

“To Be Part of the Story”: The Literacy Practices of Gangsta Adolescents

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Despite a recent emphasis on conceptualizing literacy as a tool for changing thought and experience, when people—whether the popular media, school personnel, or educational scholars—speak of the literacy practices of marginalized adolescents, they rarely talk about such literacies as tools. Instead, the literacy practices of marginalized adolescents are often referred to in terms of deviance or resistance. Gang-connected youth, in particular, are routinely represented as engaging in acts of villainy or resistance, but are rarely represented as meaning makers, people who are expressing their beliefs, values, and interests. If literacy theorists want to claim that literacy is a tool for transforming thought and experience, however, then we need to extend that theoretical claim to all literacy practices by asking what unsanctioned literacy practices do for adolescents. Are these simply acts of resistance? Or do adolescent gang members, who are often placed outside the possibility of school success on the basis of physical characteristics and social affiliations, also use literacy as a way of exploring possible worlds, claiming space, and making their voices heard?

This study uses data from three years of research with five gang-connected youth to illustrate how they used their literacy practices as meaning-making, expressive, and communicative tools. The data show how these youth used literacy practices “to be part of the story,” or to claim a space, construct an identity, and take a social position in their worlds. The paper concludes by arguing that literacy theorists, researchers, and practitioners need to acknowledge the power of unsanctioned literacy tools in the lives of marginalized youth and develop pedagogies that draw from, but also challenge and extend, these practices.

“Graffiti is a state of mind and a sign of respect.” This quote, drawn from the writing of two seventh-grade boys, provides a glimpse into motivations for graffiti writing, one of many unsanctioned literacy practices of gang-connected adolescents. Whereas graffiti writing is often considered a deviant or resistant behavior, the words of these young men signal that for them graffiti writing is central to who they are as people. It is a way of conveying, constructing, and maintaining identity, thought, and power. Their words highlight the importance of graffiti in their lives.

The words of another adolescent—in this case a 15-year-old, Laotian girl—shed light on why some young people turn to such practices as a way of constructing and maintaining thought, identity, and social position. When I asked her why she had become more involved with gang practices as she moved from elementary to junior high school, Khek (a pseudonym) responded, “Well, Elizabeth, I guess just wanted to be part of the story.” Growing up in a context in which her ethnicity, color, and social class did not make it easy for her to be part of the dominant story, Khek looked for other stories, stories in which she could be a valued participant. Khek’s words illustrate that young people may turn to gang-connected literacy and language practices as a way of writing themselves into the world (cf. Camitta, 1990, 1993). Further, Khek’s words, when taken together with the words of the young graffiti writers, speak to the importance of understanding how these unsanctioned literacy practices, though typically thought to be negative and—perhaps—worthless, may serve as tools for transforming thought and experience in the lives of marginalized youth.

My interest in how youth use unsanctioned literacy practices as tools stems both from literacy theory and from classroom research that I started in 1995, a project that began as a year-long qualitative examination of literacy in two seventh grade, regular-level English classes that used reading and writing workshop approaches. Specifically, as I began to collect classroom data, I noted that students at times kept their academic and social literacy practices separate, “code switching” between what they seemed to believe were acceptable topics and writing styles during the writer’s workshop and what they believed were acceptable topics and writing styles in casual notes to friends or on notebooks, walls, desks, and bodies. Later in the year, however, these topics and styles merged in both academic and social literacy practices.

I was particularly interested in the students who were identified and identified themselves as “gangstas” or as affiliated with gangs. As I watched gang-connected adolescents use literacy, I was intrigued with the contradiction I saw between their motivation to rapidly internalize very specific and complicated gang writing styles, spellings, rules, and dress codes, and their seeming indifference to using conventional writing styles, spellings, punctuation, and grammars. I began to wonder what these uses of literacy meant for adolescents, particularly for those often identified as “problems” or “at risk,” those students, in other words, who were marginalized in school settings. The motivation and engagement in these unsanctioned gang literacy practices led me to suspect that something more than resistance or deviance was at work and pushed me to study the practices of several young people from that classroom. My research over the next two years revolved around these questions:

1. What constitutes alternative or unsanctioned literacy?
2. How do adolescents learn and use different literacies at school, at home, and in their unsanctioned social groups?
3. What do these unsanctioned literacies accomplish for adolescents?

In the remainder of this paper, I present data analyses that illustrate how these youth learned and used unsanctioned literacy practices as communicative, expressive, and transformative tools for shaping their social worlds, their thoughts, and their identities. I show how these youth used literacy practices “to be part of the story”—or to claim a space, construct an identity, and take a social position in their worlds. I also argue that researchers and teachers can learn valuable lessons for extending literacy theory, practice, and research from the sophisticated—albeit marginalized and vilified—practices of these youth.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: LITERACY, RESISTANCE, AND YOUTH CULTURE

Over the last two decades, literacy theory has expanded from a cognitive focus on reading and writing processes to an understanding of reading and writing as tools used for specific purposes in specific contexts (Gee, 1996; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). Sociocultural theories argue that language and literacy are socially, culturally, and historically situated tools for exploring, claiming, or transforming thought and experience (Vygotsky, 1978). A number of theorists have also suggested that language and literacy are ideological in nature (Graff, 1987; Street, 1994; Volosinov, 1973) and that uses of literacy have implications for identity construction and representation. Who people are, and who they are allowed to be, is shaped in part by the ways they use literacy (Gee, 1996; Luke, 1995/1996; Street, 1994).

Although these developments in literacy theory have prompted studies of students’ social literacy practices in relation to school (e.g., Finders, 1996; Myers, 1992), as well as students’ literacy lives outside of school (e.g., Heath, 1983; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Moll & Greenberg, 1990), we know little about how adolescents use literacy in unsanctioned peer groups and how they weave their unsanctioned or alternative literacies together with academic literacies. We have only a few studies of how marginalized adolescents—those who are considered by school personnel to be “at risk of failure,” “problem” students, or “low achievers”—use literacy to make sense of their social and school lives (cf. Camitta, 1993; Knobel, 1999; Shuman, 1993).

Moreover, despite an emphasis on conceptualizing literacy as a tool for changing thought and experience, when people—whether the popular media, school personnel, or educational scholars—speak of the literacy practices of marginalized adolescents, they rarely talk about such literacies as *tools*. Instead, the literacy practices of marginalized adolescents are often referred to in terms of deviance or resistance. Indeed, one group of marginalized adolescents—members of street gangs—is viewed as using literacy (e.g., tagging and graffiti) primarily to resist authority. They are usually seen as deviants or menaces who engage in meaningless and destructive acts (cf. Cabranes & Candelaria, 1995; Yablonsky, 1962). Alternatively, theories of resistance suggest that marginalized adolescents such as “gangstas” engage in acts of resistance that reproduce the material circumstances of their lives (e.g., Everhart, 1983; Ogbu, 1982; Willis, 1977). Applying resistance theory to the literacy practices of adolescent gang members would suggest that these young people use gang literacies in reactive ways to resist mainstream school literacies and the social practices and ideologies that accompany those literacies.

If we want to claim that literacy is a tool for transforming thought and experience, however, then literacy theorists and researchers need to extend that theoretical claim to all literacy practices by asking what unsanctioned literacy practices—in this case, those of gang-connected kids—*do* for adolescents. Are these simply acts of resistance? Or do adolescent gang members, who are often placed outside the possibility of school success on the basis of physical characteristics and social affiliations, also use literacy as a way of exploring possible worlds, claiming space, and making their voices heard?

In this work I use cultural theory (Fiske, 1989, 1994; Grossberg, 1995) and literacy theory to argue that marginalized, gang-connected adolescents use literacy not only to resist, but also to make meaning about the events in their everyday lives (cf. Kress, 1996, 1997). Cultural theories have problematized the notion that people simply respond to the conditions around them by resisting or accommodating experiences. According to cultural theory, people use popular cultural texts and experiences in unpredictable ways to make sense of and take power in their worlds (cf. Radway, 1984). Camitta (1993), for example, has illustrated how urban adolescents use “vernacular” literacies in and out of school to “take hold” of their lives, to write themselves into the world. Similarly, Radway’s (1984) analysis of how housewives used romance novels in empowering ways questioned the assumptions one might make about what seem like disempowering practices. My work attempts to raise the same kinds of questions: Although gangsta (and other unsanctioned, adolescent) practices may be reproductive of marginalized positions for the youth who engage in them, what aspects of these practices are empowering, productive, and potentially transformative for

the youth? Because cultural theory also analyzes how everyday practices are tied to and reproductive of broader social structures and discourses, I consider an additional question: How do these literacy practices—while transformative in a particular social space—shape the larger life possibilities of these young people?

A NOTE ABOUT LITERACY AND LITERACY PRACTICES

By referring to literacy *practices* rather than simply to literacies, I include in my analyses the socially situated beliefs, values, and purposes that shape how and why people use literacy (Barton, 1991; Street, 1984). I also include a wide range of symbolic forms that support the text reading and writing acts of gang-connected adolescents. When I refer to *literacy*, I refer to the reading and writing of written texts, with the acknowledgment that reading and writing are always acts situated in social practices, purposes, and contexts (cf. Scribner & Cole, 1981) and that texts can encompass many forms. My decision to limit the term *literacy* to the reading and writing of written text stems from my concern—and the concern of others (Heath, personal communication, July 22, 1998; Thompson, personal communication, August 1997)—that conflating literacy with all forms of representation not only makes it difficult to talk about what literacy is and what can or should be done with it, but also privileges print literacy as the primary form of representation to which all others must be articulated.

