

A love for the thing: The pleasures of rap as a literate practice

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Four young writers and rappers are profiled in this study that explores how pleasure in composing, culture, and out-of-school literacy can affect in-school engagement and achievement.

A friend who teaches English at an alternative high school tells of her frustration over the last several years with students who drum rhythms on the tables, exchange whispered rhymes, or surreptitiously scribble lyrics in their notebooks when they're supposed to be working. "Stop making noise! Stop talking! Stop writing!" she has admonished these students, even as some part of her brain registers that the last of those commands, at least, seems a strange directive from a language arts teacher. Her annoyance with these students came not only from the fact that they were ignoring their assigned classroom tasks, but also from the particular genre in which many of her subversive composers worked. Rap, she thought, was ungrammatical and thematically problematic. It was decidedly *not* the stuff of the English classroom.

Recently, though, this teacher has begun to look at rap, and at her students who participate in it, differently. In part, she came to realize that she was fighting a losing battle. Also, though, she has started to recognize that these students are not just rapping—they're writing.

Background of the study

I am interested in my friend's story because of my ongoing interest in teenagers' and young adults' imaginative writing practices, including—though not limited to—the composing of rap lyrics. From 2001 through 2003 I documented the "out-of-school" (Hull & Schultz, 2002) composing practices of 10 inner-city Chicago youths (Weinstein, 2002a). Seven of them had dropped out of high school, either permanently or for a period of time; one was already a mother; one had graduated from high school and enrolled in a community college only to leave without finishing; three were attending community college. All wrote outside of school in ways that sometimes belied their performance in the classroom. This extracurricular imaginative writing took the form of poetry, song lyrics, and occasionally prose.

I make a distinction between poetry and lyrics here specifically because although all of the rappers in the study viewed rap as a form of poetry, they also differentiated between writing specifically intended to be performed to a beat and writing they intended to be read on the page. I concluded that imaginative writing served a variety of purposes for these youths. It was

- a venue for identity construction and experimentation;
- an outlet for expressing resistance to family, school, community, and societal norms; and

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- a way to vent sexual and emotional frustration, confusion, and desire.

I also found that many of the writers had developed productive learning strategies and demonstrated sophisticated understandings of literary features such as figurative language, voice, and rhythm. For all of the writers, though, the one constant was that they derived some kind of pleasure from the writing they did outside of school. That pleasure took a variety of forms, as this article will illustrate, but it was either implicit or explicit in all of the other motivations I observed.

While elements of pleasure were apparent in the practices of all 10 writers, the space limits of a journal article constrain me from focusing on all of them. I focus here on one specific genre—rap—and on the four Chicago writers who composed in that genre. Crazy, Jig, TeTe, and Mekanismn (all names are pseudonyms) are all writers and rappers who, along with several other friends, make up a rap collective called the Maniacs. Here I look at the central role that pleasure plays for these young rappers, and at what we can learn about young people's engagement with literacy more generally through the ways these four engage with rap. The quotations in each section are from interviews I conducted with each of these young people.

Crazy

I've known Crazy for about five years. He was 18 at the time of this study, but when I taught at the alternative high school that many of the writers in the study attended, he was the youngest student there. Crazy left every term-end awards assembly laden with certificates. I'm fairly certain he never received a grade lower than an A. He was and is unfailingly polite; the only context in which I have heard him say negative things about anyone is when he is doing battle through his rap lyrics—although his siblings insist that he had a real temper when he was younger.

Crazy started writing during his second year at the school, and continues to write both poetry

and rap lyrics: "I was given the challenge to write a poem one time, and I liked the challenge. Next thing I knew, I was writing, and kept writing...." Although Crazy does a lot of creative work (graphic design, playing the keyboard), he says that he has found certain specific satisfactions in writing:

You can take certain things that [happen in] life and alter them into a different certain way. It's like a puzzle, you gotta piece everything together, and if you don't get it, you won't understand it, and if you don't look deep enough inside it, you won't get the true meaning.

Jig

I've always been into music to begin with, but I started writing poetry in second grade. Ever since then I've been getting better and better, and when I got into high school, I started winning contests, like whenever I would enter a contest with my poetry I would always win, so people would always tell me I need to get my poetry published and have a book or something like that. And then my friends, they was already rapping, and they told me that since I had been writing poetry for so long, that it's basically rap. Just have to put it to a flow, or put it to a beat. And so I did it, like, a couple times, then we made a couple songs, and then they let people hear 'em; they was like, "You good, you ought to keep on going."

