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“Every City Has Soldiers”: The Role of Intergenerational Relationships in Participatory Literacy Communities

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This article examines the role of intergenerational relationships in the lives of experienced poets and writers (“soldiers”) and emerging poets and writers in what the author terms Participatory Literacy Communities (PLCs). Drawing from Wenger’s (1998) concept of communities of practice, the author uses data from two examples of PLCs—Black bookstore author events and spoken-word poetry “open mics”—to complicate notions of reciprocity and mentoring in the out-of-school literacy practices of people of African descent. Three soldiering traditions are discussed: soldiers as literacy activists and advocates, soldiers as practitioners of the craft, and soldiers as historians of the word.

A powerful movement of rhythmic spoken and written words is enlisting inter- and cross-generational communities of poets, writers, and musicians of African descent. Spoken-word poetry open mics and Black bookstore events provide opportunities for participants to engage in literacy practices such as public readings and performances of original poetry, prose, and music in supportive, interactive environments. Once considered a relatively grassroots effort, this “unstoppable fixation with language and ideas” (Madhubuti, 2002, xvi) has become a phenomenon with countless venues in cities throughout the United States and abroad. Part of the mission of this movement is to provide what I have termed Participatory Literacy Communities (Fisher, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2006a, 2006b)—that is, places where writers of African descent can exchange ideas and lived experiences through spoken and written words. This mission is characterized and perpetuated by the commitment of elders or more experienced poets and writers to the younger poets and writers in these communities.

There is much to learn concerning how Participatory Literacy Communities (henceforth, PLCs) are organized to provide supportive networks to both new and experienced writers. As I studied such PLCs in two northern California bookstores, I became especially interested in the cultivation of relationships between elders who act as literacy advocates and newer writers who seek membership in writing communities. Given the power of such relationships in the creation and
sharing of artful and meaningful texts, I came to focus on better understanding these elders' roles and responsibilities and the sorts of literacy practices they modeled and fostered. In this article, their actions and attitudes toward teaching and learning are illuminated through their narratives and observed practices, thereby providing an understanding of some of the values associated with literacy learning in these interactive spaces.

Elders or veteran poets were often referred to in these communities as soldiers—that is, mentors who shared a strong commitment to organizing opportunities for young people to engage in writing and performing in and beyond their local communities. The title of this article is borrowed from the words of Michael Datcher, a poet, author, and participant in both sites profiled here, who emphasized the need to marshal these available energies:

Every city I've been to, there is this kind of Black person who is conscious or who is like a real soldier. And it seems to me every city has soldiers. Our challenge is getting those soldiers together. And we have no collective plan, no army and no national agenda. But we have so many soldiers, so many charismatic people with integrity.

A soldier in his own right, Datcher had inherited the job of facilitating a writing workshop in South Central Los Angeles from an elder poet/mentor in this same tradition. A major responsibility of being a soldier is to mentor and be mentored about the history of these community-based literacy learning settings while practicing one's own craft, whether it be writing or performing poetry, prose, or music. Soldiers recognize their roles as part of a legacy of valuing literacy for people of African descent. Through participating in out-of-school literacy-centered events in their cities and even nationwide, soldiers pass on wisdom and insight through their writing and speaking, and apprentice new people into their communities.

This study specifically examines three traditions in soldiering: soldiers as literacy activists and advocates, soldiers as practitioners of the craft, and soldiers as historians of the word. You will meet soldiers from two sites—Carol's Books' Poetry on a Saturday Afternoon (POSA) and the Jahva House Speak Easy spoken-word poetry open-mic event—as they worked to establish and sustain centers for literacy learning where novice writers and readers received intellectual, emotional, and motivational support from more experienced members.

I begin by contextualizing this study of literacy soldiers in the history of activism around literacy for people of African descent. Next, I offer a conceptual framework for understanding the relationships found in these communities, employing Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice to begin to understand how soldiers and soldiering emphasize the value of literacy, artistic expression, and cultural connection. After providing the framework, I provide portraits of these
two sites of soldiering, providing overviews of both venues and a close-up look at mentors and other participants. Lastly, I provide a discussion of how the salient characteristics of soldiers and soldiering could potentially inform schools and communities.

**Framing the Study**

*Every City Has Soldiers*

Researchers have argued that the literacy learning of people of African descent must be understood in light of their cultural and political history (Fisher, 2004; Lee, 2004; McHenry, 2002; McHenry & Heath, 1994; Perry, 2003); as Lee (2004) asserts, “Were it not for this unique history, there would be no reason to focus on African American students” (p. 70). This “unique history” includes the denial of literacy learning during African enslavement in the Americas. Despite the reality that literacy was “legislated away” from African Americans (Gilyard, 1996, p. 23), scholars have maintained that people of African descent persisted in their quest to be writers and readers during enslavement and after the Civil War (McHenry, 2002; McHenry & Heath, 1994), as well as during the Black literary movements that followed (Fisher, 2004).

Documenting the “forgotten readers” of African descent, McHenry (2002) asks, “What institutions have centered the literary experiences of African Americans? Where has literacy been practiced and literature enjoyed, discussed, and debated?” (p. 10). She argues that due to the lack of access to formal educational institutions, African Americans have “created and relied on other institutions to supplement and sustain literary education” (p. 10). McHenry (2002) found that many literary societies during the early nineteenth century wanted to provide both skilled and unskilled readers and writers opportunities for “cultivating the mind” (p. 54). Young people and adults with various levels of literacy knowledge were encouraged to participate in oral readings and discussions of literary texts where everyone had an opportunity to be exposed to language and ideas.

Perry (2003) also found literacy to be communally constructed and enacted among people of African descent. In a study of historical and contemporary narratives, she asserts that relationships and mentoring contributed to an African American philosophy of education and helped shape a theory of African American literacy practices:

> While learning to read was an individual achievement, it was fundamentally a communal act. For the slaves, literacy affirmed not only their individual freedom but also the freedom of their people. Becoming literate obliged one to teach others. Learning and teaching were two sides of the same coin, part of the same moment. Literacy was not something you kept for yourself; it was to be passed on to others, to the community. Literacy was something to share. (p. 14)
Perry’s explication of narratives shows how literacy learning was not solely focused on decoding skills, but centered in relationships, wherein people developed a sense of responsibility for the process of learning to speak, read, write, and think critically. These relationships were vital because literacy learning had to continue despite the lack of formal educational institutions.