It is ironic that many who have asserted that the term *literacy* includes speaking, listening, dancing, drawing, and all other forms of representation have done so in the name of breaking the hold that print literacy has in social systems and institutions. While well intentioned, such a move seems actually to strengthen the privileged position of reading and writing print because it is so difficult to dislodge the term *literacy* from its etymological roots in the concept of letter or alphabetic print. What is more, because these perspectives collapse everything into the category of *literacy*, they do not emphasize enough the ways that symbol systems other than print shape and extend meanings made about print.

Not wishing to discount the importance of multiple forms of representation such as orality, performance, or artistic representations, however, I seek to broaden the sense of what it means to be literate and use reading and writing by examining the many symbol systems and signs that are used to make and represent meaning in addition to and in conjunction with written language (cf. Eisner, 1994; New London Group, 1996). I include these multiple forms as part of young people's literacy *practices*. Without each of these forms of representation, reading and writing would be limited tools, virtually incapable of producing the layered understandings and shifts in thinking that have been attributed to them (cf. Kress, 1997). Specific to

my research, for example, are the works of art, music, dress codes, makeup, tatoos, body movements, gestures, and hand signs that gang-connected adolescents use to identify themselves and to claim power and space in and out of their gangs. Each of these symbol systems and signs deepens and extends the meanings represented and communicated in the written texts of gangsta adolescents. In fact, some acts of reading and writing would have very different meanings were it not for the other representational forms that accompany those acts. For example, a notebook covered with writing is “read” very differently if the notebook is carried by an adolescent wearing “baggies,” an oversized windbreaker, and “gangsta Nikes” (“G-Nikes”) than it is if carried by an adolescent dressed in a polo shirt, khaki pants, and sandals. Alternatively, reading and writing also deepen and extend meanings made in other forms of representation. A notebook that reads, “187 M1F [Execute all members of Murder One Family]” could be read as gang-connected regardless of the owner’s clothing (provided that the reader is literate in gang language or code). That said, I must acknowledge that I have carried just such a notebook around (I had written the phrase on my notebook to illustrate gang codes to a group of students) and that no one has ever assumed me to be a gangsta, a point that suggests the power of other semiotic and representational forms *over* the power of print. My dress, my bearing, my age, and my social positioning are at least as powerful discursive forms as the print I carry with me. Thus literacy, even when defined as the reading and writing of print, cannot be well understood unless one attends to people’s literacy practices—the values, beliefs, and actions that people bring to reading and writing *and* to the multiple symbol systems and signs to which reading and writing of print are articulated.

Finally, as argued by a number of theorists (e.g., Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Kress, 1996; Street, 1995), literacy practices have important implications for knowledge and identity construction and representation. Definitions of identity are, of course, highly contested, and become especially complicated when one attempts to examine how particular cultural relationships—such as being in a gang—intersect with ethnic, gender, and class relationships, and how all of those relations shape uses of literacy and one’s identity. The perspective on identity that I offer suggests that identity is not a stable, unitary construct; instead, any one person can construct many different identities as s/he moves throughout many different contexts. Because an individual can construct any number of identities, identities can conflict with one another, but are articulated to the subject positions that people construct or that are constructed for them (cf. Kress, 1996; New London Group, 1996). Identities are also articulated at the intersection of class, race, gender, culture, and age (among other possibilities) and are constructed within such relations, so that it is unwise to talk about members of particular groups in ways that suggest that the members automatically take

up culturally particular or essential identities (cf. Bhabha, 1994; Heath, 1998).

METHODOLOGY, METHOD, AND PARTICIPANTS

Methodology

The methodology and interpretation in this study are guided by aspects of symbolic interactionist theory (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) and by work done in the field of cultural studies (cf. Fiske, 1994, 1989; Grossberg, 1995). Symbolic interactionism suggests that individuals define situations and negotiate meanings based on their interpretation of symbols (i.e., language, dress, body movements) while engaged in interactions with other human beings. The methodological imperative of symbolic interactionism implies that a representation or understanding of how individuals define situations and negotiate meanings can be obtained from direct interaction with the empirical world, that is, the world of people and objects. Symbolic interactionism as traditionally conceived, however, explains human interaction and meaning making in terms of patterns and categories of action in ways that can risk the reification of people's practices and the reduction of complexity in people's lives. Consequently, I turned to cultural studies perspectives, which draw on aspects of critical and poststructural theories to argue that people's practices and the meanings they make of them are shaped in various and sometimes contradictory ways as people interact with both the material and discursive world. Cultural studies does not claim to present the truth—or even stable patterns—of people's lives, but rather to understand the meanings that people make and to examine everyday lives in their complexity and contradiction. The combination of these two theoretical perspectives (cf. Denzin, 1992) supported my study of the complex and often contradictory meanings these adolescents made through their interactions with various symbols or, more to the point, of the meanings that they made about literacy, gang practices, and their lives.

Methods

Participants and sites. The data used in this paper were collected over the course of three years (I continue to interact with these participants, although I am no longer officially collecting data). Initially, I spent one year in two English classrooms at a school located in an urban area of Salt Lake City, Utah. I collected classroom data by spending two days each week in the two classrooms for the entire school year and, on several occasions,

spending lunch periods with the students either in the cafeteria, in the hallways, outside, or at special school activities. In year 2 of the study, I interviewed various students outside of school—in their homes and at local restaurants. In year 3, I continued to “hang out” with three focus students, becoming more and more a part of their social and family practices (attending church, going shopping, seeing films, browsing bookstores).

Five adolescents—Anthony, Chile, Jeffrey, Khek, and Mike (all pseudonyms chosen by the students) of four different ethnic groups (Vietnamese, Latina, Latino, Laotian, and Samoan, respectively) agreed to participate on a regular basis during years 2 and 3 of the study (I interviewed other students of different ethnic groups sporadically). The core of my work in year 3 revolves around Chile, Jeffrey, and Khek, because Mike moved away a few months into year 3, and Anthony lost interest in the research. Although I lost Mike and Anthony as core participants, Chile, Khek, and Jeffrey often brought other youth with them on our outings, so I was able to hear several different youth perspectives. Other young people who were involved in interviews or in “hanging out” with me include Yolanda, Denise, Tamar, Gina, Rachel, Alex, Oscar, and Johnny. Names used are pseudonyms that were, in most cases, chosen by the young people.

Data sources. Data sources from all phases of data collection included daily field notes in and out of school; daily audiotape (and some videotape) recordings of classroom interactions; informal and formal interviews with the students, teacher, parents, and school administrators; electronic mail communications with the teacher; artifacts and documents; photographs; and a researcher’s journal of impressions and notes that could not be recorded at the time of observation or interaction. The nature of the last two years of the study, in which I participated more in the lives of the young people and their families, made the researcher’s journal a vital data source because it was difficult—impolite in most cases—to take notes or audiotape all interactions.

Data analysis. During the first year of the study, I used the constant comparative method of data analysis (Strauss, 1987) to generate a core category that focused on the literacy practices of students who were involved with gangs. I continued to collect data around this category, while also generating selective and axial codes around what the practices accomplished for the youth, how the youth learned the practices, and how the literacy practices were different from and intersected with school, family, and community practices. I also used methods of inductive analysis (Patton, 1990) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Kress, 1989; Luke, 1995/1996) to analyze the adolescents’ classroom interactions and talk,

interview conversations, and writings and to spur the refinement of selective codes and analytic categories.

Representational concerns. The mention of analytic tools raises several complexities regarding the representation of these young people and of my relationship with them. As a white woman in her mid-30s, I was an outsider in multiple ways to the cultural practices of these young people. My social class and non-street-gang position kept me from being a full participant in their lives. I developed a different kind of relationship with each of the youth in the study, so that some were more open with me and represented their identities much as they would with a fellow adolescent, whereas others interacted with me as a trusted *adult*, but not as a fellow adolescent or “gangsta.” In short, I do not claim to have the kind of understanding of their worlds and practices that another poor or working-class, ethnic-minority, gang-connected adolescent would have.

What’s more, at times the stories they told me during interviews were stories of the practices of other youth, an aspect of data collection that can be easily problematized: Were these youth implicating others while maintaining their own innocence in gang practices? Did they tell me stories of older youth or siblings to impress me, to make themselves seem more a part of the story? I cannot dismiss these concerns regarding the trustworthiness of the data I collected. And yet I see the interviews as another form of literacy practice, a way that each of these youth represented particular subject positions and identities for themselves in the context of my relationship with them. Thus these data, as all data, can be interrogated in regard to whether the events they relate actually happened, but the data nonetheless represent some aspect of the identities of each youth.

An additional representational concern revolves around the issues of race, ethnicity, and social class represented in this study. The youth represented here are all people of color and they all come from low-income homes, not because gangs do not include white and middle-class members (although they were fewer in number in this context than were representatives of other groups), but because these are the youth who elected to work with me in this study. That is not to say, however, that color and class are not relevant to this analysis: The context of Salt Lake City, as described in a later section, does assume a particular worldview. Specifically, to be part of the story in Salt Lake City typically meant taking up a white and middle-class ethic, something these youth were not willing or not able to do.

Throughout the research process, I came to see myself as an advocate for these youth, and I committed myself to providing a space in which their voices could be heard and their practices understood. As a researcher, however, I found myself using tools—such as critical discourse analysis—

that seemed at times to appropriate the voices of the youth even as the tools made evident the sophistication of their practices. After struggling with this tension for some time, I resolved that I would present these critical analyses in conjunction with the voices of the youth, as a way of speaking *with* them rather than for them (cf. Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1993). I have also reviewed my analyses with the participants and asked for their analysis of the data as well. The analyses presented here are a compilation of their insights and my analyses.