Jig is Crazy's older brother, and the acknowledged leader of the Maniacs. Their younger sister TeTe likens Jig's role in the group to that of a father. This 21-year-old takes care of business. When I told him, by computer instant message, that I needed them to sign photo releases, he replied that he'd need to look the document over: "You know I don't sign anything without reading it." When I dropped off the release a few weeks later, I jokingly said, "Here you go. Have your lawyer look it over, and let me know if you want anything changed." To which he responded, "I *am* the lawyer."

TeTe

At 15, TeTe was the youngest of the four Maniacs in this study. She is the sister of Jig and Crazy, and

shares their good nature, intelligence, and love of music and writing:

I always wrote poetry, 'cause I get that from my momma. But when I heard my brothers rapping—and I always knew how to rap—but I heard my brothers rapping, I'm like, "I could do that." So I wrote my stuff down, like yeah, okay. [Now] I think I could be, like, equal to my brother Crazy, on my best day. [Laughs, then points to Jig.] [But] I can't touch him.

TeTe is very conscious of the sibling hierarchy; she tells me at one point that she feels like her two older brothers got the best of the intelligence and talent, and she got stuck with the leftovers. Whenever she says things like this, though, it's with a mixture of ruefulness and humor. It's true that she doesn't earn the straight As that have become the norm for Jig and Crazy. Yet TeTe's no slouch: She writes poetry and prose, and is a full member of the Maniacs with her own very distinct persona. She proudly tells stories of having surprised her brothers and their friends with her wordplay. She also has her own singing group with a couple of girlfriends. Within this group, she is able to take on the leadership role that Jig embodies for her and Crazy.

Mekanismn

Mekanismn, age 22, is another graduate of the alternative high school, where he was in some of my classes. He's a smart guy, creative and insightful, but his handwriting and spelling were always atrocious. In order to be able to read the lyrics he was constantly writing and occasionally submitting to the school literary magazine, we found ourselves more than once sitting in the school library during lunch or after school, him reading his words out loud while I typed them into the computer, asking questions about meaning and format as we went along. These moments made me feel better about not being able to understand Mekanismn's writing (in the most literal sense—I had a terrible time decoding his handwriting), because there were often long pauses in his read-

ing while he tried to figure out exactly what those squiggly marks said.

I first interviewed Mekanismn for a paper I was writing on teenagers' ethnoracial self-perceptions. At the time, he resisted the idea of labeling himself, to such an extent that I worried that I was betraying him when I identified him in the paper as African American. When I later asked him about rapper Eminem's movie *8 Mile* (Grazer, Iovine, & Hanson, 2002), and whether he felt that the (white) main character in that movie was ultimately accepted by his (primarily black) audience because he shared their class background—suggesting that perhaps class trumps race—he calmly but quickly disagreed: "Hip hop is not a class, is not a race. Hip hop takes anybody. Hip hop is skill—you gotta have skill. You can be a damn duck, you know what I mean?"

Social literacies studies

The fundamental framework for this study is provided by scholarship in the field of social literacies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; de Castell, Luke, & Egan, 1986; Gee, 1996; Knobel, 1999; Street, 1995). Writers in this field argue that reading, writing, and verbal communication are all deeply contextualized activities that can only be understood by exploring the people, places, and powers that surround and infuse them. The field also emphasizes the multiple nature of literacy (hence the pluralizing of the term), challenging the traditional wisdom that one is either literate (meaning that one can read and write in the dominant linguistic codes) or not.

Working within this framework, a number of writers have explored the kinds of reading and writing in which adolescents engage for purposes not directly related to the classroom (Knobel, 1999; Moje, 2000; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Weinstein, 2002b). These studies have delved into a variety of texts, including graffiti, how-to manuals, video games, and notes to friends. In each case, the authors demonstrated that despite the panic over low test scores, low

standards, and low skill levels, children and teenagers from across class and ethnic or racial categories eagerly read and write when they see a purpose to it and when they get something out of it.