In my previous work, I have attempted to show how recent manifestations of PLCs have become educational institutions in their own right, following the tradition of secret schools, literary societies, Independent Black Institutions (IBIs), and Black literary movements (Fisher, 2004; Lee 1992; McHenry, 2002); that is, I have argued that contemporary underground literacy venues such as spoken-word poetry open-mic and Black-bookstore events represent a return to the reciprocity-based literacy teaching and learning that people of African descent have depended on throughout history. In the PLCs I have studied, poets and writers educated their audiences and created a culture of reciprocity between more experienced and novice writers. Participants in Black bookstore author events and spoken-word poetry open mics considered these activities to be alternative knowledge spaces and sometimes supplementary to traditional education programs (Fisher, 2006b). In my more recent research (2005a, 2005b; 2007), I have found that urban high school teachers who integrate community-based literacy ciphers1 (the “coffee house”) with the formal education sphere (the “school house”) have been able to motivate African American, Dominican, and Puerto Rican students to write their own stories while fostering a nourishing culture of reading and listening among their peers (Fisher, 2007, p. 21).

Increasingly, literacy research has responded to the call to identify communities in which urban youth have found success in literacy learning (Alim, 2007; Fisher, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Mahiri, 2004; Majors, 2004; Morrell, 2004). Recent studies of out-of-school literacies show how elements of popular culture and youth culture can be used to inspire new writers as well as identify bridges between community literacies and school-based practices (Dyson, 2005; Fisher, 2005a, 2005b, 2007; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Jocson, 2005, 2006; Kinloch, 2005, 2007; Kirkland, 2007; Majors, 2006). For example, Hull and Schultz (2002) contend that studies of literacy in out-of-school contexts may help educators consider “children and adults performing successfully in a variety of out-of-school tasks that they’ve not been able or eager to complete in the schoolroom” (p. 3), and encourage researchers to look at home and school literacies as a continuum rather than a set of binaries. In many ways, this interest in literacy across contexts responds to the growing language and ethnic diversity in our classrooms as well as the pervasive disparities in academic achievement in American public schools (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). This study will add the perspectives of men and women on the front lines of these community institutions who are committed to fostering an appreciation for written and spoken words.
Participatory Literacy Communities and Intergenerational Mentoring

In many ways, my notion of PLCs mirrors scholarship that focuses on collective learning in a shared space. For example, Wenger (1998) offers the term “communities of practice” to understand “learning as social participation” (p. 4), arguing that communities of practice are defined by three components: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. The communities-of-practice framework is useful in thinking about how novice writers and poets in this study are engaged in activities around written and spoken words with people who are equally committed to such practices. However, this framework of a learning community does not suggest the sense of intimacy that I regard as a key feature of PLCs. To be sure, a visitor to the sites in this study might conclude that people are merely entertaining or being entertained by poetry, prose, and music. However, this same visitor would be missing the layers of participation and, more specifically, how experienced writers in these communities are strategic in their efforts to embrace novice writers who are looking for a supportive network in which to craft their writing and share it publicly. The relationships in these communities are their driving force. Members not only share a love for words and language, but they are also passionate about extending themselves to each other in a format that offers fresh ways of thinking about literacy-learning communities.

As I have pondered the manner in which elders related to newer writers in these PLCs, I am reminded of the work of jazz drummer Art Blakey, whose band the Jazz Messengers provided mentoring to younger musicians for over three decades beginning in the 1950s. With many of its members going on to become big names in jazz in their own right, the rotating collective known as the Jazz Messengers has been referred to as a finishing school for artists regardless of their formal (or lack thereof) music education. Considered a soldier in the jazz world, Blakey’s mission was to groom young musicians to compose, record, perform, and eventually organize their own bands. One of the most important lessons that Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers hold for literacy research and literacy education is the profound sense of respect associated with having an interested and attentive adult taking time to care about the ideas and work of younger people. Blakey’s approach aligns with Perry’s (2003) depiction of literacy as a historically “communal act” (p. 14) among Americans of African descent, and of the notion that caring engagement in PLCs involves a new set of the “3Rs”—responsibility, reciprocity, and respect.

Much like Blakey, elders in the communities in this study were keenly interested in younger artists/writers continuing a legacy of literacy practices by participating in similar activities or eventually starting their own venues. Like Blakey and his Jazz Messengers, Carol’s Books’ Poetry on a Saturday Afternoon and the Jahva House Speak Easy functioned as “institutions within themselves” (Fisher, 2003a, p. 4). In other words, these venues emerged from a tradition of Indepen-
dent Black Institutions (IBIs) in that they “validate knowledge, help shape visions, inculcate values, and provide the foundation for community stability” (Lee, 1992, p. 161). In this context, institutions are critical for providing both alternative and supplementary knowledge for members.

Methods

A Tale of Two Cities: Sites and Participants

Drawing these portraits from a larger study that spanned four sites (Fisher, 2003a, 2003b), I focus here on intergenerational relationships among participants at Carol’s Books’ Poetry on a Saturday Afternoon (POSA) in Sacramento and the Jahva House Speak Easy in Oakland (see Table 1).

Two cities with contrasting demographics, Sacramento and Oakland have made numerous contributions to the spoken word poetry scene and the Black bookstore events that take place in urban and non-urban contexts throughout the United States. My purpose in this article is to explore the ways that mentoring unfolded in these communities by focusing on the recurring themes of intergenerational relationships that emerged across my interviews and observations.

