

# “We Real Cool”: Toward a Theory of Black Masculine Literacies

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports findings from an ethnographic study of the literacy practices of a group of 11- to 14-year-old black males who called themselves “the cool kids.” The study is framed using theories that view literacy as a social and cultural practice involving multiple sign-and-symbol systems. Two research questions guided the study: How did coolness relate to literacy among “the cool kids,” and what symbolic patterns helped to shape these relations? The findings describe how race, gender, and pop culture marked the group’s use of language and style and reveal how coolness, as a pop-cultural artifact of black manhood, contributed to the literacy practices of the young men and to the construction of their symbolic selves. These findings contribute to building a theory of black masculine literacies.

For the young men in the “My Brother’s Keeper” (MBK) Program, playing with language and style seemed central to literacy practice. Even their body was a tablet that rendered the self textually, allowing powerful forms of composing to be accomplished and shared. Regularly, we observed the young men of MBK—who, by school accounts, were thought to be barely literate in the narrow, print-based sense of the term—operate within multiple symbolic systems to define themselves and shape what they saw as “cool.” They made literate decisions, indeed, scribing identity texts in unstable social situations, for example, in the events of dress and speech. The texts that defined these events—and we include here “cool” vernacular and apparel in addition to traditional print and other multimodal semiotic forms (Hull & Nelson, 2005), such as songs, films, etc.—were circulated, shared, and picked up by the young men in sophisticated ways. The texts they produced were also symbolic, offering a narrative of who these young men were and wanted to be.

As we sought to locate meaning in their texts, this study took shape around a particular set of literacy practices firmly rooted within black masculine and pop-cultural models. Although a growing body of literacy research on urban youth has seemed to harden literacy into a performance of race and gender, we have resisted

this impulse. Instead, we present the constructs of race (blackness) and gender (masculinity) merely to present a telling case (Mitchell, 1984). What follows is an examination of literacy revealed through the language and style of 11- to 14-year-old black boys.

The initial purpose of the study was to examine the critical literacy practices of the young men of MBK. As we became more familiar with the young men, we became more aware of the social ecology of the group. Important to us was understanding how the literacy practices of seven of its members, “the cool kids” (the phrase “the cool kids” is actual language taken from one of the students in the program), had lifted literacy off the page. As two young black men ourselves, the literacy practices of these young men were both unique and familiar. However, we experienced difficulty finding theories of literacy that acknowledged the particular ways in which these young men employed a variety of symbol systems to shape their lives (Jackson & Moore, 2006; Kirkland, 2006). As opposed to examining the ways in which young black men lacked literacy, we examined how literacy formed and functioned within the group, particularly among the cool kids.

To prevent confusion, we would like to explicitly state that this is not a report of critical literacy. The research reported in this study deals in general

with black male literate lives and in specific with the ways in which coolness, as cultural phenomenon, embodies and gives visible form to liminoid (or in-between) aspects of black male subjectivity as expressed through literacy. The texts produced by black males acting cool can, thus, be seen as giving visible form to not only coolness but also to the seemingly hidden (or underacknowledged) practices of black masculine literacies.

We argue here that the cool kids enacted blackness and masculinity through coolness. By association, they constructed coolness using identity texts and what Turner (1970) has called a “forest of symbols” (p. xiii). The symbols through which coolness is revealed link to our understanding of literacy as a symbolic ritual. For Turner (Deflem, 1991), symbols, as in literate forms, are representative of cultural phenomena. They produce meanings through associations, resemblances, and conventions. Quite simply, they communicate a range of messages—metaphorically and figuratively, allegorically and by implication. They are also shared locally and gain intelligibility in the common culture of a given group (Willis, 1990). When most effective, the symbol itself becomes the phenomenon.

It is in this way that we use Turner’s (1970) concept of symbology, the study of symbol systems, as a way to make sense of what things like speech and style symbolized in the cultural practices/ritual performances of the cool kids. What is at issue, then, is an explication and articulation of a theory about the relationship between the coolness cultural model and the uniquely black masculine literacy practices associated with it. To this end, we explore how coolness evolved within the particular social situation of the cool kids to enhance the nature of what it means to be literate in our society. The theoretical framing of the study is presented in the next two sections.

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## Defining Literacy

In this article, we define literacy broadly, as a cultural practice that is embedded in social and cultural phenomena, such as coolness (Dyson, 2003; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 2001; Mahiri, 2004). Literacy, then, is capable of operating from a diversity of representational systems, particularly when combining written and oral forms with visual, gestural, and other kinds of symbols.

This definition of literacy is consistent with scholars who see literacy as a cultural practice that involves multiple sign-and-symbol systems (Hull & Nelson, 2005; New London Group, 1996). That is, individuals and groups communicate by using more than just words (Bean & Harper, 2008; Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000;

New London Group, 1996). Youth, in particular, practice literacy by weaving together identities and common world views. They use numerous symbolic tools, sometimes even clothes, to communicate values, produce meanings, and participate in desired social and cultural communities (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Dyson, 2001, 2003; Moje, 2004).

Building on these understandings of literacy, we see literacy as also involving critical cultural competencies, or the situated understanding of the consequences of symbolic tool use within a particular group (Cushman, Kintgen, Kroll, & Rose, 2001; Gutiérrez, 2008; Morrell, 2002). Scholars in this tradition contend that although one can have access to a variety of modes through which to represent things, one must also have an understanding of how these modes operate within a given social, cultural, and political context. These scholars see literacy as tied to multiple modes of expression. They also see literacy as tied to the individual potential for social and cultural critique, which involves a critical awareness of cultural competencies as they relate to issues of power and desire at their extremes. By critical, we mean an awareness of things, such as the symbol that is language and the social and ideological contexts that exist beyond it. By competency, we mean the ability to demonstrate awareness of this context (and its limits) within situational events in both appropriate and skilled (or competent) ways.

Further, by focusing on black male subjectivity (Walton, 2001), how young black men imagine themselves and their possibilities for acting, we see literacy as the practice of shaping identities and as a tool for participating in culturally valued experiences. The young men we studied, in fact, used items such as eyeglasses symbolically—not only to style but also to revise themselves as serious and studious members of a learning community. This symbolic practice struck us as insightful, particularly in the wake of dominant deficit discourses that too often define black males as deviant. For one of the young men, “My [eye]glasses make me look smart. Not nerdy, but serious like Malcolm X. It says to people who think we’re dumb or only into bling and stuff like that, that we are deeper.”

It is in this way that even eyeglasses can be used as tools to communicate larger points. Hence, fashion can be seen as literacy practice. To understand this practice involves merging ideas of literacy. By understanding literacy as critical cultural competence and literacy as multimodal social practice, we define literacy in this article as a complex system of symbological patterns and practices. These practices involve the skilled use and manipulation of tools taken from multiple symbol systems, including eyeglasses, that gain meaning and purchase in the common culture that youth create and sustain (Willis, 2003).

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## Framing Coolness

In recent years, two perspectives have tended to dominate the discourse on coolness and black males. These perspectives regard coolness as either negative or positive and black males as deviant or misunderstood. Majors and Billson (1993), attempting to understand the deeper psychology behind why black males fail, viewed coolness (or “cool pose”) as a “ritualized” expression of masculinity that involves speech, style, and physical and emotional posturing. They suggested that many black males use these attributes to evoke distance from, contrast to, and superiority over outsiders. For Majors and Billson, coolness communicates a clear message of strength and control. However, they argued that it also shields young black men from intimacy, commitment, and caring relationships.

In line with Majors and Billson’s (1993) psychological assessment of coolness, scholars from a range of disciplines have argued that the social numbing that being cool produces explains, in part, why many black males struggle in school. These scholars have argued that, for the most part, black males’ lives are compromised deeply by the pursuit of coolness, as coolness corresponds with a set of negative behaviors that impair their ability to succeed academically (Cose, 2002; Davis, 2001; Marable, 1994; Ogbu, 2003). These scholars view many cool black males as marginal to the established social mores that influence appropriate social behavior.

