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LITERACY, IDENTITY, AND RESISTANCE WITHIN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVE COMMUNITY AND SOME REFLECTIONS FOR NEW FORMS OF LITERACY PEDAGOGY

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The presence of an historical tradition of liberatory literacy practices among African Americans has been largely ignored. Yet both received and marginal accounts of life within the African-American slave community disclose a world view and an ethos in which literacy and freedom were inextricably intertwined. Such a rich history of critical literacy may hold important clues for teaching and learning in classrooms populated largely by African-American children, as well as children from other cultural groups (Heath, 1991). Among other things, such a perspective suggests the impotence of literacy programs that emphasize minimum competency, employability, and other more prosaic concerns. Rather, more culturally relevant pedagogical practices might build upon the fact that literacy has been central to the liberatory ideology of African Americans throughout their history and attempt to help children cultivate personal, communal and political relationships with reading and writing. Such practices seem more likely to succeed in making literacy learning, and education per se, more personally meaningful and more motivating for African-American children.

In this paper, we analyze some of the historical uses of literacy within the African-American slave community. Data for these analyses include personal letters and narratives composed by African Americans, as well as interviews with slaves and former slaves. Through these analyses, we demonstrate how literacy functioned in the struggle to reconcile the various forces influencing the identities of African-American slaves, as well as the slaves' attempts to achieve human dignity and social significance in the context of the larger society. Finally, we provide some suggestions about how and why it might be useful to develop literacy programs for African American children that build upon and extend the liberatory uses of literacy within their historical/cultural tradition.

SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A number of theorists of narrative and critical literacy have drawn attention to the need to think about reading and writing in the real and total contexts of people's

cultures and lives. Bruner (1990), for example, has suggested that literate ways mediate between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes. Indeed, the idea that literacy is not only the ability to understand and construct textual meaning but also a means through which individuals' participate in constituting themselves and their worlds has become common currency within the perspective of critical literacy (e.g., Ferdman, 1990; Freire, 1973; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 1990; Giroux, 1988; Scollon, 1988; Willinsky, 1990). Literacy, from this perspective, is a form of *sociocultural practice*—a way of constituting oneself in relation to others and as a means of understanding and negotiating the social and cultural relationships that one believes to be desirable in the wider society. According to Giroux (1988), critical uses of literacy have the potential to expand the range of social identities that people might embody as they attempt to situate themselves and others in histories and narratives that mobilize and revitalize their hopes for the future.

Although literacy may and probably should be viewed as emancipatory and transformative, it may also be viewed as a symbol of oppression and the oppressor, and, hence, an accomplice of the enemy. Labov (1982), for example, has noted that African-American and Puerto Rican adolescents have institutionalized a sort of resistance to the norms, the ideology, and the practices of the school system, including literacy. This resistance seems to be rooted in a cultural and political conflict between the vernacular speakers and the school authorities. The linguistic behavior of peer group members is a reflection and a symbol of this conflict. Ogbu (1990), too, has argued that individuals within "involuntary minority groups" such as African Americans have adopted oppositional stances toward the dominant cultural group, which often includes an oppositional stance toward literacy acquisition and use. Ogbu has gone on to say that such a stance is rooted in a cultural model that includes a distrust of people from the dominant culture, a theory of getting ahead that precludes literacy as a useful tool, and a collective identity in which being literate is neither central nor desirable. Finally, Ogbu has argued that such a cultural model is related to the historical struggles of "involuntary minority groups" such as African Americans. Although it seems to be true that certain segments of the African-American community, as well as certain segments of other cultural groups, currently disidentify with being and becoming literate, it does not appear to be the case that the history of African Americans is a history of resisting literacy or even education more broadly conceived. Rather, this resistance toward literacy and education seems to be a relatively recent response to the continuous but changing fact of oppression by the dominant culture. A more productive response might involve not an either/or stance but a both/and stance similar to the response to literacy enacted by the African-American slave community wherein White literate ways were adopted and transformed to meet personal and communal needs through a variety of "signifyin" practices. If this is the case, it may be possible (and desirable) to reconnect African-American children with their literate history. In so doing, we may be able to help these children use literacy productively in order to achieve a greater degree of educational, social, and economic advantage without losing their own distinct historical and cultural identities, including their own literate "ways with words" and the power of freedom once afforded by them.

