adolescents, it is often the kinds of writing traditionally associated with formal schooling—what others have referred to as “academic” or “essayist” literacy—that are for many youths “alternative” and “unsanctioned.” This is not always true—when students find themselves, in the classroom, able to draw on the rhetorical skills that they have developed through participation in discourses they value, the sense of alterity can dissipate. It seems obvious: young people can and do engage with writing, and often do it well, when they have a reason and when they can incorporate the skills they have developed through prior writing experiences. The fact that students’ writing so often seems alternative and is, indeed, not sanctioned in their academic lives suggests not that *they* are doing something unusual, but that the schools are. Educators, policy makers, parents, and other adults who have young people’s best interests at heart have a responsibility to educate themselves, to focus not only on what kids need to be taught, but on what makes them want to learn.



La Juventud is a school for students aged 16 to 21 who have left high school for some period of time and have either decided or have been required to return. Because the public schools do not have to re-enroll a student once he/she turns 16, alternative schools like *La Juventud* are the only option for youth who want to earn a high school diploma rather than a G.E.D. Many of the students at this school have children; some have been or are currently involved in gang activities; some have been involved with the juvenile justice system. Many have a history of truancy, which in some cases doesn’t end with their enrollment at *La Juventud*.

While *La Juventud* is not the central research site for this study, it is the place where I first encountered most of The Writers, first read their work, and carried out a number of interviews and observations. My access to this site comes from having been a full-time English teacher at the school for two years. During that period, I published several student literary magazines and newspapers that included work by Crazy and Mekanismn; Patricia was also a student in my classes at this time. I left that job to pursue a PhD, but throughout the course of my research, I continued to participate at the school as a librarian, a literacy resource, and a volunteer instructor. It was in writing workshops during this part-time involvement at *La Juventud* that I began to work with Robbie, Marta, and José’s girlfriend Flor.

Moving beyond *La Juventud* for my research, I investigated the various contexts within which The Writers' literacy activities occurred, and that gave those activities their meaning. I followed participants into the community, to their homes, neighborhoods, community centers, and open mike events—to the places, in short, where their writing emerged.

In order to make sense of the meanings and contexts surrounding The Writers' work, I have relied principally upon the work done in New Literacy Studies (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; de Castell, Luke & Egan, 1986; Knobel, 1999; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). Writers in this field argue that reading, writing, and verbal communication are all deeply contextualized activities that, as such, can only be understood by exploring the people, places, and powers that surround and infuse them. The field also emphasizes the multiple nature of literacy (hence the pluralizing of the term), challenging the traditional wisdom that one is either literate (meaning that one can read and write in the dominant linguistic codes) or illiterate. Particularly influential in this regard is Shirley Brice Heath's seminal 1983 ethnography *Ways With Words*—readers may notice this phrase used in various places throughout this book. I do this both because Heath's title is particularly apt in referring to literacy practices and because I want to pay respect to a work that has been foundational to literacy studies as a whole and to my own understanding of what literacy research grounded in specific social contexts requires.

Also central to this study is James Gee's (1996) concept of "Discourses," which refers to the social contexts of literacy acts—he uses the capital "D" to differentiate this concept from the linguistic definition of discourse as an extended speech event. I argue that for the writers in this study, literacy acts drive and are driven by their involvement in various dynamic Discourses. Gee's Discourse is both a context and a way of behaving within that context, "a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize . . ." (127–128). Of course, the metaphor of a "kit" suggests a more clear-cut set of discursive norms than actually exists. Nonetheless, the notion of Discourse is helpful in discussing the impact of race and ethnicity on individuals' experiences and opportunities in the U.S. It helps us to understand race and ethnicity as something other than static collections of characteristics that every person from a given group carries around with them in the same ways. There are not "race" and "ethnicity"; there are, instead, *Discourses* of race and ethnicity, some of which serve to essentialize and reify these concepts. There are all sorts of other Discourses as well; one of the best articulations of this concept that I have

found comes from rapper Mos Def (1999a), who defines the Discourse of hip-hop this way:

People be asking me all the time,
 “Yo Mos, what’s getting ready to happen with Hip-Hop?
 Where do you think Hip-Hop is going?”
 I tell ‘em, “You know what’s gonna happen with Hip-Hop?
 Whatever’s happening with us.”
 If we smoked out, Hip-Hop is gonna be smoked out
 If we doing alright, Hip-Hop is gonna be doing alright
 People talk about Hip-Hop like it’s some giant living in the
 hillside coming down to visit the townspeople—
 We *are* Hip-Hop.

