

Written Communication

<http://wcx.sagepub.com>

Pregnancy, Pimps, and "Clichè Love Things": Writing Through Gender and Sexuality

Susan Weinstein

Written Communication 2007; 24; 28

DOI: 10.1177/0741088306296200

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://wcx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/24/1/28>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Written Communication* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://wcx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://wcx.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Pregnancy, Pimps, and “Clichéd Love Things”

Writing Through Gender and Sexuality

Susan Weinstein

Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge

This article examines the poetry, prose, and rap lyrics written by nine low-income, African American and Latino urban youths. The study is based on a 3-year research project using ethnographic methods including field observations, informal interviews, and collection of written artifacts. Part of a larger study of these youths' writing practices, this article focuses on the ways that they use writing to negotiate gendered and sexual identities in complicated, sometimes conflicting, ways. The article is grounded in the field of new literacy studies, and the author argues that educators and other youth workers can find, in the writing of youths like those in the study, an entrée into sometimes uncomfortable yet vitally important conversations about gender and sexuality. Through analysis of the writers' texts and conversations, the author models ways of drawing useful insights from such texts.

Keywords: *adolescent writing; gender and writing; out-of-school literacies; rap writing; youth poetry*

He wouldn't write poetry . . . he thinks that makes you gay

I wrote this poem and he got the girl

Be disrespectful and get no more nookie

I don't do love poems

I love my sistas, but I don't love no bitch

Ain't no man measure up to a female

I had a feeling that I was pregnant

I'm like a boy, I want you to notice me

Author's Note: This article includes sexually graphic poetry and rap lyrics.

All of the quotations above are from poems, essays, song lyrics, or comments by the young men and women in the current study. I start with their voices because these words capture the fascinating and often-contradictory ways that young writers experiment with and reflect on issues of gender and sexuality through their work. It's probably no surprise that themes of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality infuse young people's writing. Adolescence is, after all, a time of intensive self-construction, when young people take note of the myriad ways that those close to them and those in the public eye construct and perform their identities. And verbal composition, whether oral or written, is often if not always an act of "craft[ing] identity performances for rhetorical effect" (Gonçalves, 2005, p. xii), performances that are shaped by the various social worlds a writer inhabits. Thus, young writers provide perhaps the ideal subjects for observing and analyzing the process of identity construction. In this article, then, I analyze a variety of written texts and interview transcripts to demonstrate the ways that these texts reflect youths wrestling with questions of gender and sexuality.

Despite the ubiquity of sexualized images in American mainstream media, including nearly naked, erotically posed advertising models and graphic sex scenes in movies, television shows, and music videos, "It's not uncommon for [school] districts to say, 'Don't talk about it in the classroom,'" says sociologist Janice Irvine. "It's paradoxical that in a moment where the culture is more sexualized, we are eliminating any discussion of it in the classrooms" (Irvine, quoted in Vail, 2005, p. 21). The occasional sensationalized teacher-student sex scandal titillates media consumers while simultaneously reinforcing the norms against such relationships. Writing of the media coverage involving a female teacher-male student case in Canada, Cavanagh (2004) noted that

attention to graphic details in the alleged cases does not raise public concern about child abuse but produces a voyeuristic intrigue with the story. Instead of being held culpable for producing sexually graphic stories, reporters assume a high moral ground by condemning the accused teachers for the same actions they embellish through literary techniques and visual images to sell newspapers. (n.p.)

The problem is that, often, adults seem to conflate actual adult and/or youth sexual relations with talking openly *about* sexual relations. Such conversation, however, is imperative given the contemporary context of high rates of teen pregnancy, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and hypersexualized and stereotypically gendered imagery to which too many males and females feel pressured to conform. Adults cannot afford the

luxury of simply shutting out the issues that are almost impossible for young people to avoid or ignore. Fortunately, even as they struggle to make sense of sex and gender, this article demonstrates that young people can and will talk quite openly about these struggles. Together, their written texts and their commentary on those texts offer a unique glimpse into the negotiations in which young writers are engaged with their deeply gendered and sexualized worlds. Throughout this article then, I examine the texts generated by a diverse group of youths who share a particular geographical and social positioning, attending particularly to the ways that these texts speak to one another and to the popular texts that in some cases inspire them. In this way, I hope to contribute to the ongoing work done by researchers on adolescents' and young adults' uses of written and oral composition to find workable identities in the midst of multiple and shifting social contexts.