PREDISPOSITIONS TOWARD LITERACY WITHIN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVE COMMUNITY

> It is a peculiar sensation this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. . . . One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
>
> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self conscious manhood [sic], to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (Du Bois, 1990, pp. 8–9)

The uses to which African-American slaves put the skills of reading and writing embraced the "strife" described by Du Bois. Acutely aware of the importance of the perceptions of the White world to their present and future welfare, African-American slaves found literacy to be a propitious tool in the effort simultaneously to elevate their levels of learning and personal understanding and to create more favorable images of themselves for the larger society. Thus, literacy constituted an arena in which African-American slaves could integrate their personal/cultural identities and their knowledge of the cultural practices of the larger society, knowledge that was central to constructing identities of freedom and possibility. Ideologically, as freedom and a more profoundly human identity were believed by slaves to result directly from the acquisition of literacy, reading and writing became identified as invaluable tools in the effort to achieve personal and community transformation. In practice, literacy led to increased militant attitudes and actions. For example, the major slave rebellions were instigated by literate preachers such as Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner (Gilmore, 1978). In general, literacy was central to the African-American world view and ethos of emancipation during the ante bellum period and beyond.

Several authors have attempted to construct versions of the African-American slave community from the perspective of the slaves (Blassingame, 1972; Faust, 1980; Genovese, 1974). In doing so, they have noted the highly resistant orientations of many of the cultural practices within this community. These practices included storytelling, spirituals, and work songs and constituted "the most significant form of resistance against the spiritual and psychological, if not the physical effects of slavery" (Joyner, 1986, p. 229). The effectiveness of such practices was due to the fact that they were rooted in the African past, which offered alternative determinants of identity and status from those claimed by the slave master (Blassingame, 1972). The historical study of resistant practices on the part of slaves has yielded a quite compelling vision of slave culture as a set of collective cultural practices that amounted to a "system" that challenged the "absolute control" of the master (Faust, 1980). According to Faust, it is a fallacy to view slaves as "passive recipients" of the whims and dictates of their masters. Rather, they actively contested the extent of the slave masters' control, often engaging in subversive practices in order to undermine the intents and dictates of the masters.

Generally regarded as one of the most important literate activities within the slave community was storytelling, a practice that had been integral to social life in Africa. Blassingame (1972) has described storytelling as one of the forms most resistant to the cultural and political influences of the slave master. He has gone on to note that

this activity, which usually took place in informal settings after the completion of work responsibilities, often followed in the tradition of African Trickster myths. Trickster figures, such as the rabbit and the "Signifyin' Monkey," were small clever characters, who outwitted larger more powerful adversaries. These figures held an undeniable attraction for African-American slaves largely because they were integral to the effectiveness of storytelling as a cultural form that simultaneously resisted the world view of the dominant culture (i.e., that of the slave owners) and affirmed the slaves' own world view (i.e., that derived from African cultures) (Joyner, 1986).

This subversive aspect of African-American storytelling interacted with Euro-American literate activities, and the interaction between the two cultural systems resulted in what ultimately constituted new and distinctive cultural forms that combined orality and literacy in the interest of resistance (Blassingame, 1972). It is to some of these cultural forms that we now turn.

