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### **Cover Page Footnote**

I want to explicitly acknowledge the immense contributions that the teaching artists and mentors made to The Verses Project. The research team learned a great deal from their curriculum and pedagogy.

# “I Don’t Want to Say Bad Things about Detroit”: Examining Adolescent Literacy as Literary Presence

by Vaughn W.M. Watson

The wooden open-air building, Shed 2 on Eastern Market’s south end, bustles with shoppers on a summer Sunday. Built in 1898, accommodating a growing need in Detroit for market space, its stalls sized for horses and carts, Shed 2 has, since 2007, undergone a \$2-million renovation financed by the city and private donations, and now boasts a new metal roof, lighting, wiring, and concrete. New signs atop the building, and nearby street-artist painted murals commissioned by market officials, evoke “a sense of place and community” (Fogelman & Rush, 2013, p. 17). Vendors sell \$15 t-shirts proclaiming “Be-troit” – “Believe” blending into Detroit, the first-letter “B” stylized in Old-English font recalling the “D” of a Detroit Tigers’ baseball cap. Words printed on the t-shirt define Be-troit as: “1. Detroiters bonding together. 2. Empowering brotherhood in the city. 3. Bringing business back to Detroit” (Lengel, 2016). At a time when Detroit, since 2000, has experienced a 70% drop in public-school enrollment, as families moved away or turned to suburban public and charter schools (Bosman, 2016), T-shirts proclaiming Be-troit stir to mind the affirming civic message of a bumper-sticker slogan created by Emily Gail in the mid-1970s – “say nice things about Detroit” (LewAllen, 2016). The slogan is so contemporarily well-known that a university senior in my secondary-level English methods class, preparing to become a public-school teacher in Midtown, pastes the bumper sticker to her laptop, imploring her peers to invoke its message by refraining from deficit-oriented narratives of Detroit.

Common Core State Standards (2016a), adopted in 42 U.S. states as of September, 2016, “define



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what all students are expected to know and be able to do” (p. 6). Yet as curricular standards de-emphasize writing “drawn heavily from student experience and opinion” (2016b, para. 11), youth increasingly enact multiliteracies practices already present in experiences beyond school, underscoring identities as civic contributors. I grapple in this article with this critical tension, highlighting youth’s multiliteracies practices across two qualitative studies. In the first example, youth brainstorm a song verse during a larger study examining 6th-through 9th-grade youth’s enactment of a literacy-and-songwriting curriculum in an after-school class at the Community Music School-Detroit<sup>1</sup>. In the second example, 11th-grade youth and I design a plan to collaboratively write a screenplay following a larger study in which youth co-researchers and I examine their literacy practices having to do with hip-hop. Across both studies, I highlight youth of color demonstrating literary presence (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012) and discuss how collaborators in the educational lives of youth may attend to literary presence by centering curriculum and teaching in multiliteracies practices already present in youth’s lived experiences.

Scholars increasingly understand youth’s multiliteracies practices as extending beyond printed

<sup>1</sup> Research team members who collaborated on study design and observation include Juliet Hess and Mark Sullivan, and Matthew Deroo on observation and focus-group interviews.

texts, and taking place across varied school and community contexts (New London Group, 1996). Youth and young adults adorning their bodies with t-shirts and laptops with bumper stickers enact literacy practices that extend emboldened identities as members of communities (Kirkland, 2013). Knight and colleagues (2006), for example, in their examination of Latina youth constructing college-going identities across literacy practices, highlight an adolescent girl wearing a bandana featuring the Puerto Rican flag even as school policies prohibit youth from covering their heads. The bandana, like the t-shirts and bumper stickers, underscores youth positioning themselves as contributing to messages about their communities, even as some scholars situate youth of color as suffering a "civic achievement gap" and lacking "civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for taking effective civic and political action" (Levinson, 2007, p. 4). I understand youth civic learning and action-taking as increasingly participatory and communal (Knight & Watson, 2014; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), taking place for example across contexts of families, identities, and schooling.

Furthermore, I understand youth and young adults of color enacting multiliteracies practices as demonstrating emboldened identities as present and future civic participants (Fisher, 2005; Morrell, 2002). Tatum and Muhammad (2012) reference such stance-taking toward civic action among youth of color. The authors, seeking to bolster theoretical approaches to contemporary literacy activities of Black youth in the current accountability era, historicize ways in which Black youth and young adults have long enacted literacy practices. Specifically, Tatum and Muhammad (2012) identify practices of African American males in the 1800s in literary societies in the U.S. north, across which Black youth and young adults enacted a "literary presence, literary pursuits, and literary character" (p. 446). In defining literary

presence, Tatum and Muhammad (2012) write, Black men "wrote, spoke publicly, and educated themselves through literature. These literary societies were used as platforms to secure civil, economic, educational, political, and social rights" (p. 445). Muhammad (2012) further underscores Black adolescent girls demonstrating literary presence as "staking a claim and making oneself visible" (p. 206) through literacy activities. Two examples of youth of color enacting multiliteracies practices further underscore and build upon notions of youth's literary presence.