Finally, these findings represent my analyses of the practices of only five youth (with several others shaping the research). The findings, then, cannot be generalized to all gang-connected adolescents, although some practices have been documented in large gang-connected populations throughout the United States (cf. Conquergood, 1994; Hunt, 1996). What is most important, however, is that readers recognize that while these findings are not intended to represent all kids who are connected to gangs, the findings can be used to challenge educators and researchers to think differently about literacy theory, classroom teaching, and school policy.

The Community Context

The unique demographic and cultural context of Salt Lake City makes the study of marginalized adolescents there especially critical. Salt Lake City is the world headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, commonly referred to as the Mormon Church. The LDS Church recruits members of all ethnicities from all over the world, and while the church maintains a stance of “color blindness” (cf. Kelly, 1998), leaders in the LDS Church are generally white, and those who are recruited to join the Church are expected to adopt its predominantly white, middle-class ethic. This ethic exerts a tremendous influence in the Salt Lake Valley, dramatically shaping the type of schooling available and the perspectives of teachers in the public schools (Deyhle, 1991; Kelly, 1998). The focus students who volunteered to participate in this study are not Mormon, not white, and not middle class (although I did interview and work with several students who were white and Mormon). What’s more, the focus students are either members of gangs or are affiliated with gangs. They are, in effect, marginalized four times over.

The young people in this study lived primarily on the cusp of full gang participation. In the hierarchy of gang membership identified by various gang task forces (e.g., Salt Lake Gang Project, 1996), only two of the youth identified themselves as “associate” gang members¹ and acknowledged that they would be likely to increase their participation in gang activities as they grew older. The rest of the youth called themselves “fringe” members, a distinct step above “wannabes,” but not “jumped in” to actual gang mem-

bership. As a result, these youth did not participate actively in extremely violent gang practices (drive-by shootings, for example), although they lived in contexts in which such practices were common. For these young people, their gang practices at the time of the study² were generally confined to representing their gang identities through tagging or graffiti writing, dress, body movements, and hand-to-hand physical fights that did not rely on the use of guns or automatic weapons.

TO BE PART OF THE [GANGSTA] STORY— WHAT UNSANCTIONED LITERACIES ACCOMPLISH

In the first portion of this section, I present findings that address questions regarding what constitutes alternative or unsanctioned literacy practices and what these practices accomplish for adolescents. In short, these practices made it possible for students “to be,” in Khek’s words, “part of the story” that was being written on a daily basis at their junior high school, in their families, and in their communities. As I outline each of these practices, I examine how the practice supported identity construction, representation, and self-positioning.

What Constitutes Alternative, Unsanctioned Literacies for These Students?

I found that alternative or unsanctioned literacies used by these students included not only what one might think of as gang literacies (tagging, graffiti writing, hand signs, and dress and color codes), but also a wide range of poetry, narrative, journal writing, letter writing, and novel reading. At times the young people wrote to communicate with their peers, at other times to send messages or complaints to their “homies” (homeboys or homegirls), to rivals, and to family members. (It is interesting to note that they infrequently used either academic or alternative literacies to communicate to teachers or administrators.) The young people I worked with used each of these alternative, unsanctioned, and nonschooled forms of representation to claim and mark spaces or territories, construct identities, and label and identify—or position—themselves and others.

Specifically, I categorized the participants’ literacy practices in terms of three types of “Discourses,” or “ways of “thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting” (Gee, 1996, p. 131), that people use to identify and position themselves and others as members of social groups:³ (a) *written discourses* such as the writing of raps, poetry, and parodies; the writing of gang names, street names, and/or gang symbols on notebooks, desks, walls, lockers, and their bodies;⁴ and letters and notes that contained print and linguistic conventions associated with a particular gang or gang “set”; (b) *body discourses* that included dress, makeup, and hairstyles as well as particular

proxemics and kinesics (hand signs, body movements, and body relations); and (c) *oral discourses* (terminology, accents, and dialects were equally important). I consider each of these discourses as contributing to a set of literacy practices, or ways of reading and writing text. In the following sections, I discuss what each of these literacy practices or discourses does for students.

What Do These Literacy Practices Accomplish?

Each of the practices that I documented served as a means of identification that could accomplish a variety of purposes. For some, adopting these practices provided entree into the particular space of gang affiliation or membership. Once allowed into that social space, the young people used these different literacy practices to make sense of their everyday lives in and out of school, to maintain their membership in the gangs or other peer groups, and to move to new levels of membership within the groups. Those who could write clever poems, parodies, or raps, for instance, could simultaneously express their feelings and experiences, identify themselves as one type of gangsta or another, demonstrate their commitment to gang membership, show willingness to engage in violence and illicit activity, and win the respect and admiration of their “homies” and/or the fear of others who were not in gangs.

Written discourses: Poetry and parody. The following poem parody illustrates one of the many ways that adolescents, particularly gang-connected adolescents, use these literacy practices to “take hold” of their lives and to communicate with others. The parody was created by Rachel, Chile’s friend:

Now I lay me down to rest
 A red rag across my chest
 If I die before I wake
 Shoot a crab [Crip] with my .38.

In this violent parody of a prayer, the reference to a “red rag” indicates that Rachel, the writer, aligns herself with Bloods (a gang). Her use of the term “crab” is a derogatory reference to Crips (a rival gang of the Bloods) and identifies or positions her in opposition to the Crips, thus also marking the space or territory that she claims for herself. The writing parodies a religious form, which is particularly important because of the dominant religious presence of the LDS Church in the Salt Lake Valley and because many of the gang-connected adolescents in the study expressed a strong religious affiliation (not LDS) and incorporated religious symbols into gang dress, graffiti, and tags. Whether or not consciously intended, the poem serves several purposes via the use of the prayer form: The parody mocks

dominant religious groups at the same time that it stands within them; highlights the violence of the poem by evoking the trace of the original, benevolent prayer; and emphasizes the seriousness of the message, as the writer makes a sacred vow to exact revenge upon a rival group. The poem also served to communicate to others and invite responses such as this one from a rival gangsta:

Now I lay me down to rest
 A blue rag across my chest
 If I die before I rise
 Shoot a slob [Blood] between the eyes.

It is significant that Chile, who provided me access to these and a number of other poems written by Rachel, had memorized several of Rachel's poems, and had written them in a notebook that she carried with her. It also is significant that Chile, while not a poetry writer, wrote regularly in a journal (as did each of the female participants in the study) and in letters to friends and to me. Each of these acts of writing—whether unsanctioned or merely private—served expressive and communicative purposes. That Chile and Rachel shared poetry and music lyrics, and that Chile, Khek, Yolanda, and Jeffrey wrote notes to one another suggests that these young people saw these writing forms as tools for expressing meanings, identities, and values.

The following poem, presented to me by Anthony, also illustrates one of the many ways that adolescents—particularly gang-connected adolescents—use these literacy practices to express their fears and concerns, to construct identities, and to position themselves in particular ways. Anthony was a 12-year-old boy who described his ethnicity as “Viet.”

Gangsta Prayer

1
 2 Heavenly father please hear me,
 3 Tonight I need you so much
 4 Guideness [*sic*] to live my life right,
 5 Sometimes the pressure is so hard to bare [*sic*]
 6 I often wonder if anyone cares
 7 How can I wake up and face a new day
 8 Knowing I have to live my life this crazy way!
 9 Heavenly father please forgive my sins,
 10 I want to change, but don't know where to begin.
 11 Give me the strength to resist crazy life I desire,
 12 and help me stay away from the mighty gunfire
 13 Please bless my family whose eyes plead for me
 14 As they watch me leave, and God bless my mom
 15 who cries every night wondering
 16 If I'll be killed in another gang fight!

17 Heavenly father please answer my prayer
 18 Please let me know your [*sic*] listening up there
 19 When will it end, what's it all for?
 20 I'm down, hard core.
 21 But it doesn't seem to matter not anymore
 22 Sometimes I wonder just how I'll die
 23 With a knife or a bullet right in my side.
 24 Thanks for your giveness [*sic*], and most of all,
 25 Thank you for listening to this Gangsta's Prayer tonight
 26 A_xM_xE_xN
 27
 28 Made for our homie

This poem, like many of the poems and raps heard and collected in the study, claims a space—a troubled space—and makes a plea for help in achieving a new space. Although Anthony was a student in a classroom that used the writer's workshop approach to teaching writing, neither he nor the teacher initiated any attempt to make it a part of the writing activity for the writer's workshop. Anthony brought this poem to me just after lunch one school day and asked, "You wanna see what me and my friends just wrote?" After I read it, Anthony explained that his friend had been jumped by a "bunch of big Tongan guys" when they were walking home from a bus stop. When I showed the poem to the classroom teacher, the teacher expressed skepticism about whether Anthony had actually written the poem, and so she did not pursue it as writing material.⁵

Whether Anthony actually wrote the poem is secondary to this analysis; here the focus is on how Anthony *used* the poem "to be part of the story" at the junior high school and in his neighborhood. For example, although it seems to express fear of the danger of gang activity and a desire to leave the gang, a close analysis of the discourse illustrates that the poem is also an especially effective means of highlighting one's commitment to gang practices. Sentences such as "Knowing I have to live my life this crazy way" (line 8) simultaneously position Anthony as both trapped in and committed to a particular life style. Despite the plea for "strength to resist" in line 11, lines 11–12 reveal that Anthony (and anyone else who uses the poem) "desires" a "crazy life" fraught with "mighty gunfire." Line 16 indicates that the writer has fought in many gang fights and is involved enough in the battle to risk death, and in line 20 the writer pledges that s/he is "down, hard core," indicating that she or he is a full-fledged, committed gang member who will risk life and freedom to claim, represent, and defend the gang name. In lines 25–28, the writer identifies explicitly as a "gangsta" ("Thank you for listening to *this* Gangsta's Prayer tonight"), uses conven-

tions of gang writing (e.g., the x marks between each letter in line 26), and signs off in line 28 with the phrase “our homie,” indicating allegiance with a “homeboy” (or girl), a term often used to indicate gang membership.