SEEDS OF SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITY: LITERACY AND THE DESIRE TO FORGE A NEW IDENTITY

Although the slave community's orally based literacy practices allowed for an internal resistance to the dehumanizing and oppressive influences of the plantation environment, all external interactions and rituals of communication with the larger society reinforced the slaves' status as a lower order of humanity. Invariably this perpetual negative reinforcement had devastating and often traumatic effects upon the slaves' images of themselves (Douglass, 1845). Slaves were, therefore, faced with the exigency of finding ways to undermine their imposed sub-human identity in order to transform both their own images of themselves as well as their public images. Literacy was central in this process because in the early to mid-19th century literacy and reason were closely intertwined. In Gates' (1985) words, literacy came to be viewed as a "visible sign of reason" (p. 9). Consequently, European society, reflecting the cultural prejudices of such thinkers as Hegel, Hume, and Kant, came to view societies without the cultural practice of literacy and written historical records as inferior. Accordingly, this perspective became the conceptual underpinning of the idea that Africans and subsequently African-American slaves were "childlike" or even "puppetlike" (Gates, 1985). Literacy acquisition offered the possibility of increased self-esteem because it constituted visible counter-evidence to societal notions of African-American sub-humanity.

In addition to having to overcome the widely held view of Africans and African Americans as being intellectually incapable of reading or writing, slaves also had to overcome many legal barriers. Following a flurry of slave rebellions led by literate preachers in the 1820s and 1830s, most Southern states passed laws prohibiting slaves from reading and writing and from being instructed in how to read and write. This denial of access to literacy leant an allure of "forbidden fruit" to the practice of literacy, especially since White children often learned to read and write in full view of the slaves (Woodson, 1915). Consequently, learning to be literate became compatible with, and perhaps even enhanced, the subversive orientation of the oral literacy practices of African Americans within the slave community.

Although many African-American slaves desired to become literate, they faced several practical impediments to doing so. With a negligible number of literate slaves or free Blacks in positions to teach reading and writing skills, those slaves desiring literacy were forced to procure their initial instruction from the White plantation community (Genovese, 1974). However, because of the slaveholding society's legal opposition to literate slaves, those determined to become literate had to find what Bullock (1967) termed "hidden passages" of educative opportunity in the midst of official prohibition. "Hidden passages" were provided by the clergy, sympathetic members of the slave masters' households, and occasionally even slave masters themselves who were either sympathetic to the slaves or in need of a literate slave to perform an important plantation function.

SUBVERSIVE PRACTICES INSTRUMENTAL IN THE ACQUISITION OF LITERACY

The Role of the White Clergy and the Church

Religious instruction, which sometimes included literacy instruction, was perceived by Whites to be a "most efficient police" in terms of quelling the rebellious inclinations of the slaves (Aptheker, 1943). What the White clergy did not realize, however, was that such instruction would feed directly into the slaves communal efforts toward becoming free. The African-American slave community combined literacy with the liberatory orientations of their religious practices in order to circumvent much of the insidious and oppressive intent of religious instruction by applying its own cultural principles, particularly those of the Trickster. Reflecting the Trickster pattern of "signification" described by Gates (1988b), the African-American slave community "signified" or revised the intent of religious instruction and literacy instruction, which had originally been designed to make them amenable to further control. In other words, the community applied a cultural twist or revision upon the passifying intent of such instruction in order to make the instruction fit its own communal propensity for resistance. Instead of making the slaves more docile, religious faith and literacy instruction in the context of the White church bolstered the slaves' cultural tendencies to resist the oppressive practices of slave masters (Rawick, 1978).

The Role of the Black Clergy and the Church

Resistance to oppression was central to virtually all religious practices within the African-American slave community. Slaves frequently risked tremendous corporal punishment, even death, in order to carry out their religious observances in the manner in which they preferred. The diary entries of one Arkansas slave master from Faust's (1980) analysis of power relationships on a plantation provide a revealing picture of how religious dedication fueled resistant action on the part of slaves. Following a lengthy passage depicting previous efforts to eradicate Black religious expression, the slave master made the following remarks: "They (the slaves) are running things into the ground . . . by being allowed too much organization, too much power to the

head men [sic] and too much praying and Church meeting on the plantation" (Faust, 1980, p. 91).