Background

From 2001 through 2003, I documented the “out-of-school” (Hull & Schultz, 2002) composing practices of 10 inner-city Chicago youths: Jig, TeTe, Crazy, Mekanismn, Dave, Leo, Patricia, Marta, Robbie, and José.¹ Five of the writers identify as African American and five as Latino; of the latter, one is of Puerto Rican heritage, three of Mexican heritage, and one of Peruvian heritage. At the beginning of the study, these writers ranged in age from 15 to 21 years. Seven had dropped out of high school either permanently or for a period of time, one was a teenaged mother, one had graduated from high school and enrolled in a community college only to leave without finishing, and three were currently attending community college. Seven had attended, at one time or another, an alternative high school where I worked as an English teacher for 2 years. All wrote outside of school in ways that sometimes belied their performance in the classroom. This extracurricular imaginative writing took the forms of poetry, song lyrics, and, occasionally, prose.²

At the end of my study, 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 a way to vent sexual and emotional frustration, confusion, and desire. These conclusions grew out of the analysis of data collected using ethnographic methodologies. For 2 years, I observed the writers in a variety of settings: the alternative high school that seven of them attended, their homes, an open-mic event at a local community

center, and a recording studio where the four rappers among the writers (Jig, TeTe, Crazy, and Mekanismn) recorded improvised, or freestyled, lyrics. As soon as possible after each of these encounters, I wrote detailed field notes, working from notes jotted during the observations when note taking had been possible and unobtrusive. I conducted at least one sit-down interview with each writer, in addition to numerous informal conversations that were documented in field notes. I collected copious written and audio-taped compositions from all of the writers; in addition, I regularly read and took notes—and occasionally participated in—an online, interactive message board on rhythm-and-blues artist Alicia Keys's Web site, where three of the writers traded freestyle rap lyrics and conversations about writing with peers from around the country and the world. All of the writers were fully aware that I was observing them and would be writing about them, all signed consent forms (or got parents' signatures if the writer was younger than age 18 years), and I made a point of reviewing my analysis with participants as often as possible.

Literacy as Gendered Practice³

Assumptions abound about the connections—and disconnections—between gender, communication, and literacy. Females talk; males act. Young women embrace, or are at least comfortable with, reading and writing; young men resist. Women are from Venus; men are from Mars.

Such assumptions are, of course, of little use in trying to understanding the far more complex ways in which people actually experience gender. Although individuals do perform gendered identities, gender itself is not monolithic—the qualities and parameters of particular gender constructions shift with shifting contexts. Nonetheless, a number of studies support the male-resistance-to-literacy thesis. Newkirk (2002) claimed that young men view literacy as feminine, and so resist reading and writing: “Girls . . . can construct workable identities that include positive attitudes toward schoolwork and literacy. For boys, and particularly African American boys, the role tension is far more extreme” (p. 40). Daphne Key (1998) countered Newkirk by presenting the stories of six African American women who once saw themselves as writers but who received social messages that inhibited—or completely ended—their engagement with imaginative writing. Key suggested that despite commonly held stereotypes of literacy as feminine, girls and women may resist public acts of literacy out of fear of “being perceived as ‘incorrect’—and having one’s incorrectness confirmed by possible spelling, usage, reading, or speech errors” (p. 5).

Each of the above studies posits gender as fundamental to how, when, and whether one reads and writes. Paul Willis (1977), writing some 20 years before Newkirk and Key, provided a more complex picture of gendered literacy practices. His work serves as a powerful caution against making causal arguments about individuals' practices based on a single characteristic such as gender. Like Newkirk's participants, Willis's working-class "lads" resist reading and writing as academic and therefore feminized and/or feminizing; however, Willis's study demonstrates that maleness alone cannot explain the phenomenon. For Willis, class, culture, and gender are experienced in concrete ways through schooling, work, and family life, and all of these elements interact to generate a resistance to reading and writing.

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) also complicated the gender-literacy connection, not by foregrounding considerations of class but by examining the role of specific social contexts and of interpersonal relationships in boys' literacy practices. For Smith and Wilhelm, "boys will go to great lengths to establish themselves as 'not female' and follow what their peer group establishes as gender-specific behavior. If reading or other literate activities are perceived as feminized, then boys will go to great lengths to avoid them" (p. 13). That "if" is significant—in situations in which imaginative writing is viewed positively by peers or admired others, the danger of feminization for male writers is not an issue. It is interesting to note that Smith and Wilhelm concluded that literacy in general is neither feminized nor rejected by the young men in their study. What is resisted by many of them is school literacy, and the authors concluded that it is resisted not because it's "girl stuff," but because it is "insufficiently social" (among other things) compared to the out-of-school reading and writing that the young men tend to do, or to share, with others (p. 147).

Cushman (1998), too, found that surface performances by young people don't reveal the full story of youths' literacy practices. Among the 7- to 19-year-olds in her study, "no one . . . wanted to be seen as standing distinct from their peers" (p. 59). Thus, youths often avoid appearing too smart, too literate, too . . . anything. However, in Cushman's study, as in the current one, appearances belie reality: "Many female teens found ways to obviate these group dynamics. They hid books and writing tablets around their house" and individually requested that Cushman supply them with books by Black women writers (pp. 59-60). Like rubbing a pencil on blank paper pressed against an engraving, Cushman found that in private and among intimates, publicly invisible literacy practices often emerge.

