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## ABSTRACT

This ethnographic case study uses life history and qualitative methodologies to offer biographical profiles that highlight perspectives on writing of eight Black African-born male youth with limited and disrupted formal education enrolled at a secondary school in northeastern United States. Participants from Liberia, Sudan, and Somalia relocated to the U. S. through refugee services between 2003 and 2006. At the time of the study, they were enrolled in mainstream English classrooms with American-born peers. Students with interrupted and limited formal education (SIFEs) like these young men are a growing yet understudied demographic in urban schools (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Fu, 2007).

Through the use of writing activity genre research (Russell, 2009), New Literacies Studies (Gee, 2000; New London Group, 1996), and postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1998), the study illuminates participants' perspectives on writing and makes suggestions for teaching adolescent youth, especially immigrant populations (Campano, 2007; Gutiérrez, 2008). The findings suggest that youth like these young men need help with navigating *double binds* (Engeström, 2009; Russell, 1997) experienced between home and school and benefit from *stretch, skill, drill, practice, play, and reflect* approaches to build writing proficiency. Participants desired more authentic writing opportunities in school where they could communicate with purposes and audiences that mattered to them. Participants wrote out of school, sought to learn genres that could benefit their families' lives, and wished for more inquiry-based writing instruction in school. Their reports suggest history and global realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be

better linked to pedagogy and that teachers need a better understanding of the complexities of race and how languages privilege and inhibit marginalized youth.

A "RESPONSIBILITY TO SPEAK OUT":  
PERSPECTIVES ON WRITING FROM BLACK AFRICAN-BORN MALE YOUTH  
WITH LIMITED OR DISRUPTED FORMAL EDUCATION

By

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Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in English Education in the Graduate School of Syracuse University

May, 2012

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Unity

I think people generally look at unity as an intrinsic, emotional, or spiritual thing. Unity is also strategic, economic, and political. Starchild says it is best for Africa and I say it is best for America. Several things have pushed me to feel this way. One of the main things is the fact that I can't sit back and watch my people suffer. I have to say or do something. I am African. It's my responsibility to speak out about poverty, discrimination, and racism. Whether u from North, South, East, West Africa, we are descendants who now live in the United States. Even those born here, African Americans, face discrimination. Therefore it would be shameful for me to ignore these issues and to not speak for Black people and oppressed people all over the world.

~ Najm<sup>1</sup>, age 17

Najm, the young man from Somalia whose writing is excerpted to begin Chapter One, submitted "Unity" as an editorial in an English as a Second Language (ESL) writing portfolio the year before he entered his first mainstream English classroom. He brought the piece of writing to me near the end of my data collection, after he learned he failed his English class (Interview, 06/23/10). He discussed that the ESL assignments from the previous year, including this editorial, interested him because he was able to share his opinions about the world. He reported writing for his ESL teachers because they saw him as an individual and they cared about his learning. In contrast, he explained he was

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<sup>1</sup> All names used for participants in this research are pseudonyms.

expected to write very little in his mainstream English classroom, and that his teacher did not know him at all. Najm was passionate about Somali history and wanted to be a better writer so he could bring voice to his family's refugee experiences. To Najm, learning to write in English was "like finding unity," a spiritual and emotional process (Interview, 06/23/10) and a direct way to access power in the United States. His allusion to Starchild, an American-Egyptian hip-hop artist who sings against oppression and discrimination, is testimony to his belief that words have the potential to change the world. Through writing, Najm felt a responsibility to speak.

When Najm was six years old, his family was uprooted by the civil conflict in Somalia. The streets where he played became spaces for gunfire and soldiers looted his home. His father was kidnapped. To protect her children, Najm's mother fled to Egypt to where they lived with a relative before finding shelter in a refugee camp north of Cairo. Najm enrolled in the camp's Arabic school and learned to read and write by copying what his teachers scribed on a board.

In 2006, his family was selected to relocate to a small city in the northeastern United States. Age fourteen, Najm now needed to learn to speak, read, and write for the first time in English. He received one semester of middle school ESL before entering a local high school where 50% of the incoming 9<sup>th</sup> grade students were projected not to graduate. Najm was enthusiastic about learning a new language, and even though he grew frustrated with his limited English at times, he was driven to improve. He tried out for soccer and made the varsity team. He took an active role at a local mosque and began to help his mother translate English documents. He tutored younger siblings and

contemplated a career as an international journalist or a history teacher where he could write and speak against the injustices he saw in the world.

Although Najm hoped “to seek unity,” he reported he often “witnessed the opposite” (Interview, 01/11/10). In Somalia, he dodged bullets. In Egypt, he watched adults berate refugee children. In the United States, he observed classmates getting bullied because they had darker skin, spoke different languages, and wore traditional clothing. In his mainstream English class, he chose not to turn in his work. It was not because the expectations were too difficult. Instead, it was because he thought the assignments and his teacher were “ignorant of our lives” (Interview, 06/23/10). He did not see a purpose in the reading and writing expected of him.

When Najm presented “Unity” to me I asked many questions to myself about teaching students with limited and disrupted education in mainstream classrooms: *How do mainstream teachers help youth, like Najm, maintain personal pride as they gain skills in a second language? How do teachers become more aware of world histories to assist English language learners in regular content areas? Why do English teachers assign youth to do literary analysis of Lord of the Flies instead of promoting other genres of writing? Why weren't global issues more present in my teacher training or professional development? Why did an intelligent young man who was passionate about his world fail his English class?*

I've often stood by the motto that all students are talented and gifted, but they are also at risk. I view youth with optimism and see their potential to do great things, yet I also recognize the obstacles that stand in the way for many. Some young people lack access to resources or have relationships at home that impede their school success. Other

youth find security on the streets or view school curriculum as disconnected to their lives. Still others lack language skills to articulate what they know or have talents that are not viewed as useful in classrooms. For English language learners enrolled in mainstream English classrooms obstacles are plentiful. While I spent a semester hearing Najm's perspectives about writing, I also saw his morale and zest for learning disappear. His English curriculum lacked flexibility and his teacher, who was given a class primarily made up of English language learners, had what she called "zero training" to work with diverse student populations. As she struggled to meet the needs of a heterogeneous classroom and adhere to state standards and district expectations, he wrestled to understand the relevance of his English class. The result was that a talented and gifted young man became at risk for dropping out.

Najm and the other seven young men who participated in this study are part of changing demographics in secondary schools across the United States, what Gunderson (2000) called the teenage diaspora or youth "who retain clearly identified artifacts of their first cultures and languages" (p. 693) as they learn in Western schools. These are adolescents who negotiate national and family cultures with new cultures of the Western world. They are young people in between ethnic identities of family and school communities. All eight are Black African-born male youth who arrived in mainstream English classrooms after receiving a few years of ESL instruction. They represent a demographic of youth who have arrived in the West through a confluence of global histories, imperialism, slavery, and recent conflicts. Goodwin (2010) discussed that if educators in North America are negligent of students' histories, including these conflicts, do not attend to a postcolonial present, and are not aware of how curriculum "has the



power to emancipate or colonize” (p. 3111), they may fail to empower youth with the necessary tools to be critical thinkers, readers, and writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I would also argue that if secondary schools fail to recognize the heterogeneity of the changing demographics in the United States and frame all knowledge through Western, English-dominant traditions alone, they run the risk of alienating and marginalizing diverse language users. Although many schools in the U.S. are a cultural pastiche of many nationalities, most curriculum and assessments remain homogeneous (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2000) and limit what youth can do. Najm desired to write, had much to write about, and wanted to learn better ways to communicate through his writing. Opportunities for him to do so with purposes that mattered to him were rare.

According to Cooke-Sather (2003), "As the student populations in our schools become increasingly diverse, we *must* find ways to construe difference not as a problem but as a resource" (p. 26). My research began as one way to view youth perspectives as a resource and to learn from eight young men about how they were becoming writers in the United States. The study was designed to add to what is already known about writing instruction in secondary schools, especially for English language learners enrolled in mainstream English classrooms with limited and disrupted formal education. I saw the potential to gain insight about how young people become writers in a new nation and set out to learn from their personal expertise. I listened so I could better work with adolescent writers and their mainstream English teachers.

#### Research Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to elicit perspectives on writing from eight Black African-born male youth with limited or disrupted formal education who were

currently enrolled in U.S. secondary schools. These young men relocated from Africa through refugee services and enrolled in mainstream English classrooms at one high school. I wanted to know what motivated these young men to write, the contexts in which they wrote, who and what influenced their writing processes, the tools that were useful to them when writing, the texts that inspired them to be writers, and the communities that mattered to them as writers. Each of the eight young men who participated in this study was uprooted from civil conflicts in one of three nations of Africa: Liberia, Sudan, and Somalia. The insight they offered about becoming writers in the United States is potentially useful for all educators who work to develop youth as writers as well as individuals helping refugee families as they adjust to life in a new nation.

The primary question that guided this research was, “What do the perspectives of Black African-born male youth with limited and interrupted formal education suggest for writing instruction in secondary schools?” The eight participants discussed their histories and their experiences becoming writers in the United States. From listening to their perspectives it was my intent to make suggestions for how teachers in mainstream classrooms might better assist similar youth with developing their writing. My primary interests are rooted in English education and teaching in secondary schools, but I recognize youth write beyond English classrooms. Each young man named additional communities that influenced their writing. For these reasons, I also asked:

- For what purposes do these young men write in the United States?
- What are the contexts for their writing?
- What tools do they use to compose?

Data were collected from participants’ mainstream English classrooms, advanced ESL

classrooms, a drama class, a community center, a college preparatory program, an after-school magazine, athletic facilities, and in online environments (e.g., Facebook, text messages). The eight participants viewed themselves as writers who were affected by personal histories of being displaced, limited schooling experiences, relocation to a new nation, and entrance in classes with American-born peers. They used these histories to make sense of academic roles and personal responsibilities in the U.S.

### *Exploring the Research Problem*

The eight Black African-born male youth who participated in this study are members of a changing culture currently enrolled in urban schools – a demographic that psychologist Carol Pipher (2002) wrote is occurring “In the Middle of Everywhere” and that British sociologist Steven Vertovec (2007) has described as “super diversity.” Populations from around the globe that were once colonized by European monarchies have begun to relocate to Western, English speaking nations for economic and political security. With such relocation, Western schools are experiencing changes in their student demographics and new challenges for their curriculum.

According to Waldinger and Lee (2001), “numbers tell us that immigrant America has returned” (p. 71), especially in urban communities (see also, Camarato, 2007, 2010). Unlike the large numbers of immigrants who arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, immigrants of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are relocating from nations undergoing civil unrest and where youth have had limited educational experiences. Nations that were once colonized by Europe began to experience civil conflict in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and have seen tremendous numbers of refugee populations. The U.S., once a colony itself, has played a central role in the political affairs of many of these nations

since World War II. American provision and retraction of financial support has added to their national conflicts. Throughout Africa, as evident through recent revolutions in Egypt and Libya, yesterday's colonial history has become part of today's reality. With a strong international role in the world, the U.S. cannot shrug off its obligations.

Fu (2007) called for more research on how English language learners, especially the recent refugees who represent 15 to 25% of this population, negotiate cultural norms of their secondary schooling experiences. English language learners are responsible for learning the same curriculum as American-born peers and most often attend schools in urban settings with students who are likely to struggle with academic languages. In these classrooms, many Englishes are in use (e.g., Ball, 2005; Fu, 1995; Kirkland, 2010; Wheeler, 2005) but not always respected or supported. According to Kirkland (2010), "English as taught in city schools does not always reflect the Englishes city students travel with" (p. 293). Instead of adapting to the diversity of languages being used, U.S. secondary schools tend to promote a singular English, silencing many of the voices students bring to the classroom. Yet, as most young people in diverse schools can attest, a cross pollination of language occurs between youth cultures. The notion that there is only one English language and set of standards for using it is both complicated and absurd.

Enrolling immigrant students in American secondary schools is not new (Waldinger, 2001). Yet, the combination of accountability pressure for of all students to reach proficiency on state assessments and the growing numbers of English language learners in secondary schools across the United States is rapidly changing teachers' responsibilities to meet diverse language users (Capps, et. al, 2005; DelliCarpini, 2008; Tadesse, Hoot, & Watson-Thompson, 2009). Closing the achievement gaps on state

assessments as required by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and supporting higher graduation rates for ELLs have become major tasks for American schools. Schools are pressured to increase writing proficiency of all youth and to show adequate yearly progress (AYP).

According to Tadesse, Hoot and Watson-Thompson (2009), “school is one of the most important, primary points of contact with the host community for refugees” (p. 352), yet research that examines educational issues involved with refugee resettlement experiences is limited. English language learners in mainstream English classrooms often arrive from homes in low socioeconomic neighborhoods where they experience ethnic and linguistic isolation (e.g., Freeman & Freeman, 2009; Fu, 2007). In addition, students who have relocated to the U.S. with limited or disrupted formal education have needs such as a lack of content knowledge and social and psychological hardships caused by traumatic experiences (Alvarez, Benjamin-Gomez, & Hunklin, 2010; DeCapua & Marshal, 2010; Fox, Kistantis, & Flowers, 2008; Tadesse, Hoot, & Watson-Thompson, 2009). Addressing the literacy needs of English language learners who are enrolled in mainstream English classrooms is not only about meeting the emergent reading and writing needs of such students (DelliCarpini, 2008; Freeman & Freeman, 2009; Fox, Kitsantas, & Flowers, 2008). Teachers need more knowledge about the lived experiences of refugee youth (e.g., Fu, 1995; Naidoo, 2008; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002).

DeCapua and Marshall (2010) reported that scholarship on English language learners with limited or interrupted education in Western schools is needed as levels of immigration and the number of children speaking languages other than English in classrooms increase. Drawing from Hall (1976), their report explained that students with

limited or interrupted formal education (what they call SLIFEs) should be viewed through the notion of high-context or low-context cultures. High-context cultures are those where social relationships are highly valued and where

people see themselves as interdependent members of groups (usually large kinship networks), with concomitant responsibilities, obligations, commitments, and duties to others in the group. (p. 161)

In contrast, low-context cultures such as the United States are more individualistic. Students with interrupted or limited formal education are accustomed to group activity, oral communication, and pragmatic knowledge. Their expectations for knowledge often do not match the individualistic, academic, print-rich literacy emphasized in Western schools. Without much exposure to the academic traditions and the value placed on scientific reasoning, such students miss many of the messages embedded in school contexts. Similar to Fadiman's (1997) research of a Hmong family and U.S. medical practices, the routines that often operate in public schools do not always sync with the cultural norms of arriving refugee groups.