I found these sites compelling because of the event organizers’ commitment to attracting elders, youth, and generations in between. The hosts at Carol’s Books’

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Venues</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Organizers/hosts</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Poetry on a Saturday Afternoon (POSA) at</td>
<td>A monthly event, free and open to the public, featuring community-based writers/poets as well as an open mic for participants.</td>
<td>Mother/daughter poetry team, Staajabu and V.S. Chochezi, known as “Straight Out Scribes.”</td>
<td>Negesti—poet, teacher and midwife; The Rashad Family¹—Ishmael, Nzinga, and daughters Amara (12), Nisa (8), and Sky (6).</td>
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<td>Carol’s Books in Sacramento, California.</td>
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<td>California. Carol’s Books was a family-owned and operated bookstore specializing in books written by and about people of African descent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Speak Easy, a venue at Jahva House in</td>
<td>A weekly open mic event free and open to the public with a “first come/first served” sign-in list.</td>
<td>Radio programmer Greg Bridges, who was well-known for his program on Black music and art titled “Transitions on Traditions.”</td>
<td>Sister A—poet, teacher, musician and radio programmer; J. Ali—engineer and poet; NerCity; and Scorpio Blues—poets and artists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oakland, California. Jahva House was a family-owned and operated café which also served as a cultural center for art and music of people of African descent.</td>
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POSA event, a mother/daughter poetry duo known as Straight Out Scribes (Staajabu and V. S. Chochezi), hoped that their partnering would signal to the community the importance of cross-generational collaboration. The host of the Jahva House Speak Easy, radio programmer Greg Bridges, had similarly dedicated his life to showing how Black music, art, and literature comprised a kind of family tree with many branches. As a host, he had a gift for pairing poets and writers to foster dialogue among the multiple generations in attendance. In fact, Greg Bridges described himself as a “broker” for the participants in this community.

**Data Collection**

This study employed ethnographic case-study methodology involving participant observation. I began my observations at Carol’s Books’ Poetry on a Saturday Afternoon and the Jahva House Speak Easy in 2001. Initially, I conducted a pilot study on the role of the emcee at the Jahva House Speak Easy. By fall of that year, I began attending POSA and the Speak Easy consistently. This study focuses on data collected during a six-month period between January-June of 2002. During this time, I kept field notes and interviewed event organizers (see Appendix A for interview protocol) as well as poets/writers/artists who shared their work, audience members, and participants. Using purposeful and network sampling (Merriam, 1998), I asked event organizers to identify participants who they believed embodied the vision and purpose of these PLCs. Greg Bridges of the Jahva House Speak Easy provided the names of two elders (Sister A and J. Ali) and two emerging poets (NerCity and Scorpio Blues), participants he believed constituted the cornerstones of the community because of their consistency and influence. Staajabu of Carol’s Books’ POSA suggested that I begin my interviews with the featured poet, Negesti, who she believed embodied the purpose for the reading, as well as the Rashad family, who were consistent participants in POSA.

Semi-structured interviews began with an oral history format, in which I invited participants to talk about their lives and experiences. In the second part of the interviews, I asked a series of questions about how they perceived their roles in the communities. Additionally, I asked the organizers to describe their visions for these events and to describe their influence in the lives of participants and across their respective communities. Altogether, I interviewed 15 members of the Carol’s Books community and 20 of the Jahva House Speak Easy community. Interviews took place where participants felt most comfortable; some wanted to be interviewed in their homes, while others chose to be interviewed at the two venues during weekday lulls. All interviews were audiotaped and took between 60 and 90 minutes.

In addition to keeping field notes and conducting interviews, I also filmed events in order to identify the practices of the community participants. I began filming POSA at the beginning of the study because of my familiarity with par-
participants. Prior to the study, I had used Carol’s Books as a resource during my teaching career in the Sacramento City Unified School District, as Carol’s was one of the first bookstores in Sacramento to carry children’s literature in Spanish and Southeast Asian languages that I needed for my classroom. During POSA events, participants insisted that I was a filmmaker (participants gave me the nickname “Spike Leah” as a female version of African American filmmaker Spike Lee) and came to expect to see me filming on Saturdays. Prior to this study, I had conducted a pilot project at the Jahva House Speak Easy examining the role of the host/emcee of spoken-word poetry events, and met and interviewed Greg Bridges for the first time. I waited until April to film at this site, however, in order to allow community members to become more familiar and comfortable with my presence.

**Data Analysis**

I began the analytic process by recursively re-reading my field notes and interview transcripts, attending with particular care to descriptions and enactments of what I call soldiering (Fisher, 2003a, 2003b)—that is, elders’ efforts to welcome, affirm, and guide newer members of these PLCs. I identified three primary mentoring stances that these soldiers assumed over time as they served as 1) literacy activists and advocates, 2) practitioners of the craft, and 3) historians of the word. In the role of literacy activists and advocates, these veteran members emphasized the utility of literacy in terms of promoting a cause or calling attention to unmet needs at the levels of community, nation, or world. These practitioners of the craft provided dynamic role models through their own writing and performance, as elders’ visibility on the local literary scene empowered their work with youth across a number of activities and venues. Finally, as historians of the word, these elders stood as public intellectuals who used these bookstore performance spaces to weave connections among blues, jazz, hip hop, and spoken-word poetry, helping a younger generation understand that such events as the Carol’s Books’ Poetry on a Saturday Afternoon and the Jahva House Speak Easy spoken-word poetry open mic were exemplars of a rich tradition of African American artistic expression.