### **Enacting adolescent multiliteracies and literary presence as "I don't want to say bad things about Detroit"**

On a Monday night at the Community Music School-Detroit, youth brainstorm the first verse of a song that, at the end of a 15-week literacy-and-songwriting class, will become their contribution to a seven-song CD. Nate<sup>2</sup> and James sit beside each other at a piano bench, an iPad resting in the music rack where sheet music would typically go. Nate taps the iPad to repeat the instrumental loop he used Garageband to create four classes ago. James listens for a moment, then begins playing the electronic keyboard between them and the iPad, interpolating Nate's loop, expanding the song. Joy sits nearby taking notes as Mia leads Noah and Chloe in brainstorming and freestyling song lyrics.

Chloe suggests writing a song about candidates in the current U.S. presidential election. Nate and Noah want to write about the sickouts teachers across the Detroit Public Schools district enacted three months before: work stoppages across three days in January, and two days in May, to protest school conditions including overcrowded classrooms, mold, and collapsing ceilings (Carter Andrews, Bartell, & Richmond, 2016; Cwiek,

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<sup>2</sup> Names are pseudonyms.

2016). As youth's brainstorming session draws to a close, Chloe tells the group, "I don't want to say bad things about Detroit" (Observation notes, 4/5/16).

Four weeks later, Chloe and 24 peers complete their seven-song CD, listening to songs for the first time in the final literacy-and-songwriting class, a listening-party concert. Chloe sits with Nate, James, Joy, Mia, and Noah on a couch before an audience of family and friends in the style of a TV talk show. Two weeks earlier, they chose a group name underscoring and affirming their literary presence – "The Detroiters," titling their song "Struggle." Now, Jennie, one of three teaching artists in the songwriting class, prompts The Detroiters to discuss their writing process, asking, "How did you come up with this idea?" Chloe responds, "Some people [...] there are good things about Detroit, and also bad. [The] song [is] about struggles in Detroit, but how we [grow]" (Observation notes, 5/2/16).

The Detroiters' multiliteracies practices include some practices familiar in academic settings, such as brainstorming, selecting a topic, collaboratively discussing, and writing lyrics. Moreover, The Detroiters' multiliteracies activities include literacy practices already present in their lived experiences outside of formalized educational settings, such as Nate's familiarity with creating instrumental music using Garageband and James' keyboard playing. The Detroiters also demonstrate deft and simultaneous uses of both academic literacies and those drawn from their lived experiences, pointedly extending narratives of possibilities within and across their community. The Detroiters choose to call attention to issues in their community such as neighbors living in poverty, with Mia in the third verse singing, "The struggle is real/ [...] We're all stuck in time / Some live on a dime" (MSU Community Music School-Detroit, 2016). Amid popular deficit narratives positioning youth as lacking knowledge or skills to support their school and community, The Detroiters render their song,

"Struggle," as an example of multiliteracies practices as civic action evoking literary presence. At the same time, The Detroiters enact civic action as song lyrics, critiquing and building possibilities toward future experiences, as Noah in the concluding verse sings, "Detroit is love/ Detroit is life/ We fly higher than a dove" (MSU Community Music School-Detroit, 2016).

### **Envisioning adolescent multiliteracies and literary presence as meeting "at the Luncheonette"**

On a Monday morning in January, Dwight stands in the doorway of the classroom at City Public High School in New York City where I teach 10th-grade English. He waves me toward the hallway, where he stands, still wearing his winter jacket and hat, holding his headphones in one hand and, in the other, notebook papers rolled-up into a cylinder, like a baton. Dwight in this moment is an 11th-grade co-researcher in a qualitative study across which we are examining multiliteracies practices of youth of color having to do with hip-hop. For example, Dwight, with his classmates Harold, Clark, Royce, Ernest, and Antonio, are investigating academic literacies already present in multi-modal videos Dwight composed and posted to Youtube featuring National Basketball Association players and a hip-hop soundtrack (Warner, 2016). Now, standing in the classroom doorway, even before we exchange a handshake greeting, Dwight tells me, "I wrote the script. It's, like, 10 pages or something. It's not done yet. It's a preview [...]. That's why I've been waiting to come to school since yesterday" (Researcher memo, 1/28/13). Dwight is not currently a student in my class. Moreover, the screenplay is not written for a class assignment. Yet for Dwight, who has experienced uneven academic success at City Public, sharing a screenplay written at home extends multiliteracies practices of creating and posting Youtube highlight videos into the school space. Doing so evokes identities toward literary presence as expressing excitement to come to school and discuss the pages

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he wrote. Moreover, Dwight, in noting he is "not done yet" seeks to continue the work of screenplay writing, envisioning himself as a member of a literary community still emerging.