According to Naidoo (2008), students with limited and disrupted formal education face transitional problems with acculturation and relocation when they enter Western schools with literacy levels below their peers and, therefore, are at greater risk of dropping out (see also Fry, 2005; Gere, 2008; Fu, 2007). With this noted, specific studies on the refugee English language learner demographic in mainstream classrooms are few, and research specific to literacy is rare.

In the United States, youth relocating to public schools have arrived at a time when the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has called for more attention

to writing instruction in secondary schools. For instance, Yancey (2008) argued that adolescents need to write more than ever before in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to have a greater familiarity with the writing genres used in Western societies such as research papers, personal narratives, and analytical writing. Because of this, scholars have called for more empirical research on the writing that adolescents do (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Coker & Lewis, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007), especially writing by English language learning students (Dellicarpini, 2008; Escamilla, 2009; Fu, 2007). Knowledge of the writing processes of English language learners in U.S. secondary schools, especially youth entering mainstream classrooms without formal preparation, is needed.

This research was designed to address the gap in literacy research on how to support the writing of adolescent writers arriving to U.S. secondary schools with limited and disrupted formal schooling. More specifically, it highlights the perspectives of eight Black African-born male youth on writing in their mainstream English classrooms and in the other communities they named as influencing them as writers. Drawing on their reports, suggestions for improving writing instruction can be made.

#### Definitions of Key Terms

The young men who participated in this study were refugees from three nations in Africa: Liberia, Somalia, and Sudan. They received ESL services before they entered mainstream English classrooms, and four of the eight were concurrently enrolled in advanced ESL classes and in English classrooms at the time of the study. Although all eight young men are more complex than a label allows, I use the term *Black African-born male youth* to describe their particular demographic. The boys who participated identified as Black African-born male English language learners who arrived in the United States as

refugees with limited or interrupted formal education. That is how they reported who they were collectively from their schooling experiences. Within this group, they identified through nationalities, religions, ethnicities, and interests. I chose the term *Black African-born male youth* to represent the eight young men but recognize this terminology lessens the complexity of who they were. The young men are a small representation of African-born youth with limited and interrupted education who relocated to the United States. Upon arrival, they identified as Black African-born youth at their school. I use the terms *refugees*, *English language learners*, *SIFEs* and *Black African-born male youth* throughout my study. In the following section, I elaborate on these terms.

### *Refugees*

An estimated 42 million people around the world are uprooted as a result of current conflicts – a number equivalent to almost 14% of the entire U.S. population. Sixteen million of these people are refugees living in camps in another country while another 26 million individuals are displaced within their nation of origin but not living in camps. In 2008, approximately 60,000 refugees (less than 1% of all refugees worldwide) were granted asylum in the United States. Nearly 40% of them were children eligible for public school services (Martin & Hoeffler, 2009). The majority of refugee populations, 70%, have been resettled in mid-size, urban communities (Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance, 2009).

The United Nations refugee agency differentiates between immigrants, who have a *choice* to relocate to a new nation, and refugees, who are *forced* to leave (UNHCR, 2009). Refugees are individuals who meet the criteria set by the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act (INA): “a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her



country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (Martin & Hoefler, 2009, p. 2). Before the implementation of the 1980 Refugee Act, relocation for refugees was restricted to communist countries alone. In the 1970s, for example, over 100,000 families from Southeast Asia were given asylum in the U.S. The 1980 Refugee Act, though, redefined the term *refugee* to include any individual who seeks asylum from any nation, communist or not. Since this revision, over 1.8 million refugees have arrived in the U.S. from Asia, Eastern Europe, Mexico, South America, and Africa (UNHCR, 2009).

Currently, almost half of the world’s refugee and displaced populations reside within Africa, and it is likely that these numbers will increase. Civil uprisings like those recently occurring in Egypt and Libya, ongoing conflicts in nations like Sudan and Somalia, and drought within many western African nations will most likely continue to uproot large populations of people. As this occurs, more individuals will seek asylum, even though only a very small percentage of those applying will be invited to relocate. According to Bixler (2005), the Congressional Black Caucus voiced their criticisms about the 1980 Refugee Act because only 1,500 of the 231,700 refugees who first relocated were from Africa. Their concerns about equity, and President Bill Clinton’s humanitarian interests in African nations, changed the demographics of who was given political asylum. As a result, the 1980 Refugee Act also widened the doors for individuals undergoing political turmoil in Africa, including Sudan, Liberia, and Somalia – the three nations of my participants. By 2004, half of all refugees arriving were from war-torn African nations. Consequently, Black refugee youth have begun to enroll in U.S.

secondary schools most often in urban settings. The eight Black African-born male youth in this study were part of the 1% of refugees worldwide selected to relocate to the United States. With their selection, many also entered formal schools for the first time, where they were held accountable to the same standards as American-born youth.

### *English Language Learners*

Literacy scholarship published in the last three years has reported that English language learners, including students relocated under the refugee status, are the largest growing demographic in secondary schools across the United States (DelliCarpini, 2008; Fox, Kitsantas, & Flowers, 2008; Freeman & Freeman, 2009; Fu, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Freeman and Freeman (2009) described three different categories of English language learners as: (1) newly arrived students with adequate formal schooling, (2) newly arrived students with limited or interrupted formal schooling, and (3) long-term English language learners (LTELs), students who have been in the United States for seven or more years and who “speak English quite well but do not have the underlying base in their first languages to transfer the knowledge they need for academic success” (p. 3). Freeman and Freeman (2009) also reported that English language learners frequently are enrolled in mainstream classrooms with standard English learners (SELs). Born in the United States, these youth speak English as their native language but struggle with standard academic discourse. According to Freeman and Freeman (2009), educators who work with ELLs and SELs face multiple challenges:

Although these students may speak conversational English, they have not developed the academic English or content knowledge needed for school

success. They are usually from families living at low socioeconomic levels. They also experience ethnic and linguistic isolation. (p. 20)

Teachers at intermediate and secondary schools who have SELs and ELLs in their classrooms are often unprepared to work with young people who are reading and writing below grade level and who struggle with standard English as it is measured at school. The students in this study had limited and interrupted formal education and were enrolled in mainstream English classrooms with many American-born students who also struggled with standard English. The two participants from Sudan who have been in the United States for seven years could also be considered long-term English language learners.

#### *SIFEs*

Similar to Freeman and Freeman, Fu (2007) reported four categories of English language learners in schools of the United States: (1) students who have a strong and adequate first language literacy before entering schools, (2) students whose formal education has been interrupted and limited (SIFEs), (3) students who are long-term English language learners with good communicative skills in English, but who are unable to read and write proficiently in English, and (4) students who are mainstreamed in regular English classrooms after passing minimum language requirements.

The eight Black African-born male youth who took part in this research fit in Fu's second and fourth categories. They were young men with limited and interrupted education— known as SIFEs – who met minimal English language requirements through ESL classes and entered mainstream English rooms. Either formal education was not available to them or it was interrupted as a result of national conflicts. According to Alvarez, Benjamin-Gomez, and Hunkin (2010), SIFEs are students who come from non-

English speaking homes, enter U.S. schools after the second grade, have at least two years less schooling than their peers, often function two grade levels below their peers, and may not read or write in their first language. Although it takes more than three years to gain proficiency of the academic English measured by schools (Cummins, 1989), the young men were accountable to the same standards of American-born peers rather quickly. Many SIFEs take longer than other English language learners to become proficient because of the obstacles they face without much formal education in their first language and their limited experiences with reading and writing in any language.

#### *Black African-born Male Youth*

Participants in this study were Black, African-born male youth enrolled in mainstream English classes with an African American-born majority. They identified as Black Africans, refugees, male, and new language users with a limited and interrupted formal education. Because of their enrollment in classes with predominance of African American-born youth, knowledge of racial constructions of Blackness in the United States was important to this study (Windance-Twine & Warren, 2000). The self-reporting of my eight participants challenged a single construction of Blackness and made the argument that within Black ethnic groups much heterogeneity exists (Bhabha, 1994; Gilroy, 1993; Gordon & Anderson, 1999; Kusow, 2006; Rong & Brown, 2002; Ong, 1996). As Gordon and Anderson (1999) wrote, “racial identities are not given in nature but are constructed, ascribed, affirmed, and denied” (p. 294). Blackness becomes an identity created by social, political, historical, and economic forces. Educators need to push against a Black/White binary to resist an oversimplification of complex identities.

According to Kusow (2006), many African immigrants do not see Blackness as an identity construction until they transition into White societies. Instead, they view themselves through their nationalities and cultures more than their skin color. Drawing on Ong (1996), Kusow explained that Black immigrants are stratified along dominant racial constructions upon entering the Western world. When refugee youth arrive from Africa to Western societies, they learn Black identities through curriculum, from media, and by lived experiences. They also begin to learn how Black identities have historically been marked as inferior, uncivilized, and barbaric – remnants of imperialism and colonialism (see also, Gates, 1998; Ferguson, 2001; Ogbu, 1991).

Scholars have argued that a single category for a Black identity should be critiqued and essentialism of Blackness should be avoided (e.g., Gilroy, 1993; Gladson-Billings, 2006; hooks, 1991; Obidah, 1998). According to hooks (1991) the struggle for Black individuals should “be rooted in a process of decolonization that continually opposes re-inscribing notions of ‘authentic’ black identity” (p. 27). My participants saw themselves as Black youth, collectively, but within their descriptions of Blackness, they reported much variation. Like hooks (1991), the eight participants articulated that Black identities were robust and complex. Najm, for example, identified as a Black young man in the United States, but reported his ancestry was mixed between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Each young man reported different nationalities and cultures. They reported they were Black African-born youth in relation to others at their school.

### Background

My interest in learning about the perspectives of Black African-born male youth is a culmination of four major influences in my life: studying postcolonial literature with

Carol Boyce Davies; teaching high school English in a diverse, urban school district where writing processes were central to instruction to all students; volunteering with refugee populations in two states; and participation in a *Life Histories* project during my doctoral coursework. Although I also address these influences as part of my discussion of subjectivities in Chapter Three, I present this background information here to provide context for why I asked the research questions I did.

### *Studying Postcolonial Literature*

During my undergraduate work in 1992, I signed up to study *Literature of Exile and the Black British Experience* through a semester-abroad program led by Dr. Carole Boyce-Davies. As a scholar of the African diaspora, Dr. Boyce-Davies mentored me to question how I understood the power of language, Western traditions in literature, and the definitions of what it means to be “educated.” As a 19-year old English literature major, I wanted to visit the land of Chaucer and Shakespeare because my Western educational experiences led me to believe that British literature was central to understanding achievements in the English language. Until I met Dr. Boyce-Davies, my training as a reader and writer in the U.S. was Anglo-centric and traditional. My teachers taught European and American literature and promoted scholarship through canonized texts. My experiences as an “honors student” within a mostly White, working class school district were limited by a lack of diversity and little attention to alternative perspectives on what it means to be a reader, writer, and thinker. Youth were seldom challenged to think critically about the education they received.

Dr. Boyce-Davies assigned us to read fictional pieces by Dr. Beryl Gilroy, a novelist, scholar, teacher, and artist from British Guinea who lived in London. As part of

an independent project, I was invited into Dr. Gilroy's home to interview her about her history and writing accomplishments (Boyce-Davies & Gadsby, 2002). She introduced me to the work of her son, Paul Gilroy (1982, 1987), who has made many contributions to post-colonial scholarship in Great Britain. Reading their work helped me to further question my relationship with literature, the act of writing, the importance of race, and global inequities. I pondered what my responsibility to this knowledge would be as a White male who benefited from Western educational traditions. I decided to teach high school and, inspired by Drs. Boyce-Davies and Gilroy, I chose to work in urban settings enrolling diverse perspectives. It was important to learn from cultural demographics unlike my own as I worked to promote achievement in others.

#### *Teaching High School in a Diverse Urban Setting*

When I applied to graduate programs in teaching, I sought a state that promoted writing with youth because I often wondered why my K-12 education did not better prepare me for the writing expected in higher education. In college, I conducted research, wrote academic papers, and took classes in creative writing. Rarely was I expected to do this in high school. I read about the writing portfolio accountability system in Kentucky (Kentucky Education Reform Act, 1990) that required students to write across the curriculum in multiple genres. In 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, students were required to submit reflective, personal, creative, and real-world writing for state-assessed portfolios, and two pieces needed to come from content areas other than an English class. With emphasis on portfolio-based assessment, Kentucky was influenced by the National Writing Project (e.g., Hillocks, 2002; Russell & Berryman, 2001; Whitney, 2008, 2009)

Teachers, like myself, were encouraged to write with students, to seek outlets for student publication, and to read like writers. Writing was central to the states assessment.

The school where I taught was organized to represent the demographics of the city of Louisville, maintaining a 60% majority and 40% minority representation from 26 different zip codes in the county. As a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, this K -12 public school planned curriculum based on shared values and sought to, envision an educational system that equips all students with the intellectual, emotional, and social habits and skills to become powerful and informed citizens who contribute actively toward a democratic and equitable society. (<http://www.essentialschools.org>)

We believed every student should be nurtured, held to high standards, celebrated, and encouraged, and viewed diversity as a bridge rather than a barrier.

In 1998, changing demographics in the city brought many Vietnamese students to our school and challenged our previous definition for cultural diversity. Before, our admissions committee worked in a Black/White binary to meet our diversity quota. Like many of the other 24 high schools in our district, we saw an increase in English language learners from many parts of the world and needed to rethink the mission. What we knew as a diverse learning environment soon became more diverse, especially in terms of the languages spoken by students. Many mainstream classroom teachers like myself had little to no training for working with English language learners. The diversity training we received focused on issues of race but not language. The solution for our administration was to assign English teachers to work with English language learners in content-area classes and to offer additional help (Crandall, 2010).