In this line of thinking, Patterson (2006) has viewed coolness as a bleak and dangerous pursuit for black males, what he calls a “Dionysian trap” (paragraph 22). This Dionysian trap, what Patterson sees as the deadly illusion of acceptance, can seem appealing to young black men but in the end ensnares them in a process of self-sabotage and eventual destruction. For Patterson, the luster of this illusion is not disconnected from mainstream culture. Patterson insists that the illusion functions within it, supported by some of its most influential structures and ideals. Among them, hip-hop, professional sports, and “homeboy” fashions, viewed by many black males as cool, Patterson has argued, have become as mainstream as the Big Mac. He explained that although mainstream America is very much into these items, most Americans are not threatened by them. In particular, middle class whites, who enjoy the cool and sometimes negative accoutrements of hip-hop and sports, have structures to filter through and safety nets to stave off their consequences. For Patterson, black males do not enjoy such luxuries because the same supports are not available to them.

Not all scholars agree with Patterson’s bleak assessment of black male cool culture. Scholars such as Connor (1995) have viewed coolness as a general state

of well-being, a transcendent calm, internal peace, and serenity. They have suggested that being cool might help black males cope with (or conceal) stress caused by social oppression, rejection, and racism. It may also furnish black males with a sense of control, strength, confidence, and stability that could help them handle the closed doors and negative messages pervading modern culture. Connor viewed coolness as being associated with black males’ silent and knowing rejection of racist oppression, a self-dignified expression of masculinity developed by black males denied by mainstream expressions of manhood. She critiques mainstream perceptions of coolness for being narrow, distorted, and even racist.

So as not to be confined to a particular perspective, we use the term *coolness* here to mean a unique performative act, an attitude, comportment, or way of being characterized through verbal presentation and style. It is historically and cross-culturally rooted and has symbolically served as the disposition of rebels and underdogs, slaves, prisoners, bikers, political dissidents, and the like. It has also been the attitude widely adopted by individuals such as artists and intellectuals interested in pushing social, cultural, and political boundaries (Connor, 1995).

Although we find the torrential debate surrounding coolness alluring, the mere fact or claim as to whether or not coolness is bad or good is beside the point. Our point is that coolness as cultural phenomenon, as disposition toward life to connect with others, to push against social norms, maps onto language and literacy in unique ways. For instance, there is a poetics of self and of others housed in its symbolic construction, which intensifies with the expression of self that is made available when examining black male symbolic tool use (Gee, 1989). In the case of the young men of MBK, literacy was used as a tool for mediated participation in a world where the unwritten rules of coolness were represented.

The young men’s constructions of themselves as cool coincided with their black masculine literacy practices. These practices mapped onto the popular cultures that Patterson (2006) laments—hip-hop and sports. Nonetheless, we conducted this study to build on the work of scholars, such as Dimitriadis (2001), who proclaimed, “We have only just begun to get a sense of how young people actually use these texts to construct their identities, their unique subjectivities, and the social networks in which they are embedded” (p. 29). In understanding coolness and its relationship to literacy practice among black males, we believe it is important to explain why adolescent black males act cool in the first place and begin to describe the kinds of meanings they accomplish through this cultural model.

Connor (1995) offered four reasons to explain why black males adopt postures of coolness:

1. As a strategy for navigating their world
2. As a system to establish their own manhood
3. As a source of resilience
4. As a form of aggression, strength, and power

For Connor, these reasons for acting cool have developed, partly, in a subculture of poverty and educational neglect and have, yet, emerged as an option for young black males with a desperate need for guidelines concerning maturity. This is perhaps why acts of coolness continue among adolescent black males, why they are absorbed by other groups, and why they appeared so prominently in the MBK program. But even if we accept these explanations, it is difficult to say whether or not they are the sole reasons why adolescent black males gravitate to coolness. There is more that needs to be understood.

How might we view coolness as a way of representing other things, such as the everyday values and viewpoints of particular black males? Specifically, how do cool black males use a range of symbolic materials to construct their values and views? For instance, what blends of sound and substance figure into the language of cool? How might this language be capable of lettering the world in a spoken and an unspoken vernacular? Although we do not go into it here, we can include other features to this vernacular, such as movements and gestures (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003; Spivak, 1985). Our point is that coolness at MBK influenced the things the young men said and represented. It was embodied and expressed in multisymbolic forms that emanated from multisensual spaces. Such forms and spaces should be considered when reasoning why black males adopt cool postures.

Another reason why adolescent black males adopt postures of coolness, then, might deal with the specific symbols and symbol systems that many black males use to communicate meaning. Cool symbol systems were discernable in the MBK group, where symbols, themselves, acquired meaning and gained value within the specific contexts of the young men's lives. It is within this context that the "complex, emergent, and messy relationship" among coolness, young black men, and literacy becomes clearer (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 29).

For US, this complex interrelationship serves as a telling case, a situation "in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case, serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent" (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239). According to Mitchell, a telling case is not representative of a population group but rather serves as an example of deeper phenomena and is, therefore, capable of illustrating theoretical issues not previously visible. This is to say, in-depth examination of cultural phenomena, such as coolness, can elucidate

more general theoretical principles that underpin the social construction of literacy within a given group. This examination tends to focus attention on the critical cultural competencies needed to participate fully within a given literacy event, the cultural models that govern social relations among participants who practice literacy within the event, and the activities (i.e., what is done, said, performed, worn, etc.) that relate to textual production and social meanings around the event.

Using this approach, we have explored literacy within the particular situation of the cool kids to offer a telling case through which theoretical concepts and hypotheses about black males and literacy can be drawn. Our inquiry was guided by two questions:

1. How did coolness relate to literacy among the young men at MBK?
2. What symbolic patterns helped to shape these relations?

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## Methods

### Context

We explored our research as participant-researchers in MBK, an early intervention program for at-risk black males at Detroit's Malcolm X Academy (MXA). MXA, a K-8 public school, was established in response to community demands for an educational intervention into the crisis facing black males living in Detroit. According to Hopkins (1997), MXA emerged in Detroit during the severe economic recession and crack cocaine epidemic from the last quarter century. During this period in inner-city Detroit, one in three black men found themselves caught in a deadly cycle of school failure, drugs, violence, incarceration, and murder (Watson & Smitherman, 1997). From its inception, MXA, among the nation's first all-male public schools with an Afrocentric focus, boasted a culturally relevant curriculum that emphasized the contributions of people of African descent to traditional school disciplines, such as mathematics, the sciences, and the humanities.

At the time of this study, MBK serviced 16 adolescent, black male mentees and operated over a 30-week expanse, from September 2003 to June 2004. Two or three times a month during that period, MBK transported Michigan State University (MSU) undergraduate-student mentors (both women and men) to MXA to interact with mentees. Sessions occurred on Saturdays and lasted approximately three hours. Each session was typically structured around the following activities: welcome and pledges, community news/current events, one-on-one mentor-mentee sessions, and service-learning projects.

In addition to mentoring sessions at MXA, mentees participated in two weekend retreats on the campus of MSU (one in the fall and one in the spring) and attended a one-week workshop on career building and personal growth during the summer, also at MSU. During their visits to MSU, mentees learned details of collegiate life. They also visited dorms and classrooms, learned about college majors and careers, and were introduced to numerous university faculty, staff, and students who provided tips and pointers for making successful transitions to college and beyond.

### The Cool Kids

We focus on seven young men in the MBK program (see Table 1). We purposefully selected these young men to be focal participants as they stood out from the rest of the group. Importantly, they considered themselves and were considered by their peers to be cool. Hence, the criteria for their selection was based on three factors: (1) their reputations among peers as cool, (2) their perceptions of themselves as cool, and (3) their willingness to participate in the study. Not all youth were willing to participate.

Larry was the eldest of the group at 14 years of age. The group also included the following: Hakim,

who seemed quiet; Terrence, Hakim’s cousin; Etherin, the most expressive in the group; Lucious, the self-proclaimed “coolest”; Job, the “righteous one”; and Keith, the youngest at 11 years of age (all names are pseudonyms selected by the participants of this study). Although all 16 of the young men in the program had in some way been labeled “at risk,” the cool kids exemplified the tenuous aspirations of that label. They also placed a value on being confident, or as Etherin put it, “they don’t think we know nothing...but our game on lock.” Together, these seven young men comprised an interesting subcommunity in the program. As noted earlier, they called themselves the cool kids.