The hip hop discourse

In her article, “‘To Be Part of the Story’: The Literacy Practices of Gangsta Adolescents,” Elizabeth Moje (2000) posited graffiti tagging—the most basic form of graffiti—as an “unsanctioned literacy practice” which, though dismissed or even criminalized by many adults, accomplishes important expressive and educational work for the adolescents in her study (Moje, p. 651). Like tagging, rap is an oft-criticized practice—rap and graffiti, in fact, are both part of the cultural movement known collectively as hip hop. The terminology here can be confusing: since the beginning of this movement in the late 1970s, hip hop has been used as a general term to refer to four interrelated practices. The four elements of hip hop are

1. DJing, the manipulation of sound samples using turntables or digital editing;
2. rapping, the vocal performance that accompanies DJing;
3. graffiti; and
4. break dancing.

However, it is currently common to differentiate between so-called “conscious” rap, which critiques social, economic, and racial conditions, and the better-selling, often less thematically complex, mainstream variety by referring to the former as hip hop and the latter as rap.

Yet this use of the terms is fraught with class-based biases that generally go unexamined. For this reason, and simply to avoid confusion among readers unfamiliar with the general field, in this article *hip hop* refers to the overall youth culture movement and *rap* to its vocal performances (and their written texts).

That passionate debates like this exist within the hip hop world demonstrates the importance artists and fans place on the music. Mekanismn expresses his view of hip hop as central to not only black youth culture, but also African American culture generally, in an essay he wrote for a high school class. (Note that Mekanismn here uses hip hop to refer to both the overall movement and its music; the theme of his essay is conscious rap, and his use of the term *hip hop* to refer to certain kinds of rap music reflects this theme.)

Hip hop...brings people together. It's almost like a blessing from God. I know it is for the street cats because it gives them the extra strength to keep going and make more hip hop music. Black people got to love this something that they made, because what they were subjected to and had to go through brought this hip hop, a beautiful movement that everyone could appreciate.

The fact that hip hop as a whole is historically and culturally connected to African American dialect, music, and performance makes it unsurprising that the movement has received much negative attention from the press, activist groups, the government, and law enforcement, even as rap in particular rakes in cash for production companies, advertisers, and music video channels. Hip hop started out as, and is still primarily, a youth movement, so it is unsurprising that many older African Americans find it objectionable. Rap in particular foregrounds many of the elements that have historically been sites of struggle for African Americans. For example, rappers are unapologetic about their use of African American Vernacular English; the highly sexual nature of many popular rap songs plays into old and often-damaging stereotypes of black men and women; and themes of violence and drugs reinforce stereotypes of blacks, and black youths in particular, as dangerous, immoral, antisocial beings.

Yet, given both the political implications of assuming rap's negative nature and the intense engagement with writing that rap can inspire in teenagers, it is critical to recognize that a concept

like “unsanctioned” is a matter of perspective. For the writers in this article, rap—and the hip hop culture that spawned it—is an absolutely central discourse, sanctioned by their peers and by the artists they admire.

The significance of hip hop as a Discourse—that is, a widespread set of practices with established norms, conventions, and standards (see Gee, 1996)—within which and from which to write became clear to me as I simultaneously began to listen to the music and to examine the ways that Jig, TeTe, Crazy, and Mekanismn talk about their writing. Rap inspires a passion in each of the Maniacs that I do not see in their discussions of traditional academic genres and forms. Yet my purpose here is not simply to describe a hierarchy of which kinds of literacy practices matter in the worlds of urban teens. Like all of us, young people can participate enthusiastically in a variety of literate discourses when they are free to draw on the rhetorical skills they have already developed, and when those skills are recognized and respected. What I want to do in the rest of this article is to draw attention to the literate nature of rap and to the significance of adolescents’ often intense engagement with it in terms of their development of rhetorical skills—in other words, to foreground rap as a site of learning, not only for youths who learn about writing through the genre, but also for researchers and educators who can learn about those youths through rap texts. And in order to understand why and how so much learning can occur through this genre, I have found that I have to foreground the part that pleasure plays in the process.