### *Volunteering with Refugee Populations*

From 1999 to 2003, my students and I also participated in a project called *No More Violence* with peace activist Jan Arnow. She assigned my students to read an article in the *New York Times Magazine* (Corbett, 2001) that described the relocation of 3,000 Sudanese male refugees to the United States. Church organizations and refugee relocation services brought approximately 240 Sudanese young men, known as “Lost Boys of Sudan,” to our city. These were youth orphaned by the civil war in Sudan who reportedly walked thousands of miles to find shelter at camps in Kenya. After reading the article, I knew I wanted to help. I called the Kentucky Refugee Mission to become a mentor to one of the new arrivals, and my work with one man turned into a friendship with many. I helped them learn how to fill out job applications, earn their driver’s licenses, enroll in GED courses, get groceries, open bank accounts, purchase cars, file taxes, and write for academic classes at a local community college.

In 2007, when I left the classroom to begin work on my doctorate, I continued to volunteer with Sudanese refugee families. I met anthropologist Dr. Felicia McMahon who invited me to participate in the Sudanese Lost Boys Cow Project, whose members met on Saturday mornings to sculpt and paint clay cows in the tradition of their youth. These cows were displayed at local art shows where donations were taken for their work. The money raised was used to further participants’ education and to buy books. Through them, I began to meet Sudanese youth who were enrolled in public and parochial schools in the area. They introduced me to other refugee populations who had arrived from Africa, many of whom were high school students.

*Participation in the Life Histories Project*

In 2009, I participated in a *Life Histories* project that brought doctoral students who were interested in oral history research methodologies (e.g., Perks & Thomson, 1998) to a local high school to learn more about changing demographics of the United States. Through many meetings, several interviews, much transcription, and a lot of editing, three young men and I co-wrote their life stories, including their arrivals in the United States through refugee services and the interruptions they experienced in their formal education. One young man was from Sudan, another from Liberia, and a third from Bhutan. When the project ended, our friendship did not.

The summer after the *Life Histories* project, one of the young men, Zizu, located a soccer club near my home that was holding tryouts. Having “googled” the location, Zizu called to say, “Crandall, I think there’s a field by your house that I want to play on” (Personal Notebook, 06/30/09). I volunteered to drive him to the tryouts. The field was not on a bus route and he did not have any other way to travel there. That summer and into the fall I transported Zizu and several of his friends, including Najm and Panther, to and from the practices. The coaches and I worked out a deal that if I was willing to bring them, they would find money to sponsor their participation in the league. The boys’ teammates came from homes very unlike their own. For instance, Samuel, a young man from Sudan, played with cleats that were held together with duct tape and string while American-born teammates typically arrived with several bags of the best gear.

On the way to the practice field, the boys and I often stopped at my house to get water and to let my dog out. At these times, they began raiding my home library for books they could read, many of them adolescent novels. I joked, “My truck is a soccer

transport service – not a bookmobile” (Personal Notebook, 07/20/09), but I was more than happy to support their summer reading. As we went to and from practices, often three nights a week, the young men discussed these books, debated athletic superiority on the field, asked questions about teaching in the United States, bragged about their favorite soccer players and teams, and wondered how they could best achieve entrance into a good college. In addition, they fought over which radio station to listen to, commented every time we passed a stripper bar on whether or not lust and pornography would be justified in the Qu’ran and Bible, told bad jokes, told dirty jokes, told yo’ mama jokes, established fart competitions, and harassed each other for not having the courage to talk to a girl who served ice cream at a parlor we frequented.

The young men also reflected about their histories before arriving to the United States. For instance, on an evening when a rabbit ran in front of my truck and I almost hit it, Zizu described, “I remember the first time I saw a dead body. It washed up on a beach during the war” (Personal Notebook, 09/22/09). The boys then talked about how they wished they could tell American classmates that violence is not as great as they make it out to be. The trips to and from the soccer field, the conversations about books borrowed from my collection, the stories of schooling experiences on two continents, and the quick-wit and jokes they often used caused me to revisit what other scholars have said about male youth and literacy (e.g., Fletcher, 2006; Mahiri, 1998; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2009; Tatum, 2008), especially the importance of sports, competition, humor, and goal-setting. Thinking about how the young men behaved in the company of one another, but also about their willingness to read, I began to wonder what they would be able to teach me about learning to write.

When school began, the young men invited me to soccer games, brought me to programs where they received awards, and asked me for assistance on their homework. I continued looking for resources that could help me better support them and found *Outcasts United* (St. John, 2009), a book that told the story of a soccer team of refugee youth in Atlanta, Georgia. St. John wrote that the young refugee boys,

were caught between worlds, first as teenagers moving from childhood to adulthood, but also as resettled refugees, transitioning from one culture to another. Social scientists refer to the state of being between worlds as liminality, which the anthropologist Victor Turner described as the state in which a person *becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification; he passes through a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or coming state.*

The process is hard enough on the average teenager, but compounded for refugees and immigrants, who social scientists say possess "double liminal status." (p. 221)

St. John's discussion of an in-between space for refugee youth resonated with what I was learning from the African-born young men and what other researchers found in their academic work (Ibrahim, 2008; Sarroub, 2002). Refugee youth often live between their nationalities, histories, home life, social life, and schooling in a new society.

The young men I first met through the *Life Histories* project put me directly on the path for this research. My questions, however, have also been influenced by the work I did as a classroom teacher in an urban school district, my involvement with writing instruction in the state of Kentucky and through the National Writing Project, a

knowledge of colonial history, my volunteer work with refugee populations in two states, and the relationships forged during a summer of driving African male youth to and from soccer practices. As the young men began to share more about their lives, I realized other teachers in U.S. secondary schools needed to hear what they had to contribute.

### Overview of Chapters

In the remaining section of Chapter One I provide an overview of the six chapters to follow. The literature reviewed for this study is presented in Chapter Two. I read widely in research on refugee youth entering Western society, teaching writing in and out of secondary schools, working with English language learners in mainstream classrooms, boys and literacy, and sociocultural theory on writing. I looked for empirical research to guide my understanding of the complicated writing processes of youth and how multiple communities influenced composing processes. Because the young men reported their experiences in relation to African American youth, I also read research addressing Black males and literacy. The literature I reviewed established a foundation for conducting this research and guided my design.

In Chapter Three, I present my research methodology. Here, I explain the study's design and describe my participants and the location. I summarize the data collected, my analysis of data, a preview of themes, and the role I played as a researcher. I also address why I used activity theory (Engeström, 1998, 2009; Russell, 1997, 2009, 2010) to explain my participants' perspectives on writing within activity systems and postcolonial theory (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998; Bhabha, 1984; Spivak, 1998) to better understand the current relocation of refugee families to the United States.

Chapter Four offers biographical profiles and historical contexts of each of the eight participants. Although this information is typically found in the methodology chapter of dissertations such as this, I drew from Enciso (2007) and the argument that “it becomes important to engage with the multiple, often divergent histories that glide across and whisper alongside every action and object we are able to see or hear (p. 72). To know each of the eight young men as writers in the United States, I wrote Chapter Four to highlight participants’ testimonies, their experiences of relocation from Liberia, Sudan, and Somalia, and the other contexts they named for writing. (Because their relocation to the U.S. and enrollment in school is historical, I chose to narrate these biographical profiles as part of my findings.) They represent a small sample of African-born youth with interrupted education who are enrolling in mainstream classrooms.

In Chapter Five, I present the eight participants’ purposes for writing and analyze how activity systems produced particular written texts through rules, tools, divisions of labor, and community. Here, the tools they used that supported and hindered their writing processes are described and the activity systems they named for writing are discussed in greater detail. In addition, I present the crevices the young men saw in school curriculum where they may have benefited from further instruction.

I return to my research questions in Chapter Six and address how my findings present new knowledge to the field of instructing adolescent writers, but raise new questions. I address the implications these findings have for practitioners who work with similar youth in and out of school and highlight what still needs to be known. I also reflect on how an understanding of multiple writing activity systems helped me to better

know each young man as a writer and an individual, and suggest ways teachers can better learn the multiple contexts that influence the young writers in their rooms.

In “Unity,” Najm wrote about a responsibility to speak out about global histories and social inequities. The young men in this study, including Najm, *spoke out* to me about becoming writers in a new language and I feel a tremendous responsibility to share what I heard. The following is some of what they had to say.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of Chapter Two is to review literature related to my research and to demonstrate how my study contributes to scholarship on adolescent writing. With the intent to learn from Black African-born male youth with disrupted or limited formal education about their writing experiences before and after they arrived to the United States, I also desired to locate their perspectives as important, authoritative, and informative (Cooke-Sather, 2002; Moje, 2002). According to Cooke-Sather (2002),

As the pace of life accelerates, the population becomes increasingly diverse, and the media through which we teach, learn, and work become more complex, more than ever before, we educators and educational researchers must seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn or what they need to learn in preparation for the decades ahead. It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education. (p. 3)

I targeted the following key phrases to initiate my research: males and literacy, refugee youth in Western societies, adolescent English language learners, writing in secondary schools, adolescent writing out-of-school, immigrants and schooling, and teaching high school writers in urban schools. As I learned more about research following these phrases, I synthesized the literature into three sections.

In the first section, Research on Black African Male Youth in Western Societies, I review the small, but growing, body of scholarship on Black African refugees who have entered Western societies in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. I locate these studies in relation to



Black males and literacy but also critique the homogenous use of “Black” to represent the many cultures in the United States with African origins. In the second section, *Research on Writing in Secondary Schools*, I review scholarship on writing, broadly, and review those studies that best fit my purposes of learning from the perspectives of youth on what and why they compose. In the third section, *Research on Out of School Literacy Practices*, I review literature on out-of-school writing practices of youth. I did not want to limit my findings to school-based practices alone because I wanted to learn from participants about other communities that influenced their writing. From my own experiences as a high school student and as teacher of high school English for a decade, I know that writing is influenced by experiences beyond school. In the final section of Chapter Two, I summarize the literature I reviewed in these three sections and explain how these studies led to the specific design of my research project.

#### Research on Black African Male Youth in Western Societies

A small, yet useful, body of literature has begun to highlight the new demographic of youth relocating to Western societies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries from war-torn nations of Africa, but most of this has not been specific to literacy research. As discussed in the introduction, the Refugee Act of 1980 redefined who was allowed asylum in the United States and opened up relocation to any individual in nations beyond communist countries who feared political persecution, including those in Africa (Njue & Retish, 2010). In recent years, more individuals displaced from civil wars in Africa have applied for relocation to the United States and been accepted (e.g. Camarota, 2007, 2011; Roxas, 2010; Roy & Roxas, 2011; U.S. Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2007). The U.S. Committee on Foreign Affairs (2007) reported that in 2006, for

example, over 20,000 refugees from 28 African nations came to the U.S. – a trend that is likely to continue as new civil conflicts begin and older conflicts continue.

Research on the youth population of immigrants in the United States is not new (Ogbu, 1991, 1997; Olsen, 1997; Waldinger, 2001). For instance, Ogbu (1991, 1997) studied success rates in school for immigrant and nonimmigrant minorities. He wrote that immigrant families often entered Western society with hope for a better life and saw educational barriers as something to “overcome in order to achieve their long-range goals of employment, good wages and other benefits, rather than as markers of social identities to be maintained” (Ogbu, 1991, p. 20). Ogbu distinguished between voluntary minorities and involuntary minorities in the United States. Voluntary minorities were immigrants who came to the United States for a better life. They believed education would help them to get ahead and saw schooling as one way to improve conditions for their family. In contrast, involuntary minorities were African American-born people who often viewed education as an oppressive institution. According to Ogbu (1991),

The lower school performance of black children does not originate in the inadequacy of the black family environment, in the inadequacy of black parents as child-rearing agents, or in the autobiographies of individual black children. The problem originated in the involuntary incorporation of blacks into American society, in the subsequent subordination and discriminatory treatment of blacks in the adaptive responses of blacks to their caste-like status. (p. 259)

Ogbu theorized that lower achievement of involuntary minorities resulted from an attitude that saw doing well in school as “acting white” and “obeying white people’s

orders as blacks did in the days of slavery” (p. 27). Higher achievement of voluntary minorities, according to his theory, was linked to the belief that schools provided skills necessary to achieve in a new society. Ogbu’s research on voluntary and involuntary minorities offered one explanation for achievement of immigrant populations, but it was not focused on literacy alone and did not include Black African-born refugee youth.

Newer to the scholarship on immigrant youth in Western classrooms has been consideration of Black African-born youth like my eight participants. Research on relocated Black African youth in Canada, Australia, and the United States reported the difficulties of negotiating between personal histories, schools, neighborhoods, families and friends (Duncan, 2001; Ibrahim, 2000, 2008, 2010; Naidoo, 2008; Stoll, 2007). Similar to research on other immigrant youth groups (e.g., Ogbu, 1991; Olsen, 1997; Waldinger, 2001), these studies reported that Black African youth face exclusion from mainstream society; academic separation from American-born peers; pressure to lose cultural identity, traditions and languages; and a burden to take one’s place within a racial hierarchy unique to Western contexts. Scholarship showed that Black African-born males arriving in Western societies also faced cultural stereotypes born out of America’s racial history (Awokoya & Clark, 2008; Ibrahim, 2003, 2008; Njue & Retish, 2010; Traore, 2004; Traore & Lukens, 2006) where Black male youth have been viewed as threatening, unintelligent, violent, and disrespectful (e.g., Davis, 2006; Ferguson, 2001, Noguera, 2008; Vasudevan, 2009).

A construction of Blackness as a singular racial category has always been problematic because Blackness does not have a homogenous ethnic heritage (see also, Gilroy, 1983, 1987). The assumption that all Black people have similar values, ethics,

histories and customs is false. Drawing on cultural ecological theory, Awokoya and Clark explained that White individuals and institutions began to view all Black individuals in a “fictive kinship” (p.53) as a way to exclude them from participation in U.S. society.

