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Available online: 02 Mar 2012

To cite this article: Alfred Tatum & Valerie Gue (2012): The Sociocultural Benefits of Writing for African American Adolescent Males, Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties, 28:2, 123-142

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2012.651075
The Sociocultural Benefits of Writing for African American Adolescent Males

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Historically speaking, reading and writing among African Americans were collaborative acts involving a wide range of texts that held social, economic, political, or spiritual significance. One of the constants of literacy collaboratives was being regularly and purposefully engaged with print within a meaningful social context. During the summer of 2009 we reconstructed a communal approach to engage 12 adolescent males (ages 12–17) with reading and writing texts as we examined the sociocultural benefits of writing for these young males during a 5-week qualitative case study framed by a theory of Black literate lives and communities of practice. We offer that there may be a need to (re)theorize writing for African American adolescent males, particularly those who are underperforming in schools and who are experiencing incidents that produce vulnerability at a disproportionate rate.

The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges (2003) has concluded that writing needs to be at the forefront of current efforts to improve schools and the quality of education. However, advancing the writing development of adolescents poses a significant challenge in the United States. Approximately 70% of students in Grades 4–12 can be characterized as low-performing writers, according to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress report (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). At the same time, the market economy has a gripping influence on the politicized discourse of the writing performance of adolescents because writing is viewed in direct relationship with the economy. The National Center on Education and the Economy issued a report in 2007 that stated, “This is a
world in which a very high level of preparation of reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce” (p. 6). The relationship between education and the economy is worth noting because it has led to the production of policy documents focused on the cognitive dimensions of adolescent literacy development while ignoring sociocultural dimensions that are equally valuable for advancing students’ literacy development (Tatum, 2008).

Writing Next (Graham & Perin, 2007), a recent federally sanctioned policy document, contains research-based instructional approaches based on meta-analyses of experimental and quasi-experimental studies. Listed within this document are 11 key elements of adolescent writing instruction. They are writing strategies, summarization, collaborative writing, specific product goals, word processing, sentence combining, prewriting, inquiry activities, a process-writing approach, study of models, and writing for content learning. In a recent issue of the Harvard Educational Review on the theme of adolescent literacy Coker and Lewis (2008) wrote,

Perhaps the most significant limitation of the meta-analysis is that only experimental and quasi-experimental studies can be analyzed in the meta-analysis and, as a result, a large body of writing research could not be included in the Writing Next analysis. This constraint will certainly frustrate many teachers and researchers who may view the instructional recommendations in Writing Next as limited and underrepresented of the wider body of research. (p. 239)

In past decade policy documents have shaped instructional practices to a greater degree under federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind that contributed to an emphasis on research-based practices that subsequently informed state standards and accountability. Many of the earlier documents focused on improving the reading achievement of students in the primary grades, with later attention given to adolescent literacy development. Still, writing was marginalized, earning the distinction of the neglected “R” (National Commission on Writing, 2003). This neglect followed two decades of robust attention by researchers who applied theories and methods of cognitive psychology in the 1970s and 1980s to studying writing and writing processes. Researchers gave more attention to instructional approaches and cognitive strategy instruction. A shift occurred in the 1990s, when the field of writing became increasingly sociocultural as researchers focused on contexts for writing in school and a variety of nonschool settings (MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2006).

Although renewed attention to adolescent writing and the potential impact and influence that a focus on writing proficiency has for bridging the gaps between school and workplace writing is promising, we are concerned that a narrow focus will create a wedge between adolescents and writing, particularly for students who have yet to discover the power of writing in
their own lives. We assess that the increased attention on writing as process and product offers little prospect for reengaging adolescent males with writing, particularly the ones who may view themselves as “nonwriters” (Busch & Ball, 2004; Haddix, 2009). Moreover, we are concerned that instructional efforts void of a sociocultural focus will continue to sever the relationships between African American adolescent males and the African American literary tradition as improving writing scores in school takes precedent over strengthening students’ relationship with writing. Lastly, we are concerned about the dearth of research on teaching writing to culturally diverse students, particularly African American male adolescent writers from urban communities. The lack of writing research involving African American adolescent males is a significant problem because many educators are failing to increase these young males’ engagement with text and subsequently their writing achievement. Educators also struggle to mediate writing with these young males in ways to counter in-school and out-of-school variables that heighten the vulnerability level of poor African American adolescents who live in urban communities.