Although resistance to oppression was part of the general religious orientation of African-American slaves, such resistance was most organized in those communities led by literate slave preachers (Turner, 1973). In relation to this point, the three most historically prominent and ambitious slave uprisings were led by literate preachers, slave and free, at the top of their leadership cadre (Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and Nat Turner). Together, these preachers and their congregations created communities of struggle, and they did so because no other forms of community could adequately support their daily struggles against brutalization, exploitation, and treatment as subhumans (Rawick, 1978).

In general, literate preachers within the slave community almost always advocated resistance to oppression more than non-literate preachers. Turner (1973), for example, found that the more literate Black preachers led their congregations to engage in more resistant practices. Conversely, the less literate preachers more often encouraged their followers to conform to the demands of oppression and wait for the afterlife for freedom and justice.

Preachers occupied many roles within the African-American slave community—leaders, father figures, examples, and guides. Occupying these multiple and very important roles allowed preachers almost ideal opportunities to promote a near universal regard for the transformative possibilities of literacy (Genovese, 1974; Woolridge, 1945). Part of what made literate preachers effective was a heightened ability to discriminate what were considered to be genuine religious beliefs from those beliefs designed to make the slaves more accommodating of oppression (Boggs, 1863; Cheek, 1970). Illiterate preachers tended to preach what the slave masters told them to preach. Literate preachers, however, tended to discriminate between what the masters or White clergy advocated in the interest of maintaining the status quo from the liberation theology that could be read into Biblical accounts.

Partially because of the different leadership activities of literate versus non-literate preachers, the ability to read and write became associated with the struggle for freedom among slaves throughout the community. Thus, the ability to read and write became almost indistinguishable from the ability to see the injustice of one's fate. Connecting reading, writing, and freedom had the effect of making slavery intolerable. In the words of Gates (1987) "the first slave to read was the first to run away" (p. x).

Although the literate preacher was the catalyst for viewing reading and writing as mechanisms of liberation, it was the response of the slave community that actually enabled literate values and practices to be marshalled in the interest of emancipation. The breadth and intensity of the slave community's appreciation for literacy inspired the community to make heroic efforts to spread the use of literacy. And because literacy was so vitally connected to the community's emancipatory desires, it became almost indistinguishable from the general goal of becoming free. Had White literate practices not been transformed and incorporated into the slave community's emancipatory world view, the occasional support from White preachers, as well as the efforts of literate Black preachers, would probably have come to naught. As it turned out, many slaves responded to the opportunities made available to them through various

hidden passages within the church, and once they acquired literacy, they taught one another (Genovese, 1974).

The Role of African-American Mothers

As the previous discussion of the role of African-American preachers in fostering literacy acquisition within the slave community implies, the male experience has been given privileged status in most historical accounts. As was the case in western history generally, the voices of African-American women within the slave community tended to be silenced. In the public domain of the church, for example, male authority expected women "to keep silent and not presume to speak for God to them" (Gates, 1988a, p. xxxvi). Yet, the influence that women exercised in the home was just as profound as that of the public influence of men. "Black men . . . excelled in the art of poetic preaching in the male dominated church, but in the church of the home . . . it was black women who preached" (hooks, 1988, p. 5).

Indeed, within the interstices of received historical accounts there are hints of the immensely important contributions of women in the acquisition and practice of literacy within the African-American slave community. These contributions are also embedded within the few narratives written by slave women. It is clear from such accounts that the prevalent cultural model of literacy as simultaneously personal and communal was cultivated and perhaps even enhanced within the context of the family by slave mothers.