### Data Collection

To collect data, we would do what Willis (1977) advised:

Go to the cultural milieu...and...accept a certain autonomy of the processes at this level which both defeats any simple notion of mechanistic causation and gives the social agents involved some meaningful scope for viewing, inhabiting and constructing their own world in a way which is recognizably human and not theoretically reductive. (p. 172)

Understanding that the “cultural level is marked by contestation, resistance, and compromise” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 20), we sought to capture data at intimate levels of participation within the group, observing and listening to the cool kids in their personal settings, hoping to understand them through the consequences of their viewpoints, values, and voices.

Accordingly, our collection of data implied “the active, collective use and explorations of received symbolic...and cultural resources to explain, make sense of and positively respond to ‘inherited’ structural and material conditions” (Willis, 1983, p. 112). To receive the “symbolic...and cultural resources” of this group, we focused generatively on the young men’s language and style, as each symbol system made such items visible. What was rendered for us was an elaborate portrait of consistencies and inconsistencies, finely etched in unanticipated brushstrokes of complexity (Willis, 2003).

We compiled four types of information that helped reveal this portrait to us. They included the following: video records, field notes, audio transcripts, and site artifacts. Video records were captured using a camcorder and tripod placed in the back of the MBK meeting space. Usually within an hour of leaving the field, we wrote field notes from scratch notes and initial jottings. Using video records, we transcribed significant segments of talk, detailing each episode in the form of a transcript. Finally, we collected site artifacts, including student writings and descriptions of the young men’s clothing and style choices.

**Table 1. My Brother’s Keeper Program Mentees**

Name	Age in years
Derrick	12
Devin	12
Ernest	13
<b>Etherin</b>	13
George	12
<b>Hakim</b>	13
Jacob	13
Jamal	12
<b>Job</b>	13
Justin	12
<b>Keith</b>	11
<b>Larry</b>	14
<b>Lucious</b>	12
Mark	13
Reggie	12
<b>Terrence</b>	13

*Note.* Names in bold are the cool kids we used in the study. All names are pseudonyms.

Altogether, we collected 10 three-hour video records, multiple site artifacts, and close to 300 pages of transcripts (see Table 2). These data were immediately indexed and cataloged to correspond with one another.

### Data Analysis

In our analysis, we set out to describe, interpret, and explain the relationships between coolness as a cultural phenomenon and the young men’s literacy practices through their symbols of coolness. Specifically, our interpretation of data focused on identifying how coolness was produced through language and style. In doing so, our goal in analyzing data was to make sense of the ways in which the cool kids manufactured meaning and practiced literacy in the context of MBK through talk

and dress. We further analyzed the cool kids within the complex activity system of the MBK program, which was itself enriched by a range of symbols that sanctioned a variety of possible meanings, routines, activities, and ways of being.

Themes and codes were developed based on relationships that emerged between the group’s language and style (see Table 3). To understand these relationships, we identified patterns in spoken communication, what we labeled “cool talk.” To understand cool talk, we created three organizing categories: pragmatic/functional, cultural, and geospatial. These categories emerged base on themes we identified in the data.

We also identified patterns in the young men’s style choices, what they called “sportin phat gear.” To

**Table 2. Ethnographic/sociolinguistic data sources**

Source	Quantity	Description
Video records	10 (3 hrs/recording)	An unmonitored video recorder was set in a back corner of the field site to capture and document what students were wearing, to “eavesdrop” on their in-class conversations, and to get a better picture of classroom activities.
Field notes	10 (172 total pages)	Field notes were constructed by jotting down, in some detail, instances that revealed students’ language and literacy practices (i.e., singing, bragging, rapping, talking about “gittin girls,” and being cool, etc.).
Interview transcripts	300 pages	Informal interviews were conducted to clarify information, ideas, and literacy practices. We also talked with students randomly to get a sense of how they made sense of their literacy practices and how these practices related to being cool.
Site artifacts	317	Site documents were collected to contribute to an overall understanding of coolness and its relationship to how the cool kids practiced literacy.

Note. By accessing a wide range of data sources, subjects and the practices that reveal them can be understood more clearly (Erickson, 1986).

**Table 3. Data Analysis Matrix**

Research question	<i>How does acting cool function discursively as literacy in a particular historical and social setting of a group of young black males?</i>	
Themes*	Cool talk: Ways the cool kids used language to show coolness	Sportin phat gear: Ways the cool kids used nonlinguistic material to show coolness
Patterns/aspects of use**	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Functional</li> <li>• Cultural</li> <li>• Contextual</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Functional/social (in relation to race and gender)</li> <li>• Cultural (in relation to black popular culture)</li> </ul>
Definitions/examples	Cool talk, or “rappin”, illustrates a relationship between language, race, and coolness. By using expressions like rhyme and rhythm when rapping with their peers (Smitherman, 1999), the cool kids at Malcolm X Academy blended the languages of hip-hop and home and used other symbolic resources from African American and American popular culture to make statements about their coolness.	Cool style, or “sportin” phat gear, consisted of the ways the students used clothing and style to communicate coolness. For example, one student informed me that “wearing expensive stuff that cain’t nobody else buy, like the new Jordans, make you cool.” Thus, clothing for these young men represented a distinctive symbolic way of distinguishing themselves as cool.

\* The reason we used these themes to organize our data is because they were broad enough to help us make sense of our data, and given the amounts of data we could interpret using them, they present our best possible claims.

\*\* We used color codes (in parentheses) to highlight topics that emerged in our data.

make sense of the symbolic significance of “gear,” we organized style data by type. Two predominant types emerged: hip-hop and athletics. The categories of cool talk and sportin phat gear allowed us to code data for patterns that would help us (a) determine how coolness related to literacy among the young men at MBK and (b) distinguish the symbolic patterns that helped to shape these relations. In sum, we used our understandings of how cool talk and phat gear functioned in the young men’s construction of themselves to better understand the relationship among coolness, literacy, and black males.

### **Positionality of Researchers**

We feel that it is important to point out our particular roles in this study. We served as mentors, program coordinators, and researchers in the program, one of us for several years. In this capacity, we saw ourselves as mirrors to the young men, especially the cool kids; however, neither of us considered ourselves very cool. Notwithstanding, as black males with keen interests in hip-hop and sports, we shared many common characteristics with the young men of MBK. One of us, along with several MBK participants, was born and raised in the city in which the study takes place. To these points, we acknowledge how our proximity to the study and our roles in shaping its results can be limiting.

Despite the similarities shared with the young men, we are also both academics and cultural cousins of the young men of MBK. Leaving neither of these identities behind, this study is shaped by who we are and where we exist in relation to them. Indeed, other researchers, positioned much differently from us, might arrive at different results. To limit the impact of our backgrounds on this work, we relied heavily upon our relationships with the young men of MBK, particularly the cool kids, to make sense of their experiences and to get their input on the data we collected from them. As we present our findings, we do our best to provide rich description over didacticism and the students’ voices over our own.

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## **Results**

In the sections to follow, we present findings based on the themes and patterns that emerged in our data. Consistent with the practices of ethnographic research, results and discussion are integrated. Specific patterns that relate to the cool kids’ use of symbols illustrate how they constructed coolness and identity. This identity, as we will note, can be traced beyond coolness through the aforementioned patterns in talk and style. In particular, the cool kids, who borrowed their talk and style from black masculine models in hip-hop and sports, constructed cool through a set of literacy

practices, which were also part of a much larger black pop-cultural scene.

Larry, for example, opting against modesty, declared in permanent ink against the sides of his new sneakers, “I’m the man.” This proclamation of masculinity was, for the group, a symbol of coolness, which splintered into a variety of spoken forms: (Terrence) “I’m da man”; (Hakim) “I gotta get my grown man on”; and (Lucious) “I’m the shit.” These expressions point to the multiple ways in which cool could be pronounced in the group.