Therefore, we decided to conduct a study situated in a sociocultural tradition (Prior, 2006) to examine the sociocultural benefits of writing for African American adolescent males. We were particularly interested in examining the following:

1. How writing develops through social interaction in discourse communities
2. The social interaction and cultural context to an understanding of writing
3. Writing as a mode of social action rather than a means of communication
4. How writing is located in larger and deeper currents

Prior noted that sociocultural theory argues that activity is situated in concrete interactions that are simultaneously improvised locally and mediated by prefabricated, historically provided tools and practices.

A HISTORICAL LOOK AT THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

In preparation for the study we conducted an analysis of the roles of writing in the lives of African Americans and how African American writers have significantly impacted America’s imagination of itself for more than 300 years by examining anthologies and analyses of African American writers (Evans, 1984; Hogue, 2003; Mullane, 1993; Wall, 2005). From early American essays grounded in resistance and racial uplift in response to the inhumane treatment under de jure enslavement to the development and emergence of the Black press, African American writers have penned their existence. Their writings have ranged from self-defining autobiographies and slave narratives to wrestles with the dualities of an American identity and an African identity.
### TABLE 1  Salient Characteristics of African American Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defining self—finding the text and language that helps a person put his or</td>
<td>“I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself question which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much pain boomerangling of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: ‘That I am nobody but myself.’”</td>
<td>Ralph Ellison’s <em>Invisible Man</em> (1947, p. 5)</td>
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<td>her voice on record without waiting for others to define him or her</td>
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<tr>
<td>Becoming resilient—remaining steadfast in the face of conditions that produce</td>
<td>“They just turned, my gran’ said, all of em—and walked back down to the edge of the river here. Every las’ man, woman, and chile. And they wasn’t taking they time no more. They had seen what they had seen and <em>those Ibos was stepping!</em> And they didn’t bother getting back into the small boats drawed up here—boats take too much time. They just kept walkin’ right on out over the river. Now you wouldn’a thought they’d got very far seeing as it was water they were walking on. Besides they had all that iron on ‘em. Iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened ‘round they necks like a dog collar. ‘Nuff iron to sink army. And chains hooking up the iron. <em>But chains don’t stops those Ibos none.</em>”</td>
<td>Paule Marshall’s <em>Praisesong for the Widow</em> (1983, p. 23)</td>
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<td>vulnerability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engaging others—inspiring contemporaries to strive toward a better humanity</td>
<td>“<em>Let no man of us budge a step</em> ... America is more our country than it is the white... The greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears... They want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us... therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, killed or be killed... and believe this, <em>that it is no more barm for you to kill a man who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty.</em>”</td>
<td>David Walker’s <em>Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World</em> (1829–1830/1965, p. 38)</td>
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<td>for all</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building capacity—creating a foundation on which future generations can build</td>
<td>“In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. <em>Love it. Love it hard...</em> Love your hands! Raise them up and kiss them... More than your life-holding womb and your life giving parts, hear me now, <em>love your heart for this is the prize.</em>”</td>
<td>Toni Morrison’s <em>Beloved</em> (1987, p. 86)</td>
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<tr>
<td>their agendas</td>
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*Note.* Words that align with salient characteristic are in italics and bold-face type.
Writers have used their pens to fight for fair treatment and equal pay; to restore a historical record to counter dominant narratives of inferiority; to discuss the liberating potential of education; or, put simply, to “set the record straight” (Wall, 2005, p. 23). Poems, speeches, essays, pamphlets, short stories, and full-length novels were written by African Americans to reimagine their experiences in the United States (Mullane, 1993).

Several key findings emerged from our analysis that we used to inform our study:

1. The politics of race, class, and sex were interlocking features in the works of African American writers, who often trapped themselves within the White/Black binary. Even within this trapping, African American writers have collectively created a remarkable body of work, a rich and varied legacy that resonates powerfully today for all Americans (Hogue, 2003; Mullane, 1993; Wall, 2005).

2. Literacy and liberation were consistent across texts and revealed that teaching and learning literacy were often depicted as communal acts that valued reciprocity among the stories of Black people (Perry, 2003).