According to Awokoya and Clark (2008),

Black immigrant youth have added a third dimension to the fictive kinship of Black Americans - using it to mediate their location between Black immigrant family members, Black American peers, and White-dominated society. To understand how Black immigrant youth navigate fictive kinship in this way, it is important to understand that for fictive kinship to work, certain behaviors, namely academic and social ones, must be encouraged and policed by community members. (p. 53)

They argued that educators often assume Black African-born youth share the same heritage with African American-born populations and approach all Black youth as a homogeneous demographic. By doing this, they miss the importance of cultural heritage. For many Black immigrant youth, ethnic and racial identities are more fluid and complex than how they are viewed in the United States. Drawing on reports by Rong and Brown (2001), Awokoya and Clark reported that 12% of the Black population in the United States are recent immigrants, approximately 5 million people, and many of these individuals have arrived through refugee relocation services. Black African-born youth who attend schools in the U.S. negotiate acceptance by peer groups and an achievement in school (what is perceived as “Whiteness” in some communities). In addition, Black African-born youth also balance high expectations for success placed on them by adults in their home communities with the difficulty of learning the values, behaviors, and

traditions of Western schools that are “sanctioned by the White, dominant society” (p. 53). For these reasons, Awokoya and Clark (2008) called for more research on how Black African-born youth network with schools, communities, families and friends to contend with negative profiling caused by America’s racist history.

In a recent study, Njue and Retish (2010) looked at programmatic changes made by one high school in the mid-western U.S. that served a large population of Black African-born immigrant students. Their mixed-methods study used test scores, grade point averages, and interviews of 25 Ethiopian and Somali English language learners in a large urban high school that was “steeped in urban poverty” (p. 355). They argued that although much diversity existed within the Black ethnic groups at the school, all Black youth were accounted for in a singular category of “Black.” Black African-born youth from many cultural heritages were assumed to be the same demographic as their African American peer group. To find whether or not the school was serving the needs of its Black African-born English language learners through ESL programs, Njue and Retish faced a challenge. They needed a way to differentiate race from language use and to disentangle the way schools categorize along racial lines.

To do this, Njue and Retish turned to reports measuring Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and separated names of students who were Black and also English language learners at the school. Once they did, they were able to compare performance of African-born youth with the other demographics in the school, district, and state, although, admittedly, at the same time, they ignored the social class and educational histories of the Black African youth in their study. They found that Black African English language learners with only two to three years of education in the United States

performed comparably to African American-born classmates, but below a White-majority at other schools. They identified two factors to explain why Black African-born youth in their study, who were only in the U.S. for a short time, performed equally with African American-born youth. The first explanation they offered was school-based. Njue and Retish reported that the school had a long history of working with English language learners from other immigrant groups and had an established, reputable program that supported linguistically diverse students. Mainstream classroom teachers' perceptions of Black African immigrant students also went hand in hand with high expectations, support, and encouragement for achievement—expectations that may not have been communicated to native-born Black students. The second factor described by Njue and Retish was home-based. Black African English language learners viewed school as an opportunity to advance their position in a new society “as an institution that has potential to positively change their lives” (p. 366). Similar to Ogbu (1991), they accounted for this achievement through a frame of mind commonly shared by immigrant youth. The implication of this social positioning was that native-born Blacks in the school were underachieving.

In other studies, Traore (2004) and Traore and Lukens (2006) reported that Black African-born immigrant youth felt alienated in a large, northeastern urban high school. Drawing from ethnographies of 15 Black African-born students, Traore (2004) wrote, “The colonial mentality that degraded Africa and Africans for hundreds of years thrives in [African students'] schools, neighborhoods, and in the media” (p. 348). The exclusion of African history in almost all classes, even an African American history class, made it difficult for Black African-born students to see themselves in their schooling experiences.

According to Traore (2004), "African students soon discover that they are being judged under some of the same stereotypes as their African American peers, particularly males" (p. 350). White Americans assumed Black African refugees to fit negative stereotypes of African Americans, while African Americans assumed Black African refugees to fit negative stereotypes of Africans. Lack of serious attention to Africa and African-American history alienated Black African-born and African American-born youth who already lived in marginalized U.S. in communities.

Ibrahim (2003, 2008) studied Black African-born adolescents in Canada and argued that Blackness became an identity marker only after the young people entered Western society. According to him, Blackness became "a code, a language, a set of clothes, a hair-do, a bodily expression, and above all an experiential memory" (p. 235) that his participants performed. For six months, Ibrahim hung out with and studied ten boys and eight girls from Ethiopia, Togo, Somalia and Senegal to access "the juxtaposition of what people actually and materially perform on and through their bodies, on the one hand, and what they say and think about those performances, on the other hand" (p. 244). He argued that his participants inhabited hybrid spaces that fused African and Western world experiences. In these locations, youth aligned their ethnic heritage, cultural traditions, national communities, and family networks with a Black youth culture of the Western world. Arriving in North America, the youth quickly fell within Western constructions of race and "had to *become black*" (2008, p. 235) through a performance of speech and dress. It was a performance that did not internalize the racial history, traditions, struggles, and contributions of Black communities in North America but was rather a performance of how they saw African Americans portrayed in their school and media. Ibrahim

reported that the Black African youth in his study maintained a sense of heritage, however, through constant negotiations between a Western, Black identity and the African culture they were born into – a space *between* both worlds – to “become a negotiated product of the translated Old and New” (p. 247).

Closer to the specific purposes of my research on writing and African refugee populations, Perry and Purcell-Gates (2005) used ethnographic case studies to learn about the literacy practices of several individuals, including adult refugees commonly referred to as “Lost Boys” from Sudan. Participants in their study used literacy for resistance and appropriation. In other words, refugees adopted or rejected language practices in overt and covert ways to demonstrate personal agency in home and host countries. Male participants constructed their Sudanese identity, for example, through an adoption of an English language in Sudan to deliberately reject the Arabic language enforced by the northern Sudanese government. They arrived in the U.S. using English to assert agency and to exhibit authority against oppression. English was used for empowerment and protest against hegemonic forces in their home nations.

In additional research, Perry (2008, 2009) reported that Sudanese refugees used oral/storytelling traditions to “construct their identities” (2008, p. 350) when becoming writers in the United States, and they relied on the literacy of children in the community to assist them with the English language. Through observations and formal interviews of three Sudanese men, Perry learned that oral storytelling helped these adult learners to share history, traditions, and beliefs and to learn written communication in a new nation. Sharing stories had a purpose for the Sudanese men and, consequently, assisted their writing. In another ethnography of three Sudanese refugee families in Michigan, Perry



(2009) demonstrated that Sudanese adults used linguistic, cultural, and textual brokering via their children to assist life in a new, English-dominant, American culture. Refugee youth were intermediary in helping adults communicate in the United States, and parents relied on school-aged children to make sense of written texts and genres. Perry reported,

being able to effectively engage in literacy practices involved not only knowing the meaning of English words on a page or on a computer screen but also accessing cultural knowledge about how genres are structured and the purposes they serve in a given context. (p 267)

Perry's research highlighted that understanding genres as varying forms of communication was important to how Sudanese adults, as refugees in a new nation, understood the uses of English. Parents were not able to participate fully with textual materials brought into their homes because they did not understand the purposes or features of written forms. Children, as language brokers, assisted parents' knowledge. Perry argued, "all parents, not just Sudanese refugees, need access to important genre knowledge to understand and respond to the multitude of texts that their children's schools send home" (p. 274). Refugee parents often relied on children to become language brokers because the children had more access to the genre traditions of written communication of the Western world through their schooling. Youth shared what they learned about language at school in their homes, often reversing the adult/child roles. Children became the experts and mentored their parents.

More recently, scholarship on school-aged Somali Bantu youth with limited and interrupted education has reported on whether or not U.S. schools are assisting refugee youths' needs in an era of high stakes accountability (Roxas, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Roy &

Roxas, 2011; Roy 2008). Using ethnography, critical race theories, and discourse analysis, these reports express the specific challenges that students with interrupted formal education (SIFEs) have in U.S. schools. Specifically, they acknowledge that schools are not addressing the achievement gaps between youth with disrupted education and American-born populations partially because urban schools contend with the challenges of high absenteeism, poverty, violence, a lack of school funds, and low teacher morale (Roxas, 2011). For this reason, Roxas wrote there is “an urgent need to revisit and rethink the instructional practices used with refugee children and to seriously consider how best to meet their needs in the mainstream classroom” (p. 545). Some of these instructional practices can be learned through the expertise of ESL teachers (Roy & Roxas, 2011) and from working closely with the refugee community (Roy, 2008).

Black African-born male youth with limited and disrupted formal education are a new demographic arriving to mainstream classrooms in U.S. secondary schools. They bring disrupted education and a lack of economical resources. They are youth enrolled in urban schools where financial resources are limited and where other marginalized youth most likely attend. They are also locations that can be unsafe and mismanaged (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009; Roxas, 2008, 2010). Scholarship has shown that Black African-born youth are viewed through Western constructions of Blackness, including deficit models of Black males and literacy, and arrive with the stigma of being English language learners, as well. For these reasons, they have the potential to be highly disadvantaged by U.S. schools and are seen as at risk for dropping out.

## Research on Writing in Secondary Schools

Scholarship argues that writing in secondary schools should be what adolescents do to prepare for college (Simmons, 2005; Spellings, 2006), to be personally expressive (Fernsten, 2005), to show new learning (Shanahan, 2004), to be technologically-savvy (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003, Ciccoricco & O'Steen, 2005), to be creative (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2003, 2008; Fisher, 2007), and to prepare for work (National Commission for Writing, 2004, 2005). As addressed in the introduction, Yancey (2008) reported that American youth should write more than ever before to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even so, others have noted that most writing instruction occurring in secondary schools has been primarily shaped by state assessments (Hillocks, 2002, 2006; Applebee & Langer, 2009).

A foundation for understanding writing proficiency in the United States is provided via the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which has assessed writing for the last thirty years. In 2007, the examination was given to 27,900 students in 600 schools across the United States (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2007). To be proficient in grade 12, students were assessed on their ability to organize a fully developed response to a prompt within a short time (25 minutes) and to use analytical, evaluative, or creative details to support their response. Their writing was measured on how they maintained a main idea, used precise language, and employed varied sentences to engage an audience assigned to them. NAEP reports depict that although basic writing skills have increased at grade 12, levels for proficient writing have not changed for all youth. Only 23% of high school seniors scored proficiently during 2007, the last testing cycle with scores available at this time. Achievement gaps existed between minority

students and majority peers, male students and female peers, and socio-economically challenged students and more affluent peers on this assessment. Students who had parents with higher degrees of education did better than students who did not. Scores for English language learners will be differentiated from English-speaking peers beginning in 2011.

Graham and Perin's (2007) recent meta-analysis of writing research, like NAEP data, offered a partial direction for writing skills needed by adolescents in secondary schools. They summarized, "Explicitly teaching adolescents how to carry out the process involved in planning, sentence construction, revising, editing and summarizing had a positive and typically strong impact on students' writing" (p. 320). Students who were provided instruction around the steps of the writing processes made the most gains.

Graham and Perin (2007) declared that student writing benefited from being (1) offered structured peer support for feedback on writing within classroom activity, (2) provided clear and attainable goals for their writing by instructors to help them develop and organize, (3) given spaces in instruction to evaluate possible ideas for their writing, and (4) offered access to good models of writing (see also, Perin, 2007).

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2005) argued that research on writing processes, however, has not been empirical enough and argued more studies need to be conducted to scientifically prove what groups like the National Writing Project claim about writing instruction based on other kinds of evidence. According to them, "Teachers still need theories of teaching writing that are firmly grounded in research. This, in turn, should provide a foundation for what professionals consider best practice for enhancing student performance" (p. 285). Many in the teaching field, they argued, have varying ideas about what the term "writing process" means. More specifically, they called for more study on

the varying processes used by writers, including how they access prior knowledge, regulate their development of thought, understand the restraints of genres, apply editing and revision to their writing, and communicate with audiences. Similarly, Applebee and Langer (2009) argued, "Process-oriented writing instruction has dominated teachers' reports at least since 1992, but what teachers mean by this and how it is implemented in their classrooms remains unclear" (p. 26). Some frame writing process as the steps taken to respond to on-demand writing assessment; others define writing process as the stages taken to write novels or short fiction. Because a majority of scholarship on writing processes has been on adults, college-aged students, and elementary-aged youth, Pritchard and Honeycutt (2005) and Applebee and Langer (2009) called for more research on adolescents and writing in secondary schools. Attention to the diverse processes used by youth as they compose in a variety of genres is still needed.

Because little is known about writing in secondary schools and less is known about Black African-born male youth and writing, I looked to the scholarship on Black American-born males and literacy to provide additional context to my study (Ferguson, 2001; Mahiri, 1994, 1996; Murthada-Watts, 2002; Obidah, 1998). Black males have been characterized historically in negative, oppositional ways to Western constructions of masculinity (a binary to White populations from Europe who colonized Asian and African nations) and, as a consequence, such constructions have coupled with deficit models for achievement in school.

Specific scholarship on literacy and Black males demonstrates that school curriculum and activities most commonly reflect middle class, Western values that omit the cultural experiences of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse youth (Ball,

1992, 2005; Fisher, 2007; Hill, 2009; Kinloch, 2010; Kirkland, 2008, 2009, 2010; Lee, 2001; Mahiri, 1994, 1998; Tatum, 2005, 2008; Vasudevan 2006, 2009). These scholars provide a counter-narrative to deficit constructions of Black male youth and literacy achievement. According to Vasudevan (2006), dominant conceptions of literacy are “out of sync with the worlds that youth currently navigate and the work and higher education worlds that they will have to navigate in their future” (p. 252). Scholarship has documented that outside of school the literacy practices of Black youth, including writing, are often purposive, reflective, and imaginative (Kinloch, 2010; Kirkland, 2009; Mahiri, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2005; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996). Black male youth often find that school writing practices ignore their concerns.

