"Rise Up!": Literacies, Lived Experiences, and Identities within an In-School "Other Space"

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In this article, I consider the literacy practices that emerged in an in-school elective course centered in the literacy tradition of African American women. Drawing from spatial perspectives (Leander & Sheehy, 2004), I explore what it means to consider this course an "Other space" (Foucault, 1986), as a space created without the constraints of a mandated curriculum or standardized test pressures and as a space informed by an understanding of the connections among literacies, lived experiences, and identities. Through the presentation and analysis of five vignettes, I consider how the students shaped the course to their own ends and pursued agentive literacy work resonant with the epistemologies in the literacy tradition of African American women. While I situate these contributions and literacy practices within Black feminist and postpositivist realist theories of identities, I contend their full measure cannot be understood without a look at the physical aspects of the space, the travel of texts into and out of it, and its relational and affective dimensions. I conclude with considerations for pursuing literacy pedagogies attentive to social identities and for creating "Other spaces" within a time of standardization and testing.

Throughout the 2002–2003 school year, I taught a poetry and photography elective course centered in the literacy and artistic traditions of African American women. The course, which the students named "Sistahs," was designed with and for young women attending an urban public charter high school. About mid-way through the academic year, one of the most prolific writers in the course, Maya,[1] informed us she was transferring to another school. Maya's leave-taking prompted an emotional response in the group, a group that had grown close through the writing and sharing of poetry and photographs as well as more recently through impassioned discussions of the mobilization of U.S. forces to Iraq. After the students composed and sang an impromptu song of goodbye to Maya, she told us, "It was really, really, really great working with y'all. Jasmyn, we've been in this together for a long time . . . I feel really good when we as young women could, like, come together and just write." Maya emailed me the following poem the day after she transferred, asking

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me to share it with the group to inspire them to keep writing and to keep making their views known about their opposition to the war:

Wake up! Get up rise up from your dark sleep
This world is about to crumble, it's about to fall
Come on sisters we can't sit still while our
Life is being fondled with, shake my brothers
We're losing you by the hundreds and thousands
And millions we need your manliness to
Rearrange the deteriorating remains that they left us
My sisters speak up! I can't hear you!
What? Say it louder; they muted you for centuries!
Come on speak up! We are not going to sit in the
Back ground while the sand in the hour glass that represents the
Meager lifespan they gifted us with slip away
Sisters, why are you trembling now release that cannon
The cannon that you feel in the pit of our belly, yesss
It's been there for too long release it
My brothers, stand up wait I can't see you I said stand up
And crush the barriers that corner you,
Stand up and stomp on the floating echoes that kill your dreams
And scatter your sources of education,
Ignite a flame on the black and white that has labeled you
Ignorant
My sisters, I am, I mean we are, I mean they are, I mean us are
I mean we are all in this fight together
My brothers let this be the push you need to redeem yourself,
To regain your strength, dignity and identity
Wake up!
Rise up and take your stance

Like the African American women writers we read in the course, Maya voices an urgent articulation of social oppression and a hopeful vision of social transformation. The particular urgency surrounding this poem was located not only in Maya's desire to say goodbye to the students, but also to inspire them to continue writing within and outside this school space.

Rather than considering literacy a "political act" (Willis & Harris, 2000) and situating the literacy work of urban adolescents in the context of cultural legacies of political resistance and educational access, discussions of their literacies are often located within discourses of crisis (Meacham, 2000) and risk (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). Meacham (2000) further argued that "dominant, narrow conceptions of literacy learning exclude social and cultural factors as outside the literacy learning experience" (p. 195). These conceptions rarely reflect the critical, political,

and hopeful images of literacy in adolescents' out-of-school lives and practices (Mahiri, 2004) or draw from the emerging body of work that explores the promise of student poetry, spoken word, and hip-hop within in-school spaces (e.g., Fisher, 2007; Hill, 2009; Kinloch, 2005; Morrell, 2007). At the same time, despite decades-long discussions of the promise of multicultural literature within the curriculum (Athaneses, 1998; Banks, 1995; Brooks, 2006; Rogers & Sotor, 1997), students of color consistently lack exposure to an in-depth study of this literature within schools (DeBlase, 2003; Tatum, 2006) and to pedagogies that would invite students to bring their own lived experiences to bear on their response to it (Hill, 2009).

My purpose in this article is to consider the literacy practices that emerged in an in-school elective course centered in the literacy tradition of African American women. I am particularly interested in what we can learn from the students' participation in, and shaping of, this course as evidenced in their responses to this literacy tradition and the writing and sharing of their own poetry. Drawing from spatial perspectives (Leander & Sheehy, 2004), I explore what it means to consider this course an "Other space" (Foucault, 1986), as a space created without the constraints of a mandated curriculum or standardized test pressures and as a space informed by an understanding of the connections among literacies, lived experiences, and identities. The research questions are as follows:

- What are the affordances of an "Other space" for the literacy work of young women of color?
- How did the young women take up opportunities to construct and experience an elective course centered in the literacy tradition of African American women?
- How did students bring their own lived experiences and social identities to the interpretation and writing of poetry within this space?

I begin by presenting a triadic conceptual framework that brings together theories of literacies, identities, and spaces. This framework informed the creation of the course and the pedagogy pursued within it as well as my analysis of the students' literacy work. After discussing research exploring the challenges faced by young women of color in English classrooms, I provide a description of the context of my course and my research methods. In doing so, I also consider how my identity as both a teacher and a white woman shaped the knowledge constructed in the research. Through the presentation and analysis of five vignettes, I then consider how the students shaped the course to their own ends and pursued literacy work resonant with the epistemologies in the literacy tradition of African American women. I conclude with considerations for pursuing pedagogies attentive to social identities and for creating "Other spaces" within a time of standardization and testing.

Conceptual Framework

African American Women's Literacy Traditions and Poetry

Richardson (2003) contended that African American literacy traditions "are dynamic and fluid cultural matrixes from which revolutionary life and culture sustaining ideas and practices can be fashioned" (p. 76). Unlike understandings of literacy as primarily a cognitive skill disconnected from the social context, Richardson identified the cultural origins and the liberatory orientations of literacies. Royster (2000) provided further insight into the socially transformative nature of the literacy practices of African American women in particular, naming the use of literacy as a form of empowerment to "begin making the world anew" (Royster, 2000, p. 234). Royster (2000) argued that African American women writers have historically demonstrated the "will and capacity to use literate resources in order to participate in public arenas, and also of the desire to generate, and not just participate in, sociopolitical action" (p. 24). By identifying the strategies of Black women to use literacies to "fulfill a quest for a better world" (p. 74) from social locations as mothers, teachers, and poets, Richardson (2003) also suggested how literacies emerge from and reflect lived experiences and embodied knowledge.

In centering the course primarily within the poetry of African American women, I was informed by these understandings of literacy as a sociopolitical and embodied practice. While there was a great diversity of subject matter and style within the poetry selected for the course, commonalities can be found in the poets' attention to the asserting of Black female subjectivity; to the merging of aesthetic and political aims; and to the valuing of African American expressive language practices. Mance (2001) argued that contemporary Black women poets "destroy old myths that refuse to acknowledge their existence and create new myths that, in rejecting discursive formulations that resist black women's subjectivity, write the black female subject into view" (p. 123). Mance (2007) and Tunc (2009) further emphasized the centrality of the body as a poetic site to claim subjectivity. Poetic inspiration also emerges from everyday life and from participation in collective struggle (hooks, 1996; Kinloch, 2006; Mance, 2007).