Poetry: For Girls Only?

In my years of teaching English, I have been confronted a number of times with the concept that writing—and poetry in particular—is “for girls.” TeTe tells of a male friend who saw poetry writing as emasculating:

TeTe: He wouldn't write poetry . . .

Stella (TeTe's friend): He thinks that makes you gay or something.

Jig: Sometimes when people think of poetry, they usually think of love, stuff like that. Poetry can be anything. 'Cause I write about anything.

Stella: Jig doesn't do stuff like that. He says, “Roses are dead [all laugh], violets are gray.”

In this exchange, TeTe and Stella start out sounding dismissive of their friend's connection of poetry to “gay”ness or femininity. Yet Jig and Stella go on to imply that it is acceptable for males to write poetry primarily because poetry doesn't have to be about “love, stuff like that”—in other words, about presumably feminine—or “gay”—topics.

For some males, the one acceptable reason to write poetry generally and “love” poetry specifically is to attract females who will, hopefully, see it as a romantic and sensitive gesture. These young men also think that poetry is “for girls,” but in a way that actually motivates them to write. Dave remembers this as the reason he started writing in sixth grade:

It was one of those grammar school girlfriend/boyfriend things. Of course, I was trying to be different from most of the other people, so I tried to write stuff. But it was mostly really clichéd love things. And then I would read it; like the girl would like it, but I'd be like, “This sucks.” So I tried to write other things, and I started to write a little bit more.

Robbie has a similar story, about one of the first poems he ever wrote:

Robbie: [A friend] told me to write this poem, for this girl he liked . . . I wrote this poem, and he got the girl. And this girl was like, *she* writes poems; she was like the head of the poetry club in his school, and she could swear it was like the best poem written by someone, and . . . right now they're gonna get married after high school, and that's my poem, you know? I still hear her recite some of the words.

SW: Does she know you wrote it?

Robbie: She kind of got an idea after about a year, 'cause she would be at the house and so would I, and we were kind of all friends, and she kind of knew that I was the artistic one . . . So she kind of got the idea, but she was still like, whatever, the thought of him giving it to her anyways was the best.

Although these young men say that they began composing poetry “for girls,” they have developed into prolific, committed writers. Significantly, despite their early poems, both are now careful to distance themselves from what Stella and Jig define above as feminizing subject matter. Dave now dismisses the “clichéd love things” that populated his early pieces, and Robbie expresses surprise that the girl in question liked his poem so much because “that’s like a love poem, and I don’t *do* love poems.” Among male and female poets in the current study, then, certain kinds of poetry remain clearly gendered, and the young male who writes unironically, or without ulterior motives, about love risks being marked as feminine and/or homosexual by even those of his peers who embrace a writerly identity.

Young Women Defying Stereotypes

Gentlemen, ladies. If you please—these
are my wicked poems from when,
the girl grief decade. My wicked nun
years, so to speak. I sinned . . .
My first felony—I took up with poetry . . .
(Cisneros, 2004, pp. 27-28)

Sandra Cisneros calls her poems “wicked,” and calls the taking up of poetry “a sin.” Her words suggest that to express oneself fully, to act as though one’s experiences and emotions matter in the world—to engage, in short, in so self-centered an act as writing, is to diverge from the role of a proper female. Brown and Gilligan (1992) reinforced this perception, suggesting that for young women, communicating their own ideas and experiences can feel like pretty risky business:

Girls at the edge of adolescence face a central relational crisis: to speak what they know through experience of themselves and of relationships creates political problems—disagreement with authorities, disrupting relationships—while not to speak leaves a residue of psychological problems: false relationships and confusion as to what they feel and think. (p. 214)

For Patricia and Marta—both of whom have already crossed over the “edge of adolescence”—imaginative writing has provided an outlet for such speaking. Patricia’s work addresses difficult personal and social issues head-on, as can be seen in this excerpt of an autobiographical narrative about growing up in public housing:

Living in those projects it was like we were being punished for something we had no control over. That's when I came to the fact that I would have to go through life being judged by the color of my skin. Personally I never had a problem with the color of my skin. Black is beautiful. But I guess everyone don't feel the same way I do 'cause being Black in this society meant that you would have to work twice as hard. From what I understand that's why they built these buildings, 'cause they knew Black people would love to pay a little bit of nothing 'cause black people didn't really have nothing to begin with.

Patricia uses writing here to reflect on her childhood, and to work through the connections between poverty, housing, and race that she sees as having conspired to relegate her family to a difficult and dangerous life.