In a study of Black males beyond school, Mahiri (1994, 1998) demonstrated that they were actively engaged in literacy activities through an involvement with a community sports program. He reported Black male participants (n=65) actively used multiple literacies to be successful outside of school when they had “speaking rights” (p. 51) in activities that mattered to them. Resulting from over two years of fieldwork in a youth basketball league, Mahiri’s work demonstrated how out-of-school activities, such as sports programs, promoted confidence and competence in Black male youth in ways that schools did not. Mahiri (1991) explained,

When a boy enters this province he is primarily in the company of other males, and what he learns is not so much from being taught as it is from observing, modeling, and doing. This active mode of knowledge transmission, and the literacy that results, is vastly different from the passive transmission model offered by schools. (p. 310)

The young men in Mahiri's study used a variety of languages to be part of a sporting community: they read newspapers, argued with authority about their experiences, used statistics to make a point, and drew from live-play examples. They demonstrated skills useful for developing an ability to communicate in written language, but the out-of-school resources were rarely tapped in school. Athletic abilities improved through how coaches built skills, mentored, practiced, and promotion reflection in youth – processes that could also benefit classroom instruction and literacy practices.

In a more recent study with African American-born male adolescents, Kinloch (2010) reported how two young men became engaged in a multimodal project that explored gentrification in New York City's Harlem. Through participatory action research, Kinloch demonstrated how Khaleeq and Phillip articulated reading, writing, and thinking in multiple communities, especially when they were seen as contributors to their learning. Kinloch and her participants interviewed teachers, students, and members of the community about the changes they saw in Harlem and what these changes meant to them. Her two participants contended that there was little room for writing creatively in school and declared they mostly wrote for on-demand purposes of the state assessment. Kinloch worked with these young men to build a language they could use to see themselves as writers. They documented their work through sharing journals, interviewing community members together, taking photographs, shooting video, and analyzing the on-going collection of data that was collected. Kinloch (2010) demonstrated how the two young men flourished when they were asked to compose beyond formulaic essays and reported African American-born Black youth drew on their emerging

understandings of history and culture, whether referenced in their schools or learned in their educational enrichment programs, to articulate their positions on gentrification. Such acts are significant because they demonstrate young people's critical capacities to make meaning of and from the local community in ways that connect to their knowledge of history, culture, and place. (p. 73)

Kinloch's research in and out of school, like Mahiri's, offered an additional account of Black male literacy practices. Kinloch concluded, "No longer can we rely on traditional definitions of literacy - the ability to read and write - without considering issues of identity, culture, community practices, funds of knowledge, access, and agency" (pp. 191-192). Her study demonstrated the importance of exploring literacy practices outside of school as a way of showing the additional strengths Black youth have.

Other scholarship has questioned whether needs of English language learners are met through writing instruction in schools (e.g., Escamilla, 2009; Freeman & Freeman, 2009; Hyland, 2003, 2007; Matsuda, 2004). This body has argued that the process-writing approach benefits most those students who already have familiarity with a privileged set of tools for communicating in the dominant English language traditions of schools. Escamilla (2009), Matsuda (2004), and Hyland (2003, 2007) wrote, for example, that most writing research has been grounded in a Western, mono-linguistic cultural view that neglects the needs of diverse language users. Specifically, Matsuda (2004) criticized that although the process theory for writing is the most successful theory in the history of teaching writing, it does not consider the ways diverse writers develop written texts through planning, thinking, drafting, editing, and communicating in multiple languages.



Scholarship on writing in a second language, they contend, began as a rejection and critique of Western, mono-linguistic and culturally biased rhetorical traditions (cf., Escamilla, 2009; Zamel, 1976). According to Hyland (2007), “Teachers of writing clearly need to be teachers of language, as it is an ability to exercise appropriate linguistic choices in the ways they treat and organize their topics for particular readers which helps students to give their ideas authority” (p.151). To these researchers, students need variations in how they can use multilingual and multicultural attributes brought to school from their many cultural communities as they learn to write (c.f., Kirkland, 2010). A singular writing process method may not work for English language learners, especially if they are fluent in more than one language. These researchers argue for research on many writing processes.

Other scholars have called for research to reveal what adolescents are able to compose when they are allowed to develop multiple drafts for communicative purposes that matter to them and are not constrained by the limitations of school writing (Fisher, 2007; Hill, 2009; Vasudevan, 2009). Listening to youth about their writing purposes and intents beyond school can provide additional understanding of the writing processes adolescents utilize. Similarly, many scholars have demonstrated that providing youth with opportunities to explore languages used outside of school in relation to academic language used in school can be an effective practice for teaching adolescents to write (Fecho, 2000, 2006; Lee, 2001; Morrell, 2005, 2007; Rogers, Morrell, & Enyedi, 2007). Teachers who encouraged youth to be critical of how multiple languages are used in a variety of ways throughout many communities helped diverse language users to access academic language that is most often measured in school. Similarly, scholarship specific

to English language learners (Fernsten, 2008; Freeman & Freeman, 2009; Harklau, 2002; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Spycher, 2007; Villalva, 2006) has made the argument that educators need to be clear about the English that is used academically in school through vocabulary instruction, models, and practice. According to Spycher (2007), "English language students need opportunities to learn about and to practice how language works to get things done in different contexts so that they can gain flexibility in meeting the language expectations of those contexts" (p. 253). Providing lessons on how academic English is used for academic and professional purposes has helped English language learners access a language of power (e.g., Freeman & Freeman, 2009; Villalva, 2006). English language learners need additional support with vocabulary, genre forms, and traditions for written communication and the uses of standard English so they can use language to successfully navigate in the Western world.

Fecho (2006) provided one model for using critical language practices with youth. He collected data from an urban high school English classroom through a yearlong action research study of his own practice. In his book, *Is This English? Race, Language, and Culture in the Classroom*, Fecho described how his choices for teaching to deconstruct language codes encouraged students to be critical and analytical of language and its uses in relation to mainstream power structures. Fecho (2000) explained that through an exploration of the ways language is used "in different communities, the ways language defined them [youth] in society, and the ways they both consciously and sub-consciously switched among codes" his "students were able to take stock of their own language awareness and what it meant for them to enact these shifts" (p. 373). Instead of promoting a single, homogeneous use of language in his room, Fecho promoted a

framework for students to use inquiry to write about their multiple language practices. He argued that allowing students to analyze language verbally and through writing helped them “to see language codes less as a prescribed set of rules that somehow constrict and inaccurately define their lives and more as a system of possibility over which they have some control” (p. 392). According to Fecho (2006),

If children go through school seeing their literacy transactions only as classroom assignments – something to be done in school because the teacher required it – and little more, then we essentially doom them to unexamined lives. When we ask students to make meaning of a story through either reading or writing, we really are asking them to make meaning of themselves in relation to that story and ultimately to the world they live in. (p. 109)

In this practice, youth were encouraged to discuss out-of-school language practices, including writing, as important curriculum in school. Fecho’s emphasis of promoting critical language awareness paralleled other critical English studies (e.g., Kinloch, 2010; Kirkland, 2010; Morrell, 2005, 2007) where members of youth communities were empowered by curriculum. These scholars argued that teachers need to acknowledge multiple Englishes spoken by individuals in a heterogeneous society and that students should be taught to be acutely aware of language and its politics. Such practice allows teachers and youth to be in a dialogue about writing, reading, thinking, and learning.

Although research on critical language awareness is helpful to my work, I found few studies with a specific intent to learn from youth about writing processes. Miller-Cleary (1991) provided one exception. Through in-depth phenomenological interviewing,

she recorded the perspectives of 40 high school 11<sup>th</sup> grade writers, three times each, to learn about their personal histories, experiences, and impressions of writing. Through listening to one young woman, a Korean immigrant enrolled in a suburban school district, Cleary-Miller suggested that writing topics should be of interest to ESL youth and written for real audiences with real purposes. She concluded, “A curriculum should make speaking, listening, reading, and writing geared toward what they are intended for: self-expression through language” (p. 143). Cleary-Miller used her interviews as a way for youth to speak about their own writing and with authority.

Smagorinsky’s (1997) study of an adolescent male in two English classes (British Literature and Creative Writing) and an elective (Media Production), provided another model of listening to youth as writers. Even though the study featured only one participant – a White, American-born male in a suburban school who spoke English as a first language – it utilized activity theory, a theoretical model I also used in my study. Through observations, interviews with the student, interviews with teachers, written samples, and a follow-up meeting with the young man three years after, Smagorinsky found the young man did not view writing as a useful communicative tool until he wrote with purposes that mattered to him. Smagorinsky argued that a personal process for writing needed to complement the academic outcomes expected in school. Most instruction in the English classrooms he observed, however, followed traditional literary analysis and readings of canonical texts. Yet, during the participant’s senior year, when English teachers provided additional purposes for writing (e.g., personal and creative), the young man grew more enthusiastic about the possibilities for written communication. According to Smagorinsky, the participant’s use of

writing for emotional mediation in his two senior-year English classes contrasted with his reports of his writing experiences in prior years where the five-paragraph essay had been the staple of writing instruction. The emotionally supportive environment of both classes appeared to enable him to use writing as a tool for development and to support that instrumental use with the reward of both good grades and good personal feelings from his teachers and classmates. (p. 90)

Drawing on Wertsch (1996) and Vygotsky (1987) to frame writing as a cultural and historical activity, Smagorinsky discussed that the choices made by teachers to support a personal process of writing helped the young man to understand the possibilities for composing. Such writing “provided a social context for” his participant’s “choice of genres, thus helping to channel his expressive uses of writing into specific designative forms” (p. 91). In other words, a teacher’s awareness of the young man’s interests beyond school was useful for teaching him to write. The ways a student constructs meaning in, and through, writing is “a function of tool mediation, whether the tool is one that renders inner speech to public speech or designates meaning through a sign” (p. 96). Students’ interests are also tools that can be used to teach how to develop written communication.

In another study that used an activity theory framework, Smagorinsky and O’Donnell (1998) reported on the collaboration of four students on a single project in one English class. The researchers analyzed the shared thinking and writing that occurred between participants as they composed a “body biography” of a character from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The students co-created a life-size model of Laertes through representing him with writing and art. The researchers reported they mediated a written

outcome of their work in four ways: (1) *context* (constraints of how rules were placed on participants' collaborative work and the situation of their place together in the classroom), (2) *intertext* (participants' prior knowledge of genre-based texts), (3) *intercontext* (participants' cultural processes and practices brought from other cultural contexts), and (4) *expressive/designative texts* (how the four youth wanted to communicate to others and what they chose to represent this). Smagorinsky and O'Donnell's analysis demonstrated that writing is not only about any one assignment, but also the sociocultural processes used by students to understand the texts they compose in relation to their lived experiences and histories in additional activity systems. Students in this study needed an awareness of the context in which the assignment was given, how it related to the text they read (*Hamlet*), and how it related to the varying contexts they brought to the assignment. In this sense, Smagorinsky and O'Donnell's study reported that writing in secondary classrooms involved more than the actual written assignment. Social, cultural, and historical processes from other activity systems were at work in the classroom where written outcomes were expected.

Adolescent writing is an understudied field. Some knowledge exists about practices that are most effective for teaching writing, but whether or not these practices best serve diverse language learners and other marginalized youth is less clear. Scholarship demonstrates that listening to youth about their writing practices is beneficial to assisting them as developing writers. In addition to listening to youth discuss how they write, it is also important to provide opportunities for them to write on subjects that matter to them. English class activity systems, as well as other mainstream content classrooms, are complex spaces. For these reasons, teachers should acknowledge the

context of their rooms (the environment they create), its relationship to the societal contexts of their students (the environments students come from), and the awareness youth have for the writing genres that are assigned (how communication occurs in varying environments). Youth have much to express and are capable of designating their ideas when they are allowed to develop them in school.

### Research on Out of School Literacy Practices

In this third section of the literature review, I review literature that explored the literacy of English language learners in and out of school. Scholarship suggested that out-of-school lives often position youth as competent, empowered, and engaged learners, counteracting the deficit model placed on them by national data reports (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Moje, 2000; Schultz, 2002). According to Schultz (2002), “Without knowledge of students’ writing outside school, teachers hold limiting pictures of their students” (p. 368). Learning from youth about writing beyond school provides a more comprehensive understanding of their capabilities.

Specific research on English language learners has showed that a failure to recognize out-of-school literacy practices alienates students from in-school literacy achievement (Fu, 1995; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lam, 2000, 2009; Sarroub, 2002, 2007). For example, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) reported big divisions between home and school literacies for seven Cambodian girls who participated in a three-year study at an elementary school. According to Skilton-Sylvester (2002), “across home and school contexts, there were differences in written genres, the functions of writing, and incredible differences in volume and quality of written texts” (p. 61). Skilton-Sylvester reported that for one participant who wrote abundantly out of school, a negative attitude developed

about writing in school for two reasons: (1) the assignments were impersonal and disconnected from lived experiences, and (2) the young women feared negative perceptions of American-born peers who, in an urban elementary school setting, often ridiculed those who achieved. The Cambodian young woman did not want to stand out or to showcase her skills. Out of school, however, she wrote often.

In another study of English language learners, Danling Fu (1995) researched four adolescents from the same Laotian family in and out of school to learn about their writing practices. Fu used interviews of participants, observations in ESL and mainstream classrooms, samples of student work, visits in participants' home, and conferences with participants' teachers to understand her participants' writing lives. In an ethnographic study, Fu demonstrated that knowledge of out-of-school writing offered insight into how immigrant youth learn to compose in a new nation. Personal attitudes of the four participants on their reading and writing experiences were recorded and related to the assignments they experienced in classrooms. Fu (2005) concluded that even though the four Laotian adolescents wanted to share their lived experiences, history, and journey to the United States, to connect their cultural heritage of being Laotian through self-exploration, and to provide feelings and thoughts about their learning, their classroom teachers expected little writing. For Tran, the oldest participant, English class was a place for doing book reports that he detested. Yet, in an ESL class where writing assignments were varied and personal, the young man's enthusiasm grew. For Paw, who was enrolled in a low-level English classroom, writing meant completing worksheets "that isolated her from others and the real world" (p. 129). At home, she wrote daily in a personal diary, but at school she wrote seldom. For Cham, writing in English class was rarely expected



because the emphasis was placed on reading and analyzing literature. In an ESL class, however, where his art skills were encouraged to “show his thoughts” (p. 152), Cham became excited about composing and sharing stories. Sy, the youngest participant in Fu’s study, was the only sibling to write frequently in an English classroom. Sy’s teacher promoted freewriting and provided many opportunities to write; thus Sy had many more chances to practice his language skills. He was also encouraged to write at home and to use a journal for his thinking and personal growth.