In particular, several of the narratives written by female slaves bear testimony to the influence of the mother upon the author's desire to escape from slavery and to acquire the skills of literacy. In these narratives the main characters are not the authors themselves, but the mothers who devoted their lives to their sons' and daughters' freedom and education (Gates, 1988a). This pattern underscores the importance of the support provided by mothers within the African-American slave community for the values of freedom and literacy espoused in many of the social and cultural activities within the community at large. Moreover, many of the males who learned to read and write during slavery, such as James Curry, would not have done so without the efforts of mothers such as Susan Boggs, who described her efforts on behalf of her son's education as follows: "I had my son taught to read and write while I was there in a secret school, but I was always so busy in getting money to pay for it that I never learned to read myself" (Boggs, 1863, p. 420).

Stories of the acquisition of literacy among male slaves, such as that of Frederick Douglass, have usually been rendered within a moral framework of individualism and the assertion of individual rights. According to such a framework, literacy awakened the protagonist to realize that his inalienable rights had been violated, and consequently led him to seek freedom. However, viewing the relationship between literacy and freedom from the point of view of the prevalent cultural model of literacy as both personal and communal—a model that was espoused and even accentuated by African-American women—discloses a somewhat different moral framework. The fundamental social/familial orientation of women in the slave community precluded the association of literacy with individual concerns. The African-American female

slave saw the welfare of her children as her primary responsibility. She educated her children before herself, and she refused to escape without them (Wallace, 1990). This pattern of communal concern reflected the general cultural pattern within the slave community wherein the acquisition and practice of literacy by individuals was looked upon as inseparable from its benefits to the entire community. In other words, the literate individual became a repository of knowledge and information for the rest of the community (Martin, 1867).

The Role of the Slave Master's Family

While the majority of hidden passages for literacy learning were probably provided by the clergy and the church, and often mediated by African-American mothers, a good number were also made available within the families of slave masters. There are accounts in many slave narratives, for example, of learning how to read and write from the wives and children of slave masters (Curry, 1862; Douglass, 1845; Gross & Smith, 1861). Additionally, Genovese (1974) described the regular practice of slave children hiding after accompanying the masters' children to school and trying to follow along as they listened to the lesson. Similarly, Sella Martin provided an account of other clever practices to which he resorted in order to obtain reading instruction from White children who refused to teach him:

> Having nothing to do between meals, I was made an errand-boy of the gamblers who infested Columbus. . . . [F]rom their conversation I learned that there were coloured people in some far off place called Canada who were free. I learned too, from seeing them reading and writing, that they could make paper and the little black marks on it talk. . . . For a long time I could not get it out of my head that the readers were talking to the paper. . . . When, however, it became a reality to me, I made up my mind to accomplish the feat myself. But when I asked the white boys with whom I played marbles to teach me how to read, they told me that the law would not allow it.
>
> But though the white boys would not teach me to read, they could not control or prevent the acquisition of a quick and retentive memory with which I was blessed, and by their bantering one another at spelling. . . . I learned to spell by sound before I knew by sight a single letter in the alphabet. (Martin, 1867 p. 709)

Summary: The Trickster Revisited

We mentioned early on in this essay that storytelling within the African-American community often drew upon the rich African tradition of Trickster mythology. We also implied that African-American slaves often enacted the ways of Trickster in their efforts to transform their public and private identities. The task of thoroughly exploiting the passages of opportunity left unprotected by White preachers and by slave owners was testimony to the fact that slaves fully utilized the techniques of artifice, manipulation, and determination characteristic of the Trickster figures from their storytelling tradition. Thus, the Trickster motif provides a fitting framework for understanding the African-American slaves' attempts to acquire literacy despite the ideological, legal, and practical barriers imposed by White society to prevent them from doing so. By navigating a variety of hidden passages made available by the clergy, the church,

and the slave masters' families, many slaves trickstered their way into the literate world, a world associated with freedom and dignity.