Similarly, Marta's poems speak to her own and others' experiences of death, incarceration, friendship, betrayal, and love. Her very first poem, in fact, came out of a painful experience: "When I was 9, turning 10, my best friend killed himself. His mom wanted me to make a speech about him. I didn't know what to write, so I made up a poem." Her poem, titled "False Homies," reflects her desire to literally give voice to the people and experiences around her, as she takes on the voice of a 16-year-old male wrongfully sentenced to jail:

Cruising around town with my so called homies,
 We see a rival,
 BANG BANG—he's dead.
 My homies tricked me,
 But I was not the trigger,
 Now I'm behind some bars for 10 years.
 I'm only 16 years old wasting away for someone else's crime.

Marta wrote this for two male friends who served time in jail for a robbery: "Nobody bothered to visit them," she says. Through her writing, then, Marta sees herself as being able to mitigate a bad situation—she supports these young men by sending each of them a copy of the poem they have inspired and assumes their voice as a way of writing them back into a world that seems to have abandoned them.

Patricia's and Marta's writing certainly reflects young women figuring out who they are in the world and how they want to be perceived; however, their purposes for writing do not seem to be overtly about creating a coherent "image" for others to read. There are situations, however, in which this image construction is clearly a goal. In a study of middle-school girls at a special school for "youthful offenders," Margaret Finders (2002) reported

that the girls “engaged freely in literate activities . . . They used reading and writing to prove they were bad, and they proved it through their bodies. They spoke, read, and wrote about their sexuality” (p. 94). Finders suggested that these writers were constructing a specific, and consciously essentialized, identity in response to their external social positioning. Similarly, and as is shown in more detail below, TeTe follows the model of a number of popular female rappers in composing an aggressive sexual persona through her lyrics. She says that this kind of persona is necessary if she is going to hold her own among her brothers and the other male members of The Maniacs, the rap group to which they all belong; her identity work through composition is driven by generic norms and personal aims. Marta and Patricia write instead about love, about loss, and about family and life experiences. For all of these writers, though, their composing practices allow them to take some measure of control over their own representation. This is a particularly powerful act for individuals from ethnoracial and socioeconomic populations so consistently represented by others, and for others’ purposes, in the public sphere.

Rap and Gender

As mentioned above, Margaret Finders (2002) found that students at a school for juvenile offenders seemed to have a great deal invested in the identity of “badness” that had caused their exile to the special school in the first place. However, “badness [at the school] was distinctly gendered. Males . . . displayed their prowess through their criminal offenses. Girls, on the other hand, displayed their prowess through their sexuality” (p. 89). Tricia Rose (1994) found a similar phenomenon when she examined the lyrics of popular rappers:

Like their male counterparts, [female rappers] are predominantly resistant voices that at times voice ideas that are in sync with elements of dominant discourses. Where they differ from male rappers, however, is in their thematic focus. Although male rappers’ social criticism often contests police harassment and other means by which black men are “policed,” black women rapper’s central contestation is in the arena of sexual politics. (pp. 146-147)

In both cases, males’ thematic focus is in the realm of public behavior, while females’ focus is in the traditionally private area of sexuality. Anyone with a car radio knows that male rappers also spend plenty of time addressing sexuality. Yet the sources above suggest that in discourses that emphasize

“badness,” the options for claiming badness are more circumscribed for young women than for young men. Male rappers do talk about sex; however, they also talk about police brutality, about criminality, about the experience of being a young Black man in the contemporary United States. In the current rap climate, mainstream female artists primarily focus on one issue: sex. This is not to say that their work is not inflected with issues of race, class, and so on, but for females such elements are often subsumed under the principal category of sexuality (see Bettie, 2002). To put it differently, males and females experience race and class in gendered ways; however, the algebra of this social triad varies:

The rise of female MCs in the late twentieth century represents an ongoing musical saga of black women’s issues concerning male-female relationships, female sexuality, and black women’s representations from a working-class point of view. (Keyes, 2002, p. 188)

In other words, while there is a strong tradition of raw sexuality expressed in women rappers’ lyrics and performance, it is a race- and class-inflected sexuality. Even when female rappers are not overtly addressing race, their words situate them: “Using words uncommon in mainstream romantic pop or jazz songs, women of the blues affectionately refer to their male lovers as ‘Papa’ or ‘Daddy,’ while women of rap refer to their male competitors or lovers as ‘sophisticated thugs’ or ‘niggas’” (Keyes, 2004, p. 187).