Why pleasure matters

By not acknowledging the deep visceral pleasures black youth derive from making and consuming culture, the stylistic and aesthetic conventions that render the form and performance more attractive than the message, [scholars] reduce expressive culture to a political text to be read like a less sophisticated version of *The Nation* or *Radical America*. (Kelley, 1997, p. 37)

The young Chicago writers I worked with experience pleasure in writing variously as fun, comfort, and satisfaction, and it is these elements more than anything else that keeps them composing. Still, as Kelley points out, observers may be tempted to see the pleasure of writing as less significant than, say, a text’s practical functions or its use as a tool of social critique, particularly when the text is produced by the socially marginalized. Indeed, Barthes (1973/1975) noted that pleasure has traditionally been viewed as something purely personal and conservative in nature:

An entire minor mythology would have us believe that pleasure (and singularly the pleasure of the text) is a rightist notion. On the right, with the same movement, everything abstract, boring, political, is shoved over to the left and pleasure is kept for oneself.... On the left, knowledge, method, commitment, combat, are drawn up against “mere delectation” (and yet: what if knowledge itself were delicious?). On both sides, this peculiar idea that pleasure is simple, which is why it is championed or disdained. (pp. 22–23)

Enjoying what one does seems like a desirable goal—maybe not one that everyone can always achieve, but certainly one that is preferable to being bored or frustrated. But the reality is that too much enjoyment can cause problems—if too many people start to demand that work and school become places where they can be intellectually, emotionally, and physically engaged, it could be inconvenient, to say the least, in sites where efficiency has been highly prized. Pleasure takes time—time for creative processes to unfold; time to experiment and fail and revise and try again; time to linger, to think, to talk, to share. When teachers and administrators—indeed, whole districts and states—are focused on raising test scores, that time quickly starts to seem like a luxury. Yet, in deciding that we cannot afford the time that pleasure—that immersion in the processes of learning—requires, we are, however inadvertently, making a much larger decision: that we don’t believe that different ways of thinking about, understanding, and engaging with the world are either possible, useful, or desirable.

Given the current emphasis on quantitative measurement as both the format and the goal of education, teachers may worry that attention to students' pleasure in the process of learning is a luxury that they cannot afford. They may also worry about how such attention could be perceived.

Sometimes people assume that if the teacher is interested in pleasure, then he or she must be very lax with regard to teaching the conventions that enable successful communication. That is, people locate pleasure in a hazy binary with discipline, and then assume that our pedagogic mission has nothing to do with the former and everything to do with the latter. (Johnson, in Skorczewski, 2001, ¶5)

The writers in this article demonstrate that it is pleasure that leads to engagement with learning, attention to detail, and a desire to excel. It is also—as much as anything can be in this complicated world—an end in itself. Imagine if you were discouraged from listening to the music you love or from reading the books you enjoy. Imagine if you were judged and evaluated on each idea you came up with in an impromptu conversation, in the midst of thinking aloud. Imagine if someone followed you around, telling you which of the poets you love “counts” as a writer.

Pleasure is a quality-of-life issue. It is also a quality-of-learning issue. For Crazy, Jig, TeTe, Mekanismn, and countless others, the kind of learning that involves taking risks, trying new things without worrying about getting everything “just right,” and pushing oneself past previous knowledge and accomplishments, looks a lot like play, like enjoyment—like pleasure.

Forms of pleasure

As I have said, the pleasures that I see in the way the Maniacs talk about their writing take a variety of forms. Sometimes, what comes through is a feeling of solidarity, of belonging, of identifying oneself as part of a larger whole—what I term the pleasure of “Discourse membership.” Sometimes, conversely, there is a pleasure in es-

tablishing one's individuality—referred to here as “self-expression and self-representation.” Finally, there is the sheer fun of the experience itself: pleasure as “play.”

The divisions between these categories are at times blurry. For example, although I call Crazy's enjoyment of putting the concepts in his head into external verbal form “self-expression,” his comments also point to the significance of having a ratified audience—members of a specific Discourse—with whom to share those creations. Jig's experimentation with identity similarly blurs the lines between self-representation and fun, as the phrase *identity play* suggests. Nonetheless, it seems to me that identifying various categories of pleasure, while acknowledging the tenuous nature of the divisions, allows us to gain a nuanced understanding of what it is that makes writing and oral performance meaningful to young people. Therefore, in the following sections I define, illustrate, and analyze each of these pleasures as the Maniacs experience and reflect them.