Substitute whatever Discourse you choose for Mos Def’s *hip-hop* and the argument still works. Discourses are ideologically fraught and politically contested, and some of them—like commercial rap music—generate serious profits, but they are also populated by individuals with histories and experiences that affect the Discourse as much as the Discourse influences the individual. It is for exactly this reason that Discourses—whether hip-hop, or the stock market, or public education—regularly feature heated debates over how, where, and by whom they should be represented.³

Another key theoretical concept undergirding this study is that of social reproduction. According to this idea, “ideological state apparatuses” (Althusser, 1977) such as the courts, churches, and schools work to reproduce class structures and social positioning. This implies that people are passive recipients and enactors of reproductive ideologies. However, a number of researchers (Cushman, 1998; de Certeau, 1984; Ogbu, 1991; Scott, 1990; Spivak, 1999; Williams, 2002) have uncovered past and present enactments of agency on the part of dominated and marginalized peoples. In terms of literacy, because one’s verbal performances are tied up with one’s relationships and sense of self, one may resist participation in a (socially sanctioned) Discourse that conflicts with other (less socially valued) Discourses with which one identifies. A number of first- and second-hand accounts tell of the alienation that can result from moving between a home and a school that are grounded in highly contrastive language and literacy norms (Anzaldúa, 1987; Delpit, 1995; Rodriguez, 1993; Rodriguez, 1982; Rose, 1990; Villanueva, 1993). Pierre Bourdieu (1990), writing about a school system’s “social function of conservation

and . . . ideological function of legitimation" (102), warns against ignoring these conflicts, and the resistant stances that may develop from them, if one wants to get to the root of problems within the educational system.

Such conflicts generate tension because the languages they are rooted in are always rooted in power. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) celebrated what he termed the *heteroglossia* (the many and varied ways with words) of democratic societies; his writings critique the stifling of heteroglossia in the Soviet Union in which he lived. Although he was writing in response to a specific historical context, Bakhtin's mistrust of societies' tendency to naturalize the dominance of some Discourses over others is directly and powerfully relevant to current discussions of the ways that racially and economically marginalized people speak and write.

Because of its emphasis on language as an inherently social act, this study runs the risk of missing the trees for the forest, as it were. Individuals experience themselves as individuals, no matter how many books are written about the social construction of identity and culture. This is especially true in the United States, which is predicated on a belief in the primacy of the individual. On the other hand, when motivations are looked for within individual minds, social context often disappears. The field of social psychology wrestles with the intersections of individual and social experience. One figure who informs this study from the perspective of social psychology is Lev Vygotsky (1986). This Soviet educator-turned-psychologist viewed a science of the mind that distinguishes itself from the social as fundamentally flawed, based as it must be on an assumption that the individual can be understood apart from the society he/she inhabits.

Looking at the variety of data generated by my research, both during the active research process and during postresearch analysis, I was able to identify a number of central themes. My own experiences as a teacher, writer, and researcher suggested to me that there is no fundamental correspondence between an engagement with imaginative writing outside of school and academic success—whether measured in grades, test scores, or evident mastery of the grammatical/syntactical tools of standardized English. This situation calls for intensive scrutiny not only of schooling, but of the contexts in which such youth *do* engage productively with intellectual work. Yet there are "only a few studies of how marginalized adolescents . . . use literacy to make sense of their social and school lives" (Moje, 2000, 653). The present study demonstrates that such teenagers and young adults are often deeply engaged in writing, so the low performance of many such youth in school settings presents us with a conundrum. Why doesn't their intense interest in writing translate to school

achievement? That they learn not only how to write, but how to think critically and analyze audiences from their crafting of poems and song lyrics is clear from the way they talk about their work in this book. The conclusion I and others (see Mahiri, 2004) come to is that the difference lays in the level of connection youth feel to the writing they choose to do—in other words, the extent to which these literate practices are woven into the cultural and social contexts of their lives.

Searching for answers in interview transcripts, field notes, and the writing itself, I found that general themes of *control*, *internal exploration*, *interpersonal interaction*, *challenge*, *respect*, and *enjoyment* came up repeatedly. These themes were often inseparable from one another—as in, for example, *challenges* that involve *competition with peers* in an *enjoyable atmosphere* with the *respect of valued others* as the reward. In an effort to create a text that allows for both organizational clarity and contextual complexity, I chose to break these themes into chapters that include discussions of that thematic interplay.

While this book is unapologetically an examination of particular situated literacy practices, I have tried to be mindful of recent critiques of literacy ethnographies. By definition, all New Literacy Studies work is firmly grounded in the local and particular, as Sheridan, Street, and Bloome remind us: “The challenge for researchers interested in literacy is to describe the social, cultural and intellectual events and practices within which written language is used” (2000, 5). Both Collins and Blot (2003) and Brandt (2001) acknowledge the value of situated studies, but express concern that a preoccupation with local practices often obscures larger socioeconomic factors driving particular orientations to literacy. Brandt, in particular, is concerned that a focus on how individuals and communities employ particular literacy practices to achieve specific goals ignores the reality that literacy practices are often not so much chosen as they are inherited, assumed, or imposed—and this is true not only for those practices that are overtly “oppressive,” but to some extent for all practices. “Ethnographic descriptions,” says Brandt,

do not often speak directly enough and in a sustained way to the histories by which literacy practices arrive or do not arrive in local contexts, flourish or not in certain times and locales. Nor do they often invite a search for the interests beyond those of the local users that hold literacy practices in place, give them their meaning, or take them away. Nor do they often fully address the mixed motives, antipathies, and ambivalence with which so much literacy is learned and practiced. (2001, 8)