TeTe’s overtly sexual lyrics are in line with the styles of popular female rappers. Again, the significance of discursive norms is clear for not only her, but the male Maniacs as well. Jig, Crazy, and Mekanismn all occasionally write about personal experiences and warm emotions. Yet they also produce what, for me, is a surprising amount of violence- and/or sex-filled lyrics, given that I have come to think of all three as particularly respectful and thoughtful young men. Is this their way of establishing, if not an identity of “badness,” then one of “manhood”? Given its history, it is understandable that rap is a central site of masculine gender construction. Toop (2000) noted that

since rapping has strong roots in the predominantly male activities of toasts and dozens, it is not surprising that men see it as the musical equivalent of a sport like baseball. They are prepared to accept that women can do it but see the competitive element as the final deterrent . . . women associated with the scene, on the other hand, feel that men tend to disapprove of their standing in front of a crowd bragging and boasting. But in some cases they go along with the men: shouting about yourself might be all right when you’re young but as you get older it’s “unladylike.” (pp. 94-95)

The influence of popular female rappers' poses on her own thematic choices seems clear from the signature line TeTe uses in her posts to the Keys message board. It is a lyric from Da Brat, a female Chicago rapper: "Shit fuck y'all niggas, you can't live without pussy/Be disrespectful and get no more nookie." This aggressive stance has everything to do with control, and for TeTe, the message from popular rap women is clear: Sex is the site where females can exercise control over men most powerfully, whether through the age-old threat of withheld "nookie" or through its direct, often confrontational (lyrical) presence. TeTe says that her sexually explicit lyrics started out as a way to get her older brothers' attention as a writer:

It's like, 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* . . . I've always been the youngest [in the family], and I'm the only girl [in The Maniacs] . . . So, if I put something out, I want them to be like, "*Man*, hold on, let me stop and retrace."

The strategy seems to have worked, as TeTe has become a full member of The Maniacs. I couldn't help but ask her brothers if their younger sister's explicit lyrics made them uncomfortable. Not at all, they said. Apparently, such subject matter and language is so established as an element of the female rapper persona that TeTe's brothers are able to separate what they clearly see as writing-to-generic-norms from their sister's everyday personality.

Gender and Sexuality as Content

Love, sex, masculinity, and femininity are central themes in adolescent writing. Young people internalize the stereotypes and contradictions that pervade society; their writings often reflect hegemonic assumptions with striking clarity. In the following rap, Crazy reinscribes a classic sexist trope, that of the good girl/bad girl, madonna/whore—or as he puts it, the sista/bitch:

Jay Z said it best
 I love my sistas
 But I don't love no bitch . . .
 To gain a female
 With the strength of a sista
 No matter the ethnicity
 Cause a sista keeps her soul

A bitch takes a toll
 A sista keep your feet
 A bitch splash the grease
 A sista bring you heaven
 A bitch leaves at 11
 That's why I love my sistas
 But I don't love no bitch.

Although one might be tempted to make judgments about Crazy's general attitudes toward women based on the preceding lyric, the following poem confounds easy judgments. This time, Crazy not only does not essentialize women through familiar stereotypes but also takes the unusual step of writing a poem from a woman's perspective:

I once chose you to be my defender
 and the man who would uplift my spirits
 with the tenderest touch one lady can find.
 I sensed that you would be there and not
 destroy me. I see now that I was wrong.
 You showed me a beautiful picture, but the
 meaning behind it left nothing but pain.
 So wonderful to the outer world but inside
 is what I leave. A picture that has yet
 to come together and be complete.

Dave demonstrates a similar contradiction. His poem "Bitch" (which he dedicates "to those scandalous females") expresses exactly those sentiments seen in Crazy's rap above:

Why we treat you bad you can't understand
 push play and hear Eminem's Superman⁴
 you got a pussy and know how to use it
 lookin' good, can't no man refuse it
 your actions leave us in mad confusement
 you a bitch
 don't be surprised at the naming
 otherwise you a 'ho in training
 not all women
 are part of this web I'm spinnin'
 only those who play stupid games . . .

Despite this strong expression of resentment—even anger—toward women, Dave too can move beyond stereotypical, misogynistic postures to show his affection for and vulnerability with women. In “A Female Deserves Better,” he laments his inability to give his woman what she wants and needs but hopes she’ll love him anyway:

It don’t matter how much you try
 for her you live or for her you’ll die
 remember the day might come
 where you’ll do wrong and she’ll run
 with a question mark written across your face
 you’ll ask why
 it’s ’cause a female always deserves better
 she should always have more than she has
 more lovin’, more respect, more honesty
 my girl gives life to that which rots in me
 and I treat her well
 but when we argue I can’t help but yell
 and I don’t help her out as much as I should
 now I realize that she always deserves better
 ’cause she’s given more to me than I lent her . . .

The tensions among Dave’s and Crazy’s writing about women make clear that gender and sexuality are no less complicated for young men than for young women; for everyone, personal experiences combine with received wisdom from family and friends and with popular images and representations to create conflicting ideas about who and what men and women “are” and how they relate to one another. Rap, one of the powerful purveyors of social types for young people including Dave and Crazy, provides no clear answers. Many of the most popular male rappers suggest that a “real” man is one who controls women, who gets what he wants from them without falling victim to their gold-digging or possessive ulterior motives. At the same time, there is an almost-as-ubiquitous theme in rap (and in Black culture historically) of paying homage to the ultimate woman: “Never disrespect a woman ’cause I love my mama,” Talib Kweli raps in “Know That” (1999); “Even as a crack fiend, mama/you always was a black queen, mama,” Tupac Shakur rhymes in “Dear Mama” (1995), one of the late rapper’s trademark songs. Occasionally, though, rappers have broken out of this either/or view of femininity. It is not surprising to note that some of the best songs about women come from a woman, the rapper/actress

Eve. In her song “Heaven Only Knows” (1999) she talked honestly about her previous life as a stripper while filling in the context behind the image:

Thought it was cute to flirt with older cats up in their face
 Didn't have a daddy so I put a daddy in his place
 My mommy was my shelter but I broke free
 Learning that the streets was harder that I thought they'd be . . .