In the account that follows, I draw on both venues in providing illustrations of these modes of soldiering. I begin with a look at activism and advocacy in Carol’s Books’ POSA, considering the dynamics of these in light of its organizer’s notion of a “Black reading.” I turn next to an exemplar of a practitioner of the craft, Negesti, a writing and art teacher who served as a guest poet at POSA and who constructed a mentoring network. My discussion of historicizing the word turns to the Jahva House Speak Easy, where host Greg Bridges and an array of elder mentors provided opportunities to help young people understand the larger tradition of African American artistic expression in supportive communities. Finally, I end with an exploration of the implications of these soldiering practices for teaching and research.
Soldiers and Soldiering in Participatory Literacy Communities: “That’s Me/He/She/We”

Literacy Activism and Advocacy: “We Want to Encourage Elders and Children to Come”

In a study that documented book vendors who operated on the sidewalks of New York’s Greenwich Village, Duneier (1999) shares the stories of men and women who not only sell books at their tables, but also hold impromptu forums about the literature and attendant issues. One African American vendor in Duneier’s study, Hakim, largely sold “Black books” or a “constellation of related subjects and issues” (p. 24) pertaining to people of African descent. Duneier’s ethnography details Hakim’s relationships with his customers as well as the culture of his book table. Drawing on Anderson’s (1990, p. 136) research with inner-city neighborhoods, Duneier (1999) employs the term “old head” to describe Hakim’s ability to share wisdom and insight with the novice readers who frequent his table; an “old head,” according to Anderson (1990), is an elder man or woman in the African American community who uses storytelling and wit to share and exchange information. In the same spirit, poet, journalist, and POSA co-host Staajabu considered POSA a “Black reading” where people of African descent could talk about their experiences in a comfortable and supportive setting. She described a Black reading to be a place where she could advocate literacy learning for young people and the importance of exposure to words and language through featured writers and poets:

We want to encourage elders and children to come, especially children, because we think they benefit so much from the poetry, and we want them to experience what you can do with words and how delightful it is to be around people who love the spoken word and the written word—because they’ll be in a bookstore, and the reason why we keep doing it is so people will come to Carol’s.

At POSA, young people were exposed to language and print through the public readings and also by being surrounded by books. As they sat among works of literature and were allowed to handle the books for sale in the store, youth enjoyed opportunities to see and hear people who were readers, writers, speakers, and singers. Staajabu was one such exemplar, publishing and performing poetry under the name Straight Out Scribes (SOS) along with her daughter and POSA co-host, V. S. Chochezi. Many families brought their children to POSA with the strong belief that their children would learn to be skilled readers and writers by watching adults engage in discussions around poetry and literature (Fisher, 2003a). However, exposure was only the first level.

Straight Out Scribes formatted POSA strategically so that the audience participants were involved rather than sitting passively. POSA activities culminated in an invitation for audience participants to share the stage with the featured writer.
First, the featured author would have between 45–50 minutes to share his or her work. Authors varied in their delivery and style, and often asked for audience participation. Second, there was time for community announcements in which everyone was invited to share upcoming events or introduce issues or concerns. Straight Out Scribes began a game to get the audience involved called “Know your Peeps,” using a deck of cards with noted photographs of African, African American, and West Indian leaders, writers, and other historical figures. Staajabu or V. S. Chochezi would show the picture and the audience participants were expected to call out the name of the person. After the community announcements, there would be a “Mumia Abu-Jamal update,” in which Staajabu would share any new information about Native American, Latino, and African American political prisoners throughout the United States. Here, Straight Out Scribes encouraged participants to write letters and poetry, using their voices to articulate their concerns. The last part of POSA was an open mic time for writers or poets to share their work with the Carol’s Books community.

The diversity of the POSA format was an invitation for all audience participants to become fully engaged in the event in some way. The audience was expected to engage in active listening, responding if they heard something they were moved by and showing interest through body language; however, in addition, POSA participants shared and exchanged information, engaged in dialogue about current political issues, or practiced speaking in front of a supportive group. Straight Out Scribes frequently offered thanks to the “elders” and the “children” and insisted that they were the priority of the day. In addition to inviting people to read their original poetry, Staajabu and V. S. Chochezi welcomed prose, music, and dance, arguing that this strategy gave participants more agency in defining their experiences. Both mother and daughter believed that if the action spoke to you, then that was enough; V. S. Chochezi declared, “If it ignites something, it’s good!” Ultimately, Chochezi’s beliefs and orientation toward POSA were firmly rooted in her relationship with her mother:

My mother taught me that education is not the responsibility of school. It is the responsibility of the individual. So I was motivated to get my own education and that was instilled in me.

The Straight Out Scribes’ organizing strategies for POSA were an extension of the values Staajabu shared with V. S. Chochezi; the value of literacy education was passed on through interpersonal relationships that allowed young people to make decisions about the role reading, writing, and speaking would play in their lives.

**Practitioners of the Craft: Mobilizing Soldiers from Seattle to Sacramento**

Another important component in soldiering was being a practitioner of the craft—in other words, the encouragement given to novice writers came from
experienced poets, writers, and performers who continued to challenge themselves and to polish their craft. In addition to POSA hosts Staajabu and her daughter V. S. Chochezi, guest poet/teacher Negesti was also a practitioner who modeled the craft she believed in and fostered. Negesti was a midwife as well as a teacher, writer, and artist; before moving to California, she had taught free “Art in the Park” classes in Seattle supported by donations from small businesses and various organizations.

On one of the days when Negesti was a Carol’s Books’ POSA guest, the audience included several of her former students. Sitting in the front row of the poetry reading, Amara Rashad eagerly anticipated hearing her former writing and art teacher share selections from her new book. Amara was the eldest of three children who were 12, 8, and 6 at the time of the study. The Rashad family had homeschooled their daughters and considered POSA to be an extended part of their language arts curriculum, which included making sure that their daughters saw and experienced actual writers and people who enjoyed reading. They consciously sought out POSA as a community that could reaffirm literacy practices and a love of language. Extending the experience, the Rashads even created reading events in their home; for example, when each daughter learned to read, they invited family and friends (many of whom they had met at POSA events) to a reading party where each daughter was expected to choose a book or poem to read to the group, and each guest was asked to bring a favorite piece of literature to share.

Like Negesti, the Rashads had moved to California from Seattle, Washington. In Seattle, Mrs. Rashad had completed midwifery school and then moved with her family to Sacramento, where she got a job directing a clinic for pregnant women in need of quality health care. For the Rashad family, home schooling and participating in POSA were political acts. They believed they could provide their children with a more well-rounded education by tapping into community resources.