Asked why he wrote “I’m the man” on his shoes, Larry shrugged his shoulders and replied, “I don’t know. We be tryin to stand out.” Although brief, Larry’s admission is instructive. In an attempt to distinguish themselves from others, the cool kids were enacting black masculine selves in writing and in speech, in style and in appearance. However, there was a nuance in this discursive practice worth making note of. For them, the term *man* adopted relative meanings. The same young man who declared, “I’m the man,” also riled against the Man on a number of occasions (e.g., “The Man is holdin us down”). In this use, the phrase “the Man” did not represent the exaggerated exploits of cool black men (see Smitherman’s [1977] conversation of Stagger Lee for an example of black male models of exaggerated/performed linguistic exploits). Instead, it symbolized the Establishment as opposed to the Fringe, a symbol of the perversion of power, domination, and oppressive rule.

This semantic nuance in the group’s talk reveals the complexity of the symbolic systems through which the cool kids’ literacies operated. The young men’s expressions/representations of things, whether written or spoken, were equally complex. For example, the young men would talk about the baggage or, as one of them put it, “slave mentality” associated with brand-name items. While this critique of brand name was tied specifically to Tommy Hilfiger fashions, it vanished in relation to hip-hop and athletic apparel items.

Regardless of how we make sense of them, the social transcripts—the language the cool kids used to critique or accommodate the world—functioned to demonstrate to others how cool they were. In this way, their sense of coolness, although complex and contradictory, did not yield to conventional wisdom. It had its own logic, which was articulated through a black masculine model of discourse—what Smitherman (1999, p. 219) called “braggadocio” and what Alim (2006, p. 13) referred to as that “sacred, streetified, slick-ass” Black Language.

The literacies that helped to construct them as cool were also about style, for example, the writing on shoes—which was much like tagging (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007) or the inscription of “claimed” spaces. There literacy practices were about posturing, showing how cool they were—a kind of ritual performance that

for decades has incubated in the posthumous underground of black male speech communities.

Larry's shoes, for all intents and purposes, were marked with the echoes of these communities and enriched by the linguistic "flava" of centuries-old black male conversations. Understanding these conversations, like any form of literacy, requires intimately understanding talk. And by understanding talk—cool talk in this case—we contend that researchers might get a glimpse at a particular kind of literacy that helps shape black male lives.

### ***Cool Talk as Symbol System in the Construction of Cool Identities***

By cool talk, we refer to the recognizable discourse patterns that governed language use and literacy practice among the cool kids. Indeed, the cool kids had their own language, which became an interior anchor that allowed them to straddle the scholastic margins of school and the social parameters of peers. As we alluded to earlier, this language possessed various elements: (a) a hybridized syntax borrowed from mainstream and black popular cultures, (b) semantic qualities that gave unique and complex meanings to familiar words, (c) a musical phonology that operated almost like poetry or rap, allowing words to slip rhythmically from the young men's lips, and (d) a style that transcended even their talk.

It is not entirely without a sense of irony and humor, however, that in attempting to gain insight into the cool talk of the young men that one of us would be barred from the young men's language practices. The cool kids saw the one of us charged with instructing them as not so cool. The unwanted albatross of an "adult" hanging around in an uncool turtleneck sweater, speaking in an uncouth dialect, made the young men suspicious. When asked for an explanation, several of the young men explained, "It's because he sound white." This explanation illustrates how the young men "raced" language. For them, cool talk was black talk. Importantly, they used language to express who they were. It is in this way that cool talk was pragmatic in the general sense of the term, where language, for the young men, was as much about relevance and utility as it was about anything else.

### ***"They Gotta Rap About Something": The Functions of Cool Talk***

For the cool kids, language was a pragmatic resource for participation in valued cultural contexts. For example, the language of the cool kids, cool talk, operated as a means of linking the young men to pop culture, which in their eyes was the essence of cool. Cool talk was also a utility for social distinctions and operated as a discourse of critique. This discourse of critique, which has roots in a larger black linguistic tradition (Smitherman,

1977), itself was a sort of pragmatic activity. An example of this activity can be observed in Terrence's assessment of "marketplace ideologies" (Collins, 1999) that influence hip-hop consumerism.

Terrence: Many people trying to be like rappers, like Baby, when they first came out wearing Burberry, everybody wearing Burberry. Like when Fifty Cent [started driving] a Hummer, then everybody wants a Hummer.

Terrence's critique of hip-hop's commercial influence on "many people" represents the group's rhetorical pragmatism. That is, Terrence's comment was contextualized in his social world, remade through his own sense of what was relevant to be said within the group. In a sense, it was cool to critique market dogma in hip-hop because hip-hop was a known and valued commodity. Terrence's criticism of hip-hop's commercial influences, therefore, was useful to the group as long as the critique was driven by the group's pragmatic impulse.

Pragmatic linguistic practices were used by the cool kids as a way to stand apart as well as a way to be pooled together. Cool talk, thus, operated based on a paradoxical dynamic—to help the cool kids distinguish themselves from others but also to align them with the cooler elements of their peer worlds.

The contradiction that shaped their pragmatic language was also the contradiction that shaped their thoughts. For example, misogynistic messages—as opposed to critique—were as prevalent in the young men's cool talk as they were in the hip-hop lyrics to which the young men listened. It was difficult during the course of this study to mediate between students' right to their own language (Kinloch, 2005) and challenge what we saw (even as members of the first hip-hop generation) as hip-hop culture's and the young men's irresponsibly materialist and inexcusably (at least in our view) misogynistic language.

In one session in particular, there appeared to be strong student resistance toward criticizing rap lyrics that clearly demeaned women. As a prompt for a writing assignment in which they would critically examine rap lyrics and hip-hop culture, students were asked to read an article that argued against the popular rapper Jay-Z speaking at a high school in Detroit. As expected, the students' responses were complex and sometimes contradictory. Many students criticized the article as wrong for endorsing censorship of Jay-Z because of his lyrics. All 16 of the young men in the program became quite animated and assertive when their idea of Jay-Z as a role model possessing something valuable to say to black youth (besides "Buy my new record") was complicated by the piece.

Hakim: They gotta rap about something. I think it's exciting.

Larry: Giving people what they want...

Austin: What about crack?

Hakim: I just like his [Jay-Z's] clothes.

Larry: I don't think nobody has nothing to say; he got money.

Etherin: He talk about whatever he needs to in order to sell records...some of the stuff he says is true.

Hakim's attempt to circumvent the issue completely drew attention to Jay-Z's appearance ("I just like his clothes"). Larry's and Etherin's argument reflected the pervasive capitalist, laissez-faire sentiments that the MBK program had as its goal of disrupting ("I don't think nobody has nothing to say, he got money," "He talk about whatever he needs to in order to sell records"). Their responses offered a view of cool talk as colliding with forms of communication or perspectives the young men perceived as irrelevant to their lives, as being antiblack or uncool. In this sense, even their discourses of accommodation to a sexist status quo were pragmatic.

In particular, the theme of relevance—either as a situational awareness of what language to use or as a social critique of "uncool" language—emerged significantly in the young men's responses. One could "talk about whatever," even voicing hatred toward women, as long as the reasons seemed practical. For them, using language in a way that helps one to make money practically makes one cool, which for them was the highest form of relevance.

What was most surprising about their responses was not necessarily the young men's defense of Jay-Z and his right to free speech but the various, shifting rationales used to support their positions. Their line of argumentation moved from moral relativism ("they gotta rap about something") to simple supply-and-demand economics ("giving the people what they want to hear") and from democracy ("they got the freedom to say what they want to say") to what appears to be open misogyny. For scholars such as Young (2007), these arguments are not always leveraged against dominant discourses; they are the dominant discourses. As far as misogyny is concerned, the pragmatism behind the young men's arguments seemed to subscribe to western male dominance.

This does not mean that the cool kids lacked agency in cool talk. Rather, it speaks to a complexity concerning the pragmatics of cool talk. Cool talk, like other language systems, was hinged against the young men's internal and external worlds; it succumbed to both black cultural and American mainstream influences.

This aspect of their talk was revealed in a conversation one of us had with Lucious.

Lucious: It's hard to hear him [Austin]. He sounds like a white dude.

David: Why is that?

Lucious: I mean...I understand what he saying about Jay-Z. I don't care for him anyway, but he misinterpreting us. I think he misinterpreting Jay-Z too. That's why I don't want to talk about stuff like that in here [school]. [School] takes what's ours and changes it. It makes it so not cool.... I like the way that we sound and what we have to say. We have our own thing. We be rappin, not just talking.