Pleasure 1: Discourse membership

There is a particular element of pleasure that comes through again and again as the Maniacs talk about their craft: a deep connection to the rap genre within which they work, and to the larger culture of which it is a part. This connection is what makes hip hop so powerful for youths: They know and care about it because it's *theirs*. They have grown up listening to rap (for many years now the most public component of hip hop), and that connection between fans' personal histories and the history of the musical form creates a special bond. Mekanismn tells me that he “grew up in” hip hop, that he is “engrossed in it,” that he “lives it”:

That's what I do, I'm a hip hopper. That's what I want to make my life. That's what I want to make my living off, hip hop music.

The connection that Mekanismn feels with hip hop generally, and rap specifically, reflects a common emphasis within the Discourse on the conscious awareness of hip hop as a cultural and historical movement. Representations of hip hop culture emerged within a decade of Kool DJ Herc's first public use—at Bronx street parties circa 1973—of two turntables to extend the instrumental “breaks” on old funk and soul records to which black and Puerto Rican “b-boys” (the “b” comes from “break”) performed their increasingly rhythmic, gymnastic, and gravity-defying moves. The movie *Wild Style* (Ahearn, Braithwaite, & Dickson, 1982) featured “the first full-length account of all four elements in hip hop culture” (B-Boys.com, n.d.), publicly announcing hip hop as a coherent and thriving youth movement.

Rap, specifically, has a strong tradition of self-reference, intertextuality, and attention to the history of the musical genre and to the larger hip hop culture. Crazy follows this genre-referencing discursive model in the following freestyle:

How many ya'll know how to kill beats
Without having to breathe deep
Surpassed Jay-Z's class
Lost myself
But I found me in stealth
Purple pills
Will just slow myself
Until my invasion
Released like I dropped 50
But I'd rather place an X
Just to Detonate and Massacre....

Here, Crazy has some fun formulating rhymes around references to rappers Jay-Z, Eminem, 50 Cent, and DMX. While some of the references are obvious, like the overt mentions of Jay-Z and 50, the others require specific knowledge. Eminem is alluded to twice: “lost myself” is a play on the Detroit rapper's Academy Award-winning song “Lose Yourself,” and “Purple Pills” is the title of a song by Eminem's group, D12. And while I did

catch on to the DMX reference in “I'd rather place an X” (I know that DMX is a favorite rapper of both Crazy and Jig, and that he is often referred to simply as “X”), it took me a few reads to pick up on the fact that the letter “X” is followed by the capitalized words “Detonate” and “Massacre.” Put the three capital letters together and you have...DMX.

Crazy's decision to incorporate allusions to a number of popular artists in a freestyle about his own experience and skills reflects the intensity of his identification with the artists and texts of the genre. The imaginative way he carries out the project demonstrates the *pleasure* he takes from in-group textual play that, by definition, only participants in the rap Discourse can fully appreciate.

Pleasure 2: Self-expression and self-representation

If connection to a beloved Discourse community is one pleasure that young rappers experience, a more individualistic pleasure is equally important. This kind of pleasure becomes apparent when Crazy speaks of the act of creating: “Like a painting, you make something, like an image, and only a certain number of people that see it can understand it.” Crazy derives pleasure from the act of creating, but this comment suggests that he also enjoys the control that imaginative writing gives him over who can understand his words and how they understand them. There is a certain thrill in exclusivity—in being a fan of a little-known band, in being invited to join a selective club. Obviously, exclusivity can create huge problems in that people on the inside have a certain power over those who are excluded. Yet my sense is that for Crazy, the pleasure comes not so much from being able to exclude people from his audience as from being able to use writing to externalize his imaginative world in order to draw responses from those for whom that world resonates.

Jig actually separates himself into two identities in order to have maximum control over his self-representation and perception by others. I

first learned this while perusing his Internet postings. Jig, Crazy, and TeTe regularly post freestyles on a thread called “Let’s Get Some Freestyles...,” which is part of the message board section of the website of popular rhythm and blues artist Alicia Keys (at www.aliciakeys.com/host.html). Reading through the freestyles, I came to the following entries:

Sick Wicked (of The Maniacs)

Ayo, this is my remix to X-tina’s “Dirrty,” well at least the rap part, hope ya’ll like it.