Postpositivist Realist Theory and Black Feminist Epistemology

Within the students' very naming of the course—Sistahs—gender and cultural identity are marked; the name and the culturally specific spelling signify not only a female space, but also a space reflective of a community made up primarily of women of color. Naming identity in this way is distinct from widespread aims within schools and the larger society to be "colorblind." Pollock (2004) contended that by silencing conversations about race, schools also aim to be "colormute." A postpositivist realist theory of identity provides analytical tools for expanding discursive possibilities related to identity (Campano, 2007; Mohanty, 1997; Moya, 2002; Moya & Hames-García, 2000). Postpositivist realist theory posits the

epistemic significance of lived experience and contends that theoretically mediated experience can serve as the basis for truth claims and for collective action. This theory addresses the limitations of essentialism attributed to some identity-based political and scholarly projects. Essentialism proceeds from a questionable theoretical premise in that it can suggest that individuals have a pure, inner, and uncorrupted "essence" that predetermines a limited and static set of behaviors and beliefs. In contrast, postpositivist realists posit that identities "refer outward . . . to the social world in which they emerge" (Moya, 2002, p. 13). Therefore, social categories such as race and gender shape one's social location and influence, but do not determine, one's identity. In this way, identities have "real" meaning in the world, an understanding that suggests why both inequitable structures *and* liberation struggles are often organized around identities.

Black feminist epistemology shares many of these understandings of the epistemic significance of lived experience and the tangible consequences of identities within systems of oppression. Black feminist epistemology, however, "specializes in formulating and rearticulating the distinctive, self-defined standpoint of African American women" (Collins, 1996, p. 225). In so doing, this theoretical perspective provides a more fully elaborated set of conceptual tools for locating the processes and contours of knowledge construction among African American women. Collins (1996) contended that for African American women "everyday acts of resistance" (p. 222) to racial, economic, and gender oppression and the shared development of strategies to overcome this oppression create the basis for Black feminist epistemology and activism. Dillard (2000), in her development of an "endarkened feminist epistemology," located the cultural and racial dimensions of her theory-making. She named her intention to "articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint" (p. 662). Both postpositivist realist theory and Black feminist epistemology contend that the articulation and theorization of marginalized viewpoints are crucial to developing more accurate and fuller accounts of the social world. In alignment with these perspectives, the course and the study recognized that social identities can manifest conditions of marginalization and oppression, while also having potential to serve as sites of inquiry, poetic inspiration, and shared meaning-making.

"Other Spaces" and "Radical Creative Space"

While theories related to literacies and identities profoundly shape this study, I found that an added perspective on space was necessary to illuminate more fully the relationships among literacies, lived experiences, and identities within this context and to consider how students took up opportunities to explore these relationships over time within the course. A spatial consideration is necessary because, as Foucault (1986) asserted, "[w]e do not live inside of a void . . . we live

inside a set of relations that delineate sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (p. 23). In this way, I consider the classroom in which I taught to be actively constructed by the discursive practices, texts, social relations, bodies, and processes within it. This space was therefore made and re-made over time with the introduction of new texts, the evolution of relationships, the development of rituals and routines, and the events of the broader context. As Soja (2004) wrote, "[s]patiality of human life [is] seen not just as built forms or materialized and mappable geographies, but also as active and formative processes developing over time" (p. ix).

There are compelling connections between a spatial perspective and the theories of literacies and identities that inform this study. These connections call attention to how literacies, identities, and spaces are in a mutually informing relationship to each other, especially when considering historical legacies of racial marginalization and collective efforts aimed at social change. Royster (2000), for example, argued that for African American women writers, the "ongoing task . . . has been to create a space where no space 'naturally' existed and to raise voices that those who were entitled to speak did not welcome and were not particularly compelled to acknowledge" (p. 233). Claiming the margin as a source of "radical openness," hooks (1990) argued for the purposeful creation of "radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world" (p. 153). Here, hooks infuses space with social, emotional, political, and artistic dimensions to be cultivated for healing and for change. These perspectives are resonant with Foucault's (1986) discussion of "heterotopias" or "Other spaces," in which he explores the emergence of spaces that acknowledge and affirm difference in ways that also comment upon and contest dominant or official spaces. I consider the course I explore here as sharing some features of an "Other space," given its genesis as a response to students who were displeased with limited creative writing opportunities in the school, given its status as an elective outside of the official school curriculum, and given its grounding in a literacy tradition that expressed explicit ideological understandings of literacy as a sociopolitical and embodied practice.

Related Studies: Young Women of Color Negotiating Texts and Identities in English Classrooms

Consideration of the experiences of young women of color within English classes reveals they can face an array of unique and complex identity negotiations as they read and respond to literary texts. DeBlase's (2003) study of how culturally and ethnically diverse 8th grade girls negotiated literary texts in their English classroom found that both the text selection and the disposition of the teacher curtailed deeper engagement with literature for academic engagement, personal understanding, and social awareness. Texts chosen were characterized by images of subservient, silent

women and lacked diversity in terms of race, class, and ideology. Furthermore, the teacher's pedagogy proceeded almost exclusively from a "text-centered and teacher-based" perspective (p. 296) which focused on the identification of "universal themes," literary conventions, and "singular thematic" interpretations. The girls' responses to the literature thus ranged from skeptical to silent, leaving them little opportunity to explore how their own life experiences shaped their responses to the texts or to share those interpretations with the broader classroom community.

Sutherland (2005) explored the experiences of six African American young women reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* within a high school English class informed by a more progressive pedagogy than in the study by DeBlase. The conversations most documented in the article come not from the class itself, however, but from individual interviews and focus group conversations facilitated by the researcher. In these discussions, the students engaged in searching and critical reflections on the book, commenting on such issues as Eurocentric standards of beauty and the language choices made by the characters. In considering the implications of the study, Sutherland questioned the potential for deeper engagement with these complex issues of racial identity, language, and representation within a whole class context given the generally culturally conservative orientations of schooling and given the capacities and willingness of teachers to facilitate these kinds of conversations within the heterogeneous settings of typical English classrooms.

Additional studies demonstrate these difficulties while also highlighting the efforts of young women of color to carve out spaces for critical engagement with literature within their English classes. Carter (2006, 2007) studied the experiences of two African American young women in an Advanced Placement course in British Literature. Carter documented how the students used tactics of silence and nonverbal communication with each other to resist their marginalization in the class and the unquestioned hegemony of whiteness within the literature they were reading. Carter (2006) argued that the course did "not affirm their cultural and social knowledge and their teacher at times view[ed] them as failing, silent, and/or not participating" (p. 356). While the students worked in quite sophisticated ways on their own to create a "culturally affirming space within the classroom" (p. 357), Carter (2006) noted the particularly unjust nature of their positioning within the class, writing, "[o]thers did not need to do so, nor were their social, racial, and gender identities threatened" (p. 357). Unlike the classroom in Carter's study, the pedagogy informing the classroom in a study by Beach, Thein, and Parks (2008) was specifically designed to evoke critical conversations around race, class, and gender in literature study. However, due to the dominant roles of white students of high social status, the two young women of color in the class "did not find easy spaces to construct agency" (p. 195) and their classroom contributions were understood as either "defensive" or "passive," despite their critical engagement with the novels expressed in journal entries and in small groups.

It is noteworthy that despite, or perhaps because of, limited opportunities for engagements with literature that would take into account students' lived experiences and social identities in traditional English classrooms, recent studies of writing have documented in-school spaces where poetry is providing students of color outlets for self-expression and social analysis. In her study of spoken word within an extracurricular high school class, Fisher (2007) wrote that for the students, "building literate identities began with crafting stories or 'truths' using their own sense of style and rhythm" (p. 92). Jocson (2005) explored how June Jordan's Poetry for the People curriculum encouraged students to see connections among poetry, identity, and empowerment. McCormick's (2004) research within a comprehensive New York City high school documented the restorative power of poetry writing within schools marked by institutional practices of silencing and surveillance, arguing that for urban girls, "poetry is a sanctuary within, a place to play out conflict and imagine multiple possibilities for identity" (p. 194). Unlike many studies of the experiences of young people in English classes, these studies are suggestive of the potential for students to create texts and communities where the social, political, and critical dimensions of the written and spoken word are made manifest. My study takes inspiration from these efforts and focuses on how young women took up opportunities to engage with the literacy tradition of African American women on their own terms.