While living in Seattle, the Rashads had met Negesti. Born in Richland, Washington, Negesti had been raised in a predominately White community, describing the few Blacks who lived there as “close knit.” When she was in high school, an African American couple moved into her neighborhood and became her mentors. Negesti explained that this couple had been knowledgeable about aspects of African American art, literature, and history, and shared their resources with Negesti and other neighbors:

As I got into high school, there was a couple who moved into the city. I’ll never forget them. And they came with Black history. It was during the late sixties, early seventies. They came with all this information and knowledge. I remember the [husband] used to teach these classes and we’d just be sitting there with our mouths open and he asked “Did you know there was a Black National Anthem?” And I ran home and I asked, “Mom, did you know there was a Black National Anthem?” And she started singing it! So I said [to myself], “Wait a minute. If you knew, how come we didn’t know?” But it
was that movement at that time that you blend in—you become part of the greater whole. And in that we lose ourselves.

Negesti’s discovery that there was a Black National Anthem—and even more startling to her, that her mother knew the anthem but had never shared it with her—speaks to the experiences of many men and women of her generation whose parents, like her own, felt the importance of “blending into” the community. However, it was these circumstances that inspired her neighbors to teach classes to young people, and the exposure to this new pool of knowledge that pushed Negesti into reading more about people of African descent:

Just being able to have that eye-opening experience...the beauty of it all. I started looking for books. It was just a really wonderful time in my life to discover books, and the titles intrigued me; I am the Darker Brother, I was like, “Wow! Black Voices, Wow!” You know, you start hearing these titles, and they were poetic...The Me Nobody Knows, The Invisible Man. So you start looking and searching for more, and the more you search the more there is. And with those discoveries, then, other people are writing because they’re discovering too...so it really just opened a whole new world to me that I had no idea existed.

Negesti’s admiration of the “Black classics” encouraged her to continue the search for cultural history through biography and narrative. In the same way that Negesti’s neighbors had mobilized the young people of African descent in her suburban community, she became a community-based teacher as well. Claiming her “small town sista’” identity, Negesti was committed to remaining in a small city for other young people who found themselves making similar discoveries. From 1986–1991, Negesti taught at an Independent Black Institution in Seattle called the Garvey School,3 which offered what she called “standard learning” such as math, reading, and science, as well as “our content,” or African American perspectives on these subjects. Much as her neighbors had introduced her to new ideas, she did so through the Garvey School and free classes she offered in the city of Seattle. Continuing a tradition of teaching in grassroots institutions, Negesti created poetry, performance, and art classes (while simultaneously seeking grants for materials and supplies). Reading at Carol’s Books for the POSA series was another way for her to connect with former students like Amara Rashad, with new young people, and with their families.

During Negesti’s reading, Amara took photographs that she felt were “important” to the event at Negesti’s request. Amara took her job very seriously; she took pictures from various angles, including from behind Negesti so that she could capture the audience, as well as from behind the audience, to capture their perspective of the event. Negesti considered the camera a “representation of commitment” to the young people she taught and mentored. Negesti also integrated the
young participants by reading her poem, written specifically for her students, titled “There Are Some Powerful Young Writers On This Planet Earth!” (see Appendix B for complete text of poem). In her poem, Negesti depicted her students as capable and responsible participants in their literacy learning. According to Negesti, her students “don’t just observe, they participate; they don’t just write it, they speak it.” Here, Negesti did not dichotomize the oral and written, nor did she isolate literacy learning from action, emphasizing that her students “don’t just speak it, they live it; they don’t just live it, they be it!” Negesti saw her work with students as returning the “gift” that she had received from her Richland, Washington neighbor, who had enabled Negesti to experience a teaching and learning space in their home. This experience led to Negesti’s eventual quest to read and learn more, and eventually to her commitment to passing on what she had learned to novice learners. Negesti’s poem demonstrated her ability to step back and watch her students take a leadership role in their writing; she observed her students as much as they observed her, and encouraged her audience to do the same: “Give ‘em a pen. Watch ‘em, watch ‘em, watch ‘em change the world!” Most importantly, Negesti encouraged her students by demonstrating the very practices she expected from them.

**Historicizing the Word: “We’re Taking Their Struggle and Passing It On”**

Carol’s Books’ POSA and the Jahva House Speak Easy had different formats, yet both took pride in attracting writers with different levels of experience. Primarily an open-mic format, the Speak Easy required poets to sign in to read and adhere to the two-poem-maximum rule. Over time, newer poets used the microphone to form relationships with veteran poets by acknowledging their presence and thanking them for their encouragement before they read or performed their original work. The conduit for relationships between members of the community was the Speak Easy host, Greg Bridges, who thought of himself as a “broker” between the various artists who read at the open mic. Bridges was in his forties at the time of the study, straddling the generations of Sister A’s peers (who were in their sixties) and NerCity’s peers (who were in their early thirties and younger). Although there was no formal assignment of titles, newer poets/activists like NerCity4 considered more experienced poets such as Sister A an “elder” out of respect and admiration. Serving as “old heads,” elders were thought to be knowledgeable not only through formal education, but also through life experiences. Additionally, elders could offer history that helped community place settings such as the Jahva House Speak Easy in a larger historic, cultural, and artistic context. A poet, musician, teacher, and Speak Easy elder known as Sister A explained that she had experienced places like the Jahva House in New York, sites of a continuum of events that took place during eras such as the Harlem Renaissance:
Jahva House is just a continuation of what I left in New York. There are always places like this. There always have been places [like this] before I was born. People were doing the same thing before. Langston Hughes, from what I understand, did the same thing in clubs in New York. I remember seeing Eddie Jefferson in a club in New York do something similar. It’s a classroom—I learn, and hopefully somebody learns from me.