Lucious's thoughts about language, "rappin" in his words, is telling. For him, rapping was something that was created by and for the group. It served the purposes of the group, whatever those purposes were at the time. His assessment of language, then, must be seen as consistent with the assessments of scholars who describe a culturally and even racially relevant linguistics (Clark, 2003; Kinloch, 2007; Purcell-Gates, 2002; Richardson, 2003; Villanueva, 1993; Young, 2004). Indeed, other scholars share Lucious's observation that co-optation of language by authorities poses a threat to its relevance (Kirkland & Jackson, 2008; Richardson, 2006; Smitherman, 2006). It is no wonder, then, that the cool kids felt protective of their linguistic property.

### **"That's How We Be Talking": The Culture of Cool Talk**

Cool talk also played on language in culturally specific ways (see Alim, 2006; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; and Smitherman, 2006) for a discussion of African American language play). Words like "dog," for example, were frequently used among the cool kids as terms of endearment. Such terms were also used as affirmations of coolness, reserved for those young black men who, according to the cool kids, were "down," a word they used to signify allegiance.

They appropriated their vocabulary from black culture (Alim, 2006). Moreover, the lexicon of African American Language often spilled into the young men's forms of writing. Terrence, for example, drew two "cool"-looking figures (see Figure 1), one dressed in Phat Farm saying to the other, "What up young pimp juice"—a phrase made popular by rapper Nelly. The other character in the figure, sporting a Fubu shirt, responds with an affirmative, "Forsheeze" (coded hip-hop lexicon for "for sure").

While these examples further demonstrate the pragmatic aspects of cool talk—that is, language use

Figure 1. Terrence's Drawing



for practical/relevant reasons—an important link can be made between the lexicon of coolness and the lexicon of black people. Morgan (2005) has suggested that because of its perception as cool, many words and expressions from African American language have passed into the mainstream lexicon. This includes the contemporary term *cool* itself, which adopted new meaning on the black jazz scene. Instead of referring to something that is temperately cold, the jazz use of cool referred to the smooth demeanor and slick style of jazz artists. In this way, terms like *cool* have transcended time in black space. The term *cool*, as used by the cool kids, stretched through the black linguistic tradition, from jazz to hip-hop, from the talk of black athletes to the chilling rhythms of rap.

It is within this larger black pop-cultural backdrop that the cool kids used the term, defining *cool* as easygoing, smooth, skilled, or capable of extraordinary

exploits. As an adjective, the term was used to modify various aspects of the cool kids' lives, including their talk and style. For example, their use of expressions like "chill" characterized a Zen-like contentment. The use of the phrase "that's cold" characterized something they found appealing. Both of these utterances have origins in African American language, and both their meanings have been extended through the language of rap (Alim, 2006; Smitherman, 2000). Therefore, it was not surprising that during our analysis of the cool kids' talk, we found coolness to be marked by black pop culture and African American language. These markings were visible in the young men's writings.

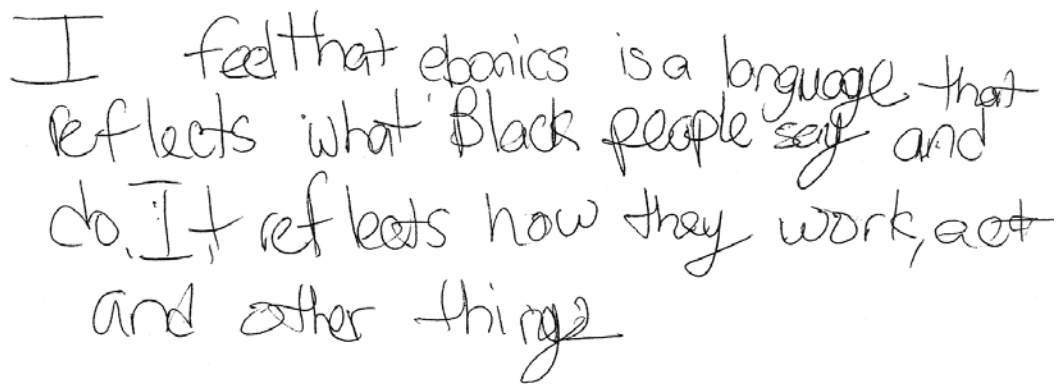
Figures 2 and 3 illustrate how the young men understood African American language, or as they put it, Ebonics. For them, this cool language variety was tantamount to "what rappers do." Hence, at a cultural level, cool talk was a form of rappin—a cultural

code that could help shape black male identities. This claim is further illustrated in Figure 3, which depicts two supposed cool young men greeting each other using African American language in the black masculine pitch. In the figure, one of the young men asks, "What's up main [man]?" The other responds, "Nuthin [nothing] much, cuz." Etherin, commenting on his characters, explained, "That's cool talk. That's how we [the cool kids] be talkin."

In this instance, African American language contributed not only to the oral but also the textual products

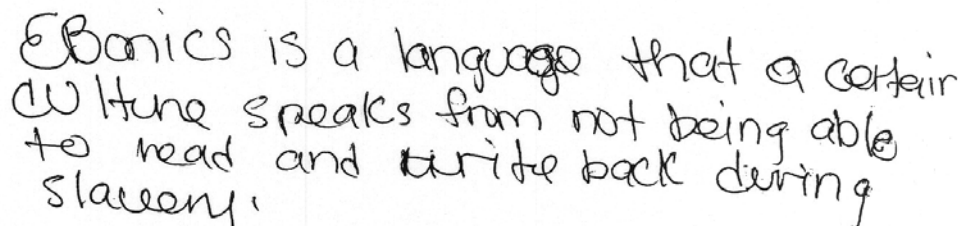
of the cool kids. It functioned as what Halliday (1978) referred to as antilanguage —exclusive, coded speech created by a subgroup to signify a shared sense of identity and group membership. In the context of MBK, the cool kids employed this antilanguage to promote solidarity. For example, Keith, a seventh grader with family roots in Alabama, observed this strategy during a trip to his parents' home state. "I was down south," Keith explained. "People were shouting and stuff like that. I was with my mother. People were talking proper. They was talking *straight English*, but then they switched

Figure 2. Hakim's Thoughts on African American Language

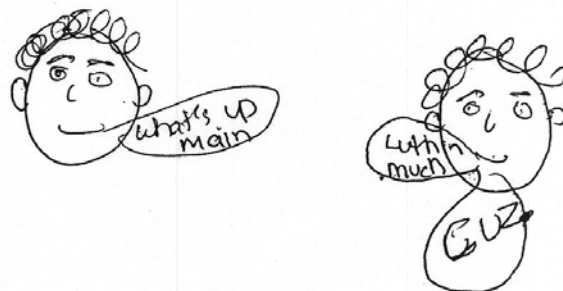


I feel that ebonics is a language that reflects what Black people say and do. It reflects how they work, act and other things.

Figure 3. Etherin's Thoughts on African American Language



Ebonics is a language that a certain culture speaks from not being able to read and write back during slavery.



when white [people] were around... People do this to have their own little language.”

Based on his comments, we can see that Keith observed a flexibility in language that allowed speakers—black or cool—to have “their own little language.” This language could erect cultural fences to join groups together and yet help them to stand apart. For him, this rhetorical maneuvering amounted to a self-conscious rhetorical strategy used in the southern vernacular to “keep folk out yo bid’ness.” Indeed, the cool kids inherited this linguistic trick. They could move in and out of cool-talk situations seamlessly. In fact, they used talk—as Keith would later inform us—to “protect their secrets.”

While it was cool to code language to protect the group’s secrets, it was perhaps cooler to play with language to extend its style and use. This point explains how a sort of hip-hop pig Latin, made popular by California “gangsta” rapper Snoop Dogg, emerged in

the group. In a paper he wrote for the program, Keith used the phrase, “Off the hizzle fo’ shizzle, my nizzle,” which translates to “Off the hook, for sure, my nigga.” Similar to how “heezy” or “hizzle” altered the surface appearance as a suffix in this last example, another student used z + nits as a suffix to accentuate the expression “the shit” (i.e., “shiznits” as in, “my pec[s] are the [shit]”). The use of this morphology comes between two cool interlocutors, writing in class, wearing dark shades, one with a “fly” Afro, the other with dreadlocks (see Figure 4).