Eighteen months later, Dwight had graduated from City Public. Yet he and Howard, well past the time and space of their high-school English class, sought to continue collaborative writing they began in 11th-grade as co-researchers. Dwight, Harold, and I began drafting a screenplay based on their experiences with Clark, Royce, Ernest, and Antonio researching their multiliteracies practices. I relocated to Michigan, and Dwight, Harold, and I turned to Facebook's text messenger to find a time to write collaboratively across evolving geographic spaces and social identities, as writers conceptualizing our literary contributions.

Dwight: "I'm free Wednesday."

Harold: "Tuesday is the best for me but I could might be able to make it Wednesday." (Personal communication, 11/22/15)

In the next semester, we continue to write, Dwight messaging Harold and I through Facebook: "I think we can develop ideas together writing the monologue draft" (Personal communication, 2/4/16). Harold responds, in a text time-stamped 1:28 a.m. on a Friday night, "I'm free Saturday" (Personal communication, 2/5/16).

Harold: "You tryna link over by ya way at the Luncheonette."

Dwight: "Yeah, around 11 at the Spanish joint [...]" (Personal communication, 2/5/16).

The exchange resonates as example of multiliteracies practice as evoking literary presence; "the Spanish joint" was Harold and Dwight's name for the Avenue Luncheonette, where in high school Dwight, Harold, and classmates gather, mornings before school, ordering bacon, egg, and cheese sandwiches from the counter grill, then eating and chitchatting on the corner out front before walking the two blocks to City Public. The school stretches across a city block buffered on one end by

a six-lane highway traveled by 170,000 cars a day, and, on the other, a Naval shipyard shuttered in a wave of mid-1960s military-installation closings. Harold and Dwight furthermore attend a school in a community that includes such recent construction as an arena just six blocks away, newly built in 2012 to house a relocated National Basketball Association team, and a renovated building at the shipyard that in April, 2016, was site of a Hillary Clinton-Bernie Sanders U.S. presidential debate (McGeehan, 2016; Robbins, 2012).

Yet Harold and Dwight do not choose to meet and write in either of the two gourmet coffee shops with free wifi recently opened within walking distance, or a library study room at Harold's college. Rather, Harold and Dwight choose to enact public writing practices at the Luncheonette, a setting where youth and community members regularly engage in literacy practices such as reading a menu, ordering and paying for a meal, or discussing everyday events. In this way, the Luncheonette underscores community gathering spots as less frequently considered settings in which school-based accounts of writing as multiliteracies take place (Hill, 2011). Furthermore, some City Public teachers see the Luncheonette in opposition to schooling, as students ordering and eating breakfast were at-times late for first-period class. Yet Harold and Dwight pointedly seek to continue their engagement by choosing this setting in their community that held meanings across their lived experiences, as friends and classmates at City Public. In meeting to write, discuss, and collaborate at the Luncheonette, Harold and Dwight, as did The Detroiters, simultaneously assert their place-based literary presence as contributors and participants in their school, and community.

## Recommendations

Across 12 years at City Public, I taught secondary English, led English teachers in curriculum design, and designed school-wide professional development. In teaching in public school and community-based

education settings, and in my present university-based research and teaching, I purposefully build upon adolescents' multiliteracies activities beyond school – such as brainstorming a song and designing a plan to collaboratively write a screenplay. At a time when Common Core State Standards (2016b) delimit opportunities for writing built upon youth's experiences, these examples of youth's multiliteracies practices demonstrate the urgency of centering multiliteracies practices already present in youth's lives. Classroom teachers, literacy specialists and coaches, education administrators, and teacher educators may build upon literary presence as integral to curriculum and teaching in several ways:

- Connect curriculum design and teaching practices outward from youth's lived experiences (Paris & Alim, 2014) to standards-based curriculum and teaching, rather than foregrounding decontextualized knowledge of standardized curriculum;
- Focus on youth's multiliteracies practices as exemplars of what youth can do, rather than on deficit perspectives that solely position youth of color as needing interventions (Howard, 2013);
- Emphasize contexts to assert the importance of place as meaningful to youth, not solely as topics for youth writing, but as settings for where youth may collaboratively write;
- Involve and invite youth as collaborators in curriculum design and teaching practices (Irizarry, 2011; Watson & Marciano, 2015);
- Discuss youth's multiliteracies practices as new forms of civic learning and action, particularly at a time when, as Singer (2013) notes, a focus in the Common Core State Standards on increased exam scores in math and reading displaced state-based measures for teaching "citizenship, democratic values, and preparation for an active role in a democratic society" (para. 12; see also Mirra, 2014); and
- Reconsider civic learning and action-taking as participatory, communal, and taking place across youth's multiliteracies practices within and beyond classrooms.

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