Methods

Context, Pedagogy, and Participants

The course I explore in this paper took place over the span of three trimesters in one academic year. The course began after two students, Maya and Jasmyn, approached school administrators to request more gender-specific programming and more opportunities to pursue their poetry writing within school. Although I was not an existing member of the teaching staff, one of the administrators knew of my work with adolescent girls and asked me first to organize an after-school group with interested students and later to teach an in-school elective course during the following school year. I had freedom to design and enact the course in ways fitting with my objectives and the students' interests. In the first trimester the course was offered as an elective for a grade and in the second and third it was offered as a non-graded credit-bearing "club" within the last period of the school day. Although a "club," I continued to construct the course as an elective and the amount of reading and writing pursued in the course increased over the first trimester.

I taught a total of 72 classes across the three trimesters. Classes were held for 75 minutes. A total of 16 young women participated in the course over the three trimesters it was offered, some for only one trimester and others for two. One student participated for all three trimesters. The course had an average of 10 students ranging from 14–16 years old, per class. The majority of the students

identified as African American. Three students identified respectively as Puerto Rican, multi-racial, and Black/Grenadian. One white student participated in two classes before withdrawing for academic reasons.

Given the students' stated desires for a writing community, we read a variety of texts chosen to inspire and support the students' own creative work. I organized the course around both implicit and explicit inquiry questions about the role of identity in artistic creation, literary expression, and knowledge construction. In the course description given to the students, I wrote:

> We will read about, discuss, and write about the complexities and possibilities of being young women. We will engage with women of color who write, photograph, sing, and work for social justice through artistic expression. Hopefully, their work will inspire our own. We will consider their perspectives on gender, race, and sexuality. We will also consider how our work together can raise consciousness and create change.

While the students and I considered and analyzed the artistic and literary work of African American women poets, songwriters, essayists, and photographers, the course also provided numerous opportunities for the students to pursue their own writing and photography. In the second trimester, the one I focus on in this article, these inquiries were organized around two poetry and photography projects with the themes "Where I'm From" and "Self-Portraits." In nearly every class we read poems by women of color, including, among others, Ruth Forman, Sonia Sanchez, Maya Angelou, and June Jordan. The poems were used to frame discussion and to inspire the students' own writing. Discussion about the poems often revolved around open-ended questions like: What stood out to you? What inspires this writer? What inspires me? What kind of truth does she tell? What kind of truth do I want to tell? What kind of change is she seeking? What kind of change am I seeking? While poetry was the dominant genre, we also read short stories, song lyrics, and essays by women of color. Student writing also became key texts.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is informed by practitioner inquiry and feminist research methodology. Practitioner inquiry supports the development of a research endeavor wherein the teacher researcher has a unique relationship to, and plays a fundamental role in, the creation of knowledge within the study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). A significant feature of this methodology is that it also positions students as creators of knowledge with agency to inform and change the work in the classroom and the research (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992). Throughout the study, I drew upon literature theorizing the possibilities and complexities of imbuing practitioner inquiry with a social justice framework (Griffiths, 1998; Noffke, 1999) and upon the writings of researchers who orient their work in this way (e.g., Blackburn, 2002; Campano, 2007; Staples, 2008; Vasudevan, 2008).

Like practitioner inquiry, feminist research methodology places high value on creating contexts for mutual knowledge generation, reciprocity, and "praxis-oriented" (Lather, 1991) inquiries. In this study, I followed Fine (1992), Mirza (1995), and Visweswaran (1994) in believing that feminist research places the experiences of girls and women at the center of the inquiry, creates contexts for reflection on inequities, and leads to action and change. Feminist researchers, as Richardson (1997) contended, are also concerned with a range of issues pertaining to the processes and ramifications of the research endeavor, including "authority, authorship, subjectivity, power, ethics, representation" (p. 2). Although feminist researchers prize "identification, trust, empathy, and nonexploitative relationships" (Young, 2000, p. 630), there is considerable debate about the true possibilities of realizing these ideals, especially within cross-cultural research, a topic I explore in my discussion of the analytical tools utilized in the study.

Sources of Data and Procedures

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) defined teacher research as "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (p. 7). Working from this understanding meant that I recognized that my "research process is embedded in practice" (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992, p. 448). I developed structured avenues for documentation and reflection on my practice through record-keeping, field notes, and memos. I jotted notes during each class and then crafted those notes into descriptive accounts after each class. In these field notes, I also reflected on questions that emerged for me as a teacher and a researcher. Every two weeks, I wrote analytic memos (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003) to locate emerging themes. I also collected student writing and photographs. In the second trimester, I began audiotaping and transcribing selected classes, for a total of 20 classes. I gathered student insights on the course by facilitating reflection sessions in each trimester that included both writing and recorded discussions. I also conducted individual interviews with students. In these interviews I asked questions about the students' literacy practices in and out-of-school, their experience in the course, and their poems and photographs. Finally, I documented our processes of assembling exhibitions, presentations, and publications.

Analysis

Analysis was ongoing, iterative, and recursive throughout the study. Mid-way through the second trimester, the students and I co-constructed a presentation for an educational research conference. Together, we reviewed the poems and photographs produced in the classes to identify the themes we wished to explore in the presentation, which we named as "sisterhood," "where I'm from," "self-portraits," and "social change." The insights that emerged from these discussions and the data highlighted became the foundation for my continuing analysis. After the course ended, I assembled binders for each trimester containing my field notes, student

writing and photography, lesson plans, photocopies of poetry and other documents used in each class, interview transcripts, class transcripts, and documents collected from the school. While referring back to the analytic memos I wrote during data collection and referring back to the themes identified during the planning for presentations with the students, I began to make initial codes such as, "responding to each other's writing," "lived experiences," "autobiography," "race," "solidarity," "silences," "teaching struggles." I then used the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to look across the codes. In doing so, it became apparent how integral writing and sharing writing were to this space. Once the codes were further refined in respect to writing, I identified a strong resonance between the students' writing and the epistemologies embedded in the texts of the African American women we read in the course. With further data analysis, it became clear that it was more than the texts we read in the course that supported the creation of student poetry reflective of the literacy tradition we were immersed in; rather, the students themselves made significant and agentive gestures that shaped how knowledge was constructed in the space. These themes therefore pointed to the need for a spatial consideration. As a result, I turned to discussions of "other spaces" (Foucault, 1986; Soja, 1996) and African American women's perspectives on space (hooks, 1990; Royster, 2000) to consider how texts and identities shaped and were shaped by this space.

Location of the Researcher

Lytle (2000) argued, "the positioning or location of teachers as researchers interrupts the easy distinctions often made between 'insider' and 'outsider' and destabilizes the boundaries of research and practice—creating a space where radical realignment and redefinition may be possible" (p. 699). Teacher research has long been considered valuable for teachers to enhance their own practice, but questions persist related to its relevance to the academic community (Fenstermacher, 1994; Huberman, 1996). Fecho (2001), however, considers teacher research a "genre of academic research" (p. 17) and others have noted its capacity to provide unique insights into urban education and social justice (Fecho & Allen, 2003; Hatch et al., 2005). Morrell (2006) contended the value of "practitioner action research" rests in ". . . its explicit focus on culture and power and its attention to the role of 'context,' its focus on curriculum and pedagogy, and its rich, thick descriptions of classroom life from the perspective of insiders" (p. 12).

As an "insider" by virtue of my role as a teacher within the classroom, I am aware that insights emerged that may not have otherwise, given my direct role in constructing this context over an academic year. It is also the case, however, that as much as this role opened up possibilities, it also shut down other perspectives, or as Fecho (2001) argued, the study "both benefits from and is constrained by that emic view" (p. 17). Furthermore, my "insider" perspective is made more compli-

cated by my identity as a cultural "outsider" as a white woman. By virtue of this identity, I did not share the students' experiences of race and racism or have the same kinds of experiential connections to the literature we were reading. I therefore drew on the principles of cross-cultural feminist research (Young, 2000) to develop research approaches to take into account issues of difference and imbalances of power. My approaches included creating opportunities for students to pursue their own self-representations in the course and the research; engaging in a process of self-reflexivity; pursuing collaborative inquiries with the students in the teaching, research, and presentation of the data; and employing culturally attuned analytical lenses when analyzing the data (for further discussion see Wissman, 2008).