Fu (1995) concluded that youth who are tracked into low-level classes, as English language learners often are, get bombarded with endless worksheets and meaningless mechanical skill work. Opportunities to write and to assist their language acquisition were less likely evident in mainstream classroom instruction. A rigid curriculum of literary analysis of classical literature made it difficult for the English language learners to develop the language skills they needed. According to Fu, “What each of our students carries with him or her should be the resource for our teaching as well as the starting point of the student's learning” (p. 207). The four participants, close in age and from the same family, found success with different writing forms. Recognizing individuality in young English language learners promoted their ability to use language in written forms.

Similarly, Sarroub (2002) collected data from six Yemeni girls enrolled in a public high school located in a mid-west city of the United States. She looked at the discourses (Gee, 1989) of the young women in relation to their literacy practices outside of school and the involvement they had in multiple worlds (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998; Moje, 2000). She also complicated an easy binary between home and school. According to Sarroub, “Home and school spaces often overlap one

another and are inherently related; therefore, the boundaries between them shift constantly as the girls in this study negotiate social, academic, and cultural norms" (p. 130). Sarroub collected data for 26 months in her participants' homes, classrooms, and communities. She discussed that the Yemeni girls constantly negotiated expectations from home nations and family culture with how they saw American students in the context of a U.S. high school. According to Sarroub, "in-betweenness or the locality of culture signifies the immediate adaptation of one's performance or identity to one's textual, social, cultural, and physical surroundings" (p. 134). Similar to St. John's (2009) discussion of liminality for refugee youth, Sarroub reported this negotiation was an *in-between* space that was central to the identities and learning of the female English language learners in the study. The young women were always between a home culture of being good Muslim daughters, sisters, and mothers, and a school culture of American youth. Akin to Perry (2009) and the language brokering practices of Sudanese youth, the young women from Yemen read and paid parents' bills that were written in English, took care of school materials for younger siblings while signing their parents' names, and were responsible for memorizing Arabic texts at home to prove to their parents they were holding onto their heritage. In school, however, the young women needed to balance the strict religious practices of home with the more liberal freedoms discussed in classes about music and movies. They needed to monitor their behavior when it became too American-like and "too risky" (p. 138).

Additional studies on out of school literacy have also begun to show that 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies offer English language learners additional communities to write (Black, 2009; Lam, 2000, 2009). According to Black (2009), immigrant youth who have

access to technology in the United States are provided more opportunity for greater communication with communities they left behind. Black explained, "As many adolescents socialize and spend a great deal of time in such online, global social settings – the process of relocation for many immigrant youths also takes place at least partially in technologically-mediated environments such as online discussion boards, social networking sites, fan communities, and video gaming environments" (p. 689). Similarly, Lam (2000, 2009) reported that online communication benefited the writing of her English language learning participant because it offered additional spaces for written communication for purposes that mattered to them. According to Lam (2000), an online identity was a location to try out new language practices for an ESL student from Hong Kong enrolled in a senior English class. Lam reported, the "English he controlled on the Internet enabled him to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness to a global English-speaking community" (p. 476). In another study, Lam (2009) described how a Chinese female immigrant who had been in the United States for only two years used "a hybrid variety of English" with her online communication that included "standard orthography of written English, nonstandard orthography to represent the linguistic features of African American Vernacular English and hip-hop, and IM conventions to approximate colloquial speech" (p. 387). Lam (2009) argued that online composition provided an alternative route to literacy development where English language learners in a new country could use a variety of Englishes for purposes that belonged to them. Youth composed more text in online communities than they did in school, yet these out-of-school locations were rarely tapped for in-school instruction.

Fusing the literacy practices of English language learners in and out of school can

benefit mainstream classrooms in positive ways. For instance, Gerald Campano (2007) conducted action research in his own classroom and argued that a teacher's understanding of English language learners' additional communities beyond school offered additional resources for literacy purposes. In *Immigrant Students and Literacy; Reading, Writing, and Remembering*, Campano reported findings from three years of research in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom where 14 different languages were spoken by his students. He explored the use of inquiry to promote students' cultural identities and reading, writing, and thinking skills. For Campano, the status of immigrant, itself, "implies a degree of informed, self-respectful agency: the ability to interpret personal and familial conditions to move toward greater freedom" (p. 88). Every choice immigrant youth make is a further demonstration of intelligence, capability, and agency.

Campano (2007) described that fusing home and school literacies (including what constitutes as knowledge and skill in those communities) benefited the reading, writing, and thinking desired in his fifth graders. Similar to Sarroub's (2002) discussion of the *in-between* spaces for Yemeni girls and Ibrahim's (2003, 2008) discussion of African youth's acts of *becoming*, Campano (2007) referred to the location where he saw students' learning occurring between home and school cultures as the *second classroom*. According to Campano,

The second classroom runs parallel to, and is sometimes in the shadow of, the official, first classroom. It is an alternative pedagogical space. It develops organically by following the students' leads, interests, desires, forms of cultural expression, and especially stories. It is part of regular instruction hours, but it also occurs before school, after school, during

recess, during lunch, and occasionally on weekends and extends beyond the immediate classroom walls, into homes and community spaces. (p. 40)

Second classroom spaces are not measured by schooling assessments, but they should be recognized as a location where skills for literacy are being developed. For Campano, these spaces must be negotiated and understood by teachers and students together because they are the locations where youth make sense of out-of-school realities and in-school expectations (c.f., Gutiérrez, 2008; McCarthey, 2002; Moje, 2002).

For educators, having a knowledge of how refugee students come to know their world through home communities and experiences may be helpful, especially when negotiating in-between spaces of home and school. A respect for how youth live outside of school can benefit curricular choices made in classrooms. Fu (2004, 2007) argued that understanding home cultures of adolescent English language learners as they acclimate to an American “print-literate society” (2007, p.14) is a necessity for future academic research. She established that adolescent English language learners

face many additional challenges in their new lives in the new world. The loss of their past, identity, and everything familiar is already hurtful enough, yet they still encounter discrimination, alienation, humiliation, and confusion daily in both their school and home lives. (p. 227)

Fu also argued that writing is a way for English language learners to express themselves and to feel better connected to school. Having opportunities to explore their lives through meaningful assignments are helpful to finding an identity in a new culture. Adolescent English language learners need multiple opportunities to express themselves both orally

and textually within school curriculum. Having knowledge of their out-of-school lives and histories is helpful for supporting their progress in school.

Knowledge of writing practices used in many contexts by youth, including their homes, can provide educators with understanding of how they use language in a variety of ways for purposes that matter to them. Youth are engaged in activity systems beyond school where they think, plan, question, and learn. Scholarship on literacy with English language learners and immigrant youth has shown that writing processes often occur beyond school. Young people who struggle with an academic English in school use written communication in their additional activity systems where they often find more success. Secondary educators can learn from the writing youth do in their homes, communities, and extracurricular activities. Having knowledge of alternative pedagogical spaces can be helpful to teachers who work with the second classroom of immigrant youth as Campano (2007) discussed.

### Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter offered the necessary foundation for designing research methods to learn from Black African-born male youth about writing in the United States. In this review, studies were highlighted where youth were seen and heard as valuable contributors to research. These studies provided a beginning foundation for understanding Black African-born male English language learners' perspectives on writing, especially those young men who have recently arrived to mainstream English classrooms with limited or interrupted formal education after exiting from ESL services. Njue and Retish (2010) argued that schools needed to begin differentiating reports about student demographics, acknowledging more heterogeneity in how Black populations are

categorized. Awokoya and Clark (2008) challenged social constructions of a singular Black identity – what they viewed as a colonial practice – and argued that a singular definition of Blackness did not allow for the necessary understanding of the heterogeneity of Black populations in Western schools. Traore (2004) and Traore and Lukens (2006) concurred, reporting that Black youth populations share a colonial history that goes unexplored in classrooms, disallowing them from studying the complexities of the African diaspora. The in-between spaces (Ibrahim, 2003, 2008; Sarroub, 2002, 2007) of cultural experiences in a home nation and cultural expectations in Western society are sources for knowledge when working with immigrant youth, including refugees. To learn from Black African-born youth, this research argued, scholars must be open to reports of lived experiences, complex cultural conflicts and recognition of national and international colonial practices that created a diaspora of Black populations.

Instead of using a deficit model that sees young people for what they cannot do, I wanted to learn from research that showed the possibilities of what youth can do, especially when invested in what they are learning. Both Mahiri (1994, 1998) and Kinloch's (2010) research with Black males were informative to the questions I had for learning from African-born male youth. Mahiri learned his participants were involved in literacy acts after school in a sporting program where they felt encouragement, competence, and confidence. Kinloch learned her two participants became engaged with writing when they were personally connected to projects, which she called "pedagogy of possibility" (p. 176). Allowing youth, especially marginalized young men who were Black, to explore alternative stances to the status quo through participation in debates, close readings, and a negotiation of multiple perspectives, gave them authority to

passionately respond to knowledge that mattered to them (c.f., Vasudevan, 2009).

Similarly, immigrant youth show a willingness to write in a new language when purposes matter to them (Campano, 2007; Fu, 1995; Lam, 2002, 2005). Campano (2007) explained that tapping into the *second classroom*, the space between home and school where his 5<sup>th</sup> grade students made sense of what they were learning, was an effective way to promote their growth as writers. For him, the 2<sup>nd</sup> classroom was an in-between space (Ibrahim, 2003, 2008; Sarroub, 2002, 2007). Like Fecho (2000, 2006), Campano (2007) demonstrated that teaching writing to diverse language learners required the promotion of interrogating language practices as they wrote their stories and histories. This also helped them access new language skills. Fu (1995), too, recognized that to understand the writing of four immigrant youth, her research needed to go beyond English classrooms and into other contexts where students were likely to compose for purposes that mattered to them. In addition, Lam (2002, 2009) demonstrated that having an ability to connect with friends around the world provided digital spaces where youth are composing with hybrid language to serve their needs.

More specific to studying the literacy of Black African-born male English language learners, the scholarship of Perry and Purcell-Gates (2005) and Perry (2008, 2009) influenced my study's design. Specifically, as I began to work with refugee youth I wanted to listen to them about the histories of their cultures and educational experiences. In addition, I wanted to provide opportunities for them to orally discuss their writing experiences with me, especially in relation to the genres they used in and out of their U.S. secondary school. It was important for me to hear participants' responsibilities to their families and to learn from them about their out-of-school worlds. With the intent to learn



from the perspectives of Black Africa-born male youth on their writing, my goal was to understand the contexts that influenced their writing, the ways they discussed their writing, the purposes and outcomes of what they composed, and the uses writing had on their lives in and out of school. I listened to the young men in my study about their relocation, the genres they used for communication, the contexts where they wrote, and the responsibilities they had as young men enrolled in mainstream classrooms.

In recognition that scholarship on adolescent writing in secondary schools is scarce (e.g., Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2005; Applebee & Langer, 2009), I looked to Smagorinsky (1997) and Smagorinsky and O'Donnell (1998) to serve as primary models for understanding the complexity of writing activity systems and adopted the theoretical lenses they used (see Chapter Three). With the recognition that writing is an activity influenced by many social, cultural, and historical factors I interviewed my participants and collected data from several activity systems where they wrote. In Chapter Three, I describe the choices I made for conducting this research. These choices resulted from the specific literature I reviewed here.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study investigated the perspectives on writing of Black African-born male youth with limited and disrupted education who were enrolled in mainstream English classrooms in an urban, public high school in the northeastern United States. For the purpose of my research, I defined writing as any act involved in creating written text(s) through the use of artifacts/tools, rules, communities, and labor – the language used in activity theory (Engeström, 1998). I sought to learn from my participants’ perspectives on writing in multiple activity systems. As the introduction stated, my primary question was, “What do the perspectives of Black African-born male youth with limited or interrupted formal education suggest for writing instruction in secondary schools?” In addition to this question, I also asked, “For what purposes do these young men write in the United States? What are the contexts for their writing? What tools do they use to compose?” In addition to hearing reports from my eight participants about writing, I wanted to observe the activity systems where they wrote and to hear from individuals who were influential to them. This allowed me to have more data about the contexts and tools reported and a better understanding of writing rules, divisions of labor, communities, and outcomes. Such information assisted the ways participants’ perspectives could be reported.

I divided this chapter into two sections. In the first section, I explain why I chose an ethnographic case study design to investigate the perspectives of my participants and why I applied activity theory within a tradition of writing activity genre research (Russell, 2009) to make sense of my participants’ reports. In addition, I explain why I drew from postcolonial theory as a secondary lens in an attempt to avoid ahistoricism and to remain

critical of my role as a White, U. S.-born male researcher who was learning from Black African-born male youth.

In the second section of this chapter, I present my methods and procedures for this research, including the locations where data was collected, the decisions that were made for recruiting and selecting participants, the ways data were collected and analyzed, and the subjectivities I brought to this research.

### Ethnographic Case Study Design

For this ethnographic case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Heath & Street, 2008, Van Maanen, 1998) I used qualitative research methodology (Biklin & Cassella, 2007; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Cresswell, 1998; deMarrais, 2004) to investigate the perspectives of eight Black African male youth with limited and disrupted education on writing in and out of U.S. secondary English classrooms. I chose ethnography as a way to share the stories of participants' writing activities and to highlight the unique cultural communities to which they belonged (e.g., school, athletic teams, social networks). According to Dyson and Genishi (2005), ethnographic research is intended to "slowly, but deliberately, amass information about the configuration of time and space, of people, and of activity in their physical sites" (p. 19). Ethnography has a tradition of looking at how people make meaning of their lives within particular contexts, and ethnographers engage in "description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system" (Cresswell, 1998, p. 58).