Comparing the Jahva House Speak Easy to a classroom, Sister A noted the reciprocal teaching and learning that takes place among scribes and lovers of words. However, unlike many classrooms, it was not limited to singular notions of literacy, as poetry could be expressed through written text, free-styling, rapping, acoustic instruments, and even dance. Seldom missing a Wednesday night, Sister A liked to come “late” because she believed the “die hards” would still be there. Sister A also situated spoken word’s recent renaissance with the goals and vision of the well-known and highly documented Langston Hughes and the less-known lyricism of jazz vocalist Eddie Jefferson, demonstrating the relationship between spoken-word poetry and music. Jefferson, known for his *vocalese* technique (putting lyrics to established compositions that were originally instrumental), recorded lyrics for famous compositions such as Dizzy Gillespie’s (1942/2005) “A Night in Tunisia” and Miles Davis’ (1959) “So What?” Sister A characterized her recollection of Jefferson in a night club in New York as “something similar” to what she experienced in places like the Jahva House Speak Easy. One of the prevailing attitudes at the Speak Easy was that Black creative expression was a continuum; the blues evolved from work songs, jazz emerged from the blues, and hip hop was close kin to poetry from the Black Arts Movement. This belief was underscored by the deejay who played a mix of music prior to and after the Speak Easy open mic began. This practice was also carried out in Bridges’ and Sister A’s radio programs, in which one could hear spoken word poetry, blues, hip hop, and jazz from the African Diaspora. Sister A was committed to showing the connection between music traditions such as the blues and spoken-word poetry through her own work. In one of her poems that she shared frequently at the Speak Easy, Sister A educated young poets about their connection to blues music, working-class Black people, and the rural South:

The blues is as diverse as the people who sing it and those kind of people who are ashamed of [the blues] need to understand there’s not one of them, whether [they] are from New York . . . Trinidad . . . Canada, not one of us who doesn’t have somebody somewhere who didn’t pick cotton, chop cane, pick tobacco, or what have you, and instead of being ashamed of those people who probably broke their asses so that we could be who we are we should be proud . . . some of them got their hands chopped off so that we could write poetry.

Sister A’s lessons in history at the Speak Easy open mic led her to write and produce a play about the history of the blues in the Bay Area. Casting younger
poets from the Speak Easy as actors, Sister A encouraged new writers to understand that they were a part of something larger. Other community elders like J. Ali carried similar attitudes about links between generations. J. Ali believed that many young people of African descent spent time building oppositional identities because they were not shown how they were linked to other people and important movements:

I can provide that component of inclusion to let individuals see what they’re dealing with is not exclusive to their generation, is not exclusive to a particular time reference. This is something just like what Quincy did with Back on the Block. I think when young people have someone that they clearly know is from a different generation connect with them around issues of art, where the young people feel isolated and separated and they now have the opportunity to get a sense that they’re part of a continuum. And the extent that they respect and involve themselves in that continuum rather than as being separate, they will also be included and accepted as being part of that continuum as those who are older.

J. Ali referred to musician/producer Quincy Jones’ recording project Back on the Block, in which Jones invited young musicians to collaborate with more experienced musicians. Jones, who began his career as a jazz musician, played with many jazz legends and was able to reconnect with the hip-hop generation with his launching of Vibe magazine. Like Blakey, Jones created opportunities for newer musicians and artists to get work as writers and performers. Extending a folk saying “I’ve been around the block and back,” or “I’ve already experienced what you have and more,” Jones wanted to show young people that he could participate in their new traditions and vice versa. J. Ali saw Jones’s work as a roadmap for teaching younger people about the history of art forms and forms of expression without isolating them or degrading their efforts to create something new.

Younger generations in the Speak Easy accepted the responsibility of continuing a tradition of crafting words with pride and purpose. NerCity and his poetry partner, Scorpio Blues, began their own spoken-word venue as a result of their experiences at the Speak Easy and at its predecessor, Dorsey’s Locker. NerCity also saw himself and other poets in their 20s and 30s as vehicles to get school-aged students involved. NerCity enjoyed receiving recognition from his peers, but he also valued getting the feedback from more experienced artists and audience participants like Sister A and J. Ali:

That’s one of the greatest things in the world, to have someone much older than you, who’s been to more places than you to say, “you know what young man? I enjoyed your work.” Sister A came to Dorsey’s one time and she just said these pieces that blew my mind back. She loved my pieces and she called me “son” the first night. It’s a great thing to have the elders in there because we’re taking their struggle and we’re passing it on. And I’m just holding it for a little while so the youngsters can get it. [There are] so many
generations in this forum, when you're doing spoken word you're saying how you feel and still put it in a form that you are in a way of hip hop but you are doing the spoken word and respected. It's the greatest feeling in the world. And I feel that a lot of [elders] passed that torch and they feel comfortable passing that torch to [me and Scorpio Blues] because we are not going to drop it.

As NerCity's statement suggests, the many generations at the Speak Easy continuously nurtured each other, providing mutual respect and abiding interest in one another's lives. Both NerCity and Scorpio Blues started attending the events as observers, but with the encouragement of hosts like Greg Bridges and veteran poets, began to perform and eventually host their own events (Fisher 2005a). NerCity emphasized the importance of his writing and performance being acknowledged, recognized, and respected by an experienced writer, and understood that he too shared the responsibility of "taking their struggle and passing it on." NerCity and Scorpio Blues composed poetry that critically examined the words and actions of their peers while remaining accessible to elders and youth. On a night that a film recording of a Speak Easy session was to be aired on a local television station, both poets chose pieces that they hoped would reach a wider audience beyond the venue.