The poem is also useful in terms of constructing a subject position and identity for Anthony not only as a loyal gang member but also as one who is intimately acquainted with gang violence and who thus deserves a powerful social position and a wide berth in social interactions. As the writer/user wonders in lines 22–23 “just how I’ll die . . . With a knife or a bullet right in my side,” s/he sets the terms for how others should interact with him or her. The poem, then, can communicate to others that they should not mess with the writer (or user) of the poem because this is a person who has experience with knives and guns and has accepted death as inevitable. This is a person with whom one should not toy, says the poem, even as it laments the fact.

Written discourses: Tagging and graffiti writing. Tagging and graffiti writing also serve as tools of identity construction and representation. Those who were proficient taggers (individuals who could write or draw tags) could win admiration, demonstrate commitment to the group (whether a “tagging crew” or a street gang), and gain power and respect from those who wished to improve their tagging abilities or from those who desired to use these tagging abilities to advertise the gang (some gangs pay members of tagging crews to “tag up” walls with gang names and symbols because these taggers are so proficient).

Although it is risky to engage in tagging practices in school,⁶ it is by no means unusual for gang-connected adolescents (and “wannabes”) to use schooltime to draw tags. In addition to the tags that taggers might write on highly visible spaces, many serious taggers keep tagging notebooks or sketch books in which they practice their tags in pencil or pen before throwing them up on a wall, sign, or fence. Both Mike and Anthony routinely carried with them oversized sheets of heavy bond paper, calligraphy pens, and charcoal pencils used for practicing their tags. These notebooks—and the accompanying writing/drawing equipment—served both as practice sites and as emblems of tagger or gangsta identity. Because taggers tag as a way of making themselves known,⁷ these notebooks announced the ability to tag, at least on paper. They served, in this sense, as an advertisement. It is particularly important to note that all the youth with whom I talked distinguished between tagging and graffiti at some level, although the distinctions were often contradictory. What makes the distinction important is the fact that gang-connected adolescents carried tagging notebooks and materials with them in school, apparently under the assumption that the nonviolent, artistic nature of tagging

lowered the risk of censure on the part of school personnel. Graffiti were often scrawled on desks and lockers, and sometimes hidden in notebooks, but the youth engaged in tagging practices more openly.

One particularly interesting tagging incident occurred during school, when Mike and Anthony worked with another young man, Scott, on a social-action project about graffiti and gang violence. As part of the project they prepared posters that represented tagging and graffiti. Although Scott was not a tagger or a gangsta, he was included in the project as Mike prepared an elaborate tag of Scott's name. Below the tag, Mike wrote his own name in small letters. When I asked them about this unusual arrangement, Scott replied, "Well, I can't tag, so Mike did it for me. But it's his tag, so he should get the credit. That's why he signed his name." The tag, meant to include Scott in the project and grant him position in the group, also served as a means of identification and power for Mike, who was widely recognized as an active gangsta and as a proficient and talented tagger.

Tagging practices appeared to be gendered; while I observed numerous instances of males practicing tags, I found only two tags created by female youth. (Both males and females, however, wrote graffiti.) Young women, by contrast, engaged in much more journal and letter writing than did the young men, which suggests that the forms served as different types of expressive and communicative media. Some feminist theories would suggest that the individualistic and competitive nature of tagging may have appealed more to young men's ways of knowing and being in the world, whereas the more relational acts of journal writing (even when private, these entries often focus on relationships) and letter writing might appeal more to women's ways of knowing and being (cf. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).⁸ It could also be argued that these different ways of expressing oneself were socially mediated; young women, in particular, struggled with gang affiliation and identity both in relation to non-gang authorities and in relation to the young men who were gang identified. These more feminized practices could be viewed as ways of participating in gang practices without identifying explicitly as gangstas or as sex objects of gangs.

Thus tagging practices help to illustrate the complexity of gangsta literacy practices. Although they represent the cultural practices of a particular group—marginalized, gang-connected adolescents—we cannot assume that all members of the cultural group practice in the same ways. These practices are complexly shaped by a myriad of social commitments, positions, and ideologies associated with gender, ethnicity, color, age, and class relations.⁹

Written discourses: Letters and notes. Identification and membership could also be signified through letters and notes when particular phrases, sym-

bols, and styles were used. A note might not contain any explicit indication of gang affiliation, but if the adolescent wrote about algebra class, for example, certain print conventions in the writing of the word “algebra” could clearly indicate loyalty or rivalry. The note reproduced in Figure 1 provides an example of the merging of gangsta scripts and symbols with conventional writing. This note, written by Gina to Brat (one of the study participants) during the oral reading portion of English class, illustrates much of what I saw in the talk, writing, and interactions among the gang-connected youth with whom I worked. For example, in the note Gina explicitly named herself as a home girl, a member of a particular group, in this case, a street gang. Similarly, by addressing the recipient of her note by her street name, “Brat,” Gina identified Brat as a member of the group and simultaneously kept Brat’s identity secret from those who were not familiar with street identities. Less explicitly, Gina’s use of language and code in the note named and identified her as an adolescent, a gangsta (or gang “wannabe”), and a female. To “kick it” among these youth meant to be “down with” or affiliated with a gang, although it did not necessarily imply gang membership.¹⁰ The x marks on several of the Os signify “crossing out” and indicate rivalry with a gang whose moniker begins with O, most likely the OLG, or Original Laotian Gangstas (also known as Original Locced Out Gangstas to members who were not Laotian).¹¹ Gina’s signifying language suggests that her identity is a group identity, based on allegiance and loyalty (“*your* home girl”). As she seized a social space, she pledged allegiance to a group. These fairly complicated codes and discourses—or literacy

Brat^{*}-
 WAZ A n~~o~~ttin Much here
 just kicken it
^{*} do you like Tina?
 she says you dont act
 like it.
 your home girl
 Gina^{*}

Figure 1: Note from Gina to Brat.

practices—were learned in part as students engaged in meaningful communication with one another.

A second note, reproduced in Figure 2, provides insight into the meta-linguistic awareness possessed by a number of gang-connected kids, while also illustrating the ways that gang identities were represented and communicated through a merging of conventional and gang literacies. Some gang literacy practices are immediately evident in this written text, such as the use of the street name, “Lil LOC,” which means, “little crazy man.” The “tagging up” of the note with the letters OLG, serve to represent the Original Laotian Gangsters.

Why sexy! Was up me nothing just
sitting here in 2nd thinking how good you
look. So everyone mad at you. That's
fucked up. They have no reason to
be mad at you. BUT N-E-WAYS I might
page up my friend and he might come
picc me up. you want to come. Or what
ARE you doing this weekend? But
u got to go.

W/B

Lil LOC

CHILE



Lil LOC 1
W/B

t t t

LOVE ALWAYS & forever
for REVER

Sorry
Happy

S

P.O.
I give you everything I can
I'll build you dream with
these two hands. We'll
hang some memories
on the wall.

Figure 2: Note from Lil Loc to Chile.

What is less obvious, however, is Lil Loc's use of gang spelling conventions, as illustrated in the words "fucced" and "picced." While this might appear to be a misspelling produced by sloppiness or by lack of awareness of spelling conventions, it is actually an important way of identifying Lil Loc as a member of the Crips. The use of "cc" is a deliberate move on Lil Loc's part that stems from his refusal to write "c" and "k" together in a word because "CK" is commonly used as an identifier for "Crip Killer." While Lil Loc might write a sentence with no punctuation, or spell the word "memories" incorrectly (see Figure 2), he would never write "ck" in a word. Not only did Lil Loc refuse to identify as a Crip Killer with this language move, but he also very explicitly—if the reader is literate in the code—identified as a Crip.

Body discourses: Dress and body practices. Insofar as literacy practices include many forms of representation, one important literacy practice includes the dress codes, makeup, and body movements of both gangstas and taggers. Most young people participate in aspects of these dress codes to some extent, whether they are in gangs, down with gangs (loyal to a gang, but not jumped in or initiated), trying to show respect for gangs and gangstas, or simply trying not to stand out. However, adolescents who want to indicate their loyalty to or their membership in gangs or tagging crews often wear particular clothing (Salt Lake Gang Project, 1996). One of the most noticeable gang dress codes is footwear: Gang-connected kids around Salt Lake often wear black Nike Cortez running shoes with a white swoosh, white leather Nikes with a black swoosh (both called "gangsta Nikes" by the youth), or olive-green corduroy "house" shoes (slippers), sometimes called lokes (also spelled "locs") because they are often worn by drug dealers who are "loced out" or high.¹² Other popular brands are worn by specific gangs if the acronym of the brand can stand in for a message that gang members want to send (e.g., British Knights = BK = Blood Killer) (cf. Salt Lake Area Gang Project, 1996). "Baggies"—baggy pants that sag on their bodies in what seem like precarious positions¹³—loose-fitting shirts, baseball caps, and "head rags" (scarves) worn as bandanas outside of school (all scarves are prohibited in most schools) are important aspects of gangsta dress. Baseball caps worn in particular positions can signal different identities: the bill worn to the left signals membership in one gang; bill to the right, membership in a different gang (Conquergood, 1994).