My own experiential and intellectual history informed who I was and what I brought to this context: a history of working with urban girls in out-of-school contexts and my own coming-of-age within third-wave feminism in which unitary understandings of "woman" are questioned and attention is paid to "hybrids, affinities, coalitions, contradictions, and localized politics" within feminist work (Arneil, 1999, p. 212). My history also included academic study of women writers in comparative literature as well as teaching and living within multi-racial communities. From my experiences in feminist research projects, I understood research as an "intentional gesture, a re-bodied approach to working with people, particularly women, on projects which matter to them locally and globally" (Neilsen, 1998, p. 236). While these experiences and perspectives informed my location, they do not compensate for the limitations, biases, and privileges of my identity as a white woman within this teaching and research context. At the same time that I had both "insider" and "outsider" perspectives in the setting, I am also "a straddler in the practitioner and academic research communities" (Fecho, 2003, p. 287). In these ways, the sense I make here, the claims I derive, are done so in this complicated mix of holding many identities and experiences in tension, reconciling some, not reconciling others.

I locate the validity of the study within conditions put forward by the research traditions within which I am working. Fecho (2001) noted that validity in teacher research can be "derived from the immediacy, contextuality, and historical framework of the study" (p. 18) as well as participation within teacher researcher communities. I participated in such a group prior to, during, and after the study. In terms of feminist methodology, I work from Lather's (1986) notion of catalytic validity, namely, "the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it" (p. 272).

Findings

Drawing from the presentation and analysis of five vignettes (Fecho, 2001; Kinloch, 2005), I explore how the students took up opportunities to construct an elective

course centered in the literacy tradition of African American women.[2] The five vignettes were chosen after determining they reflected the most influential, determinative, and agentive student contributions to shaping this in-school space. In this way, I show how the students extended the broader inquiries detailed in the course description above by pursuing literacy work and crafting the space to meet their own purposes. While I situate these contributions and literacy practices within the epistemologies of this literacy tradition and within Black feminist and postpositivist realist theories of identities, I contend their full measure cannot be understood without a look at the physical aspects of the space, the travel of texts into and out of it, and its relational and affective dimensions. I present the vignettes in chronological order so as to consider the development of practices, beliefs, and understandings in the course over time.

Vignette 1. "I Want to Write": Identity, Writing, and School Space

In this vignette I explore how, on the very first day of the second trimester, our context was shaped by a student-initiated discussion of race, gender, and writing. I also consider how a foundation was laid to consider literacy as an embodied and critical practice within an in-school space. To start the class, I asked the students to help me arrange the small work tables in the classroom into one large table we could all sit around, introduced myself and the course, and passed around the publications produced in the first trimester. I then asked for everyone to introduce themselves and to state their reasons for electing to take the course. As soon as Maya named her purposes for re-enrolling in the course, the air in the room became very charged. From my field notes:

> Maya says she signed up for the class again because she loves to write poetry and because this is one of the few places in the school where she can express herself as a Black woman. Her comments immediately prompt a flurry of conversation. The students first look at me for my reaction and then quickly turn to Maria. Maria starts to talk, but is drowned out by Janelle who is saying "Asian women, White women, Black women" and suggesting that all women have something they need to say and a place to say it in. I ask Janelle to hold on just a bit so we can hear what Maria is saying. In a quiet voice that grows louder as she speaks, Maria says that even though she's Puerto Rican she identifies as a Black Puerto Rican, with Black culture, and that many of her friends are Black. She puts her arm around Lynn who is sitting next to her and who is African American and says, "She's my best friend." Jasmyn calls it a "Kodak moment."
>
> Maria then looks at me, her eyes filled with emotion, and says talking about this is kind of embarrassing and that she's turning red. I tell her I understand what she's saying and thank her for what she's shared. We return to Janelle's point about all women needing a place to express themselves regardless of race. Maya says she didn't mean to offend anyone, looking toward Maria, but that she thinks it is important for "women of color" to have places to express themselves and to write about their lives.

Collins (2000) argued that Black women's experiences, especially those of marginalization, provide a "distinctive angle of vision" (p. 12), an understanding that Maya echoes in her claim that she felt this course gave her an opportunity not only to write, but to write as a Black woman. Maya's assertions reflected a sense that identities have "real" consequences and "epistemic significance" (Moya, 2002) in the world and in literacy practices. Maya's words, spoken with a sense of directness and urgency, brought into the course an explicit discourse of race that took some students in this multi-racial in-school context off-guard. Janelle was most affected by this intrusion into the "colormute" (Pollock, 2004) nature of much of the talk and curriculum within schools and asserted reservations at the naming of racial categories in this way. The effect of Maya's comments at first seemed to be magnified because of the physical positioning of us around a common table where we were compelled to look into each other's eyes and that positioned us closer to each other. Maya's naming of race led Maria to complicate racial categories in a sensitive and emotional reflection on her own Latina identity in relationship to the Black community, while also later opening up a conversation where I assured students that I did not find it "racist" for them to name race in this direct way. In addition to bringing a discourse of race into the space, Maya also brought a critique of the structural and spatial arrangements of schooling, noting the lack of similar venues within the school and her own sense of the need for them. Spatially, she demarcated the Sistahs class as one both within and against the larger school and one that could be open to her experience as a Black woman.

Seeking to extend the conversation related to identity and writing and to gather perspectives from all students on their hopes for the course, I invited the students to read Margaret Walker's (1997) poem "I Want to Write." Published when she was nineteen, Walker's poem describes her desire to write "the songs of my people." Reprising the line "I want to write" throughout the poem, Walker uses this device of anaphora to provide texture to her desire for writing, most notably her desire to use her talents to "frame their dreams into words; their souls into notes." After we discussed the images and lines in Walker's poem that stood out to us, I asked the students to write their own "I Want to Write" poems expressing their desires for writing in the course. Maya wrote and shared this poem with the class that day:

I want to write
I want to write about the mentally oppressed
and we females who are distressed
I want to write about discrimination
that is blinding our generation, causing us the
youth of tomorrow's future to fall in the line
of demoralizing the we's and us, and the they's and yours
I want to write about the givers of
life, showing the world their strife, to come up

from under dominant figure
I want to write about our liberation
and will, to win this rat race
I want to write
I want to write about life.

Maya explores the inspiration and directionality of her writing, locating both within a social context of struggle, discrimination, and liberation. Although she uses the personal pronoun "I" throughout, she also writes in the collective of "we females," "our generation," and "our liberation." Here, her writing is concerned with not only her own individual experience or emotions, but is also directed outward to inform and inspire others. In analyzing June Jordan's writing, teaching, and activism, Alexander (2007) contended that the "'we' is the site" (p. 120) of her poetic work. In a similar way, in a poem written swiftly and with Walker as inspiration, Maya's poem shares a resonance with African American women's poetry that "pivot[s] on notions of belief, identity, and social responsibility" (Royster, 2000, p. 107). In both her clear articulation of her desire for a school space to express herself as a Black woman within a community of young women writers and in her clear embrace of the sociopolitical nature of writing in her poem, Maya suggested that lived experiences and identities can serve as generative sites of inquiry and writing within a school space.

Vignette 2. "What Inspired You to Write That?": Examining Poetic Inspiration and Purpose

In this vignette I explore how the agentive literacy acts of students shaped inquiries into the inspiration and purposes of writing, deepening course explorations of the connections among identity, experience, and literacy. Two weeks after our first class, I brought in the written words and video presence of Paule Marshall. I wanted to examine with the students Marshall's discussion of how various women in her life—her mother, aunts, and neighbors—inspired her to become a poet. Referring to these women as "poets in the kitchen" Marshall (1993) explored how their everyday speech was alive with poetry and how she continues to draw inspiration from them in her own writing. Before beginning class, however, I asked if anyone wanted to share writing. Maya volunteered. This moment was significant because it was the first time in the trimester when a student volunteered to read a poem composed outside of school. Maya's poem itself was also particularly salient because it prompted an exploration of the sources of poetic inspiration. In this case, it was Maya who framed our engagement with this important feature of the literacy tradition of African American women rather than a text brought in by me doing so.