However, male rappers too have created songs that complicate images of women. Ironically, and in keeping with his deeply contradictory character, Tupac Shakur wrote many songs that portrayed women as purely sexual objects, yet he also created one of the most powerfully empathetic portraits of Black urban womanhood in the history of rap with his song “Keep Your Head Up”:

You know what makes me unhappy?
 When brothers make babies, and leave a young mother to be a pappy
 And since we all came from a woman
 Got our name from a woman and our game from a woman
 I wonder why we take from our women
 Why we rape our women, do we hate our women? . . .

Dave and Crazy have mothers and sisters, both have had girl friends and girlfriends, both watch movies and music videos and listen to rap and other musical genres. All of these influences are brought to bear on their developmental struggle to make sense of male-female relationships, sexual and otherwise. Their apparently contradictory poems, reflecting distance and empathy, are no more contradictory than their own experiences and the representations they see all around them.

The young women in the current study also use imaginative writing to address gender-specific issues, although in different ways—or, perhaps, for what seem like different purposes. Patricia and Marta write poems that deal with relationships. Marta's poem “My Boyfriend's Prayer”—a version of a popular, unattributed poem of the sort that teenagers forward to their friends or post on their blogs (a quick Google search turned up four such posts) expresses both love and anxiety:

Dear Lord,
 Full of grace

Bless my boyfriend's cutie face,
Bless his hair that always curl'z,
keep him safe from other girls,
Bless his eyes so green & nice
make them see the morning light,
Bless his arms so big & strong
make them stay where they belong,
Heavenly father from above
please protect the one I love,
Let him know & finally see
that the one who loves him is me.
Keep him Lord keep him 4 Ever.
But most of all keep us together.

Patricia's "So Young" also talks about love; however, like Marta, she also seems preoccupied with the experience of romantic love as always partly a competition with other females:

I am so young
what should I do
I knew he would never
love me like I wanted him to
it started off just me
then came along Keash and Tresy
we was together for quite a long time
as time went along I wanted to make him all mine
I fought girls to make myself understand.
If I can't have him
nobody can.
He told me he loved me daily
now I found out I am three months pregnant with his baby.
Now I am getting older and am coming to understand
he was never really my man.

This poem alludes to the now-central issue in Patricia's life, that she is the mother of three young children. An unfinished narrative about one of these pregnancies expresses not only the anxiety a young woman experiences on realizing she might be pregnant but also frustration at the slow and impersonal treatment one receives when one has to go to a public health clinic for examination:

I was mad that day. I had planned to make an appointment to see my doctor. I called the clinic Monday and made an appointment for Saturday, 'cause that was the day she would be at the clinic. I was going to her 'cause I wanted to take a pregnancy test 'cause I had a feeling that I was pregnant. This had been on my mind for about a month and I really wanted to know.

So Saturday came and my appointment was at 2:30 that afternoon and I was so anxious. I had left early from the house so I could be on time . . . When I got upstairs the lady at the desk said she called me to cancel because my doctor wasn't there but I didn't get the call. So she asked if I wanted to go downstairs and do it, and I didn't go up there for nothing so I said yes.

So I went downstairs and the lady told me to pee in the cup and sit in the waiting room and wait to be called on. So I am just sitting there . . .

In fact, pregnancy was a common theme for female writers at the alternative high school that seven of the writers had attended, which is not surprising as a significant number of the students were parents. Stories about giving birth and raising children were a way that young women in my writing workshops bonded with each other, often composing detailed descriptions of pregnancy, labor, and birth, then reading these descriptions aloud and discussing them with each other. This "testifying" about one's experiences, particularly experiences that are viewed negatively or simply ignored by the larger society, "is . . . a way to define and redefine one's humanity; to ground oneself in community; to revel in the touch of hands and bodies familiar with the testifier's pain or joy" (Tarpley, 1995, p. 3).

Whereas Patricia and Marta's writing, above, is about topics connected to sexuality (e.g., romantic relationships, pregnancy), TeTe's writing is the most graphically sexual of the female writers. TeTe's overt approach cannot be separated from her chosen genre—it is no coincidence that she is the only rapper among the females in the study, and the only one to use graphic sexual language and imagery and to write directly about female sexual power.