3. Black writers unapologetically focused on the social, political, and economic concerns in Black communities throughout the world in their work (Fisher, 2009).

African American writings in the United States point toward at least four salient characteristics: (a) defining self, (b) becoming resilient, (c) engaging others, and (d) building capacity. These characteristics appear repeatedly in the writings of many who used both creative nonfiction and exposition to inform their writings (Tatum, 2009). An illustrative example of each category is shown in Table 1.

The excerpts from the Invisible Man, Praisesong for the Widow, and Beloved in Table 1 capture the dichotomous tension of reading texts written by African Americans as sociological texts or aesthetic texts. It is often difficult to separate the two. It is clear, however, that African American writers penned texts that (a) provided a way for the African American community to maintain itself and (b) combined art with racial progress as they protested the devalued representation of African Americans in the United States (Hogue, 2003). We assess that much of this literary tradition remains elusive to African American adolescent males, and we wanted to develop an institute to restore this writing tradition, which is currently in a cultural black hole.

A LITERACY COLLABORATIVE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT MALES

During the summer of 2009 we designed and hosted a 5-week Summer Literacy Collaborative (SLC) at a large midwestern university. One of the
goals of the SLC was to reconstruct a communal approach to give young adolescent males the opportunity and support to write about the multiple contexts informing their lives. They wrote poetry, short stories, children's stories, and the beginning of a novel. The young males met for 9 hr each week, for a total of 45 hr during the 5-week SLC. The meeting times were Tuesday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The institute’s daily schedule was as follows:

10:00 a.m. SLC’s Preamble
10:05 a.m. Writing Warm-Up With Explicit Instruction
10:30 a.m. Mentor Writer or Visiting Author
11:00 a.m. Raw Writing and Critiques from Other Brother Authors
12:30 p.m. Blog Postings and Writer’s Chair
1:00 p.m. SLC’s Preamble

The SLC participants were charged with anchoring their writings into the four salient characteristics or platforms that emerged from the historical analysis of African American writers: (a) defining self, (b) becoming resilient, (c) engaging others, and (d) building capacity. They recited the SLC’s preamble to open and close each 3-hr writing session. We developed the following preamble to nurture a cooperative and conversational community:

We, the Brother Authors, will seek to use language to define who we are, become and nurture resilient beings, write for the benefit of others and ourselves and use language prudently and unapologetically to mark our times and mark our lives.

This, we agree to, with a steadfast commitment to the ideas of justice, compassion, and a better humanity for all.

To this end, we write!

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was grounded in a theory of Black literate lives that brings attention to how purposeful reading, writing, and speaking encircle one another and how reading, writing, and speaking are propelled by a desire for people to become independent and self-sufficient (Belt-Beyan, 2004; Fisher, 2009; Tatum, 2009). The study was also informed by a sociocultural approach to literacy teaching that brings attention to students’ identity, agency, and power (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Lewis et al. (2007) offered the following definition of identity, power, and agency that informed our study:

1. **Identity** is a fluid, socially and linguistically mediated construct, one that takes into account the different positions that individuals enact or perform in particular settings within a given set of social, economic, and historical relations.
2. Power not only resides in macrostructures but is produced in and through individuals as they are constituted in larger systems of power and as they participate in and reproduce those systems.

3. Agency is the strategic making and remaking of selves within structures of power. Agency is a way of positioning oneself so as to allow for new ways of being, new identities.

Lastly, the study was framed by communities of practices that pay attention to how human actions are mediated by language and other symbol systems within particular cultural contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). These theoretical frames were chosen because we agree that contexts in which writing occurs play an important role in students learning to write and in their transformative uses of writing (Ball, 2006). These frameworks also align with our focus to nurture the next generation of socially conscious African American male writers.

We planned to have African American adolescent males write for themselves and for others in prudent and unapologetic ways in a literacy collaborative (Tatum, 2009). Ample historical precedence suggests that it is viable to reconceptualize literacy as a collaborative act with and among African American adolescent males who live complex lives. Historically speaking, collaborative acts were conduits for becoming regularly and purposefully engaged with print within a meaningful social context (Belt-Beyan, 2004; Fisher, 2009).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Twelve African American adolescent males who were selected to participate in the SLC agreed to participate in a qualitative case study designed to answer two research questions:

1. What are the sociocultural benefits of writing for African American adolescent males?
2. What are the sociocultural benefits of the writing environment for African American adolescent males?