All of these dress codes are embedded in a larger color code. Colors, like other dress codes, represent gang memberships; the clothing, jackets, scarves, and hats one wears must conform with the gang colors. Although constructed as deviant and villainous in the media and in most school settings, in many ways these colors are reminiscent of school colors adopted by teams and other

sanctioned social groups. For example, as one young woman, Chile, explained to me, the West Parkque Locas, Suavecitas set (a predominantly Latina gang in Salt Lake City), adopted burgundy and gray as their colors. The most important basic, or “primary,” colors in local Salt Lake City gang discourses, however, include red (Bloods), brown (QVO), and blue (Crips).

These dress codes signal not only identification with gang practices—for some non-gang-connected adolescents, this identification through dress is critical because compliance with the dress codes shows acceptance of gang practices even though one is not an active gang member—but also with particular gang memberships. Thus, while to an outsider all gangsta kids may look the same, to gang members these codes provide critical signs. Dress codes are signs of identity and relationship. These codes tell gang kids how to act in relation to other gang kids—whether another adolescent is a homeboy or homegirl—and the codes help to keep gangsta kids from entering potentially threatening situations. Just as writers would not violate particular print conventions, committed gang members would not violate color and dress conventions. These conventions are, however, always changing in part to response to fashion and media trends, in part in response to school and society rules regarding gang dress, and in part to create interesting and innovative looks and identities.

Despite the importance of dress codes, dress alone does not signify gang commitment. A number of embodied practices or body code, as well as oral language practices, are necessary to indicate gang allegiance. Gangsta kids and gang-connected kids use particular gestures and facial expressions to indicate that they are down with or in a gang. Some of these gestures are also gang signs (the ASL sign for “I love you” is a gang sign that indicates loyalty; other ASL signs are also incorporated into gang communication), but equally important are gestures such as a wave good-bye; the way one holds one’s body—head down, shoulders hunched; and, among these particular adolescents, body slamming by bumping into each other’s shoulders when greeting one another.¹⁴ Among gang-connected girls, cosmetics are also a significant identifier.¹⁵ Because appearance is a key aspect of adolescent performance and identity in junior high and high school, it is important to remember that none of these dress or body codes alone signals gang membership or even gang connections. For many of the kids I worked with in the classroom study these codes allowed them to signify respect for or even loyalty to gangs without claiming membership. Thus, whether gang members or not, adolescents in general use these codes to signify particular relationships, commitments, and identities.

Oral language discourses: Words, accents, and plays on language. Oral language practices or discourses, particularly those borrowed from languages

other than English, are critical to understanding the multiple means of signifying membership and of identifying with a gang group. Three patterns emerged from my analysis of oral language practices. First, words were borrowed from other languages, particularly Spanish for these youth (even if they were not Latino/a), and were often used in slightly different ways from conventional usage. In addition, the youth frequently borrowed terms from police parlance and code—the use of 187 to call for the elimination of rivals comes from the police code for a homicide—in language play that indicates some sense of resistance or mockery in addition to invention and play.

Second, the youth invented a number of terms and phrases, much as young people do in any group. These invented terms and phrases had specific meanings for gang-connected interactions. For example, as Mike and Anthony discussed some of the problems with tagging and graffiti writing that they had encountered, they talked about a particularly difficult court judge whose punishments for tagging and graffiti writing were widely known:

Anthony: If you get caught tagging, he makes you stick to the wall for like a long time and if someone tags on it, you have to clean it up.

Moje: Wait, what do you mean, “stick to the wall”?

Anthony: You have to—

Mike: Well—

Anthony: Whoever does the graffiti wall . . . they have to, uh, clean up the graffiti on the wall.

Moje: Every time it comes up?

Anthony: Yeah.

“Stick to the wall” joins phrases like “loked out,” “courted in,” and “pee-wees,” as just a few of the innovative plays on words and language among the enormous number of terms and phrases that these young people either constructed or learned from others. This ability to “invent” and play with language attests to the abilities, interest, and motivation of these young people.

Third, like any group, the way the words were uttered mattered as much as the words themselves. For example, the kids I worked with rarely said, “What’s up?” and instead would ask, “Wazzzzup?” usually uttered with head cocked to the side and lowered slightly, especially when spoken by young men. The talk of the kids was also usually accompanied by hand signs and the touching of bodies, usually shoulders or hands. For the Latino/a, Mexican,

or Hispanic-identified adolescents, a Spanish—or more accurately, a Mexican—inflection was also important. A number of these language uses are also highlighted in the next section of the paper, in which the youth talk about how they learn these practices. (For a more extensive and general catalog of youth cultural and gang language, cf. Stern, 1996.)

In sum, as in any discourse community (the academic community makes a particularly good analogy), adolescents connected to gangs used language, literacy, and other discursive practices to make meaning for themselves, communicate with others, gain membership in the community, and move about in the community's hierarchy by demonstrating special proficiencies with the discursive tools valued in the community. These language, literacy, and discourse practices were tools of power that allowed the youth to negotiate and construct a particular social space. And, because gangs were so powerful in the youth culture of this school, these young people also used gang-connected practices to negotiate their school lives. In effect, all youth in the school engaged with these literacy and social practices in some way because all the youth lived in relation to gangs, whether or not they identified themselves as affiliated with gangs.

Learning and Articulating Practices at School, at Home, and in the Community

If we accept the analysis that these literacy practices are an important aspect of young people's identity construction and representation, then we need to ask how they learn these practices and how they articulate these unsanctioned practices and identities with other practices and identities that they have constructed in various contexts. Do they represent themselves as gangstas in all the contexts through which they move each day? What are the implications of these forms of representation? In the next sections I explore these questions of learning and identity articulation as framed by the desire "to be part of the story."

Learning to be part of the story. One of the most fascinating aspects—at least for an educational researcher—of gangsta literacy practice is the way these practices are learned. Although the ways that one can tag or write graffiti are formalized (cf. Hunt, 1996), they are also fluid and changeable and are learned in what would be considered informal ways when contrasted to formal institutions of schooling. In general, the young people with whom I worked learned these practices by apprenticing to others in a community of practice (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991) and by practicing the different forms in various spaces.

One of my first experiences in learning about gang literacy taught me a great deal about the learning process of these adolescents as well as about

the assumptions about learning that educators—myself included—bring to teaching. Having noted a number of different symbol systems being used and valued by the seventh-graders I worked with in the writing classrooms, I asked Chile about the different types of writing and communication I had observed. My question prompted a 20-minute “lesson” from her on the different rules of gang-related writing. She explained to me, for example, why some letters are crossed out or written upside down in a note, how different groups were identified, and how people learned and practiced various codes.

Chile’s extensive knowledge of complicated codes, phrases, and practices—learned from sisters and friends—illustrates the situated and community-based nature of learning gang literacy practices that stands in contrast to the kind of learning one does “in class”:

Chile: The gang VLT (Barrio Loco Town) is for guys.

Moje: Wait, isn’t “barrio” spelled with a “b”?

Chile: Yeah, but if you used the Spanish spelling you’d have—

Moje: B-L-T—

Chile: —and that would look stupid. . . .

Chile: Girls have the V la T. All of their street names begin with “La” because that’s the feminine form [of the article, “the”]. One is named “La Precious.” One of my sisters is “La Beautiful.” She’s named that because she’s so pretty and petite, but she’s one of the meanest.

Chile went on to explain that her sisters’ gang—which she identified with as a seventh- and eighth-grader—was specifically the West Parkque Locas, 19th Street, Suavecitas set, a tag that she often wrote in various notebooks. This complicated hierarchy of gang relations (gangs, cliques, and sets—cf. Hunt, 1996, for a detailed discussion of these hierarchical structures) was something Chile learned by watching and emulating her older sisters. What’s more, she also learned about the rules of membership and the language for talking about membership and for gaining social position:

One of my sisters was jumped in by six girls for 1 minute and about 30 seconds or something. My other sister got jumped in by six big girls, too. She lasted for something like 1 minute and 19 seconds.

From the stories her sisters told of their experiences, Chile learned the language of the group—being “jumped in” (initiated into) or “courted in” to a “set,” for example—together with the organizational framework and

rules of membership and position (the length of time one could “last” in a jumping-in ritual corresponded to one’s power position in the group). She also learned by watching and hanging out with other young, gang-connected kids (“peewees,” in gang parlance) who learned similar lessons from their elder family members and friends.

When I asked Jeffrey why he could read the tags and graffiti that I showed him in photos while other people, like me, could not read them, he responded, “They didn’t grow up in it.” Jeffrey’s comment illustrates how much a part of their families and local communities these practices were. Indeed, Jeffrey repeatedly asserted that learning gang literacy practices came from “being born into it” and having “it all around them.” He added, however, another element that helps to explain how learning gang literacy (and other social) practices occurs even across state lines. In many instances he recognized gangsta literacy practices common to other states because he knew people who had moved from those states and who had brought the practices with them:

So, like that in California, Avenues, they’re red, but they’re not Bloods, they’re not Murder 1 Family, they’re just red. That’s, that’s what I heard because I used to have a friend named Joseph and his brother was, was like out in California and that’s what his brother came back and told him.

Later in the same interview:

See, like, I know this kid, his name’s Ghost, that’s just his nickname but his real name’s Mario. . . . He came from Chicago, and he moved here and out in Chicago he was in a gang called Ambrose and he brought it here. . . . He’s the only one from that, that, from Chicago, from what I know of that was in that and he came here just a little while ago and started it and now he’s the leader here.