Maya prefaced her poem by simply saying "it's about domestic violence" and read:

When they made you, they should have labeled you hazardous,
Cause when I first laid eyes on you, I knew that you were dangerous
It started out sweet, but ten months later you punched out my teeth
You pounded on me like I was an old piece of board that could no longer
afford to withstand the cold.
You made me bleed and plead when you dragged me by the hair
Causing my skin to tear, looking me in the eyes and
Saying I love you dear but I really don't care!
And every time I packed my bags to leave you would get down
On your knees, begging me "baby please don't leave" and like a fool
I would let you use me like a tool blinded by the roses, instant messages,
gifts, and forget me notes
But ten months later, you blacked my eye,
Tore up my clothes, and pushed me out in the cold, you aborted our baby
When you kicked me in the belly accusing me,
Looking at your best friend Jerry
You broke my jaw; you created a war between.
What was once a happy marriage, you made me feel like dirt cause
I couldn't hide the hurt
I gave you every thing I'd ever owned, mind, body, and soul
Was yours and yours alone you converted our love into a series of horror
Flicks as you made my lips bigger and bigger when you were
Controlled by your liquor
Whenever you would enter a room you would make me
Quiver with the fear of becoming submissive to the abusive,
Every time my mother would discover a plan for me to recover from the
Battering lover you suddenly convert to Saint John the saved sinner
Taking me to an expensive dinner, placing a new rock on my
Finger making my thoughts linger as you make
Sweet, sweet love to my body making me scream and,
Dream of our new future together, and like
Potter we would get back together, but ten months later
You cracked my skull and knocked some sense into me
And I decided that I couldn't take it any longer one of us was gonna
Have to meet the savior and answer to the Lord
At heaven's door
So I picked up a knife and ended my strife of being his wife
But ten months later
I was charged for murder
Accused of the
Woman who killed her abusive
Lover

In the quiet moments that followed the reading, Renee asked Maya, "What inspired you to write that?" From my field notes:

Maya says that the poem started when she was on the bus and she saw a cigarette pack that said smoking is hazardous to your health. This made her think about an older woman she knew. She then describes how a man used to "beat on" this woman. He always apologized and the woman always took him back. Maya says she just had to write down the words and images that were coming to her.

The exchange between Renee and Maya was a uniquely pedagogical one in that it created a context for examining the sources of poetic inspiration. A poem, Maya suggested, can be created in the midst of the most ordinary of human endeavors (riding a bus) and inspired from the most prosaic of language practices (a warning on a pack of cigarettes). Just as Maya's poem suggests poetry can emerge anywhere and from the language that surrounds us, she also suggests poets themselves can emerge anywhere—in school, on the bus, or, as Marshall would argue, "in the kitchen." Maya's poem also showed how poets can be political and refuse to participate in the dominant language and social practices of silencing and obfuscation; rather, poets can name and intervene in experiences often repressed or denied. Maya's poem and her discussion of its inspiration resonate, in many ways, with June Jordan's (1995) assertion that "poetry means taking control of the language of your life" (p. 3) and with the work of many African American women writers like Lucille Clifton, Alice Walker, and Ntozake Shange who name and contest sexual exploitation and gender violence within their work.

To Jasmyn, Maya's poem was instructive in that it expanded her own sense of the potential topics and forms of poetry. In an interview with me, Jasmyn commented on what she had taken from Maya's poetry across the two trimesters that they had been in the class together:

JASMYN: [Maya's] poems are really unique and they're a lot different than what I would write. She writes mostly about culture. And not so much . . . and she can like . . . I don't know how . . . it's weird. She can put poetry through someone else's eyes or something. I like how she writes.

KELLY: And, how do you think it's different from what you write?

JASMYN: Because I basically put like what I'm feeling, what I'm thinking, or what I see. And like the poem she read yesterday, "Ten Months Later," that was kind of crazy, but it was like, it was still like, you know, people don't really think about women going through that and writing a poem about it.

Maya's poem and the discussion of it made manifest an epistemology of the social, critical, and political nature of literacy resonant with the literacy tradition of African American women. Spatially, Renee opened the course as one where students themselves led discussions and guided our inquiries and Maya also suggested that poetry written outside of school can find a place to be shared in school. Maya's text physically traveled into school and her reading of it profoundly shaped this

in-school context as one where students' own experiences and knowledge were not only centered, but also pedagogical.

Vignette 3. "Damn, I Look Good": Pursuing Self-Definition in a Community

In this vignette, I consider how one student's poem inspired students to write their own poems that reflected a central tenet of Black feminist epistemology and a central theme in African American women's poetry: self-definition. After Maya's sharing of "Ten Months Later," student poetry became increasingly prominent and defining of the space, contributing to the development of an in-school space where students listened to and responded to each other's writing on a regular basis. Nearly every class began with at least one student reading a poem to the group. Two weeks after Maya shared "Ten Months Later," Lynn asked to share a poem with us entitled "Damn, I Look Good." Lynn was inspired to write her poem after seeing a poem of the same title within a book of poems and photographs (Franco, 2001) that I had shared with the class a week earlier in order to brainstorm ideas for the students' self-portrait project. Known for her reserved demeanor and quiet presence, Lynn creates an ethos in her poem that took many of us by surprise, reading:

Damn, I Look Good
Moving those big ass hips while I walk down the street
Men stirring while girls hating on me
Take your man in a blink of an eye
Never mind, don't want him, cause I'm too damn fine
Hair flowing, shoulders back
Big ass booty shaking from right to left
Talk that talk baby, make that money lady
Miss Diva coming through
Don't try to stop me now
Doing everything I please just to have you wishing you looked as good as me
Looking in the mirror and in a sweet sexy voice,
Just to repeat for the third time damn I look good.
Don't need those short shorts and tight ass jeans
I could wear five layers of clothes
And still make a man fall to his knees
From head to toe this is all of me, my unique personality to my inner beauty
Not bragging but speaking the truth
You can't help but wanting to look as good as I do.
Cause damn I look good
I approach you with the pep in my step, the grace of my smile, the flicker of my eyes
Will suddenly make anything mine.
With the roll of my tongue, long legs doing everything in just the right way
A flirt in a skirt, can't help but obsess over my cuteness
Cause damn I look good.

The students responded to Lynn's evocative language with a spontaneous burst of clapping, laughing, and praise—and immediate requests for her to read the poem again and to make photocopies for the class. Maya and Jasmyn, who had been in the course with Lynn the previous trimester, responded:

JASMYN: I was waiting and I was like, this is Lynn?

MAYA: Right. Whoa. Lynn. Wow. Wow.

JASMYN: She's like . . .

MAYA: I've been waiting for something like this for, like –

JASMYN: From her, right?

MAYA: Go, Lynn.

Although the voice in her poem is uniquely Lynn's, the poem shares a resonance with the voice and rhythms of Angelou's (1978) "Phenomenal Woman," a poem we had read three weeks earlier. Lynn repeats the assertion "Damn, I look good" throughout the poem in ways reminiscent of Angelou's repetition of "phenomenal woman" in hers. Lynn's line, "I approach you with the pep in my step, the grace of my smile, the flicker of my eyes" resonates with the word choices and rhythms in Angelou's poem. Lynn's poem also reflects Angelou's embrace of her sensuality and physicality. Lynn makes this poem her own, however, by claiming her own identity as a young woman living in and traveling through a contemporary urban city. Recounting her journey as "Miss Diva coming through," Lynn claims her abilities to thrive here due to her physical beauty, stylish clothing, and confidence. Yet, like Angelou, Lynn claims her own "inner beauty" and "unique personality" as the true sources of her winning ways.