One of us taught writing during the SLC while the other collected data. Data consisted of field notes of 35 hr of observations, 58 semistructured individual interviews that were transcribed verbatim within 48 hr of the interviews, and 87 samples of students' writings. The second researcher focused primarily on the young males' engagement with the readings that were used as model texts and the young males' interactions when they were writing and discussing their creative works during the observations. The researcher's memos were attached to the two-column field notes during and after the 3-hr meetings with the young males. For example, the following memos were attached to the
field notes on July 7, 2009, at 11:45 p.m. following the fourth day of the 15-day institute:

Memo 1
As Brother Authors get more comfortable with their environment, how will their interactions change? I wonder what type of writer they view themselves as. Will increased competence (identity as a writer) influence their interactions with each other?

Memo 2
It seems as if other pieces of writing inspires [Brother Author] 7’s writing. Is he living with his eyes open?

Five different interview protocols were used to gather the young males’ insider perspectives on the sociocultural benefits of writing (Schultz, 2006). A similar interview protocol was used for Weeks 2–4 of the institute. Questions were added in subsequent weeks as we engaged in recursive data analysis and collection during the study. However, some version of the same questions appeared on the Week 2–4 protocols. They were as follows:

1. How has your writing changed since the first week of the institute?
2. Why have you chosen to write about the things that you’ve been writing about?
3. Describe what it’s like for you to write in this environment with other Brother Authors.
4. Talk about the benefits of the institute, that is, things that have a positive effect on you. Describe the benefits you find from the types of writing you have been doing.
5. How do you think you will describe the impact this institute is having on you?

A three-step process involving open coding, axial coding, and selective coding was used to analyze the interview transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We coded the interviews separately using the constant comparison method focused on within-case analysis and cross-case analysis looking for the sociocultural benefits accrued by the African American adolescent males. We then looked specifically at the five questions from the interview protocols using the constructs of power, identity, and agency as defined by Lewis et al. (2007) to frame our analyses. Lastly, we examined 41 of the young males’ poems from Week 1 of the SLC to examine how their initial writings in the SLC fit within the storied literary tradition of African American writers.

THE BROTHER AUTHORS

We called the SLC participants Brother Authors. The Brother Authors ranged in age from 12 to 17 and were from 11 different elementary and high schools
in the large urban area and its surrounding suburbs. They were of low and average academic range according to self-reported interview data. Each young male was selected based on ideas he had communicated in a writing sample that was required as part of the SLC’s application process. Participants were also informed that they must attend all 15 sessions. Ten of the 12 Brother Authors had perfect attendance during the SLC. Two of the young males, siblings, missed two sessions because the older brother was ill. Several Brother Authors can be considered vulnerable, as measured by their own words. Listen to samples of their voices that reflect the presence of gang activity in their lives; the prevalence of poverty-ridden conditions; and feelings of race-based, culture-based, and poverty-based rejection:

Applicant 1
Affiliation in gangs has always affected young black males and this rate is constantly growing. I attend a public high school and for the last couple of years the number of my fellow public high school students’ death toll has increased. This year about 30 students were killed this school year and most of these incidents occurred off school grounds and were gang related. Still some of this falls back on these young men backgrounds, because most do not know any better since it was the life to be brought into. These gang members often get sentenced to prison for selling narcotics, homicide, and having unlicensed weapons.

Applicant 2
All my life I have never been anything more but a trouble making black boy. I was always the one that got in the most trouble throughout my family. In my entire life I never had my time to shine. Everyone around me was happy and joyful but not me. I was by myself in a cold world. I always tried my best at everything but my best wasn’t good enough. I know no one in the world liked me because every time I walked in a room people looked at me like I was wanted for murder. Most people tell me that I will be locked up with the real bad boys but truly I would love that because most of the bad boys I talked to know how much it hurts to be left out or forgotten. They know it hurts to look in the eyes of their family and friends and teacher and they see fire and disappointment. For me, I never could look in someone’s eyes and see happiness when they look at me. All I would see is my reflection fading away.