Artist: Christina Aguilera

Sick Wicked’s verse:

I wake up at night

Right around 3:30

Tear this muthafucker down

If the party ain’t dirty

Chickens surround me

Probably 30

Had to dismiss a few

Cause they stink from herpes....

Jig (of The Maniacs)

Damn Sick, you takin’ the boards over, I’m feeling that, you got a [weird] sense of humor dawg fa’real.

Although I hadn’t read anything by this “Sick Wicked” on the boards before, his name sounded familiar. Seeing that Jig was currently online (he’s on my instant message list, and I on his), I immediately sent him a message and we corresponded:

sueweinst: Hey, I’m just reading your latest posts. Can I ask a quick question?

Jig: yeah, wassup

sueweinst: Ummm...didn’t you tell me that Sick Wicked is your alter ego?

Jig: lol yes [“lol” is standard instant message shorthand for “laughing out loud.”]

sueweinst: So you’re basically talking to yourself

Jig: lol that’s about the size of it lol

sueweinst: Very funny. I’m enjoying it.

Jig: Don’t tell no one that Jig and Sick Wicked is the same person though...i’m just hav-

ing a little fun, seeing who is going to catch onto it

Like other posters to online message boards and chat rooms who take on more than one identity, Jig is having fun with identity here, as he says himself. But it is also clear that Jig has a sense of how he wants his audience to perceive him—Jig—as a writer, and the pleasure that he describes as “fun” in taking on an alternate persona is also, it seems to me, a pleasure in having control over exactly who people think he is as a writer. This becomes clear when I ask him to explain the difference in the two personas:

If I’m saying some decent stuff, then that’s me as Jig. But if [other freestylers] just said some crazy stuff that don’t really mean nothing, then Sick Wicked [responds]; I don’t care, just saying something.

If Crazy gets pleasure from eliciting understanding from select others, and Jig gets pleasure from controlling others’ perceptions of him, then TeTe’s style has at least in part developed out of a sheer desire to be heard. TeTe sees female rappers like Trina and Lil’ Kim as models for her own hypersexual rhymes. When I ask her why she chooses sexuality as a primary theme (which I will come back to in the next section), she explains that it grew out of the fact that she has two older brothers who were already writing and rapping by the time she started out:

When you grow up and everybody else [is] already doing something, I want to come out and let everybody look at me like, “Man, I’m gonna notice her.” And I was the only girl [in the Maniacs]...I’ve always been the youngest, and I’m the only girl, so if I put something out, I want them to be like, “Man, hold on, let me stop and retrace.”

TeTe literally wants to make people stop and notice her. Clearly, in an extended family of composers (Mekanismn and the other Maniacs have all been friends of the family so long they might as well be a part of it), being able to use one’s

words to draw attention away from the rest of the clan is a powerful pleasure for this little sister.

For these writers, one motivation for continuing to compose is that it allows them to manipulate the way that others respond to them; they control how others *see* them by controlling what others *hear*. They use writing to craft an identity that can be communicated with an audience, and when the writers sense that they have done that successfully, they experience a pleasure that then motivates them to continue to compose.

Pleasure 3: Play

Finally, there is the sense of pleasure as play, as sheer fun. As Jig does above, Crazy specifically uses the word *fun* to characterize the feeling of being in a rap battle:

Oh, it's fun, it's almost like you're a kid all over again, talking about somebody, like you back in elementary, bringing back the kid inside, it's just fun...I don't take it serious. I just know that they're trying to make me get mad. Like me being a kid again, like I can keep poking you just to try and get you mad [he mimics a child's mocking tone]: "I'm not touching you, I'm not touching you."

Crazy explicitly equates fun with being a child, suggesting that there is an innocence to play that allows one to get away with certain kinds of behavior that might be read differently outside of the playground—literally, the *ground* set aside for *play*, the ground on which everything that occurs is understood as play. This is significant given that battle rap is founded on play-transgression, much like the dozens, the traditional African American oral form of verbal insult-play most commonly known as the source of “yo’ mama” jokes. (A rap battle is a verbal competition between two rappers who “freestyle,” or improvise, lyrics against each other.) Off the playground, an insult to someone’s “mama” is dangerous indeed; but on the playground—whether the jointly recognized ground of The Dozens or of battle rap—“yo’ mama,” and everything else, is fair game. This is

exactly because the message is never really about anyone’s actual “mama,” but about “the humor, the creative pun, the outrageous metaphor” (Kelley, 1997, p. 34).