One powerful way TeTe demonstrates sexual control in her lyrics is through the boast that while she might allow a male to "pleasure" her, there is a strict line that he is not permitted to cross:

these pretty juicy lips ain't used for shyt
 but gettin kissed by a nigga on occasional shyt
 after they do that I know wut you sayin
 a nigga gettin pussy NAW!! they waitin
 no cherry bein popped up in this place
 but I'll pop somethin else up into ya face

What's so interesting about this lyric is the juxtaposition of raw sexuality in vocabulary and description, with a powerful assertion of this woman's right to refuse actual penetration. The implications of this juxtaposition are various: in a positive sense, it suggests that there is space within the rap discourse to celebrate the power of both female sexuality and virginity, and in a potentially problematic sense, it suggests that female rap writers—even those who don't actually have sex—may see raw sexuality as a required element of their performance.

TeTe does seem to approach her chosen themes of sexual control with relish. Her co-optation of the hypermasculine rhetoric of rap is on prominent display in a freestyle that she wrote to the beat of 50 Cent's 2003 mega-hit "P.I.M.P." and posted to the Keys message board. In the original version of the song, a male pimp brags about his work:

I ain't that nigga trying to holla cause I want some head
 I'm that nigga trying to holla cause I want some bread
 I could care less how she perform when she in the bed
 Bitch hit that track, catch a date, and come and pay the kid
 Look baby this is simple, you can't see
 You fucking with me, you fucking with a P-I-M-P.

TeTe introduces her version by addressing the other contributors to the message board directly: "Hey y'all, they told me y'all was talkin' about pimpin' and left me out. I can't believe this. I'ma show y'all what true pimpin' is." She goes on to rewrite 50 Cents's intensely masculine boasts, creating a female "P.I.M.P." who can control her "workers" just as successfully as any man. TeTe apparently has no interest in challenging the fundamental concept of pimping; she does, however, demonstrate the extent to which one can, at least discursively, challenge the parameters of gender-appropriateness simply by claiming a given set of characteristics for oneself:

I be runnin' shyt constantly
 I be sportin' diamonds and I ain't bought a god dayum thing
 I be havin' niggas strait spendin' they cheese
 and then I'll have the prettiest nigga strait on they knees
 and keep the grimiest strait on the streets so
 he can make that hot young money for me . . .

The work of the rappers in the current study generally suggests that they are trapped within a common dichotomy: women are either stronger or

weaker than men, males are either more or less valuable than females. This is true in their lyrics even when it is not so in what they identify as their poetry (see Crazy's work at the beginning of this section). Again, this brings up compelling questions about the influence of generic norms on subject matter and ideological stance in writing, questions that I examine elsewhere in my research. Here, though, in conversation with her friend Stella, TeTe provides an example of just how conscious this dichotomizing can be:

TeTe: [Discussing how she needs to shift her way of thinking when she's giving Stella feedback on a rap] Stella would say something like this, she wouldn't say that, that's more like me, she's more like a lady. I'm more like . . .

Stella: [raising her voice] She's like a man. I'm like feminine.

TeTe: 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 [referring to her nonrap persona]. I don't usually shout, but Tete, she loud and ghetto and proud of whatever she is [TeTe, Stella, and Jig laugh]. She loud. 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.

Again, the equation seems clear: to be "loud and ghetto and proud" is to behave "like a boy," as is the demand for attention and a lack of concern for others' opinions of her.

Listening to TeTe and Stella, I get the sense that there's a negotiation going on among three concepts: lady/feminine, boy/masculine, and a third thing that is as yet unnamed. That third thing, I think, is "woman"—the female who opts out of the discourse of Lady-ness. That this term remains unspoken in TeTe's and Stella's conversation could reflect the girls' own lack of clarity about exactly who it is that TeTe is trying to be in her raps, what interests of her own she is trying to serve, and how those interests connect with the gendered identity she is—at age 15—very much in the process of developing. Although her lyrics may shock some readers, it is clear that writing gives TeTe a place to wrestle with such questions.

Conclusion

Given the centrality of gender and sexuality to identity construction, it is not surprising to find these themes coming up in overt and covert ways in youths' imaginative writing. That they tend to emerge in complex and often contradictory ways reflects the complexity of youths' experiences of gender and sexuality, and the often-confusing messages they receive from family, friends, and popular culture. Through their writing, young women may

challenge traditional notions of femininity in one line while reinforcing them in the next, and young men may go from verses that place females clearly below them on the social scale to pieces that acknowledge the particular challenges that women face.

If there is great concern expressed about teenagers' enactments of gendered and sexual identities in the public sphere, there is equal or stronger interest in these issues on the part of young people themselves. I hope that the discussion of the writers' work here demonstrates that avoidance or condemnation of youths' textual engagements with gender and sexuality are at best misguided. Adults may well experience some discomfort as they read and discuss such texts with young people; however, that discomfort is a small price to pay for the insights such texts offer, and the possibilities for open, frank, and critically important discussion they create.