The drawing and its accompanying printed texts further demonstrate how the cool kids worked within and extended the black linguistic tradition and connected themselves to pop culture. Moreover, through pop culture, the young men extended their cultural connections to a common, more mainstream heritage (cf. Dimitriadis, 2001; Fisher, 2004), creating new words that fit within the apparent cultural model of cool

Figure 4. Example of (Hip-Hop) Cultural Influences on Cool Talk



(cf. Alim, 2006; Makoni, Smitherman, Ball, & Spears, 2003). However, pop culture and African American tradition alone did not make their ways with words meaningful. Their uses of language resided in particular plots of social real estate, where rapping was viewed not only as cool but also as a spatially “appropriate” discourse.

### **“Ebonics Is Like Being Ghetto”: The Location of Cool Talk**

The cool kids saw language—whether linked generally to the larger black culture or specifically to hip-hop culture—as a tool for meaningful communication within specific situated contexts. In separate conversations, each of the young men shared with us their thoughts about Ebonics. For Lucious, Ebonics “shows how characters would act on the street.” Larry explained the special rules that governed appropriate use this way: “Ebonics is like being ghetto...when you around your parents, you talk proper, but when you around your friends, you change roles and cuss and stuff. It’s cool.” This understanding of language beyond culture to location (“the street”) is important. It suggests that coolness and cool language could be positioned in the group not only functionally and culturally but also geographically. This means that language gained meaning for the youth in the specific physical contexts of use. However, their public positioning of language did not include all spaces. For example, “It’s...ok to use Ebonics when you around your boys and stuff,” Hakim explains, “but when you get around people...you never know.” Similarly, Keith suggests, “It’s like, you know, you can actually like chill with your boys and stuff...but when you talking to adults and...you can’t do that because you supposed to respect your elders.” In this sense, context denoted more than physical place. It was also about audience and stage, or physical situation.

In this way, cool talk had geographic functions that were defined by their contextual parameters, in most cases the peer space. Whereas African American language was used in-group to establish and manage peer relationships, cool talk was contextually inappropriate for communicating outside the peer group with uncool people, such as parents and teachers, and in uncool places, such as official speech events. What strikes us as ironic about this sentiment is that, based on our understanding, language is learned in particular social environments (Filmer, 2003; Foster, 1992; Hymes, 1974; Isenbarger & Willis, 2006). If the cool kids acquired most of their language skills from home, then why did they feel that their language was inappropriate for talking with adults at home? The question is interesting, as most black parents have a home language policy for their children. They want their children to not only speak but master what Smitherman (1999) called “the Language of Wider Communication” (p. 38). Hence,

they might correct their children’s use of cool talk so that they could gain access to a “wider” world, or so the thinking goes. Based on their situational flexibility, however, it seems that these young men did not fully adopt their parents’ mores.

We have not talked much about coolness and the linguistic making of blackness and masculinity. This, however, is not the point of this section. Our point here has been to examine the language of the cool kids—its functional, cultural, and contextual dimensions—to understand how coolness relates to the young men’s practices of literacy. We argue that these dimensions of talk are rooted within the young men’s beings. They spill into the young men’s rendering of life. It is important—we believe—to also illustrate how cool talk helped the cool kids make sense of the world beyond themselves. How did their cool talk factor into the symbology of MBK? How did it play out in what we have come to see as a black masculine literacy practice? We attempt to address these questions next.

### ***“Sportin Phat Gear”: Style as Symbol System in the Construction of Cool Identities***

The cool kids’ clothing and personal appearance extended cool talk and indexed for them beliefs, behaviors, thoughts, and values. Since the cool kids could manipulate clothes like they could words, their unspoken forms of language expressed their own cool meanings that their talk did not. We call this dimension of their symbolic lives *style*—a term that, for us, serves multiple purposes.

By style, we mean the aesthetic values associated with the young men’s composition of themselves (e.g., styles of [ad]dress). Style also refers to a particular form of practice, such as “cool style,” that we use to index coolness and the symbolic techniques employed to construct it. We also use style here to refer more specifically to the modes of being that the cool kids manufactured as much with cloth and their dress as they did through language and their speech. Hence, their style along with their talk and other symbolic vestiges, including print, helped them construct and sometimes quite literally write coolness.

In this much larger view of literacy—literacy as a practice of symbolic construction—the young men were well aware of the politics and yet potential of style. For example, Etherin acknowledged this point when discussing Tupac Shakur, his hip-hop hero, who had branded “ThugLife” across his abdomen. For Etherin, this branding was not a criminal act or an act of hostility but rather a way “to stand out.” We again highlight this point. As much as they wanted to connect, the cool kids wanted to simultaneously be set apart. For Etherin

and his peers, Tupac's appearance, his dress as well as his skin, made a political statement that helped him stand apart. Specifically, Etherin acknowledged Tupac's inversion of the term *thug*, which was branded across his abdomen. For Etherin, "Tupac used 'thug' to acknowledge hardworking people. People who don't get talked about." We as authors understand Etherin's sentiments to be akin to Karl Marx's inversion of the term *proletariat* (as Marx used *proletariat* to describe the exploited working poor as opposed to the common outlaw, Tupac used *thug* to bring attention to the underdog as opposed to the common criminal) or black folks' inversion of terms like *bad* and *nigga*. Hence, understanding how texts can be manipulated calls attention to the relative degree of autonomy the young men perceived they held over symbolic forms like clothes, for if Tupac could do it, so could they. That is, they understood that clothes could be imbued with meanings, that they could be imprinted upon and be imprints themselves. According to Etherin,

I like to wear clothes that got stuff written on them. Sometimes it's funny, but other times it's just real.... You like make a statement. Next thing you know, everybody be wearin [what you wore] because your statement is true. You like create a new way to dress, a new way to do things.

As Larry would explain, "what you wear says as much about who you are" as what you say. Hakim also believed that clothes communicate meaning; they "make you cool.... They say something to people about you." Standing squarely in the same tradition of meaning inversion (Smitherman, 1977) that describes how Tupac or Marx bent words to mean new things, Etherin's and Larry's statements speak to the power of style shifting to reshape the meaning of lives. This shifting involved the ability to play with, reclaim, and invert texts, where even clothes served as symbol for composing narrative and critique.

"Phat gear," their phrase for cool clothing, extended their cool vocabularies. In function, phat gear served to help the young men compose cool selves. In their dress and appearance, the cool kids also projected images they associated with coolness, such as the images of hip-hop artists or popular athletes. They fashioned selves in multimodal layers (i.e., clothing stained with letters and pictures) and expanded what these texts could mean.

Similar to their talk, in style, the cool kids frequently appropriated material from the pop cultures of hip-hop and sports. In expressing themselves on a tapestry of flesh, a cool, new literacy did emerge—a practice that entered the MBK program with profound frequency. This point is best illustrated in the following exchange:

David: Now Larry explained why clothes are so important. But help me understand. Does anything go?

[Laughter]

Larry: Naw man. It ain't like that...[interrupted]

Etherin: There is just one rule: You can't expect to be cool and wear something wack.

David: What's wack?

Etherin: You know.... Stuff that ain't saying nothing....

For Etherin, clothing could speak. Moreover, opportunities to "control the mic" or "hold the floor" should not be wasted. This wasting or misuse of opportunity was deemed by Etherin and his peers as "wack." Indeed, the young men were always in a position to be judged and to judge others.

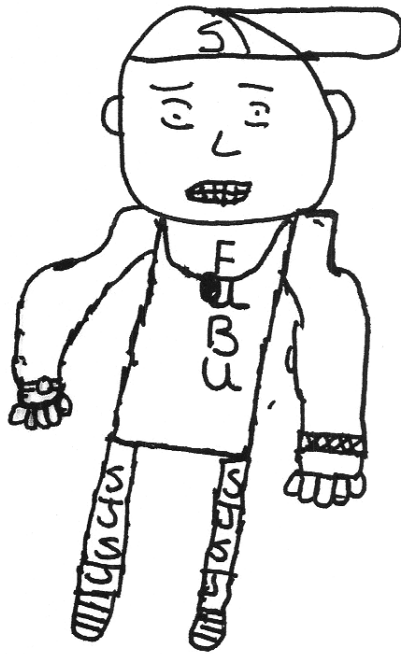
To avoid unfavorable judgment, the young men used their clothes as a subversive tool, which allowed them to declare "what they gotta say without sayin it." In this way, clothing helped them communicate their ideas on their terms despite being entrenched in a contested educational domain that is commonly hostile to black males. Nowhere else was this feature more evident than in the young men's appropriation of hip-hop style.