Lynn's poem inspired students to write what they called their own "Damn, I Look Good" poems. The students' interest in writing these poems was exceptional in large part due, I believe, to their eagerness to claim an opportunity to write with the affirmative, almost audacious, sense of ethos required for writing a poem with a title like this. Royster (2000) noted that African American women can come to the writing task with "a situated ethos more often than not deeply compromised" (p. 65) by the social milieu. Richardson (2003) argued that Black women writers therefore have consistently used "language and literacy practices to resist White supremacist and economically motivated stereotypes conveying subhuman or immoral images" (p. 74). Collins (2000) argued that self-definition is thus a key component of Black feminist epistemology. Noticeable in Lynn's poem, though, too, is the sense of playfulness and creativity that can accompany this project of self-definition. In Lynn's poem, in the students' jubilant response to it, and in the student poems that later emerged, there was a clear sense of a "celebration of visibility, empowerment, and the return to voice" (Mance, 2001, p. 136).

The "Damn, I Look Good" poems written by Lynn and other students generated an ethos particular to this in-school "Other space" because of the unique nature

of writing poems where they wrote of the body and with language not typically considered "appropriate" for school. While Lynn's poem reflects a clear grasp of the sociopolitical nature of literacy, the influence of a pivotal figure in the literacy tradition of African American women, and an impressive use of aesthetic devices to further her rhetorical intentions, Lynn's poem struck many of us as remarkable because it reflected an understanding of literacy as an embodied practice and as a practice that was shaped in a community of other young women writers who "were waiting for" this voice to emerge.

Vignette 4. "What's the Point of This Poem?": Reading Counter-Hegemonic Texts

The continuing writing and sharing of the "Damn, I Look Good" poems complemented broader course inquiries into how women poets and photographers have used the arts and poetry to pursue autobiographical representation and how these efforts could inform the students' own creative work. In this vignette, I explore how students played agentive roles in continuing to construct knowledge together about issues related to self-definition and representation. In a prior class devoted to planning for the students' photographic self-portraits, we engaged in a discussion of how to represent identities, especially in ways that could reflect how the students' poetry was beginning to problematize the stereotypical and sensationalized images of women in popular media. To extend this conversation, I brought in a poem by Ruth Forman (1997) entitled "Even if I Was Cleopatra Jones" with the intention to explore further how women are positioned within dominant discourses and to invite students to talk back to those discourses through their own photographic self-portraits and metaphorical poetry. Our engagement with the poem points to the larger struggles and possibilities of constructing pedagogies exploring how "identities are negotiated among conflicting and multiple discourses and how power is constituted and claimed rhetorically" (Hesford, 1999, p. 35). Most pointedly, however, the conversation reveals students' desires to engage with and pursue these conversations on their own terms.

Forman's poem evokes the popular persona from the 1973 film *Cleopatra Jones*, a "Blaxploitation" film that many argue encapsulates the sexual objectification and exploitation of Black women in this film genre (e.g., Royster, 2003). Although I sensed Cleopatra Jones might not be known to the students in the class given the time period of the movie, I chose the poem because Forman names her only in the first stanza as a starting off point to reflect on and challenge representations of Black women. Forman begins the poem by stating, "Even if I was Cleopatra Jones/wild cane and sugar in the raw" and, after more description, completes her thought, stating, "i would not be the one." She then moves into a series of lines that are rich with figurative language, each starting with "i would not be," writing, for example, "i would not be the Nile at the end of your long long day/i would not

be your Ebony queen in this misplaced land." Later, she continues to suggest her resistance to more contemporary images of women's sexuality, contending, "i would not be those rose hips on the fly girl round the way straight up/. . . i would not be your milk or honey although I do come close." Forman concludes the poem with these two lines, with an additional line break in between for emphasis:

> i would not be any of these things. ever.
>
> just the source of some damn good imagination.

Forman's purpose in the poem, as I saw it and as I wished to explore, was to "bend and taunt the conventions of the mainstream" (Mance, 2001, p. 135) in order to expose the ideologies that inform these images and to use the power of poetry to claim new possibilities for the assertion of subjectivity.[3] Given our photographic inquiries and the students' work in the "Damn, I Look Good" poems, I developed specific plans to frame our engagement with Forman's poem with inquiries into her rhetorical strategies of asserting subjectivity. Time limitations that day, however, restricted my pedagogical plans, cutting short time both to introduce and to discuss the poem. After we completed a choral reading of the poem and had a brief discussion about it, I attempted to wrap up the conversation so that the students could write in response in the remaining moments of class. LaToya, however, opened up further conversation about the poem with a very straightforward question:

LaToya: What's the point of this poem?

Maya: She would not be, like, she would not be his . . .

Jasmyn: And I know how that feels sometimes, so I'm just gonna write on how I'm feeling.

Janelle: What you see?

Jasmyn: She feels as though she want him, but she can't have him. That's what I see.

Janelle: What you see, Maya?

Maya: What do I say about it?

Janelle: No, what do you *see*?

Maya: Oh, what do I see? I see a strong black sistah refusing to fall under the dominant male figure.

Janelle: Like, she don't want him?

Maya: No, it's not that she don't want him. She's trying to be like, "Even though, you know, I feel you, I won't lower my standards for you. You're going to accept me for what *I* am."

Jasmyn: Ooh! I didn't get that.

Janelle: Yeah? Right, I see it.

Renee: Right, right.

Jasmyn: I thought she was saying that she want him, but she can't have him.

Maya: No. [laughs]

Jasmyn: That's what I thought. Because she say "I would not be the Nile at the end of your long long day." Like you, you know, when you want to go home and go home to your dude, but –

LaToya: Miss, Miss Kelly, what you think? What was the poem about? To you?

Kelly: Me? I think there's all kinds of ways to interpret it, but I think she's saying, um, she's going to retain who she is, everything about herself, not just her sexuality, and she's not going to change it for any man.

Maya: I ain't gonna change it for nobody!

Kelly: And I think it's also that she refuses to be perceived only as a sexual person—

Maya: Right.

Kelly: — that there's more to her than just being in relationship to a man.

Jasmyn: Oh, I see! I see. I see it now.

Guided by the persistent questions of LaToya and Janelle, we worked through a range of sometimes conflicting interpretations of Forman's poem. I find it very intriguing that Jasmyn, who often used figurative and metaphorical language in her own poetry, initially read the poem in the literal way that she did. As she noted, "I thought she was saying that she want him, but she can't have him." By not initially grasping the rhetorical intent with which Forman was naming these images in order to reshape them toward her own purposes, Jasmyn at first reads the woman in Forman's poem as a woman full of longing instead of a woman full of agency, independence, and self-awareness. Maya's interpretation of the poem—"I see a strong black sistah refusing to fall under the dominant male figure"—emerged concisely and powerfully in the conversation and inspired Jasmyn to go back to the poem to share a line from it to support her initial interpretation. Within this conversational turn, Jasmyn also hinted at her own desire for someone to return home to at the end of her own "long long day." Still dissatisfied with the interpretations offered, LaToya continued to inquire into the poem's meaning and created further opportunities for both Maya and me to locate our understanding of Forman's poem in her resistance to dominant constructions of women as primarily sexual beings, only then leading Jasmyn to exclaim excitedly, "Oh, I see! I see. I see it now." This conversation suggested the collaborative nature of meaning-making within this space and the ways in which the students searched for meaning within the text, their own lived experiences, and the responses of others.

Forman's poem illustrates Kelly's (1997) observation that "[t]he social and cultural world is always embodied, its meanings are carried on the body, which is,

itself, a social and cultural site of struggle within and against this social order" (p. 102). In retrospect, I see potential for how a deeper analysis of the various images and their meanings within the poem could have led to closer examination of how the "you" Forman addresses in the poem is not just representative of one man, but an entire social order in which gender and racial ideologies and histories are inextricably bound and are reflected within even the most intimate communications and relationships. Despite what I might now see as missed opportunities in my own pedagogy, the students were persistent in their efforts to construct meaning on their own terms and one student picked up on the themes in Forman's poem in a later class, as I explore next.