It is clear from their voices that adolescents encounter a wide range of difficulties impacted by personal and environmental factors. This is why we believe that using cognitive approaches alone to teach writing without considering the complexity of students’ lived experiences is conceptually thin.

BENEFITS OF THE SLC

As researchers and instructional leaders of the SLC we were interested in examining the benefits of writing in which students’ multiple identities (i.e.,
community, developmental, ethnic, gender, personal) were centered. Each of
the Brother Authors shared his insights when asked to discuss what he believed
he would take away from the institute. Their remarks converged around the
three issues we used to frame our analyses: identity, power, and agency.

Taking on a Writer’s Identity to View the World

The students’ voices reflected the fact that they were experiencing identity
shifts as a result of their writings. The following remarks indicate an internal
shifting for one of the Brother Authors:

I think I would see the world differently like with the writing. I would
look at everything differently. Because when you’re writing and you hear
a lot of writing, you feel different. It’s like your feelings change and how
you think of writing.

The following comments from another Brother Author are illustrative of an
external shifting connected to a changed perspective about African Americans:

From this institute, I think I will take that all Black people are talented
and I could do more than I thought I could. I can take all this stuff that
I know and take it to the next level and nobody can tell me nothing—I
can already know what I’m able to do.

The Brother Authors began reaching down into themselves in ways they had
not imagined or anticipated prior to their writing during the institute. They
came to believe that “all writing is significant, [depending] on how you write
it.” Having the opportunity to write in ways they were not afforded inside of
their classrooms, they found a different way to express themselves, as sug-
gested by one of the Brother Authors, who compared his writings in the
SLC with other instructional contexts: “Well it’s allowed me to express myself
in different ways that usually I wouldn’t be able to do like outside this class or
without a paper and pen in front of me.” His remarks are similar to those of
other Brother Authors, who offered the following:

The benefit from my writing is insight into myself because when I write, I
don’t really think about it. I write and it just flows. Basically I write what
I’m thinking without really knowing what I’m thinking. I write this and
then I’m like “oh this is what I’m thinking.” It’s kind of like weird. It’s
different of like I have two selves and the one whose writing is telling me
“this is you, and I’m just the one out here with the pen.” Whenever
I’m writing, I look at my writing to a reflection of myself. It’s not like I
had this played out before I did it. It’s after I did it that I find out that this
is what I had planned out. If that made any sense at all, but that’s how it
works.
Um, it helps us like reach down into, like look down into ourselves and find like the inner core of our writing instead of the outer core. Because the inner core is more sensitive to experiences. What the inner core is gonna have it’s gonna have more feeling in it than the outer core.

The Brother Authors described how they were able to “get off the things [they] can’t say on a daily basis” and how writing affords the opportunity for them to make things better. The benefits they received from writing ranged from “I feel that after each writing, it makes me a better person” to getting “to know myself a lot more personally and [learning] stuff about myself that I had not learned [in other] type of experiences” to “just becoming a better person period.”

Finding Power Within the Platforms

The Brother Authors were asked to reflect on the four writing platforms—defining self, becoming resilience, engaging others, and building capacity—and the SLC preamble at the end of each week. Their words indicated that they embraced the platforms as a contract that cemented their purposes for writing. One eighth-grade male explained the meaning of the preamble that focused on the platforms in the following way:

To me it means writing to express how we feel about ourselves and how others might feel. How we’re becoming better men as we write telling our story. And the last paragraph I’d say—or the last part—is a contract part that we are signing.

As part of this contracting, the Brother Authors found direction and new personal boldness that strengthened their relationships to their own writing and the writing of the other young males in the literacy collaborative. Whereas one of the Brother Authors mentioned, in reference to the platforms, that “we are part of a group or commitment or relationship to our work,” another mentioned that “it tells us to write in our own way . . . and we write with no regret and we write with full effort.”

Reconceptualizing writing to pay attention to the four platforms that characterized the writing of African American males historically became a source of cognitive stimulation for the SLC participants. Within a 5-week period their writings became purposeful. The Brother Authors felt as if they were becoming reflective, resilient beings. The shifts they experienced in relationship to the platforms and the preamble are reflected in the words they shared during the interviews:

It makes me think about what I am writing about. Not just writing for fun but writing to define myself. Some of it goes back to the preamble.