In this research, I looked at the case of Black African-born male youth with limited and interrupted education enrolled in mainstream English classrooms and the additional activity systems where they wrote. During my participation in the *Life*

*Histories* project, many of the students talked openly about other contexts for writing such as ESL and drama classrooms in school and online communities at home. I wanted to hear the stories of how they viewed writing in the United States and to be critically reflective of learning from immigrant youth. For these reasons, I chose to use a critical ethnographic stance (Foley, 2002; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Trueba & McLaren, 2000). According to Trueba and Maclaren (2000),

Critical ethnographers must maintain a serious, consistent, and strong commitment to children's liberation from abuse, oppression, and misery; but such ethnographers must also commit to study further the use of appropriate strategies to maximize the intellectual development of children as they grow in schools and society. Pedagogy does not end in the school: it must continue in the homes, in society, and all domains of life. (p. 68)

I set out to “discover the rich cultural and linguistic capital of the immigrant family and the optimal use of the cultural and linguistic resources available to children in their own home environments” (Trueba & McLaren, 2000, p. 61). This required listening to and hanging out (Ibrahim, 2008) with participants in and out of school to learn from them as experts on their own experiences. This provided one way for the young men to name the activity systems that influenced their writing and to report on the purposes and outcomes for writing that mattered to them. I agree with other researchers (Foley, 2002; Lee, 2005; Trueba & McLaren, 2000; Winddance-Twine & Warren, 2000) who have articulated the ethical and political concerns associated with representing participants through ethnography. My reporting of these findings is framed to highlight their voices as much as possible.

In the words of Stake (1995), ethnography "is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). The relocation of the young men who participated in this research resulted from civil wars in Africa. Included in these experiences were interruptions in their formal education, violence, unavailable resources, poverty, discrimination, hunger, and, eventually, a hope for a new life. As adolescents from Liberia, Sudan, and Somalia, they shared life narratives that, as a result of complicated histories, displaced them to Guinea, Ivory Coast, Egypt, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. In order to understand their positions as new writers in and out of a U.S. secondary school, it was important to learn about their perspectives and experiences before they left Africa and once they arrived in the United States. Their histories, as additional activity systems, made them the young men that they were. For these reasons, I chose to locate their perspectives in a historical context (Enciso, 2007).

I used case studies because I view writing, and access to it, as phenomena bounded within historical social systems and time (Cresswell, 1998). According to Buraway (1998), "History is not a laboratory experiment that can be replicated again and again under the same conditions" (p. 11). Because of this, I felt it was important to locate participants' perspectives within a location of colonial histories and self-reporting. These case studies involve a colonial past that caused limitations and disruptions in participants' educational experiences.

I also used oral history research methods (Portelli, 1997; Perks & Thomson, 2006; Shuman, 2003) so the young men could offer testimony to their lived experiences and offer insight on learning to write in the United States. I located my participants'

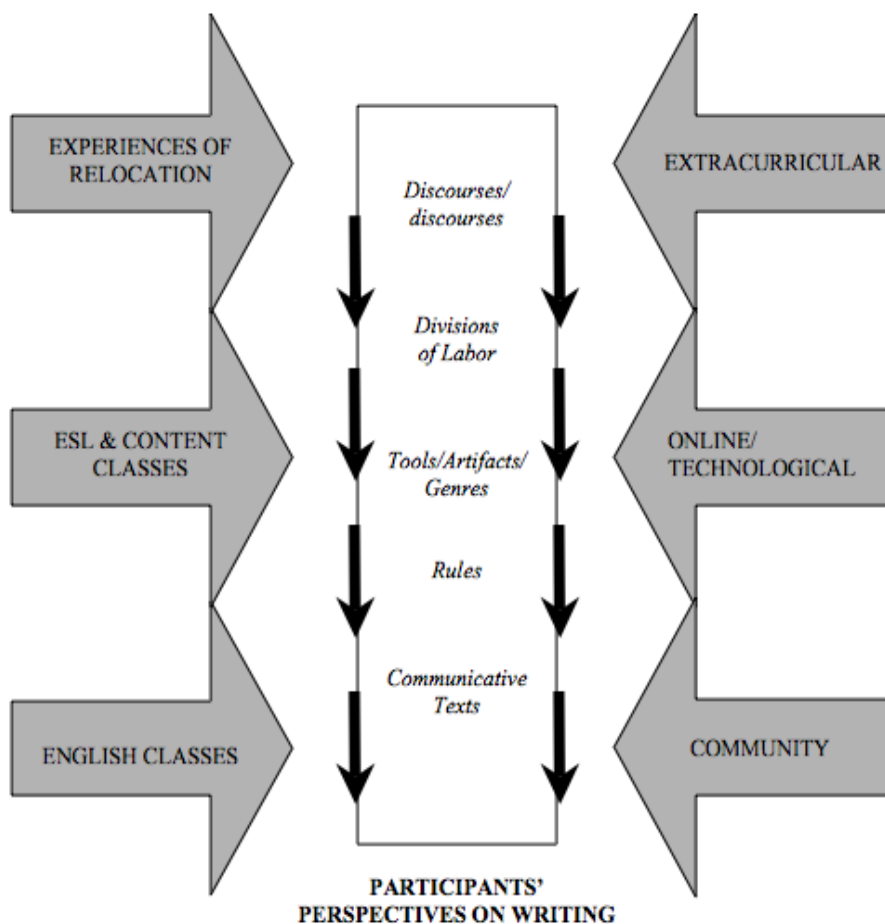
perspectives in historical contexts of civil conflict in three nations of Africa. I felt such history was important to understanding what the young men had to say and followed their stories to learn more about their refugee camp experiences. By locating participants' perspectives within history, I intended to make myself, and others, aware of the complex history involved in their relocation. At the same time I wanted to give authority to the youth as narrators because I agree with Shuman (2003) that if writing life narratives “only confirms the marginal status of the narrators rather than creating individual or social change, then all that has been accomplished is an act of display that further distressed the already tormented” (p. 131). These case studies were written in hopes that teachers in secondary schools, adults who work with refugee youth, and researchers interested in adolescent literacy might learn from what the young men have reported.

For this research, I located mainstream English classrooms as a primary activity setting for writing because English teachers have traditionally been responsible for writing instruction in secondary schools. In addition, my primary interests remain in English education. I opened data collection to additional activity systems named by participants, however, because I recognized that youth write beyond school. Many educators in secondary schools are teaching diverse student bodies and trying to meet multiple needs, but few studies have looked at cases of English language learners with limited and disrupted formal education who are enrolled in mainstream classrooms.

Figure 3.1 is a summary of the primary activity systems that influenced the perspectives the young men reported. Purposes for writing in the U.S. were influenced by the divisions of labor, tools (including discourses), rules, community, and outcomes experienced within the multiple activity systems they belonged. An awareness of these

influences helped me to better understand their views on writing. I was interested in the writing instruction they received in mainstream English classrooms, yet writing was influenced by their other classes (including ESL classes and other subject areas such as history), their experiences of relocation, their extracurricular activities, their online and technological spaces, and their neighborhood communities.

### 3.1: Participants' Activity Systems Influencing Perspectives on Writing



To be able to make suggestions for writing instruction in U.S. secondary schools that would help youth like the young men who participated in this study, I needed a framework that would allow me to make sense of their perspectives. Following Harper and Mitchell's (2009) recommendation of thinking globally while acting locally, I chose

an ethnographic-case study that listened to the relationships between my participants and their writing lives, and used oral history methodologies to position participants' perspectives in a historical context. Ethnography allowed me to hear their stories of how they learned to write and to listen to how they named and categorized their unique experiences in the world (Spradley, 1980). Life history provided a way to center what the young men had to say.

### *Theoretical Framework*

To frame this study, I used sociocultural theories of literacy (e.g., Enciso, 2007; Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007), especially New Literacy Studies (e.g., Gee, 2000, 2008; Heller, 2008; Luke, 2003; New London Group, 1996; Prior, 2006). Within this framework, I relied most heavily on writing activity genre research (Russell, 2009). In addition, I drew from postcolonial theory (e.g., Appleman, 2009; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989; Goodwin, 2010; Faraclas, 1997; Said, 1978). In the following section I explain these choices.

### *Sociocultural Theory*

According to Englert, Mariage, and Dunsmore (2006), sociocultural theory in writing research seeks to understand how histories and cultures construct, reconstruct and transform meaning for writers within the communities they belong. Sociocultural theorists views writing as an activity embedded in systems that result from social, cultural, and historical influences. With roots in Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1986), sociocultural theory provided a framework to understand how individuals communicate through written language. Writing is influenced by many factors and dependent on more



than one context. Additionally, individual writers are members of many social, cultural, and historical groups that influence what they write.

### *New Literacy Studies*

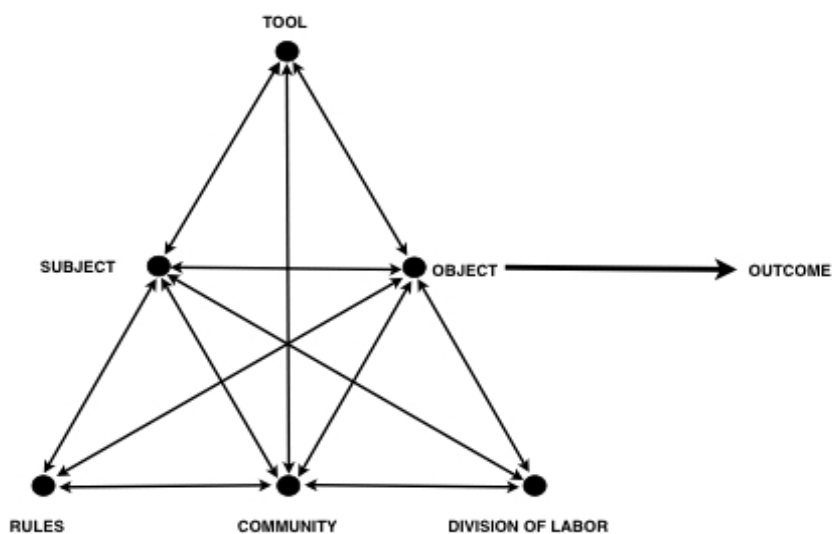
Within sociocultural theory in writing research, I drew from New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 2000, 2008; Heller, 2008; Luke, 2003; New London Group, 1996; Prior, 2006) to frame writing as socially, historically and politically situated within a complex arena of power relationships. "The NLS," wrote James Gee (2000), "are based on the view that reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and we can add historical, political, and economic) practices of which they are but a part" (p. 180). New Literacy Studies takes the stance that literacy cannot be separated from the social structures of power within any culture or the ways it gets used to advantage and disadvantage particular groups of people. The NLS perspective makes the argument that individuals use multiple literacies in a variety of ways (e.g., Gee, 2000, 2008; New London Group, 1996; Luke, 2003; Moje, Overby, Tysaver, & Morris, 2008). Literacy is more fluid, abundant, dynamic, and socially situated than traditional literacy models allow.

### *Writing Activity Genre Research and Genre Theory*

For these reasons, I looked to writing activity genre research (Russell, 2009) and activity theory (e.g., Engeström, 1998; Lompscher, 2006) to help me report participants' perspectives on purposes (objects/motives) through the use of materials (tools), both physical and mental, for writing (outcome) in the activity systems they reported. Activity theory provided a heuristic framework to hear what participants reported writing in the United States. Through the use of tools (e.g., pen marks in a journal, letters typed across a

computer screen) that are also socially and culturally influenced, internal thoughts are able to become external signs that speak to audiences beyond the self. Children move through school and other social situations accruing additional tools to express their thinking. All writing is a social and cultural act shaped by environments, experiences, and histories. Figure 3.2 depicts the commonly used model of an activity system.

Figure 3.2: Basic Activity System Map (adapted from Engeström, 1998)



According to Engeström (1998), mediation occurs in activity systems through various networking factors: 1) a subject (the actor), 2) the object (purpose/motive for the act), 3) tools (artifacts that are used within an act), 4) rules (norms and sanctions that are followed), 5) community (discourses shared by members), 6) division of labor (how responsibility is distributed), and 7) outcome (the product of the activity system). An individual subject within an activity system works toward an outcome and draws from multiple tools (both mental and physical) that influence a decision to act.

A New Literacy Studies framework broadened my definition for literacy to explain communicative purposes and outcomes beyond school, while an activity theory

framework provided a way to discuss how participants *acted*, as subjects, within multiple literacy systems to write for varying purposes. The use of both allowed me to understand how participants saw writing (and communication) in ways that transcended school-defined writing practices alone. Participants discussed writing beyond student subjectivities and remarked on how they saw writing in the context of lived experiences. They reported on writing in Africa, in the U.S., in school, as part of extracurricular involvements, and via social networks.

Within the broader framework of activity theory, I drew specifically from writing activity genre research (Russell, 1997, 2010), including genre theory (Bazerman, 1994, Dean, 2008; Herrington & Moran, 2005; Hyland, 2003, 2007; Miller, 1984). According to Russell (1997), a genre is,

the ongoing use of certain material tools (marks, in the case of written genres) in certain ways that worked once and might work again, a typified tool-mediated response to conditions recognized by participants as recurring. (p. 515)

Genres, and systems for genres, make material tools (e.g., markings on paper) and mental means (e.g., thoughts) recognizable through the act of writing. A subject needs familiarity with genre forms (rules) and how they are used for varying purposes in order to participate in activity systems where writing is valued. Genres are tools that shape one's ideas into patterned forms and, consequently, direct what a subject writes (outcome). A subject must have familiarity with genres in order to communicate their ideas with others in a community. Genres

come historically to fully mediate human interactions in such a way that

some people (and some tools) have greater or lesser influence on others because of their dynamic position(s) in tool-mediated systems or networks. (Russell, 2007, p. 524)

An ability to use a particular genre provides membership into specific activity systems; an inability to use a genre can exclude a subject from belonging.

Genres used in Western societies arrive with histories that are socially constructed to make communication possible (Beach, 2000; Herrington & Moran, 2005; Hyland, 2003; Russell, 1997, 2009). Herrington and Moran (2005) described genres “as social knowledge” (p. 247), Hyland (2003) wrote they “represent effective ways of getting things done in familiar contexts” (p. 22) and Beach (2000) referred to them as “social glue” (p. 17). A menu, for example, is the written genre used by restaurants to offer prices and food selection to customers. The person who composes the menu must understand the purposes for a menu in the activity system of a restaurant in order to communicate food prices to customers. The family who eats at the restaurant must understand what a menu does in order to use it for selecting food. The menu, as a genre, creates a relationship between a restaurant and its customers.