In his poem "Me/He/She/We," NerCity began with a critique of people referring to themselves and others as "niggas." Eventually, he revealed that the people talking were not of African descent by asking "Don't you hate it when people talk like that? Especially when they aren't even Black?" At this point, NerCity contrasted what he believed were media-generated stereotypes of Blackness with what being Black meant for him:6

This is for all those suburban faces
Trying to act like those urban races
See I don't want my own people to be niggas
So why would I want you to be niggas ... 
See if you want to emulate me why don't you emulate 300 of us getting stacked on boats
coming over here
See, that's me
While she was getting raped by master
While he was getting beat by master
And me, I couldn't do nothing 'cause master had all of us shackled down
Locked down
See, that's me
See, you don't want to be me ... 
You know what's me?
Muhammad Ali not going to Vietnam
That's me
The 1968 Olympics
Best believe that’s me
[Sister A (with her fist in the air): That’s right!]
[NerCity (acknowledging Sister A): Put that fist in the air.]
[Greg Bridges: Word.]
That’s me
My father going to work everyday
That’s me
Us getting together in this environment
That’s we/me/he/she
Not these wannabees

Aligning his identity with particular moments in African American history, NerCity asserted that if someone wanted to emulate him or Black people in general, they would first have to understand the physical and psychological terror of the enslavement of Africans in the Americas. NerCity held up athlete and activist Muhammad Ali’s refusal to enter the military draft as well as the Black athletes in the 1968 Olympics as examples of courage in the face of criticism. These references provoked feedback from both Sister A and Greg Bridges, who were listening attentively from the audience. In the closing of his poem, NerCity observed that the daily lives of men like his father and the members of the Speak Easy community were ultimate role models.

Explaining to the guest host from the television station that her writing was largely inspired by elders like her grandmother, Scorpio Blues went next, sharing a piece about reclaiming womanhood which began with a song:

*When I wake to greet the day*
*I give thanks and then shake the hate*
*I got a whole world to face*
*I’ve been trying to hold it down*
*Though sometimes I feel like breaking down*
*But I gotta keep moving*
(Several people in the audience can be heard shouting “Yeah, keep moving girl”)
*The world won’t wait for you*
*So you gotta do what you came to do*
*’Cause nobody’s going to hold your hand*
*Nobody’s going to prove your plan, only you can*
*I am what I am and what I am is a woman*
*Hey y’all*
*Hey y’all*
*I am what I am and what I am is a woman*
*Hey y’all*
*Hey y’all*
Today I was reincarnated as a woman
A month ago I was a ho
Two weeks ago I was a trick
Last week I was a broad
And yesterday I was a bitch
But today
Today I was reincarnated as a woman

Taking back my name
Putting it back on my desk
Taking back my birthright
And letting it shine across my chest
I am claiming once again what should have never been left
Having you know there is a knowledge of mind that goes along with these breasts
I’m talking about the same name that day to day gets stripped from me
And I find myself having to fight for it
Both emotionally and physically
I mean I do my best to spread positivity
But there's only so much of it left in me
Because I’m constantly being weakened by words of men
Who try to tear down my identity . . .

Scorpio Blues captivated the crowd every time she shared this piece. Her desire to increase the visibility of this poem was motivated by her disdain for media images that continuously denigrated women in general and Black women in particular. Tracing the evolution of degrading names used against women, Scorpio Blues reclaimed the title “woman” in her refrain throughout the poem. She and NerCity had similar goals for their poetry: They hoped to be catalysts for linking older with newer generations. On those rare occasions when Greg Bridges was absent, NerCity hosted the Speak Easy. He also co-organized an open mic with Scorpio Blues on a different night of the week than Speak Easy nights. Eventually, with the support of the Speak Easy family, NerCity and Scorpio Blues moved to Sister A’s hometown, New York City, to continue their commitment to spoken word. Not only did they perform in venues throughout the city, but they also became involved with the teen spoken word program, Urban Word, and hosted one of the sixth annual preliminary slam competitions at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Sister A believed that young people like NerCity and Scorpio Blues should be given credit for preserving certain aspects of Black education and culture:

And then usually it's some grandchild who finally realizes “Oh my God” and he'll snatch it back. For whatever reasons, grandchildren and grandparents always have gotten real tight and that's how spoken word has come back. Like right now you'll hear the hip hop songs and they'll have pieces that are taken from Curtis Mayfield and James Brown. So
you’ll hear some of the stuff in there and that’s how it comes around when young people get sick of all this self-hatred so they pick it up and turn it around.

Sister A’s choice of the linguistic device “snatch it back” helped her to signify a historic cycle that included a reclamation of expressive culture, history, and tradition. Sister A’s understanding of this cycle reflects the critical step of becoming empowered writers, readers, and speakers reclaiming the vitality of their grandparents’ artistry. Sister A saw young people’s hip hop music as an instance of such reclaiming, reflecting a deliberate refusal to accept negative imagery that might prevent young people of African descent from seeing themselves as potential participants in literary communities. NerCity and Scorpio Blues were those “grandchildren” who refused to be limited by self-hatred and stereotypes.

“Art Blakey’s Drumsticks”: Implications for Schools and Communities

Literacy research in out-of-school settings does not always translate neatly into implications for schools. With that said, I would argue that there are features of the intergenerational relationships found in these communities that can be useful as we think about how people of African descent, both young and old, view themselves as part of a literate culture. To foster such relationships, soldiers must continue to sustain learning communities such as those found in the Poetry on a Saturday Afternoon and the Speak Easy events. Additionally, school communities would do well to consult such community-based institutions to understand the features that cultivate relationships around reading, writing, and speaking.

Using Art Blakey’s drumsticks as a metaphor for restoring intergenerational relationships in urban communities, poet and activist Kamau Dáood (1997) proclaims his wish “to give Art Blakey’s drumsticks to a child without a father.” Dáood views Blakey’s elders as an important source of wisdom for the newer generations. Blakey and his Jazz Messengers, my metaphorical guides for this work, not only reinforce the reality underscored in this study that teaching and learning take place in multiple settings, but also demonstrate the key role that elders can play in alternative learning communities. Throughout the study, literacy teaching and learning were carried out and passed on in three primary ways:

- First, these soldiers were literacy activists and advocates who were passionate about writing for the kinds of personally meaningful purposes that can serve as important inspiration for writers. They also sincerely believed that the young people they encountered were responsible human beings capable of literacy learning on all levels. Elders said to young people “your music has a place here, your voice has a place here, and most importantly, your ideas have a place here.”
• Second, soldiers in these spaces were practitioners of the craft who not only taught but also composed original work, performed their work publicly, and published locally. Most importantly, these practitioners of the craft listened. They did not just tell younger writers what to do, but showed by example (Fisher 2007, 2005b).