It actually helps me understand what I’m writing about like what kind of message it sends to the people. I didn’t really know about the
platforms but I’d just write and I would have my own message to it. But these four platforms kind of help me understand the things I’m writing and what kind of things I’ve written about.

Well it has a lot of meanings to me—becoming resilient. Just writing like no matter what and using your language unapologetically. When you write, don’t apologize. Explain your thoughts. I really like the preamble because I’m bringing these ideas out in my writing and I’m expressing the thought I have toward the preamble.

Through my writing, it’s getting me to think about some things that I haven’t thought about. Like with the preamble—it’s really showing me that these thoughts I’m having I can put it all on paper in my writing.

The following piece of writing is from one of the academically underperforming young males and was written on the third day of the institute. His words are illustrative of his strivings to use his pen to mark his time and mark his life:

You can take my life and my mind too. You don’t have to take my heart; I’m giving it to you. But the one thing you will never get is my pen because without it I’m nothing. Writing is the only thing I have left. My mom don’t like me, my family treat me like I was a person on the street. Most of my family never wants me by their kids. Isn’t that something; I cannot go next to my cousins. So kill me, let me rollover and die, but when I go don’t let my writing go with me, let it stay with you. I know people are getting tired of reading about my blank life, because I am. I can’t take it anymore. Someone kill me and get it over. I’d rather die and be remembered than live and be forgotten. So, when I turn to dust don’t let my writing turn to ashes. (Italics added)

The adolescent males experienced a new kind of power through writing as they moved toward a stronger sense of self. This is illustrated by several quotes: “It’s a lot of power behind writing and that’s something I want to continue... Let our testimony be our pen’’ and “I kind of know myself a lot more personally. I’ve learned stuff about myself that I had not learned... And when I use 1st person, it kind of defines myself.”

One young male’s perception of the role of writing changed during our time together. He shared the following:

Before I was just writing because it was fun, it was something that I was comfortable with... [Now] if I write, it’s like doing things you’ve never seen before, writing things you’ve never heard, doing things that people just can’t imagine. I take away that you are something and that you have something to write.

All of the adolescent males echoed the need to put their voices on record and the fact that writing has the potential to reshape the image of African American adolescent males and others who experience internal conflicts.
During individual interviews the Brother Authors of different ages and academic abilities unanimously mentioned that there was power in their working together, suggesting the impact of being in a community of practice in which writing was conceptualized to focus on specific platforms.

Exercising Agency to Name Their Realities

The Brother Authors connected writing to their roles as African Americans specifically and connected the role of writing more broadly to their universal humanity as they used their pens to name themselves and their realities. When asked how writing affected them as people, two Brother Authors shared the following:

It helps me to be more intelligent and fluent...and it makes people see that African Americans are not just you know dumb or nothing. [The SLC] taught me to write because of the people....give me something to do...for a better humanity.

As an African American male, we have a lot to work on and think beyond the moment like [name of another Brother Author] said we don’t think beyond the moment. We don’t think about the consequences. Like if it’s—I definitely want to start doing that. And I’m going to think about it first, think about it first definitely. And think beyond.

Reflecting on the types of writing anchored in the platforms, two other Brother Authors said the following:

The benefits from the types of writing...I learned to broaden my perspective of things and write about other subjects and topics that I usually wouldn’t write about or never thought of writing about.

From this institute I will take that before I was just writing because it was fun, it was something that I was comfortable with because I was...writing on paper, so I would take away that I am something more than just a black person that could write but someone who likes new possibilities and say like you can do this. So if I write it’s like doing things you’ve never seen before, writing things you’ve never heard, doing things that people just can’t imagine. I take away that you are something and that you have something to write.

One Brother Author, after reading a text written by another SLC participant, shared, “Some of our writing makes us seem like resilient beings.” Another Brother Author’s words neatly encapsulate the role of the preamble embraced during the literacy collaborative. He explained the platforms and the preamble in the following way as he reflected on one of his pieces:

I think it basically means to tell our story without the sugar. It basically like to tell our story straight up, like what’s been happening and why
it’s been happening. And just let people know what’s been going on and also to write for others in a sense as to give them insight into someone else’s feelings or someone else’s experiences. And I think it’s basically just to mark our time, mark our lives to show what we’re doing. It is really about nurturing resilience, engaging others.