A relatively high degree of transiency—each of the study participants had moved several times in their lives and some had moved several times during the course of one year of the study—contributed to their learning a wide variety of practices in order to survive and gain position in their communities. This ability to quickly learn multiple discursive and literate gang-connected forms begs the question of why these young people did not practice conventional, schooled literacy with the same proficiency (each of the young people could read and write conventional forms with some proficiency; they simply did not choose to do so). The previous analysis of the transformative and communicative power of these practices, as well as of the ways that these unsanctioned practices were connected to—but not necessarily sanctioned by—their families and local communities, suggests that these young people valued the unsanctioned practices more because of

the connections they made to culture and family. It can also be suggested from these data that the youth simultaneously recognized the limitations of the power of schooled literacies for their lives and used schooled literacies only when necessary.

Although the learning of gang literacy practices happened outside of formal, traditional institutions like the school, the learning that occurred and the knowledge that was generated was neither random nor automatic. As Jeffrey described the differences between tagging as art and the “throwing up of a sign” (Jeffrey’s words) that gangstas do, he alluded to differing levels of expertise and knowledge:

Jeffrey: Maybe they [the writers of a tag I showed him] didn’t know how to use the spray paint. Like they, it wrote different than they thought it would or something.

Moje: Is there kind of a, like a technique to it? An art to it?

Jeffrey: Just like if you had, if you put it too close when you do it [the wall], it like drips so if, and if you do it far away at a certain place it like, it goes on smooth. It’s like, like if you see taggers that do it nice you could see it ’cause they know how to use the can and stuff and they have the fat tubes where they poke a hole, they make the hole bigger so it comes out fatter . . . and they know how to like make it flare or where it goes dark to light.

Later in the same interview:

Moje: How do they, like those tricks, how do they, do they teach each other those tricks? . . . [If I were going to try to tag] Would you like teach me how to do that? Or do I just watch and practice?

Jeffrey: It depends on the person, like if you don’t want to tell ’em, let’s say I don’t want to tell you how I do that. Like I think they just get good from, I think that they just get, they just get good from doin’ it a lot and practicing on paper and stuff, like drawing. If they could draw good they could probably do good with spray paint, they’d know how to put it, how to use it.

Moje: So that’s why a lot of kids, you see ’em just practicing kind of in their notebooks at school.

Jeffrey: Uh-huh.

Jeffrey’s explanation illustrates that learning the practices of gang literacy not only requires membership and, indeed, a type of apprenticeship, within a community of practitioners—in this case either taggers or gangstas—but also that the learning process is one imbued with power. Possessing the

skills necessary to write “pieces”—short for masterpieces (cf. Hunt, 1996)—gives one power and position in the hierarchy and therefore might be knowledge or skill that one might not want to share. The dedication with which Mike and Anthony treated their graffiti writing practice (carrying notebooks, good paper, special writing instruments) supports Jeffrey’s contention that good taggers—“piecers”—were those who practiced their work and who were most “down with” gangs or tagging crews. The prestige associated with Mike and Anthony’s tagging/graffiti abilities—prestige that I observed in peer interactions at school—attests to the claim that these are powerful practices within their social groups.

Playing parts in many stories. Chile’s stories about her sisters’ experiences and Jeffrey’s assertions about being born into gang life allude to the ways that these young people represent their gangsta identities in various contexts such as home, school, and community. For the most part, the young people with whom I worked were able to maintain many of the external codes of gang practice in their home and community groups for several reasons. First, the dress codes and writings that were so important to their gang identities were in many cases derived from cultural and family practices. Second, many family members had been or continued to be connected to gangs. Third, family and community members were willing to see the dress codes and graffiti or tagging as one only aspect of the young people whom they knew and cared about. It was common, for example, for gangsta adolescents to attend the church I went to with Chile and to wear full gang dress, including gang colors. After services one might see young adolescents in baggy pants, cloth belts, and oversized windbreakers milling about with elderly women and men in dresses and suits or with young children in formal dresses and suits. What seemed an incongruous picture to an outsider was an everyday occurrence to members of the group.

These practices, however, were not accepted by all church and community groups: One young woman who participated in the first year of the study was a member of a local black Baptist church. During the year that I worked with her I never saw her sporting gang dress codes in school or in church despite the fact that she affiliated with a gang known as the “Lay-Low Crips.” Similarly, Kelly (1998) reports that one young woman in her study, although not explicitly affiliated with a gang, made a conscious choice to represent herself differently at school (wearing baggies and athletic shoes) from the way she represented herself at another black Baptist church in the Salt Lake community (wearing dresses and high-heeled shoes). Although she wore clothing popular with teens and identified with gangsta groups in school, she shied away from such clothing in her church com-

munity because she felt that she would not make a good impression on her church community members.

For the participants in my study (none of whom were African American), though, it was primarily in school and broader social settings that these dress codes signified negative group membership. As Jeffrey and I hung out in various restaurants and stores, for example, I noted frequent glances in our direction. On one visit to a local restaurant Jeffrey told me that he could hear the waitress behind him discussing our unusual appearance with the hostess. In school, a group of young women invited an ex-gang member to speak to a seventh grade class as part of their presentation on gang violence. As the young man (a 15-year-old Latino) entered the school he was taken aside by administrators and interrogated about his presence in the school. The young man was allowed to speak to the class, but the head principal sat in on his talk and the teacher was admonished for not clearing the visit with the office before giving her permission. When I discussed the situation with the teacher, she explained that his presence was a problem because he was “dressed like a gangster,” in dark colors, with a hat and belt buckle that at first glance sported gangster signs and script.¹⁶ As we talked about the assumptions made by the administration, she felt they were justified, and asked, “If he really had gotten out the gang, then why was he dressed up like a gangster?” To her, and to other school personnel, such cultural codes (in part aspects of both Latino/a and youth cultures) were always and only gang codes.

Although literacy practices such as dress codes were accepted by family and close community members, parents and adolescents were aware of the ways these codes might position the youth. Jeffrey’s mother explained to me, for example, that she routinely discouraged Jeffrey from wearing his baggiest shorts to work as a ticket taker at the local university football games:

I think that those shorts he wears are really weird looking, but if he likes ’em, then I’m not going to tell him not wear ’em. But I do tell him that other people will look at him and assume he’s a gangster and that he shouldn’t wear ’em when he goes to his job. I tell him that he can wear other shorts that don’t look so obvious.

As Jeffrey’s mother assumed, people who dressed as gangstas or who carried notebooks covered with tags were read as problems by school personnel and law enforcement officials. For example, during an Independence Day celebration one local community banned from public parks anyone wearing any kind of gang-related dress. Young people routinely reported their peers being shaken down by police officers as they cruised the streets on the weekends or even as they waited at bus stops. It was clear

to the young people that their dress codes, body movements, and writings were communicative and potentially problematic. Jeffrey commented:

I think they just look at 'em [gangstas] and say, "Look what he's wearin', look how he's got his head, his hair, look how he, how he walks, how he talks," and they just judge 'em like that and no matter what, they want [him] to be on the bad side.

Jeffrey, Chile, and Khek each knew when they could represent their gang-connected identities and when they should revise their appearances to convey other types of group membership. For Jeffrey, the hard work of articulation fell to the "other":

Well, a lot of times I know that people look at me for the way my, like I look and stuff, and I'll just say to myself, "I don't care." . . . If they don't like, like how I look then they shouldn't even look at me. . . . It's just this little thing that I have to do for myself.

For the young women in the study, however, articulation of their gangsta identities across multiple contexts changed as they grew older. In the third year of data collection, three of the young women—Chile, Yolanda, and Khek—made a conscious choice to dress differently from how they had in seventh and eighth grade, with Chile and Yolanda stating that they "didn't want to look like some chola or something."¹⁷ Motivated at least in part by their changing sexual relationships with young men, these young women sought to change their dress codes to present a more feminine, and less gang-affiliated appearance. In other words, these young women were attempting to disassociate publicly with gangs despite their continued allegiance to and affiliation with gang members. Chile and Yolanda explained to me that they wanted to dress in "more feminine ways" and that they didn't like "all that dark make-up and baggy clothes."

It is ironic that these changed practices, intended to represent them as softer and more refined women, led to violent physical exchanges with other young women. A different group of young women of the same ethnicity (initial data indicate that ethnicity was central to these particular relationships and interactions) "read" this changed dress code as a way of trying to claim more—and better—space, as disloyalty to the gang culture, and as a challenge to their identities and social positions. They responded by regularly challenging the first group both verbally (in oral and written exchanges) and physically. These interactions were aggressive—and perhaps desperate—ways of carving out new spaces or maintaining the spaces they had taken hold of. For both groups of young women, these verbal and physical interactions served not only to claim or protect space, but also to position others in negative social spaces.

Thus, as these young people attempted to be part of the many different stories being written for and about them, they found it necessary to change some practices or to articulate particular stances on their practices. Jeffrey, for example, refused to change his mode of dress unless urged to by his mother, for whom he had immense respect. Similarly, Mike and Anthony enacted gangsta identities regardless, it seemed, of whether they were at home, in school, or out on the street. By contrast, the young women involved in the study—Chile, Yolanda, and Khek—adopted a similar stance when I first met them, but began to negotiate different stances—or stories—as they got older. As each of the young women entered high school, they moved toward what they saw as more feminized, less gang-connected identities in terms of both dress and written literacies, even though they continued to interact in the world of gangs on a regular basis.

IMPLICATIONS

What do these findings suggest for literacy theorists, researchers, and teachers? I often have been questioned in the last three years about how this research—while “fascinating”—can make any contribution to school pedagogy, curriculum, and practice. The implication is that teachers do not have time to think about the linguistic sophistication of and motivations for gang practices. I want to suggest, however, that these analyses highlight several aspects of adolescent life and learning practices that educators—researchers, teachers, and administrators—*must* consider if we hope to extend learning opportunities to all students.