Winnicott (1971) suggested that the earliest manifestations of play in infants are directly connected to trust—in fact, he says, “playing implies trust” (p. 51). This implies that the level of play possible between individuals is directly related to the level of trust in their relationship. Take, for example, Jig, TeTe, and Crazy’s description of a marathon rap battling session Jig engaged in with a friend:

- Sue: How long will you guys go for?
 Jig: I think one time....
 Crazy: SIX HOURS [yelling over from the computer].
 TeTe: Six hours straight.
 [All laugh.]
 Jig: We were freestyling. He said something about me; we just went back and forth, until like seven in the morning.
 Sue: Did you go to the bathroom?
 Jig: We wouldn't even sit down, we were just standing up going back and forth....
 Stella (TeTe's friend): Nothing to drink?
 Jig: You don't even think about it. It's just that moment, the whole world changes, it's just you and that person.
 Crazy: Like in *The Matrix* [Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999].
 TeTe: Like you in the rap matrix.
 Jig: Your thoughts come a lot easier; everything comes a lot easier...you'll start going into your zone; that's the only thing you see at the moment. Everything starts to work a lot easier, a lot quicker.

The centrality of trust and comfort to this kind of involved play might explain why Jig and

his friend can happily “battle” for six hours, lost in pure flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). These two young men have known each other for years; they have developed their rapping and writing skills together; they both understand that their play battles are just that—play—and that what sound like attacks on the surface in fact represent a deep affinity. The lack of such a history and established camaraderie would also explain why public rap-battle events follow established routines, such as set time limits and clearly identified rules for naming winners: Rules are required where trust cannot be assumed. (A good example of such structured battles can be seen in rap superstar Eminem’s movie *8 Mile* [Grazer et al., 2002].)

When such trust, respect, and rules exist, the pleasure of rapping is that it creates an arena for individuals to play with roles that would not normally be available or appropriate to them. TeTe demonstrates this when she talks about her rap persona (TeTe is her rap name, not her real name):

I’m the type of rapper, I’m like a boy, I want you to notice me. And TeTe, she like the total opposite of me, I don’t usually shout...but TeTe, she loud and ghetto and proud of whatever she is [laughs]. And she gets anybody’s attention, and she said what she said, and you won’t understand, or you just won’t be able to look...You’re like, “Ooooo,” or I’ll try to chew somebody up, and everybody be like, “Ooooo.”

By playing her rap persona against her everyday identity, TeTe is able to draw a response from her audience that adds to her pleasure. Play provides a site where she can safely transgress the rules of gender and try different ways of “doing” sexuality and aggression in front of an audience that implicitly understands that it *is* play—a performance that they are not to take literally or expect her to live up to once she leaves the (literal or figurative) stage.

The way Jig, TeTe, and Crazy tell it, the whole point of rap battling is to provide maximum pleasure for both the performers and the audience. When I ask how they can gauge the audience’s ap-

preciation, they answer by *becoming* the audience—by performing the audience’s reactions:

- TeTe: It makes people, like, “Ooooo.” If you on the floor and you can make everybody like, “Oooo,” you wonderful.
- Sue: Can you tell the difference between when people think it’s just OK and when they’re blown away by it?
- Jig: Yeah. They’ll get more elaborate with it. [On the Alicia Keys message board] instead of saying, “That’s cool,” they’ll write a whole lot more, like “it made me think of such and such...”
- TeTe: [Or they’ll say] “Oh my god, that was *ignorant!*” [Ignorant in this case being a very good thing, because it suggests that one has gotten in a powerful dig at one’s opponent.]