• Third, these soldiers were historians of the word who took pride in knowing the legacy of poetry and music in their respective communities and beyond. This practice often meant seeking supplementary resources to those found in schools. It is also important to note that the elders in these communities at one point sought outlets for their work and ideas outside of school settings, as they wanted to reciprocate the mentoring that had been given to them.

Although there may not have been a “national agenda,” to borrow from Datcher (as indicated earlier, a participant in both sites), these communities have been adept at attracting the very groups of readers and writers that our public schools still struggle to reach. As Datcher asserted, the lack of a national agenda has not stopped the tireless efforts to organize at a grassroots level and to bring “beauty” to young people's lives through the art of writing:

So we need to introduce beauty into Black kids' lives. Beauty cannot be underestimated. Art cannot be underestimated as a change. Art changed my life. I'm working on myself now and I've seen art change the lives of my friends. You can reinvent yourself. That is an amazing power boost to you, and it will change how you deal with the world and people who lack confidence will draw confidence.

When younger poets and writers are developing their literate identities, it is important for them to see that they are linked to a complex yet accomplished history of reading, writing, and speaking. They do not have to accept the notion that they are an exception to the rule if they are successful in learning. Communities and schools have to be in conversation about how to provide such literacy opportunities and mentoring to newer generations.

NOTES
1. “Ciphers” is a term used in spoken word poetry circles to describe a gathering of poets and writers exchanging their work and building on a particular energy among those present.
2. All Rashad family names are pseudonyms.
3. See Lee (1992) for an examination of the philosophy and values systems of Independent Black Institutions (IBIs).
4. In “Open Mics and Open Minds,” NerCity appears as N’er City. Signifying on the concept of “inner city,” he has changed the spelling of his moniker to “NerCity.”
5. Dorsey’s Locker, a bar and soul food eatery, hosted a spoken-word poetry open mic every Tuesday in North Oakland. The owner of the Jahva House, D’Wayne Wiggins, and the Speak Easy organizer and host Greg Bridges, used the open mic at Dorsey’s Locker as a blueprint according to Bridges.

6. The quoted passages from NerCity’s and Scorpio Blues’s poems are excerpts. Both poets memorized these pieces and the versions here are transcribed from video footage; other versions of these pieces may exist.

7. Italics designate passages that were sung.

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL*

Questions for venue owners and/or event organizers:

1. Tell me about your personal background. Where and how did you grow up? Discuss your life experiences, including education, work, and community involvement.
2. Tell me about the background of your establishment (context for the opening, key people involved, etc.).
3. Discuss your vision for your establishment/event. What role do you see yourself and your establishment/event playing in the community?
4. How would you describe/characterize the participants?
5. What are the practices and/or rituals of this community?
6. What is the protocol for choosing featured guests? What are you looking to accomplish with particular poets and writers?
7. How would you define this community?

Questions for poets and writers:

1. Tell me about your personal background. Where and how did you grow up? Discuss your life experiences, including education, work, and community involvement.
2. When did you first start writing? What was the context? What role did schooling play, if any, in your literacy practices? Who and what has influenced your writing the most or how do you think you learned your craft?
3. Why do you participate in this particular community? What does it mean to you to share your work in a predominately Black venue?
4. How do you view your role in this community? What is your relationship to audience members? What are you expectations from audience members?
5. What are your future plans with respect to your writing?
6. Explicate one to two of your pieces that you’ve shared in this setting. Discuss.

Questions for audience participants:

1. Tell me about your personal background. Where and how did you grow up? Discuss your life experiences, including education, work, and community involvement.
2. Discuss [name of event]. What do you believe you gain by participating in this activity?
3. How would you characterize your role as a member of the audience at these events? Why do you attend this particular event? For families: Why do you bring your children to this event?
4. What kinds of reading/writing/performing do you engage in outside of this particular event?

*This protocol only served as a framework. Interviews were conducted in an oral history and sometimes open-ended format and therefore did not always follow the protocol.
APPENDIX B: NEGESTI'S POEM FOR HER STUDENTS

There Are Some Powerful Young Writers On This Planet Earth!

I have students with magic in their fingers. I mean they can take a pen, a pencil, a crayon, a stick in dirt...whatever and start pullin' words right out of the sky and puttin' 'em on paper.

I have students who can capture the world, on a scrap of paper. Any ole scrap of paper, it doesn't matter. They can write the world into creation on just a bit of paper.

I have students who make you see visions of their own choosing. They'll make you see the world thru their eyes, and make it beautiful.

My students can write a blue streak onto a grey sky and keep on writin' til the whole sky is blue!

My students can change the seasons in a pen stroke. Remember when it snowed in March in Seattle in 2002 when we all thought spring was finally here? I believe that was one of my students puttin' pen to paper.

My students don't just observe, they participate; they don't just write it, they speak it; don't just speak it, they live it; they don't just live it; they be it!

My students are livin', breathin', walkin', talkin', movin', groovin', forward thinkin', free speakin', fact findin', spell bindin', agitatin', instigatin', clarifyin' emphasizin', stimulatin', radiatin' young writers with dynamic minds and magic in their fingers.

Give 'em a pen. Watch 'em, watch 'em, watch 'em change the world!

2007 Promising Researcher Winners Named

Amanda Haertling Thein, University of Pittsburgh, “She's not a prostitute! Re-reading Working-Class Girls' Responses to Literature through an Examination of Interpretive Practices.” Tara Star Johnson, Purdue University, Indiana, “Crossing the Line: When Pedagogical Relationships Go Awry.” Steven Talmy, University of British Columbia, “The Cultural Productions of the ESL Student at Tradewinds High: Contingency, Multidirectionality, and Identity in L2 Socialization.” In commemoration of Bernard O'Donnell, the NCTE Standing Committee on Research sponsors the Promising Researcher Award.

The 2007 Promising Researcher Award Committee Members: Deborah Hicks, Chair, Colette Daiute, Joel Dworin, Mary Juzwik, and Yolanda Majors. Standing Committee on Research: Sarah Freedman, Chair.