First, as suggested by various theorists (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978), the literacy and language practices that I have outlined here are communicative and transformative in the sense that they were used to make and represent meanings, to change or construct identities, and to gain or maintain social positions in a particular social space. Although the practices are often devalued as idle amusements unrelated to school, or are vilified as violent and deviant, they must nevertheless be considered as central aspects of the everyday practices of young people, practices that contribute to their identity construction and representation. As such, we need to consider ways to acknowledge and perhaps use such practices in pedagogy and curricula. Brian Street (1998) argues that “we can no longer, if we ever could, afford the luxury of debates about language, curriculum, and pedagogy that are located only in educational contexts: The wider context of world economic and organisational development impinges at every point.” We need to find ways to support youth as they seek to articulate their social and literate practices to those privileged in school and broader economic and social settings.

The young people with whom I worked took pleasure in their literacy practices and spoke with interest and pride about the different gang sets, relationships, and identities. The practices allowed them to develop and maintain relationships and to make sense of an increasingly complicated world in which they and their families were often marginalized on the basis of physical, economic, and linguistic markers. The gang practices provided stories for them to tell about their lives, as illustrated by Chile's stories of her sisters, and allowed them to construct identities in relation to a group, to become part of a larger, unfolding story. In the context of Salt Lake City, in particular, where the stories told often revolved around membership in the LDS church and around white, middle-class practices, street gang relationships provided alternative stories. These practices allowed them to be actors in a story, rather than passive watchers or listeners of someone else's story. Perhaps most important, these stories represented ways of being part of a group that valued their experiences even as they lived in a community and school culture that devalued, dismissed, or vilified them on the basis of their color, culture, or class,

Second, this analysis portrays the remarkable sophistication of the gang literacy practices that these young people used. Their literacy practices indicate a high level of metalinguistic awareness as they engaged in wordplay and in the alternative spellings they used to construct and represent identities or, as Jeffrey put it, "To have their own little way. Like a certain gang will have a certain way of spelling something and that's how they do it."

These abilities to manipulate language and to generate new codes illustrates that these young people have an interest in and motivation to explore language and express themselves, and yet these abilities are not particularly valued or supported in their school practices. As Eccles et al. (1993) argue, there is a mismatch between the ways young people are treated as they work to construct independent identities in adolescence and the kinds of school experiences and structures they are offered in junior high, middle, and high schools. Specifically, Eccles et al. suggest that the school practices offered to adolescents are often employed for the purpose of controlling students rather than challenging them. Similarly, it seems that there is a mismatch between the literacy abilities of many marginalized, gang-connected youth and the kinds of literacy activities they are offered in secondary school settings; not only were these youth offered school literacy activities that appeared designed to control them, but over the course of three years of data collection I observed these young people also being silenced or dismissed from many school settings. Khek, for example, described her eighth grade English and mathematics classes by saying,

They [the teachers] don't pick on, like to answer stuff, they don't pick on me. I'm sittin' there, yes, and every time like they would go down

every row and I'd just sit there and act like I'm writin' on somethin' and I won't even be talkin', but they'll just like look away and say the next person's name.¹⁸

The school experiences of these youth controlled, silenced, or dismissed them. But as this analysis reveals, the practices of these young people are motivated, expressive literacy practices, ones that we might try tapping in to, rather than simply trying to control, ignore, or eliminate. Indeed, if we can learn to work within the experiences and texts of these young people, then we may be able to participate with them in the expansion of their literacy practices and in the rewriting of school experiences for typically marginalized adolescents (cf. Lankshear, 1997).

I do not intend to imply that as educators we should valorize and uncritically invite unsanctioned literacy practices into schools and classrooms. As Darling-Hammond (personal communication, October 15, 1998) has noted, these practices represent a paradox. That is, there is potential for both transformation *and* tragedy in the literacy practices of gang-connected youth (cf. Moje & Thompson, 1996; Moje, Thompson, Christiansen, & Zeitler, 1997). The practices of these youth are transformative in the sense that they provide a means for the youth "to be part of the story" and to gain and maintain powerful positions within that story. What's more, although it can be argued that the transformative power of gang literacies is relegated to a narrow social space (cf. Moje & Thompson, 1996), gang literacy practices have at least influenced broad social arenas. For example, in their literacy practices these young people have created a commodity that the music (e.g., gangsta rap) and fashion (e.g., Ben Davis shirts, Tommy Hilfiger clothes) industries have co-opted for financial gain. These gang literacy practices have also received attention in the media and in school settings, and school personnel respond routinely with dicta regarding dress codes and graffiti designed to keep gangs out of schools. In Salt Lake City, a number of gang task forces were formed during the time of my study, and the news media routinely reported measures to reduce gang activity. Each of these measures shows that gangs have changed the face of schooling and society, albeit in ways that often further marginalize gang-connected students in mainstream school and social settings.

It is in the potential for further marginalization that gang practices become tragic. Common representations of marginalized youth illustrate that the practices, although powerful to the youths themselves, also serve to reinforce and reproduce negative, stereotypical, and misleading images of young people, images that support their continued marginalization. Moreover, many of the practices in which these adolescents engaged, as meaningful as they were in their lives, were physically dangerous to them and to others. Thus although the literacy practices of "gangsta" adolescents

provide a site for the generation of a cultural theory of literacy, one that acknowledges the transformative power of people's everyday literacy practices, these findings also raise difficult questions about how these students are labeled and further marginalized by their uses of gang literacy.

The tragedy, however, is not really that the transformative power of these gang literacy practices is limited to a narrow social space and that the young people are reproducing their own positions of marginalization; a similar narrowness, after all, could be found in any tightly organized group's practice. The literacy practices of academics, for example, are useful in a fairly narrow social space. A prime difference between the practices of gang-connected youth and those of academics is that academics operate in a relatively *privileged* social space. The tragedy of gang literacy practice, then, is not that the young people reproduce their own marginalization, but that the social space of these young people—even before they associate with gangs—often is devalued and, in some cases, vilified in school and social discourses. School and social structures constructed within these discourses support marginalization of youth who are identified as “at risk” and as “problems.” Thus although it can be argued that these youth reproduced positions of marginalization through their taking up of gang literacy practices, we must acknowledge that as educators we share responsibility for the tragic consequences of these practices if we fail to acknowledge their power, find ways to support youth as they construct their own stories, and teach them how to reconstruct the dominant story.

There is at least one other aspect of tragedy related to gang and other unsanctioned literacy practices. The young people in this study are sophisticated practitioners of literacy who are writing themselves into the world by means of their literacy practices. Nevertheless, these youth, each of whom was identified as unmotivated and “at risk” of failure in school, had little awareness of their own at-riskness or marginalization or of how their everyday practices might reproduce their marginalization. Although Jeffrey acknowledged that his gang-connected appearance might make people see him as a problem, he did not make a connection between his appearance and his school performance. Nor did Jeffrey—or any of the other youth in the study—acknowledge race or ethnicity as playing a part in their school relations. Unlike the resilient and successful adolescents that O'Connor (1997, 1998) and Foley (1990) studied, the youth in this study did not have an awareness of structural sources of oppression and marginalization or of actions they might take to change their marginalized positions or to change oppressive practices or structures. Chile, for example, when asked how to change the ways that gang-connected kids are regarded and to open up opportunities for gangsta kids in school, responded that, “They [gangstas] won't learn anything, they're just punks. They're just stupid.”

Although Chile appeared to accept the idea that gang-connected youth were the source of their own struggles, I documented culturally biased, racist, classist, and sexist ideologies among teachers, family members, and members of the broader community, ideologies that suggested a broader source for the struggles of gang and other marginalized youth. Teachers and other school personnel, for example, regularly spoke of “the gang problem,” and of “Hispanic female attitudes” or “typical Polynesian males.” Such attitudes provide evidence that the limited school success of these youth was not due to their “stupidity,” to use Chile’s term, but to a myriad of social forces. Because the youth are relatively unaware of their own marginalization, they do not know how to use their metalinguistic and metadiscursive knowledge to navigate other social spaces and challenge the ways that their social and cultural spaces are positioned in society. Street (1998) argues that language abilities themselves do not shape future work or life skills required in a “New Work Order,” in which complex forms of literacy are required for economic and social success (cf. Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996):

The answer is in the detail: The micro ways in which people deploy linguistic resources, including especially how they link communicative practices from one domain, such as literacy, with those of another, such as visual images. It is this communicative competence, knowing when and how to use resources from different channels, that affects abilities to operate in different domains. (p. 2)

Although the youth in this study are able to generate alternative stories or texts, they do not have the language and literacy tools and knowledge of how to deploy their tools across multiple contexts or spaces. Nor do they know how to construct *countertexts* (cf. Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991) that challenge and reconstruct the text of the dominant story that surrounds them.

The kind of empirical and pedagogical work necessary to develop such literacy and language tools and the metadiscursivity (New London Group, 1996) necessary to use them across contexts, however, needs to be more than an invitation to write and read about one’s experiences (cf. Delpit, 1988; Dressman, 1993; Lensmire, 1994; Willis, 1995). When expressive and progressive pedagogies such as the writing and reading workshops were used with these young people, neither the teacher nor the students brought forward such experiences as a site for learning about and deconstructing language. This is not surprising, because it is unlikely that students—any students—would trust a teacher’s exhortation to write about any and all experiences or to use graffiti or other unsanctioned codes in their writing for fear of further marginalization (see Moje, Fassio, & Willes, 1999).