## Hip-Hop Symbolism in the Cool Kids' Style

As Figure 5 suggests, the young men read and wrote with their wardrobes. These texts usually involved hip-hop symbols and style and were uniquely influenced by the young men's impressions of what it meant to them to be cool black men. Hip-hop style, then, contributed greatly to the cool kids' writings. During one of the program meetings, the young men were asked to conduct a meta-analysis of African American Language using both words and illustrations. In their writings, the cool kids wrote and illustrated characters wearing popular hip-hop apparel items, from Sean John and Phat Farm to RocaWear. Other students constructed characters adorned in clothing that was lettered in hip-hop vernacular (cf. Alim, 2006; Richardson, 2006). The next example illustrates how hip-hop offered the young men a style that figured significantly into their views of themselves and the world.

According to Keith, "We gotta wear stuff like Fubu and RocaWear. That's part of what make you cool... That's part of how people know you cool. You learn that in kindergarten, but you don't learn that in school." We use Keith's statement to illustrate the relationship between being cool and wearing it. That is, the cool kids understood that to communicate themselves as cool, they had to practice the literacy of cool dress. Moreover, the symbols of (ad)dress they used played on the sym-

**Figure 5. Example of Hip-Hop Apparel in Young Men's Drawings**



bols of hip-hop culture. It played on the symbols of sports culture as well.

### Sports Symbolism in the Cool Kids' Style

The cool kids turned to sports culture for symbols to script cool. In their written responses, the young men created several characters wearing athletic apparel. We collected artifacts of characters drawn that were wearing basketball jerseys, baseball caps, and various other sports-related items. Figure 6 illustrates an example of how sports and sports symbols played a role in the young men's practice of literacy.

According to Lucious, "We wear jerseys and things of that nature because athletes are cool." Like Lucious, Keith believed, "Sporting a baseball cap or a good jersey is hot. I mean girls like it. Dudes respect it.... We got our own little thing going on." Asked about what that "own little thing" was, Keith replied,

We know what's up. It means something when you fresh to death. I mean people notice you. And for us, fresh don't mean...wearing suits unless it's Easter [laughing]. A suit ain't always cool. But if you wear something like this [pointing to his basketball jersey] then people gone notice you because it says something to people.

During a conversation with David, Larry expressed a similar sentiment.

Larry: We all know what's hype to wear.... It's important to sport phat [interrupted]

David: What's that?

Larry: You know...clothes like...[Michael] Jordan's [shoes] or a Snoop Dogg's outfit. You can't be coming in here with just anything on. People gone think you not cool. So, we [like] under pressure to get it right. Most of us just wear what we see stars on TV wearing.

David: Which stars?

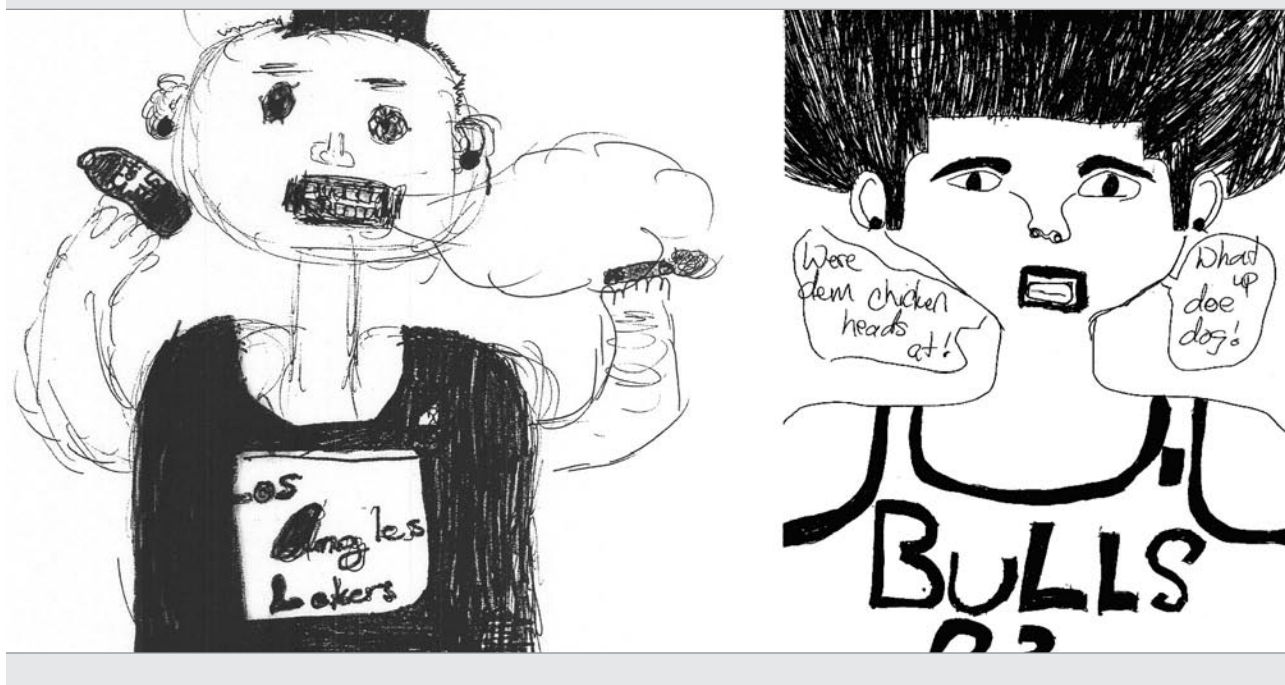
Larry: Rappers...basketball players...football...athletes. Most people think they cool. So a lot of us, we want to be like them. They make the freshest stuff [i.e., clothing apparel].

Larry's comments illustrate the ways that coolness, as expressed in the dress of rappers and athletes, influenced his own clothing choices. These clothing choices, which we argue connect directly to the black masculine cultural models communicated in hip-hop and sports, offered Larry and his peers a way to write selves, make sense of pop culture in their lives, and extend shared perspectives about what it meant to be a cool black man. The young men embodied and embraced (i.e., "sported") hip-hop and sports materials to articulate a particular version of themselves that was not only acceptable in their own performances of cool but also desirable in their greater peer contexts—the places in which these literacies made most sense (cf. Bakhtin, 1981; Ball & Freedman, 2004).

While our view of clothes as tools is important to understanding how these young men practiced literacy, we acknowledge that clothes are also tools of the marketplace. They promote consumerism, particularly among poor people. However, in spite of the consumerist impulse to place value on expensive gear and arbitrary items, the cool kids used clothes as language to express a desire—among other things—to be accepted and to stand apart (cf. Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). This does not dismiss the marketplace ideologies that bait kids into craving clothes. It simply suggests another way of looking at clothes. From the young men's perspective, clothing was also symbolic material that could be used to shape identities and define what it means to be cool. While the market forces attached to these items may have offered the young men a lot of help, these young men never fully succumbed to these forces but instead operated within a style system in multiple ways, manipulating through the use of style symbols (e.g., cloth) what it meant to be cool.

We find this latter point important, especially in thinking about the two questions that have guided this study: How did coolness relate to literacy among the cool kids, and what symbolic patterns helped to shape

Figure 6. Example of Sports Apparel in Young Men's Drawings



these relations? In practicing a black masculine literacy, the cool kids constructed coolness through symbols of speech and dress taken from pop-cultural locations. These larger symbol systems helped to shape complex relations—relationships between how the young men wanted to be cool and how they articulated this desire through literacy.

This relationship cannot be separated from the physical and social characteristics of the young men's identities. Rather, their constructions of coolness were as much about reading and writing, hence fully understanding coolness, as it was about being cool. This understanding too was a kind of identity text that, in large part, the young men appropriated from elsewhere even as they were producing it themselves. As they appropriated symbols from pop culture, they reaccentuated them to serve their very own purposes. Still, much of what it meant to be cool resided elsewhere, which was the complexity of their cool culture—being present in that contexts of peers yet being elsewhere in the contexts of pop black masculinity.