For researchers interested in the connections between writing and identity development, attention to young people's poetry, prose, and song lyrics provide invaluable insights into their struggles to situate themselves within varied and sometimes conflicting worlds. Because many youths—like Jig, Patricia, Marta, TeTe, Crazy, Robbie, Mekanismn, and Dave—are writing avidly and often, working with such texts also provides a useful point for researchers to collaborate with teachers and other youth workers who want and need to address complicated and sometimes controversial issues. When appropriate, youths' imaginative writing can be brought into the classroom as literary texts for analysis, side by side with canonical literature, providing engaging sources for comparison and contrast among historical and contemporary mores and styles. When published in books and magazines or Web sites and blogs, they can also provide a place for peers to share their experiences with one another, in person or at a distance.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for all of the writers in this article. In the cases of Jig, TeTe, Crazy, and Mekanismn, the pseudonyms are, at the writers' request, the rap names they were using at the time of my research.

2. I make a distinction between *poetry* and *lyrics* here specifically because although all of the rappers in the current study view rap as a form of poetry, they also differentiate between that which they specifically write to be performed to a beat, and that which they intend to be read on the page.

3. For the purposes of this article, I define *gender* as the range of socially constructed norms for performing masculinity and femininity, and *sexuality* as the physical and/or erotic identities one performs in action and language. These are distinct but related categories, and this article moves back and forth between them in ways that I hope make the distinctions and the relationships clear. It is also important to note that all of the writers self-identify—to me

and, as far as I have seen, to the public generally—as heterosexual, and their writing reflects that identification.

4. A song from the 2002 CD *The Eminem Show*: “Not a jealous man, but females lie/But I guess that’s just what sluts do/how could it ever be just us two/I’d never love you enough to trust you/we just met and I just fucked you.” Note that Dave’s piece and Crazy’s, which precedes it, start out by referencing famous male rappers (Crazy references Jay-Z). This strong and conscious connection to popular artists is a subject I address elsewhere in my research.

References

- 50 Cent. (2003). P.I.M.P. On *Get rich or die tryin'* [CD-ROM]. Santa Monica, CA: Interscope Records.
- Bettie, J. (2002). *Women without class: Girls, race, and identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brown, L., & Gilligan, C. (1992). *Meeting at the crossroads: Women's psychology and girls' development*. New York: Ballantine.
- Cavanagh, S. (2004). Upsetting desires in the classroom: School sex scandals and the pedagogy of the femme fatale. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 9(3). Retrieved from www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&se_gglsc&d=5008609204&er=deny
- Cisneros, S. (2004). Preface. *My wicked, wicked ways*. New York: Vintage.
- Cushman, E. (1998). *The struggle and the tools: Oral and literate strategies in an inner city community*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Eminem. (2000). Superman. On *The Marshall Mathers LP* [CD-ROM]. Santa Monica, CA: Interscope Records.
- Eve. (1999). Heaven only knows. On *Ruff Ryders' first lady* [CD-ROM]. Santa Monica, CA: Interscope Records.
- Finders, M. (2002). Literacy, gender, and adolescence: School-sponsored English as identity maintenance. In R. Yagelski & S. Leonard (Eds.), *The relevance of English: Teaching that matters in students' lives* (pp. 82-104). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Gonçalves, Z. M. (2005). *Sexuality and the politics of ethos in the writing classroom*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Hull, G., & Schultz, K. (2002). *School's out: Bridging out-of-school literacies with classroom practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Key, D. (1998). *Literacy shutdown: Stories of six American women*. Newark, NJ: National Reading Association.
- Keys, C. (2004). *Rap music and street consciousness*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Kweli, T. (1999). Know That. On Mos Def, *Black on both sides* [CD-ROM]. Los Angeles: Priority Records.
- Newkirk, T. (2002). *Misreading masculinity: Boys, literacy, and popular culture*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rose, T. (1994). *Black noise: Rap music and Black culture in contemporary America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Shakur, T. (1995). Dear Mama. On *Me against the world* [CD-ROM]. New York: Jive Records.
- Smith, M., & Wilhelm, J. (2002). “Reading don’t fix no Chevys”: *Literacy in the lives of young men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Tarpley, N. (Ed.). (1995). *Testimony: Young African-Americans on self-discovery and Black identity*. Boston: Beacon.

- Toop, D. (2000). *Rap attack 3: African rap to global hip hop*. London: Serpent's Tail.
- Vail, K. (2005, November). Talking about: Sexuality. *American School Board Journal*, 18-22.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Susan Weinstein is an assistant professor of English at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge. She has taught high school English in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and Chicago, Illinois, and currently directs the secondary English concentration at LSU. Her work has appeared in *English Education* and *Pedagogy*, among other journals, and she has upcoming articles in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* and the book *Icons of Hip-Hop*.