It can also be argued that the simple inviting of experience would not be particularly productive; as Delpit (1988) argued in a different context, students will learn little from a pedagogy or curriculum based solely in their experiences. These young people, after all, already are quite proficient at these literacy practices and do not require formal schooling to hone their unsanctioned literacies. Most important, regardless of the power for transformation that these literacy practices afford young people in their peer and cultural groups, the practices as constructed in broad social settings are reproductive of stereotypical and negative images of youth, images that support their continued marginalization. Young people need to learn the power of many different literacy and discourse practices so that, like the native Alaskan students in Martha Demientieff's classroom (cf. Delpit, 1988), they know when particular practices are powerful and when they are reproductive. But they also need to learn something more than the idea that certain language and literacy practices are acceptable only in particular contexts; in fact, they need to learn to challenge such assumptions. As James Gee argues (cf. Lankshear, 1997, p. xviii), critical literacy involves both the juxtaposition of discourses *and* learning how to take action to contribute to a more just society. Thus we need to do more than bring, for example, gang literacies into classrooms, and let gang-connected kids know that these are powerful practices within gang or youth contexts, but not as powerful in other contexts. As educators, we need to work with youth to learn how the language and literacy practices they value might be used productively in other contexts to challenge dominant assumptions about literacy and social practice.

In this way we can support youth in the writing of their own stories, and teach them how to reconstruct dominant stories. For example, my colleagues and I have tried to "re-vision" existing pedagogies (cf. Moje, 1999; Moje & Fassio, 1997) to engage students in action-oriented reading and writing projects that teach kids to use their metadiscursive knowledge to read "how the past informs the present and how the present reads the past" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 124; see also Foucault, 1977). We asked them to study problems or issues that were important to them and to use multiple forms of representation to represent and discuss these problems and issues with their peers. We hoped that these projects would start with their experiences, but also move them to question their experiences as well as to question larger social values and norms. We also hoped that such projects, which relied heavily on multiple forms of representation, would provide opportunities to hone those forms and opportunities for students to reposition themselves as thinkers and agents of change in their classrooms and schools. While these projects were by no means perfect solutions (see Moje, 1999; Moje & Fassio, 1998), we did begin to encourage students—including many who were typically marginalized or disengaged—to use

their literacy practices as resources in school in ways that neither romanticized nor vilified the practices.

I do not claim to offer some sort of transformative or liberatory literacy tool that will work where others have not. After all, the youth I write about here will continue to face economic and social marginalization both in and out of school. In addition, schools are spaces in which powerful discourses of difference and power maintain inequitable relationships (cf. Moje, 1999). I do argue, however, that we can become more aware of what adolescents can do and of the power and sophistication of those practices that are so often dismissed as vandalism or laziness. If we reconceptualize our literacy theory, research, and pedagogy to acknowledge the tools at use for making meaning in unsanctioned practices, to work with the strengths that our students already possess, and to teach students how to navigate the many discursive spaces called for in new and complex times (cf. Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Lankshear, 1997; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1998), then we may be able to teach students tools that provide them with opportunities to be part of and to construct multiple stories in many different social worlds.

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Notes

1 According to the Salt Lake Gang Project (1996) street gangs generally operate with a network of members who affiliate with the gang to different degrees. Each gang has a leader who organizes the activities and commitments of hard core, associate, fringe members. Wannabes are those youth who adopt some of the practices of the gang—especially literacy practices—but who do not regularly associate with the gang.

2 Follow-up data collected early this year indicate that a number of the youth—especially the males—who participated in this study are turning increasingly to violent activity that does include the use of guns and other weapons. Female participants are not directly involved in these violent activities, but continue to “kick it” with young men who are becoming more involved in violent gang practices.

3 Gee used the upper-case letter “D” to distinguish between discourse as a stretch of conversation and Discourse as a way of “thinking, believing, valuing, and acting” (p. 131). In the remainder of the paper that any reference to discourses is intended to signify those ways of being, and I refrain from using the upper-case “D.”

4 The terminology used to talk about unsanctioned “youth groups” is complex, confusing, and disputed. In this work I follow the definitions and terms set out by the kids I worked

with, but I have checked these usages with other sources, most notably the work of Hunt (1996), who studied tagging and graffiti writing on the West Coast. The young people in this study distinguished between tagging and graffiti by arguing that tagging was the drawing of colorful characters done by individuals who were members of tagging crews. Tagging done by taggers was considered artistic, nonviolent, and individualistic. It was done to proclaim one's ability to tag, or to claim a position as an artist. Graffiti, by contrast, was written by members of street gangs and was used to claim territory. Although there were definite rules of graffiti writing that were established by each gang, the writing was often referred to as "sloppy," even by the writers. The purpose of gang graffiti was not to show oneself as an artist, but was to claim territory and to call for the destruction of a rival gang. As such, the writing of gangstas was group-oriented. All of the gang members usually would be listed in the graffiti, but the names were listed to impress on the reader of the graffiti the gang's size and strength. Gang-connected adolescents, however, did not refrain from tagging—or the creation of colorful characters. In fact, they much admired the ability to "tag," and those who were proficient could gain more powerful positions within the gang. The important difference to note, however, is that members of "tagging crews" would not necessarily consider themselves to be gang members. These distinctions are, as mentioned previously, highly disputed, especially by those young people who identify as "skaters" or "hip hoppers." They engage in what the gang-connected kids I worked with would call tagging—the drawing of colorful characters—but they call this art form "graffiti" and they resist the connection of graffiti writing with street gang activity (G. Davis, personal communication, June 1996).

5 It is also quite possible that the nature of the text may have discouraged the teacher from using it in a school-sanctioned writing activity. However, later in the year, the teacher reported that another teacher had brought some gang poetry to show her and produced the exact same poem. I asked Anthony about the authorship of the poem during the summer and shared with him the story about another teacher finding the exact poem attributed to a different author. Anthony replied, "Me and my friends wrote it—I swear it."

6 When I asked one young woman about the writing on her hand and notebook during school, the young woman—Khek—responded, "It's not tagging or graffiti. You can't get me in trouble because it's not school property. It's my notebook and my body. You can't get me in trouble." This was one of the first instances when I became aware of both the power and risk associated with tagging and graffiti.

7 As one of the adolescents wrote in a project about tagger versus gang graffiti, "Taggers graffiti is battling, the one that tops [is] the best and [it's] a word of statement" (cf. Hunt, 1996).

8 This reference is not intended to essentialize these practices on the part of young women and men. Indeed, these ways of knowing and being in the world, from the perspectives of symbolic interactionism and cultural studies, are learned in social and cultural practice and not essential or inherent to males and females.

9 Indeed, the data I have collected over the course of three years suggest multiple ways in which these practices are marbled with questions of various social relations too numerous to discuss here.

10 Many adolescents use the phrase "kickin' it" to indicate that they're "hanging out." Nevertheless, the language stems from gang relationships and serves to indicate the power of gang connections in a school environment. Adolescents who do not claim membership in or even allegiance to a gang nonetheless use affiliatory language as a way to show acceptance of gang practices among their peers.

11 To be "locc'd out" means to be crazy. The o in "loc" is long.

12 Dark glasses were originally referred to as "locs" because they were worn by musicians to cover their eyes when "locc'd out." The glasses were then worn by drug dealers to signify being "locc'd out." The green corduroy slippers are also often worn by drug dealers or members of gangs who are active in drug dealing businesses. Thus one word is transported from the act of being high (locc'd out) to the glasses worn by people who are high, to the

shoes worn by people who sell drugs to make other people high. The phrase “locced out” is also used to convey that someone is crazy, wild, or angry. The dark glasses and green slippers are examples of what Baudrillard refers to as the proliferation of signs, wherein the signified (the state of mind of musicians) comes to be a sign in and of itself. The adolescents are unaware of this shifting of the sign and simply know locs (the glasses or the slippers) as objects, as real, rather than as signs of another referent (Baudrillard, 1988).

13 The gang task force defines this dress code as “sagging,” giving the following explanation for the style: “This is commonly recognized as a sign of disrespect similar to verbal/symbolic obscenities [*sic*].”

14 See Kristeva (1989) for a brief discussion of connections between ritual practices of secret societies or religious groups and the body codes or gestural practices they use to signify.

15 One Latina girl who is closely connected with gangs, but claims not to be in a gang, told the author that white girls often thought she was a gang girl. “They think I wear all dark makeup. I don’t wear dark makeup,” she said. “I don’t wear brown lipstick or black around my eyes. I wear white eye shadow and hardly any eye liner.” Her comments indicated that dark make up is considered an indicator of gang membership by many adolescents. It is interesting, too, that assumptions about dark make up seem to be confounded with assumptions about darkness (skin, hair, eyes, lips) in general, indicating that although gang membership is by no means limited to ethnic minority adolescents, those adolescents marked by other than white skin and light hair, particularly in the Salt Lake culture, are assumed to be connected to gangs.

16 Upon inspection we found that the hat identified the young man as a member of group dedicated to helping adolescents exit gangs, but that the words on the hat were, indeed, written in gang script—specifically, Old English lettering—and that gang-like signs were included on the hat.

17 According to Chile, a “chola” is a tough-looking female who is associated with gangs. The term comes from the word “cholo,” which, according to Vigil (1993), is used in Latin America to describe Indians who are “only marginally acculturated to the Hispanic urban culture” (p. 97). The young people of Salt Lake City use the term to refer to the gang-connected men and women of the ’70s and ’80s, and call young women “cholas” when the young women wear dark makeup, baggy pants, and “big hair.”

18 It is important to note that Khek concluded her description of how she was never asked to speak in her eighth grade classes by saying, “I just love it.” As a result of years of schooling and perhaps her move into adolescence (see Gilligan, 1993), Khek is complicit in her own silencing, a point that is important to remember as we think about school policy and classroom teaching, but that nevertheless does not provide a rationale for continuing the silencing process.

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