Vignette 5. "It's Because I Have an IQ of a Woman": Drawing upon Identity to Make Knowledge Claims in an "Other Space"

The final vignette brings together issues of lived experience, identity, and collaborative meaning-making and is reflective of the many ways students shaped the space through their literacy practices. The day prior to this vignette, the students were thwarted in their attempts to join a citywide student antiwar protest, despite having made public speeches providing a rationale for their participation. Our class that day was devoted entirely to a discussion of the students' perspectives on the actions and arguments made by school administrators to prevent them from leaving school. With both sadness and anger, the students shared how they felt disrespected and silenced. In our class the following day, Mia volunteered to share a poem-in-progress. While her poem echoes the structure of the Ruth Forman poem discussed in the previous vignette ("Even if I was . . . .I would not be . . . .") she told us she found further inspiration to write it after our conversation about the student walkout. Although she had not yet finished the poem, she shared with us her beginnings:

MIA: Even if I was a young jawn, I wouldn't be a dumb "b"
I know I'm young in age, but my mind is like a grenade.
Exploding with various thoughts,
Things you thought people my age don't know about.
I guess you could call me special.
Not because I'm dumb.
It's because I have an IQ of a woman. [**MAYA:** Mm-hmm. Go ahead.]
You thought you could walk all over me.
You failed, but I guess only I can see.
I'm not done. [clapping, overlapping talk]

RENEE: OK, girl!

JANELLE: Ohh. I got that one, too, y'all.

MAYA: You better read it.

Kelly: It's interesting the "IQ of a woman." I like that.

Maya: Yeah, I like that.

Jasmyn: I like that, too. [overlapping talk]

Mia: Thank y'all. I was, I was on the ball yesterday when we was talking, I was like, "Go ahead!" [group laughter]

Like Lynn's "Damn, I Look Good" poem, Mia's poem also shows how identities shape knowledge construction and poetic inspiration, given the ways she references her age and gender and the ways in which we responded affirmatively to her line, "it's because I have an IQ of a woman." By claiming her own perspectives, identity, and knowledge, Mia's literacy work facilitates a change in direction from the previous day's expressions of anger at the silencing of student voices to an expression of agency and assertiveness within this space. Showing the influence of Forman's poem in style and in substance, Mia's poem also reflects an investment in pursuing writing "for the affirmation of new horizons" (Royster, 2000, p. 71). It is noteworthy that Mia names the inspiration for the poem as our previous day's conversation about the war protest and that she also feels compelled to share her poem within our class, suggesting a resonance with hooks's (1990) argument for purposefully creating spaces to facilitate creative work that "affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world" (p. 153). As a result of this conflict over the walkout, the relationship between our space and the broader space of the school was brought into relief. In this instance, Mia used the space of this elective course—an "Other space" that the students had shaped throughout the trimester to center their lived experiences and perspectives—to comment on the viewpoints and positionings that emerged outside of the space. In doing so, she used her own experience to begin to assert her own identity on her own terms and to define herself outside of the discourses and understandings that emerged in the conflict over the walkout.

Discussion: "Other Spaces" and the Literacies of Young Women of Color

Through the presentation and analysis of vignettes, I showed instances where the students took up and created opportunities for exploring the sociopolitical and embodied nature of literacies; for claiming poetic inspiration from experience; for pursuing self-definition; and for making meaning within a community. Locating analysis of the vignettes within theories of social identities and literacies suggested both the nature of the literacy tradition of African American women the course was centered in as well as the students' responses to it. As I noted in my analysis of the vignettes, writers from this tradition influenced the students' writing in both form and epistemology. Rather than viewing this influence as resulting from a simple

"identity match" between the writers and the students, however, I argue that its impact would be more productively understood by considering the epistemologies that are reflected in this literacy tradition. These poets and the students' response to them inspired an understanding of the social nature of literacies and revealed the potential to claim literacy in the service of self-definition, social critique, and social imagination.

While writers like Walker, Angelou, and Forman served as sources of inspiration, the students' own written and spoken contributions profoundly shaped the space, deepening course inquiries into literacies, identities, and meaning-making. By their agentive acts in response to both this literacy tradition and the space itself, the students helped create and sustain a community in which reading and writing were oriented toward mutual knowledge generation. The discussion of Forman's poem especially revealed the importance of the group context for knowledge construction in order to come to an understanding of its radical nature. As the students' insistence on discussing the poem suggested, it was not enough to "add" counter-hegemonic works to the curriculum or to move ahead with a pre-determined pedagogical plan. Rather, given the insidious and powerful nature of hegemonic ideologies, these works necessitate democratic pedagogical practices and mutual relationships that promote exploration and discussion of a wide range of viewpoints and that welcome interpretations both provisional and unfinished. By drawing on her lived experience, Jasmyn, for example, initially read Forman's poem in a way that missed its counter-hegemonic nature. Rather than viewing Jasmyn within a deficit framework that would critique her for lacking critical capacities or suggesting the barriers of personal response to the development of critical and transformative readings of texts, however, we might instead see the value of encouraging response within communities that include socially conscious literature and that invite multiple perspectives on that literature over time. For instance, Jasmyn came to revise her initial interpretation of Forman's poem in conversation with the group and also later wrote a poem herself in which she used her own experiences to critique a number of exploitative images of women of color (see Wissman, 2009).

In concluding my discussion of the affordances of this kind of space to the literacy work of young women of color, I turn to the words of Maya and Jasmyn who provide insight into how they conceptualized why this in-school space was needed and what it afforded them. They wrote the following to introduce their poetry and photography at an educational research conference:

> We think this work is a reflection of the things that are left unsaid because of the scarcity of opportunities that are placed in schools for young, strong sistahs to make a way. Our individual poems emerged from our past and present experiences, the problems we face as young females trying to make a way, and the way we are being represented in society.

In first raising concerns with school officials that resulted in the development of the course and in later framing our presentation with similar sentiments, both students recognized something missing in their in-school experiences and both noted that the course afforded them a space to read, write, and be in the company of other young women; to say what is often "left unsaid" in school; and to facilitate their journeys in "making a way" as young women of color. These viewpoints reflect an awareness of the institutional prerogatives of schools that often do not include explicit creation of spaces for young women to come together to pursue literacy work of this nature or to nurture a sense of collectivity around social identities.

Implications

While the existence of this course reflected the school's willingness to embrace the students' desire for an in-school space in which to write, the course was not offered the following year due to changes in the school schedule that replaced "clubs" with classes designed to support and promote more traditional academic skills. The realities of testing and other pressures that informed that decision are certainly not unique to this school. Given this broader context, my study has clear and numerous limitations that would constrain its generalizability. Namely, unlike the vast majority of teachers, I had great freedom to design an in-school elective with texts and topics of my own choosing and I could generally follow the interests and lead of the students. I did not contend with the demands of standardized testing or a mandated curriculum, a large class size, or substantial interference of administrators. Given the continuing achievement gap and given the roles gate-keeping exams play in shaping life chances, a limitation of the study is the course's lack of explicit attention to the teaching of academic literacies, literary devices, or writing conventions. Furthermore, it could be argued that this is not a true "Other space," or one reflective of calls for "radical creative space" (hooks, 1990) for women of color, given my racial identity and the school-like traits the course retained. Below, I consider what insights might nonetheless be drawn for literature study and for writing instruction. I focus first on considerations that take into account existing curricular realities and spatial arrangements that are not as conducive to the emergent and student-centered pedagogy I was able to pursue. Informed by the agentive literacy work of the students, I then consider possibilities for rethinking literacy work and educational spaces in these times.