Winnicott (1971) told us that parts of playing involve unrelated thought sequences—what might look like nonsense to an observer. “Free association that reveals a coherent theme is already affected by anxiety, and the cohesion of ideas is a defence organization” (pp. 55–56). It is striking to me how close Jig’s description of freestyle rap is to this definition; he says that when one is in the middle of a freestyle session, “your state of conscious thought over what you are saying is gone.” Although I don’t believe that Winnicott’s psychotherapeutic view of play as free association maps exactly onto the current topic of play in composition (especially as “cohesion of ideas” is implicit in the very definition of most kinds of composition—from freestyle raps to doctoral dissertations), it is useful to consider that a premature emphasis on form, structure, and organization in classroom activities related to writing may eliminate the possibility for students to play with new ideas—to be deeply creative. When teachers get cookie-cutter essays with predictable topics, organization, and transitions (“first/second/finally,” “conversely,” “in conclusion”), it is either because that is what they have directly requested or because the students have not had the time, space, or tools for initial play

with the material. Either that, or—to use Winnicott’s terminology—the students have developed an anxiety about schooling that causes every assignment and activity to be carried out “defensively,” in a way that is safe enough to get them by and to protect them from embarrassment, humiliation, censure, or failure.

Implications

Why focus this article on the theme of pleasure, rather than simply presenting findings on the Maniacs’ literacy practices and leaving it at that? There seems to be a connection between rap’s deeply social quality and grounding in a well-established Discourse and the pleasure that its practitioners get from it. We know, of course, that young people respond to activities in which they can take an active role and connect to their lived experiences and to the cultures of their families and communities. Rap as an activity encapsulates all of these features, and as a result, the connection that young people feel to it is particularly strong. That connection, I would argue, is a unique kind of engagement—an engagement that grows out of and nurtures pleasure. The connection has implications for the work of both literacy researchers and classroom teachers.

Implications for research

Young people who compose raps know that they are working within a Discourse in a way that is not necessarily true of other novice imaginative writers—young poets, for instance. Because the genre is so ubiquitous, novices are able to internalize the wide variations in the way rap is enacted, its limits and limitations, and the implications of opting for one or another way of “doing” rap. Part of the pleasure of doing rap, in fact, comes from the challenges that being conscious of all of these elements presents. All of the kinds of pleasure discussed in this article—community membership, self-expression and self-representation, and play—are experienced within, and through, the constraints and possibilities of the rap discourse.

Rap, then, provides an explicit example of the social character that Bakhtin (1986) argued is implicit in all acts of speech, and certainly in all imaginative verbal texts. Understanding the ways that participating in rap as a writer, performer, or fan connects people to their peers; to histories of oral, musical, and political discourse; and to communities that have the potential for social action adds to the field of literacy studies, an ongoing project of which is to document the work that literacy does for people, and that people do with literacy, across social contexts.

Implications for educators

An analysis of the connections between rap writing and pleasure also provides rich examples of what engaged learning looks like. Jig, Crazy, TeTe, and Mekanismn are participating in an ongoing educational project that reinforces the view of learning that John Dewey (2001) championed a century ago. Readers may wonder, however, if what is true for these four individuals necessarily holds true for the youths with whom they work. The Maniacs are all in their teens or early 20s, after all, and they are each clearly intelligent and capable of reflecting thoughtfully on their own practices. Yet only two—Jig and Crazy—have been consistent academic “standouts” in terms of grades, and they were all younger than they are now when they first started listening to rap and writing it. Whether they are in measurable ways “representative” of various student populations is well beyond the scope of this study to establish. But it is something that individual educators can begin to explore with their own students.

What educators might find if they begin asking such questions is that there are youths in their own classrooms who are, in terms of their literacy practices, quite like Jig, TeTe, Crazy, and Mekanismn. As we have seen, these four write and rap because they have a choice in the matter, because the genre resonates with their family and larger cultural backgrounds (the three siblings’ mother, for example, has long written poetry, and the cross-generational love of black music is evi-

denced by the portraits of 1960s soul artists hanging prominently in the family living room), and because they have some control over when and whether they participate in high-stakes evaluation of their abilities (say, in a public rap battle) and have as much opportunity as they want for assessment of their drafts and revisions (to use the language of the writing workshop) by themselves, their peers, or those whom they consider “experts.” They can be simultaneously serious and playful (think of Jig’s six-hour battle with his friend), and can work with topics that are significant to them at the same time that they are refining their ability to compose within generic norms.

Focusing on the intricacies of a genre that gives so many young people so much pleasure, and in which they participate so enthusiastically, can only enrich our understandings of how and why engagements with literacy develop. I believe that it can help classroom teachers to understand why their own students are or are not responding to the reading and writing they are asked to do in or for school, and to construct an educational environment in which the kind of engagement with learning that one sees among young rappers can develop.

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