As a result of their agency and the strategic focus to anchor their writing in four platforms, these young males reaped sociocultural benefits as well as other cognitive benefits. They were affected both personally and academically. Several times throughout the SLC the young males offered statements such as, “I think I’m smarter now; I definitely have a lot more knowledge” and “As a person I was affected education-wise. I feel this will help me going to high school. It will definitely help me in writing classes, like grammar, poetry classes and stuff.”

BECOMING MEMBERS OF A STORIED LITERARY TRADITION

The Brother Authors collectively wrote 41 poems across a wide range of topics during the first 2 weeks of the institute (see Table 2). Most of their writings tackled issues of ethnic and racial identity, violence, and injustice. Their poetry closely mirrored Black writers who unapologetically focused their work on the social, political, and economic concerns in Black communities. Fisher (2009), in her examination of the writings of Gwendolyn Brooks, noted how young people used writing as a way to confront violence and poverty and possibly think about new ways of living. In addition, an examination of the African American literary tradition yielded information on how writing was used to forge self-representation, engage in a renaming, accelerate the journey to selfhood, function as a tool of self-preservation, and provide clear calls for action (Wall, 2005). These productive threads were present in the poetry of the African American adolescent males in large part because they anchored their writings in historically focused platforms.

The four poems here capture these productive threads. The first poem, “STOP!!!!!!,” is a call to action. The second poem, “Distraught Image,” is written in the tradition of self-preservation. The third poem, “Slave Boy,” falls within the master/slave narrative and the White/Black binary of earlier writers. It uniquely captures the modern-day context of violence in the writer’s urban environment. The last poem captures the tension between survival and surrender or the “striving” to remain resilient in the face onerous social conditions.

Poem 1
STOP!!!!!!
I can hear the flames
Burning the future of others
Gun violence
### Table 2: Writing From the First Two Weeks of the Summer Literacy Collaborative and Topic Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing topic</th>
<th>BA 1</th>
<th>BA 2</th>
<th>BA 3</th>
<th>BA 4</th>
<th>BA 5</th>
<th>BA 6</th>
<th>BA 7</th>
<th>BA 8</th>
<th>BA 9</th>
<th>BA 10</th>
<th>BA 11</th>
<th>BA 12</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Identity: personal characteristics</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XX</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>2. Identity: race or ethnicity</td>
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<td>XX</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
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<td>XXX</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>XXX</td>
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<td>XXX</td>
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<td>3. Love</td>
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<td>4. Family</td>
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<td>6. Africa</td>
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<td>7. America</td>
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<td>8. God or religion</td>
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<td>9. Racial discrimination</td>
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<td>10. Caucasian or White people</td>
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<td>12. Politics</td>
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<td>13. Resilience</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Violence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Injustice</td>
<td>XX</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Role models—mentors</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>17. Writing or power of words</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>18. Power</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: BA = Brother Author.*
Gangs
All of this is killing our city
Stop the violence
Stop the flames
Stop everything

Poem 2
Distraught Image
Two teen boys walking though a park.
Nothing ever goes wrong, right?
Wrong . . .
Two other boys taunt my image.
Ego overpowers, I talk back.
I try to stay strong.
I can’t.
I feel as if I was a punk.
They leave my image distraught . . .
Will it return to default?

Poem 3
Slave Boy
You’ve taken away my dignity so I look at the sky
For I refuse to look down to see two million blacks who have died
Where is the right you took from my father
We still have hope so why even bother
My fellow brothers this has got to stop
For we don’t deserve to be picking crop
For the white man or the white man’s son
Is this America Mr. Washington
They are controlling us by fear and sin
But I bet I won’t see a white foot in the cabin I live in
Tshaka is dead, but his blood is alive
My fellow brothers if I am to die
I want sons and daughters to see
How wonderful life of a black person can be
I’d do all that right now but instead
It will have to wait for there is a gun held to my head

Poem 4
The Tree
Branch
Oh no, I am falling
They were so beautiful
What has happened?
My leaves
They were once so bright
They have always looked so full of energy
I wonder how they are
I have not seen them since
Could it be because I have faded
Did the wind take their remains
Like little sprinkles of dust in an hour glass
Man is it truly my fault?
Did I really deserve this?
The storm is still here it is indeed me who has fallen

It became clear to us that affording the conceptual space, opportunity, and support for African American adolescent males to write their lives led them toward a historical and cultural literary bridge that they did not know existed. Their bridging aligns with sociocultural theorizing views of writing as being simultaneously improvised locally and mediated by prefabricated, historically provided tools and practices. Whereas the SLC offered the instructional writing context, the four platforms served as the historically provided tools. We began to observe the young males’ climbing out of the cultural black hole that severed their relationship with writing and with the African American writers who preceded them. The Brother Authors suggested that the writing platforms were central to the positive instructional writing context.