THE ESCALATION OF LITERACY PRACTICES IN THE POST BELLUM WORLD

In a now classic slave narrative, Douglass (1845) described the transformation he experienced as a function of having learned to read and write as giving him a "view of my wretched condition. . . . It opened my eyes to a horrible pit" (p. 279). Similarly, Hall (1863) articulated the relationships among literacy, freedom and oppression that he experienced or witnessed:

> I stopped it and gave up reading until I was 19 years old. But the more I read, the more I fought against slavery. Finally, I thought I would make an attempt to get free, and have liberty or death. . . . I told one of my brothers that I was going to be free. He was the only one of my mother's fifteen children that I had any confidence in, for all the rest believed everything the white man [sic] told them. He had learned to read, as I had, and knew better. (Hall, 1863, pp. 416–417)

During the ante bellum period, and mediated largely by literate preachers, African-American slaves had come to develop a belief in the "magic" of reading and writing (Martin, 1867; Osofsky, 1969). For example, Sella Martin (1867) referred to his position as the reader in the community as "an oracle among the slaves" (p. 711). This pronounced reverence for literacy led slaves to make extreme personal sacrifices to acquire and to teach each other reading and writing skills, as well as to share information acquired through literacy practices (Bellamy, 1971; Genovese, 1974). Indeed, African-American slaves developed a cultural model in the ante bellum period in which literacy and freedom were almost indistinguishable and which paved the way for a virtual explosion of efforts to acquire literacy skills after the Civil War.

The most eloquent expression of the slave community's association of literacy with their hope for true freedom and future advancement occurred with the advent of the "Freedman's [sic] Bureau." Volunteers in the effort to educate former slaves claimed that it was "impossible to overestimate the freedmen's [sic] desire for knowledge" (Osofsky, 1969, p. 42). The actual literacy practices during slavery amounted to a trace in comparison with the enormous community-wide engagement with literacy instruction immediately after the Civil War. The following description is not an isolated instance, but a general representation of what Bureau volunteers found wherever former slaves were provided the opportunity to learn to read and write:

> Makeshift schools were jammed with pupils. It was common to note the awe with which youngsters regarded the mastery of penmanship, or to comment on the similar attitude of older folk. One Quaker teacher wrote that 'Men come home tired with their labors, sit in their door-ways, with their open books, til the dusk drives them to the fire-light and are joined at their fire-sides by their little ones. (Osofsky, 1969, p. 42)

The yearning for literacy was borne of the conviction that "educated men [sic] were rarely slaves. . . . Negroes instinctively realized that the great difference between themselves and white men [sic] was not color but knowledge" (Myers, 1971, p. 163).

Having endured the legalized impediments to their human development, literacy was more than simply a means of acquiring a better lifestyle or standard of material living. It represented the beginning of something profound and internal. "These slaves hungered not only for knowledge but also for a [new] sense of self. By crowding the schoolhouses they were laying claim to their manhood [sic]" (Osofsky, 1969, p. 43).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Much recent research on the school performance of African-American children has concluded that these children perform below their White peers for one or more of the following reasons: social class differences (e.g., van den Berghe, 1980), discontinuities between the linguistic and cultural patterns of home and school experiences (e.g., Michaels, 1981; Philips, 1983), or differences in cultural models about the value of literacy and education (e.g., Ogbu, 1990). Other research has cast doubt upon the explanatory power of each of these accounts (e.g., Stern, 1986; Ogbu, 1990; Steele, 1992). Doubtless, there is some truth to each of these accounts, but they all tend to be relatively ahistorical—even the cultural model account, which appeals only to very recent social/historical circumstances.

We would like to suggest that a primary reason for the African-American disidentification with literacy and schooling has something to do with losing touch with a world view and an ethos in which literacy and freedom are inextricably intertwined. As we have shown in this paper, such a world view and ethos were central within the African-American slave community and during the post bellum period when there was unsurpassed community-wide engagement with literacy instruction. Why has the African-American community (or segments of it) lost touch with its literate historical tradition? Discussing the many plausible reasons for this historical phenomenon exceeds the goals and space limitations of this essay. However, one possible reason worth mentioning is the fact that the dominant White culture has managed to inculcate a world view in which the orality of African-American culture has been emphasized and its literate foundations downplayed. In other words, cultural hegemony has been the culprit. What might be the pedagogical value of reconnecting children with their literate heritage, a heritage in which literacy was central to emancipation and a new identity? We believe that such a move would have tremendous pedagogical value. How then might we begin to make such a move? Several suggestions come to mind.