Social Identities and Response: Entryways Rather than Endpoints

This study suggests the potential of bringing understandings of social identities to bear on the choice of texts and the pedagogies pursued in analysis of them. Focused exploration of literacy traditions typically excluded in Eurocentric curricula can help facilitate critical engagements in ways that may not be possible in so-called "world tours" of many multicultural literatures and in pedagogies

aimed at "celebrating diversity." Instead, I argue that the study of one tradition can be conducive to deeper analysis of the epistemic significance of identities and can serve to enhance students' understandings of the broader world and their place within it. As Mohanty (2000) argued, "an adequate appreciation of such 'particular' perspectives and viewpoints makes possible a richer general picture, a deeper and more nuanced universalist view of human needs and vulnerabilities, as well as—by implication—human flourishing" (pp. 61–62). I also suggest that the genre of poetry is especially conducive to these kinds of analyses given how poets distill complex ideas with evocative and often visceral word choices. Within explorations of literature and poetry informed by these epistemologies, students' own responses to texts can be enhanced, supporting conversations in the field that seek to enrich how theories of reader response are taken up in classrooms (Lewis, 2000). By working from understandings of personal experience as theoretically mediated and historically situated, students could consider both the texts and their *own* responses to them as reflective of broader ideologies. In this way, personal identifications could be envisioned as entryways, rather than endpoints for response, encouraging the sharing of multiple and provisional interpretations among members of the classroom community.

Situating "Mentor Texts" within the Social Context and Epistemologies

Misson and Morgan (2006) contend that there exists an unproductive divide between literature and creative writing courses within secondary literacy education. In my case, the students' poetry helped further engagement with, and understanding of, the texts we read in the course (i.e., Lynn's and Mia's poems extended consideration of the themes in Angelou's and Forman's poems respectively), therefore suggesting a productive synergy between literary study and creative writing. The understandings embodied in our readings and conversations were also picked up in the students' poetry; their poems emulated the work of African American women writers in both form and epistemology. Rationales for the use of "mentor texts" (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007) within elementary writing instruction and becoming increasingly popular in secondary pedagogies, often revolve around encouraging students to "read like writers" (Ray, 1999) and focus on exposing students to writing traits. These approaches often do not consider the epistemologies, purpose, or intent behind the work, tending to gloss over the context in which the writing emerged and the author's social positioning. A focus on craft can enhance students' awareness of rhetorical strategies, genre features, and literary devices; however, I believe this knowledge is most fruitfully produced in the context of exploring how the author uses those techniques to inform our understandings of larger questions of the human condition. This study also suggests the potential of building on students' desires to share their writing with each other. This could mean expanding the audience for student poetry beyond the teacher and suggests that "mentor

texts" need not be limited to published authors; rather, student poetry can become course texts and inspire provocative discussions and writing.

Claiming Literacy Legacies: African American Women's Poetry as a Resource for Creative and Analytical Writing for Young Women of Color

Given my experience in the course, I contend that reading and writing within the literacy tradition of African American women may be of particular consequence to young women of color given how these works can center their experiences, expose them to a vibrant and multi-faceted tradition of accessing the power of literacy for social transformation, and inspire their own writing. Tatum (2006) suggested African American boys need "enabling" texts to provide them "the capital they need to be resilient in environments in which they were previously vulnerable" (p. 49). Given the absence of such texts within schools, Tatum (2008) advocated for the re-building of "textual lineages" of African American boys. I suggest that both reading the poetry of African American women and writing poetry in response can open opportunities for young women of color to participate themselves in this literacy tradition. In this way, young women can not only form experiential connections to what they are reading, but can also claim the literature as a part of their legacy to build on as a resource for their own writing and as an entryway into making community.

In my focus on the creative and poetic, and in my discussion on the affordances of inviting students to shape educational spaces, however, I recognize that there is a danger in neglecting the importance of exposing students in direct and systematic ways to the literacies necessary for accessing the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1995) required for academic and professional success. While my course was not designed with the specific intention to enhance academic literacies, some possibilities could be offered for aligning this work with the others who have considered the role of culture and students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) in this regard (Gutierrez, 2008; Moje et al., 2004). Lee (1995, 2007) identified how cultural knowledge and language practices can be leveraged for academic aims, analyzing how the incorporation and study of African American Vernacular English and community-based language practices enhanced students' literary interpretation strategies and reasoning. For writing instruction, Ball (1992) found that African American high school students were drawn to rhetorical styles of "narrative interspersion," wherein they could draw upon personal experience to analyze and construct their own expository texts. Given how the students in my course continually and agentively claimed the value of their lived experience in their literacy work, and given how clearly their poetry reflected incisive analyses of dominant discourses, my study suggests the unique potential of poetry as a genre to facilitate this kind of analytical work. Rather than seeing the self as divorced from social realities, for example, the students in my course often wrote poetry that

acknowledged and critiqued social discourses and conditions, while also claiming agency to define themselves on their own terms. Further study and analysis of African American women poets' use of poetic devices such as anaphora, rhetorical strategies such as signifying (Gates, 1988; Lee, 1995), influences such as the blues (Collins, 2000; Kynard, 2008), and literary purposes such as advocating for social and environmental justice (Walker, 2003) could be incorporated in order to enrich students' literary understanding and writing.

Conclusion: "Teaching for Openings"

In describing what she called the "New Word Order," Taylor (2005) argued that literacies are becoming more and more regulated, quantified, and dehumanized in a time of standardization and high-stakes testing. I suggest that it is possible and necessary to raise questions about these emphases and orientations in literacy education. hooks (1990) contended that even within the most oppressive and regulated contexts, "[s]paces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice" (p. 152). Teaching with the texts and epistemologies of African American women writers can be one way to "teach for openings" (Greene, 1994) within a wide range of spaces and can help students both critique injustice and claim new possibilities. In both more traditional spaces and "Other spaces," these texts may also help work against the threats to identities that some young women of color may face in English classrooms (Carter, 2006) and set the stage for inquiry into identities, lived experiences, and literacies in an affirmative, affective, and relational way. As Moya (2000) eloquently stated, and as the students' responses to each other's poetry and the space suggests, "[c]ultural identities are not only and always 'wounded attachments.' They can also be enabling, enlightening, and joyful structures of attachment and feeling" (p. 8). Far from being separatist or exclusionary, I would contend that these kinds of "Other spaces" and curricula can be viewed as necessary responses to broader institutional practices and discourses that are themselves exclusionary of the literacies and lives of young women of color. Furthermore, by animating teaching and research spaces with an "ethos of collectivity" (Vasudevan, 2008) possibilities may emerge for students' own knowledge to be centered and for their own agentive acts to shape those spaces. These kinds of understandings of classroom spaces, of students, and of research are especially important in cross-cultural teaching and learning contexts as they have potential for shifting perspectives on who is viewed as a knowledge producer, how knowledge is constructed, and to what ends knowledge is produced. Through "meaningful spatial transformation" (Soja, 2004, p. x), we may not only be able to "teach for openings," but also work toward the creation of spaces that could facilitate those openings and that provide opportunities for young women of color to, in Maya's words, "rise up."

NOTES

1. All student names are pseudonyms.
2. My focus on literacy and not on photography is based not only on the particularly fecund production of poetry in this trimester, but also based on a recognition of the sense of identity the course took on as a writing community across all three trimesters.
3. Given its language and subject matter, and especially given my racial identity, I feel it is important to note that I had and continue to have reservations about my choice of "Even if I Was Cleopatra Jones" as a course text. Despite the ways race was named explicitly in the course and the students' growing ease with these discussions at this point in the trimester, this poem was decidedly the most suggestive of all the poems read in the course of the interpersonal and intimate experiences of race, gender, and relationships. Without consideration of Forman's broader rhetorical project to shed light on the insidious and exploitative nature of dominant representations, many images within her poem could appear deeply offensive especially when shared in an in-school context and especially when shared by a white teacher. While I did not share or condone the perceptions of Black women referenced in the poem, my introduction of the poem into the setting might suggest that I did or that I was claiming a kind of identification or ease of familiarity with these experiences that would signal a clear lack of self-awareness. While our conversation about the poem revealed the students' interest in engaging with the poem and constructing meaning about Forman's incisive social critiques, I nonetheless continue to question the implications of my choice to introduce it.

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