TO THIS END, WE WRITE

Using a sociocultural lens, we focused on writing to live or writing for “personal growth” (Soven, 1999) by engaging young African American adolescent males to anchor their writing into four platforms—defining self, becoming resilient, engaging others, and building capacity—in a collaborative writing environment that they assessed as both engaging and supportive. It became clear from this study that African American adolescent males garner sociocultural benefits from writing. Writing became a social act for the young adolescent males participating in the SLC. The SLC fits neatly within a theory of Black literate lives that brings attention to roles of participatory literacy communities, literary societies, and writers’ collectives (Fisher, 2009). Our study extends the theory of Black literate lives, which focuses primarily on adults, to include African American adolescent males ranging in age from 11 to 17, who desperately need their own literary traditions.

We found that when different approaches for mediating writing and different instructional contexts are shaped, the writings of African American adolescent males will extend beyond their immediate contexts to the society writ large. The Brother Authors who participated in this study “used their writing to ask challenging questions, give different perspectives, and get others involved in acting on issues affecting families, communities, countries, and the world” (Tatum & Gue, 2010, p. 93). Ultimately we observed an increased engagement with writing during the SLC as young males wrote for the benefit of others and themselves.
Avoiding the limitations of an ahistorical approach (Tatum, 2008) and the increased pressure educators feel to narrowly focus on writing scores, our efforts to restore confidence in writing for a group of adolescents were informed by historical orientations of writing and the literary lineage that has deep roots among African American writers. The orientation we used stands in stark contrast to some of the modern-day iterations of education that focus on writing proficiency based on national norms or educational standards devoid of cultural significance and meaning.

Based on the data from this study, we recommend several approaches for providing responsive writing instruction and shaping instructional contexts that African American adolescent males might find legitimate. They are as follows:

1. Anchor writing instruction in clearly defined platforms and use the platforms as critical-thought points for identifying, selecting, and mediating texts in ways that pay attention to fair and equitable treatment.
2. Provide writing models and engage students in discussions involving complex issues, being sure to honor their voices.
3. Move African American adolescent males beyond writing texts that only stress a victim mentality. Have them write to become self-reliant, self-determined, and resilient.
4. Structure literacy collaboratives with African American adolescent males, and provide authentic opportunities for them to write with a purpose.

These recommendations align with those from the Brother Authors, who were asked to provide directions to teachers as a result of their experiences in the SLC. They offered the following:

1. Let us speak our mind, not with our mouth, but with our pens.
2. Allow us to choose what we want to write about.
3. Allow us to write for ourselves.
4. Find something that relates to us.
5. Let us express ourselves as a person instead of simply assigning an activity.

Honoring the voices of these young males is overlooked in classrooms in which writing instruction is too rigid to accommodate students’ personal needs (Coker & Lewis, 2008). The challenge is carving out spaces in classrooms and shaping useful response structures that nurture collaboration and a community of practice in the time already allotted for writing. This carving may require a change in disposition toward writing that runs counter to a strict cognitive approach for advancing students’ writing. Our experience in the SLC highlights the need to grant adolescents opportunities to write texts that they find meaningful. With four clearly defined platforms, explicit writing instruction, and mentor writers, 12 adolescent males used their writing to experience a full measure of their humanity.
As researchers, we experienced the tremendous power in the words of 12 African American adolescents, a community of Brother Authors, who used their writings to tap into the power lying latent within them. We witnessed young males searching for their writing signatures—the words that want to go out into the world. It is our hope that these signatures find a place alongside the signatures of other African American writers. We will rest comfortably if we have contributed in some small way to nurturing the voices of the next generation of African American male writers.

REFERENCES