The presence of an historical tradition among African Americans of personal and communal engagement with literacy calls into question the appropriateness of pedagogical approaches that emphasize minimum competency, employability, and other more prosaic concerns. The communal orientation of this literate tradition also calls into question strategies which emphasize individual achievement and fail to connect such achievement to benefits that might accrue to the larger communities to which individuals belong. Philosopher and theologian Cornel West (1991) has argued for the liberatory value of the African-American practice of forging "cultural structures" which, in part, create space for the quest for freedom and identity throughout African-American community history (p. 221). One cultural structure or model inherent in the African-American slave community and the post bellum African-American

community held that literacy and freedom were integrally related. This cultural model suggests a starting point for new literacy pedagogies for African-American children. According to such a model, there are a number of changes in classroom practice that we might make in the effort to construct new pedagogies. First, we might familiarize students with the voices of literacy and freedom that grew out of their forefathers and foremothers ante bellum experiences and were renewed during the Civil Rights movement. Second, we might allow students to participate in the process of constructing and controlling their curricula, a curricula that would likely involve the collective production of skills and knowledge and be geared to some extent toward collective goals. Third, we might suggest to children that they use literacy to think about and to transform the local conditions and problems that they face everyday within their peer groups, their classrooms, their families, and their communities. In doing this, we might be able to help children recognize the complex tensions, pressures, and conflicts inherent in being African-American, as well as some productive ways to resolve, diffuse, or diminish these tensions, pressures and conflicts. Fourth, we might recognize, and indeed celebrate, the poetic and narrative expertise that African-American children bring with them from their home and community experiences. Related to this point, we might capitalize on this expertise in developing new ways of "being in the world" (Heidegger, 1962) or "new forms of life" (Wittgenstein, 1958) within the discourse community of the classroom.

Together these suggestions do not constitute a formula for liberatory literacy pedagogies. No such formula is possible in a world that includes (and always will include) cultural hegemony and racism. Rather they stand as signs of the need to rethink literacy pedagogies continually in light of social and historical circumstances. And as we continually rethink our pedagogies, we need always to consider our students' past and present social/historical circumstances and, if necessary, to reconnect students with cultural models within their own traditions that might help in the process of constructing more critical attitudes toward literacy and education. Thus, the goal of socially, culturally, and historically relevant literacy pedagogies should be to help African-American students use literacy productively in order to achieve a greater degree of educational, social, and economic advantage without losing their own distinct historical and cultural identities, including their own literate "ways with words." Put another way, these new pedagogies might help students understand that to be literate does not require assimilation into the dominant culture. Rather, it is possible (and probably desirable) to adopt literate practices and to transform those practices through a variety of "signifyin" means so that the practices fit students' own cultural needs but do not risk denying students access to culturally relevant advantages of the dominant culture. Following in the tradition of Trickster, this would be a productive form of social and cultural resistance. Such a form of resistance might offer opportunities for appreciating and critiquing present circumstances, as well as opportunities for envisioning new possibilities of freedom and identity for African-American individuals and the African-American community.

If as educators we are going to contribute to the production of such possibilities, we must cultivate methods for increasing the personal, communal, and political relevance of literacy. Otherwise, we will have to defer to explanations of the poor school performance of economically disadvantaged African-American children that echo the

following statement uttered by an African-American slave in response to a suggestion that he learn how to read: "Mrs. Kemble suggested to the son of a literate plantation slave that he ask his father to teach him to read. He answered in a manner that went straight to my heart, 'Missus, what for me learn to read? Me have no prospect' " (Genovese, 1974, p. 566).

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