## Implications: Toward a Theory of Black Masculine Literacies

It is likely that the cool kids practiced literacy as much to figure out new ways to exist in a world defined by a

tapestry of traits, blacknesses, and masculinities as to decode and encode texts. Indeed, they carved lives out of letters, stained skin with social meanings, and embraced multiple symbol systems to manufacture meaningful existences. The symbols within these systems, moreover, shed light on a world where literacies are alive and expressed in ways that have been difficult for literacy researchers to see. Particularly, they shed light on what young black men do in the dark, the obscure grounds upon which black masculine literacies are taking shape.

In recent years, a research base for black masculine literacy practices has developed, which reports on the relationship among race, masculinity, and literacy (Brozo, 2002; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Maynard, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2005). These studies, along with ours, we feel, are outlining a new theory of literacy, of black masculine literacies, capable of helping literacy scholars explain the unique and dynamic forces influencing literacy in the lives of black males.

It is important to note that our study is not without its limitations. For example, some readers will regard adolescence unlike we do, as less an age range than a dimension of development. As a dimension of development, adolescence is difficult to pin down. Thus, we use the term *adolescent* to refer to the age range of the young

men we studied, which given the variability in the term is itself limiting.

Additionally, as we noted earlier, much of what we found in this study is based on our ability to see things as black males. To this end, one must use caution in interpreting these results. In this case, we have not intended to generalize our findings to all black males. Rather, we use our findings to theorize black males into conversations on literacy. Moreover, our use of one group of students, although not a sufficient sample for generalizing to population, has in the ethnographic tradition proven helpful for generating theory about situated phenomena.

Indeed, a theory of black masculine literacies is timely as relatively little is currently known about what motivates black males to practice literacy. Therefore, it is essential to explore literacy in the lives of black males because black males are a unique and often stigmatized social group. To this point, Young (2004) has described black male uniqueness as characterized through a “difference between black boys and white boys.” For him, “black boys not only feel coerced to give up their masculinity if they do well in school, but they also feel forced to abandon their race” (p. 700). This pressure that young black men face to choose between a mainstream and fringe world, between race and educational rights, we argue, is the force motivating black masculine literacies—literacy as practiced by the cool kids.

In keeping with the findings of this study, we understand black masculine literacies in terms of the cool kids’ literacy practices and processes. As practice, black masculine literacies exist in the nexus of the oxymoronic arrangement of tension, a kind of push–pull dynamic that characterizes a function of black masculine literacies as simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. As in the case of the cool kids, this arrangement shaped the cool kids’ constructions of self and others and structured their language and style. A good example of this is in how the cool kids practiced literacy to pull themselves together, to fill in the black masculine space between them and black popular culture. To do so, they used a variety of symbolic forms: cloth, print, drawings, etc. The young men also practiced literacy to push themselves apart, away from threatening and uncool individuals and groups. In so doing, the young men critiqued the world around them and at times the world they were writing, using varied symbolic forms to connect to it.

Even the functions of language in their black masculine literacy practices fitted within this dynamic. For example, the young men’s language was pragmatic as opposed to flowery. This pragmatism was essential for performing male identities and constructing cool. It had cultural roots, which attached the young men to cool destinations, such as hip-hop and sports. Each of these locations enhanced the young men’s talk and style so

that they could unlock the hidden and protected vaults of their cool world. In sum, the language of black masculine literacies functions in a systematic way, as a means for helping young black men fit in and gain entry into cool cultures and contexts but also to distinguish them.

As a process, black masculine literacies imply the skilled use and manipulation of multiple systems, where even talk, in this case, symbolizes what’s cool. It is in this way that we observed a particular pattern of literacy emerging from the specific and situated experiences of the cool kids. These experiences included what we consider to be positive attributes of coolness (e.g., rejection of racism, self-dignified expressions of masculinity, meaningful and socially relevant performance of identity)—attributes, to the cool kids, essential for being a black man.

They also include negative attributes, such as misogyny and benign prejudice toward effeminate male identities (cf. Young, 2004). Yet as a whole, these patterns reveal a process of symbolic play, where the tools of literacy harden into race-specific and gender-specific meaningful configurations. Although raced and gendered, these literacy processes cannot be essentialized into any fixed configuration. Even among the cool kids, literacy could be described as a practice that undergoes its own processes of constructions and ongoing and forever-changing configurations. For the cool kids, these configurations were characterized by how black males symbolically embrace and collapse multiple forms of black male identity through systems such as talk and style. These systems tend to be uniquely defined in black male social circles, particularly in the cultures of hip-hop and sports (Cooks, 2004; Dimitriadis, 2001; Johnson & Roberts, 1999; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). We note here that these cultures too are ever-changing (Taylor & Taylor, 2007).

There is another important point to be made with regard to theorizing black masculine literacies; that is, to insist upon black masculine literacies, one must first insist that black males are literate. Although we disagree with his rigid representations of masculinity and, sometimes, deficit constructions of blackness, we agree with Tatum’s (2005) description of adolescent black males as multiply literate (hence the phrase “black masculine literacies”). For Tatum, the multiple literacies of black males have various dimensions: cultural, emotional, and social. By cultural literacy, Tatum is referring to a deliberate awareness that black males have of historical and current events. Such events, he maintains, help to shape a black male identity.

By emotional literacy, Tatum (2005) is referring to black males’ abilities to manage their feelings and cope with their lived traumas. Tatum’s concept of emotional literacy suggests that black males initiate a set

of practices to work through their feelings and traumas to come to a sense of how to live with emotions that have too often taken troubling forms. Finally, by social literacy, Tatum is referring to black males' abilities to navigate a variety of settings to construct manageable meanings of a world where items like blackness, maleness, and even literacy are contested.

We build upon Tatum's typology by acknowledging the linguistic and stylistic dimensions of black masculine literacies. Beyond the cultural, emotional, and social dimensions about which Tatum writes, black masculine literacies share a common linguistic code, familiar among many black males. This code is not so much invented by black males as it is an artifact of black maleness that cool black men play on and revise. Nonetheless, the view of black males as multiply literate within the narrowed scope of language and style presents a striking deviation from the public perception that black men are barely literate.

Studies such as ours and Tatum's (2005) have begun to present a clearer picture of black masculine literacies. This picture illustrates a range of literacy practices, from bragging to rapping, from tagging to other forms of symbolic play. It also provides a glimpse of literate processes—how some adolescent black males read and write (Fashola, 2005; Kirkland, 2006; Tatum, 2006).

Although a clearer picture of black masculine literacies is emerging, more research is needed to determine the specific themes presented in texts produced and consumed by black males. Specifically, one wonders whether or not there is a relationship between the texts that young men write and the texts they read. We know from this particular study that the cool kids tended to write coolness as they read it from within the group and the pop-cultural world that enveloped the group.

These acts of scripting, reminiscent of the cool kids' writing with clothes, reveal significant ways in which personal narratives of literacy relate to how writing, reading, sharing, and creating multilayered understandings of self and others take on new meanings. But one also wonders, what exactly is the substance of black male writing? To this point, we have only been able to gather that the cool kids sometimes used their flesh as parchment to write about the deep things affecting and sometimes afflicting them. However, it remains unclear how and why particular black males use their bodies as texts, for example, to capture the range of meanings found in their lives.

Developing a clear picture of black masculine literacies will be complex, messy, and ongoing undertaking. It cannot be limited to a futile quest to simply explain what black males read and write. The work of theorizing black masculine literacies must go beyond simple explanations. It must inquire about the range of reasons

why young black men practice literacy—even when we do not find those reasons real cool.

## Notes

We would like to thank all those who provided helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. Specifically, we thank Geneva Smitherman, Anne Haas Dyson, Fabienne Doucet, Gordon Pradl, Elaine Richardson, Maisha Fisher, Jhumki Basu, the editors of RRQ, and its referees for their invaluable feedback.

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Submitted January 8, 2008

Final revision received February 13, 2009

Accepted March 3, 2009

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