According to Enciso (2007), use of activity theory is a way “to examine how the past becomes present in sociocultural framings of history” (p. 50), especially if it addresses inequities of power and agency in literacy education. Genres shape (and are shaped by) traditions for communication that are historical, including how they have been used to allow or exclude individuals access to additional activity systems. Writing activity genre research (Russell, 1997, 2010) is useful to understand how a subject thinks about written communication for desired purposes within an activity system. With an aim

of adhering to textual features of particular genres, a writer learns specific tools and rules that are historically valued. Access to particular tools (and activity systems that employ them) is political in the sense that, through them, divisions of labor occur. Those who can use tools to compose with particular genres have access to additional activity systems.

### *Postcolonial Theory*

Additionally, I drew from postcolonial theory (Appleman, 2009; Aschroft, 2009; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989; Goodwin, 2010; Faraclas, 1997; Said, 1978; Smith, 1999; Spivak, 1998) to interrogate how writing was used in the activity systems of my participants, how it allowed access to particular genres of power, and how it could help me remain critical of my own position in this work. According to Gikandi (2006), postcolonial theories “provide new vistas for understanding cultural flows that can no longer be explained by homogeneous Eurocentric narrative of development and social change” (p. 473). I wanted to be critical of how language was politicized in the activity systems of my participants, including both their limited, disrupted education in refugee camps in Africa and their experiences in an urban U.S. secondary school. Individuals need to have access to – and to be instructed on – how written communication can empower them within the activity systems valued in Western society, including activity systems of school. Educators should be critical of whether or not they make curriculum accessible to the youth they teach (Goodwin, 2010).

An inability to use and demonstrate control of particular written genres has been used throughout history to oppress populations unfamiliar with traditional Western forms because the activity of writing has most often been used in colonizing nations to show one’s ability (or alleged inability) to reason.

Writing, many Europeans argued, stood alone among fine arts as the most salient repository of “genius,” the visible sign of reason itself. In this subordinate role, however, writing, although secondary to reason, is nevertheless the medium to reasons expression. (Gates, 1998, p. 217)

During colonialism many colonized populations did not use written communicative genres familiar to European nations and were provided few opportunities to learn them. According to Gates, an inability to write in the language of those with power “led directly to the relegation of black people to a lower place in the great chain of being” (p. 217). The ability to communicate in the traditions of European societies (hence, use their genres) was used to categorize people (Kusow, 2006). Those who did not have an ability to write – and to use genres valued for written communication – were demeaned as less reasonable and intelligent as those who could.

Participants in this study arrived in the United States from three nations once colonized by European countries. Before arriving, they had limited exposure to the English language and the genres used for communication. In U.S. secondary schools, academic English is promoted to uphold particular language practices and traditions that allow participation and success within activity systems for those who are most familiar with the rules and tools of those systems. Within a postcolonial critique, language practices are viewed in terms of how they recreated hegemonic definitions of intelligence, ability, and success while ignoring the intelligences, abilities, and desire for success of marginalized communities. In other words, those who speak and write in a particular English style, academic English, are traditionally rewarded within the educational framework of the United States. Language recreates history, race, place,

identities, and stories (Ashcroft, 2009) and continues to benefit particular populations while suppressing the voice of others (Spivak, 1998). A postcolonial lens helped me to make the argument that listening to Black African-born youth about their history and experiences could benefit writing instruction in U.S. secondary schools, especially in mainstream classrooms where students, like my participants, are currently enrolling.

New Literacy Studies and writing activity genre research coupled with a postcolonial lens helped me to critically understand participants' perspectives on writing and how they interacted within larger, sociocultural contexts of their histories. Using an NLS framework opened my research to the writing students did beyond school assignments and helped me to position their writing worlds in languages that mattered to them. Writing activity genre research provided a language to discuss participants' perspectives in relation to other scholarship on writing. Using postcolonial theory reminded me to highlight and promote my participants' perspectives, instead of speaking out for them. With postcolonial critiques in mind, I listened to the young men discuss how they used written English for purposes that mattered to them, how divisions of labor occurred, and their criticisms about how written language was assessed in school. They reported specific needs as writers in a new country and addressed how their multiple activity systems for writing either helped or hindered their growth.

### Methods and Procedures

In the following section, I address the methods and procedures I used for collecting data. I describe the site(s) of research, recruitment and selection of participants, and data collection and analysis. I also discuss my subjectivities. The choices made for

this research resulted from literature reviewed in Chapter Three and from my knowledge of qualitative research methodologies.

### *Site(s) of Research*

The primary locations for data collection were my participants' mainstream English classrooms at Robinson High School, a 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> urban public school located in a mid-size city in the northeastern United States. Data were also collected in other classrooms, during activities after school, and within communities named by participants as influencing their writing lives (e.g. home, tutoring centers). For six months, I accrued information from my participants about their writing in and out of school.

Robinson High School enrolled 1300 students at the time of the study and included a large English language learning population, many of whom arrived as refugees with interruptions in their formal education. The racial/ethnic population of Robinson High School was 25% White American, 3% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 8% Hispanic or Latino, 1% American Indian, and 63% Black or African American. A breakdown between English-speaking African Americans born in the United States and Black African-born English language learners enrolled in the school was not reported in materials provided by the school, district, or state, similar to what Njue and Retish (2010) found. At the time of data collection, the state Department of Education reported that Robinson High School graduated 57% of its student population overall and did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for students who were Black or African American, economically disadvantaged, or with disabilities. Federal guidelines have begun to require districts to disclose data on English language learners (Zehr, 2009)



and state records showed Robinson High School graduated 30 students with limited English proficiency the year before this study occurred.

English teachers and students were under the pressure of meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) on a state English examination. State reports showed slightly over 50% of the students at Robinson reached a passing score as compared to a 70% passing rate in schools with a similar demographic and a 98% passing rate of nearby suburban schools. The state English examination had four emphases: 1) listening and writing for information and understanding, 2) reading and writing for information and understanding, 3) reading and writing for critical analysis, and 4) reading and writing for literary response. English teachers described that English language learners enrolled in their mainstream classrooms had a difficult time with the state test and speculated that the high population of ESL students in mainstream classrooms resulted in their department's failure to meet AYP.

Of the 1300 students enrolled at Robinson High School at the time of this study, ESL teachers estimated that 15% were English language learners in beginning, intermediate, and advanced ESL classrooms. An ESL teacher speculated that the school served approximately 160 African-born English language learners who had relocated from Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Egypt, Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Liberia; approximately half of these students were young men. At the time of data collection, African refugees from Somalia were the most recent arrivals to the school and represented the largest number of African-born students. A few years earlier, Sudanese and Liberian youth were newcomers. Eligibility for entering mainstream English classrooms was linked to scores on the state's English language

achievement test. This test measured language proficiency of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students through listening, speaking, reading and writing. The state's English language achievement test was given in the spring of each year to determine the placement of students at three levels: beginning, intermediate and advanced. English language learners needed to score at the intermediate range or higher before they were placed in mainstream classrooms. If they received an intermediate score they remained in an advanced ESL class and simultaneously took a mainstream English class. This was a strategy used to increase students English-language proficiency. Once they received the advanced score, though, they no longer received ESL services and were no longer counted in the numbers that the ESL department reported.

Mainstream English teachers involved in this study, however, did not differentiate between English language learners in terms discussed in the introduction (e.g., long-term English language learners, SIFEs) or through the terminology used by the state's English language achievement test. Instead, they most commonly referred to students like the young men in this study as "the ESL kids" (Field notes, 01/07/10) or "the Africans" (Interview, Ms. Clinton, 03/02/10). Because funds used to support professional development between English and ESL teachers were cut in recent years, they had few opportunities to collaborate with each other.

Data were also collected in environments beyond English classrooms at Robinson High School that were named by participants as influential. This involved spending time in the homes of participants and meeting their families, attending athletic events, or hanging out after school. For two of my participants, this meant meeting tutors at a center that worked with Somali Bantu youth within their housing community, and in the case of

one participant, it meant spending time walking around the city. For all eight participants it also meant socializing in online communities, especially Facebook.

The city where these young men lived had approximately 150,000 residents. Like many northern and Midwest cities that prospered in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, industrial employment had moved to new locations. The population of the city where these youth lived has remained rather stable, partially because refugee families have relocated to the area. According to the city's website, the demographics at the time of the study were approximately 64% White, 25% African American, 3% Asian, 5% Hispanic/Latino, and 3% other, with the median income for households at \$25,000 (Field notes, 01/27/10). The city has a long history of housing immigrants arriving from Asia, Europe, Africa, and Pacific Islands. Like many urban environments, its neighborhoods included ethnic enclaves, upper middle-class homes, student housing for a local university, and public housing. Data outside of school were collected mostly in public housing communities, a community center, several city parks where the young men hung out with friends, a local mall, and at facilities where participants played on club teams.

#### *Recruitment of Participants*

I learned about Robinson High School in 2008 when I supervised a student teacher placed at the school. The diversity in the student body was obvious in the classrooms I observed. I gained additional access to Robinson High School a year later when I interviewed three male students enrolled in an advanced ESL class through my participation in a doctoral seminar, *Life Histories*, which I discussed in the introduction. In this seminar, my classmates and I used oral history methodologies to write the life stories of students who had interruptions in their formal education (SIFEs) with the goal

to be more aware of changing demographics in one urban school district and to validate the experiences of new youth through sharing life stories. At the time, I was assigned to three young men: a sophomore from Liberia, a sophomore from Bhutan, and a senior from Sudan. Through the project I became a familiar face. In addition, I co-taught a university class that met at Robinson High School to graduate students in Literacy Education the following year while simultaneously working on a writing-focused professional development initiative for Robinson's English teachers. I came to see the location as an ideal space for my research. Robinson High School's urban demographics and resemblance to schools across the United States enrolling Black African youth were what I desired for collecting data. I proposed my research to the principal, who contacted the chairs of the ESL and English departments. With their support, I was granted administrative, district, and teacher permission to collect data at Robinson High School from January until June, 2010.

Male participants were chosen for this dissertation study for three reasons. First, as an English teacher in a school whose mission was diversity, I often reflected on the writing practices of male students (Smith & Wilhelm, 2004; Tatum, 2008) and took an interest in how males sometimes resisted reading and writing activities in my room. I grew curious about their disregard for literacy in school, especially when I saw them as ambitious thinkers who were involved in a plethora of activities beyond school where they actively demonstrated an ability to think critically. Second, several adult males in the refugee communities where I volunteer suggested it would not be appropriate for me,

as a male, to work with young women in their community<sup>2</sup>. Their advice about youth/adult relationships and my knowledge of violence sometimes used against girls during conflict, including rape (Leatherman, 2011), made me choose to work with male youth at this time. Third, I established a mentoring relationship with several young men at Robinson as a result of the *Life Histories* project and they informed my initial research proposal. A collaborative relationship already existed. These young men knew my interests in writing and my volunteer work with refugee families.

Recruitment began through several informal conversations with these young men. They suggested friends, and a “snowball sampling” occurred (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The boys suggested I talk with ESL teachers at the school and, once I did, I was introduced to more students. I wanted participants across a 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade spectrum: varying country of origin, grade level, years in the United States, years in mainstream English classrooms, and diversity of teachers. Once I had many willing participants, I began to talk with guardians and teachers. I also visited many homes and talked with elders. The young men introduced me to families and, as language brokers (Perry, 2009; McCarthy, Garcia, Lopez-Velasquez, Lin, & Guo, 2004; Sarroub, 2002, 2007), they helped me communicate the purpose of my study. Although many of the young men were of age to consent for themselves, I wanted to involve families as much as I could. I wanted them to be involved in the study as additional informants and to know the purposes for my research. In addition, I wanted to make myself available to them if they had any questions, comments or concerns. Because of their vulnerability in the United States, I wanted them to have access to me if ever they needed it.

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<sup>2</sup> Experiences as a classroom teacher taught me to be cautious when working with youth populations, both male and female. For these reasons, interviews were conducted in open environments and in close proximity of others. Attention to safety, for my personal wellbeing, as well as theirs, was considered throughout this study.

### *Selection of Participants*

Eight participants were targeted for this study to represent a 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade demographic enrolled in mainstream English classrooms at Robinson High School. I wanted my sampling to have more variation in the countries of origin, but willing participants did not always have consenting teachers and elders. The three nations (Liberia, Sudan, and Somalia) were well represented at Robinson High School, but they do not represent all African-born youth at the school with limited formal education. The students ranged in ages from 16 to 20, with two students selected from each grade level. After agreements were made with participants, families, teachers, and the school, however, I learned that a participant's enrollment in a particular grade level English class such as 10<sup>th</sup> grade English did not necessarily mean that the participant was a sophomore. Two of the eight participants were enrolled in grade-level English classrooms that did not correspond to their current grade. Ultimately, no senior-level English classrooms were observed during this study, although two "seniors" participated. One participant was a senior enrolled in a junior English classroom and the other, who thought he was a senior until the end of the study, was enrolled in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom. A third participant, who was introduced as a sophomore in 10<sup>th</sup> grade English, was actually an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student enrolled in a sophomore English class. The target of two students per grade level was partially met, although the data were collected, officially, from two freshmen, one sophomore, four juniors, and one senior.

The final eight participants included two young men enrolled in a 9<sup>th</sup> grade mainstream English class, Ali and Panther<sup>3</sup>; a sophomore enrolled in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class, Samuel; two juniors enrolled in 10<sup>th</sup> grade English classes, Najm and Shafac; two juniors enrolled in 11<sup>th</sup> grade English classrooms, Zizu and London; and one senior who was enrolled in a junior English class, Ade. Three of the participants were dually enrolled in Advanced ESL and a mainstream English classroom: Ali, Najm, and Shafac.

Figure 3.3 is a summary of participants. Chapter Four, the first of the findings chapters, elaborates their history, as subjects, within several activity systems.

Figure 3.3: Summary of Participants

Participant	Country of Origin	Refugee services	Age	Arrival to U.S.	Years in U.S.	Years in Mainstream English
<b>Ali</b> 9th Grade	Kenya Somalia (Bantu)	Dadaab Dahley, Kakuma, Kenya	16	2004	6	3
<b>Panther</b> 9th grade	Sudan (Dinka)	Hishag, Egypt	16	2003	7	2
<b>Samuel</b> 10th grade	Sudan (Dinka)	Kakuma, Kenya	17	2003	7	4
<b>Najm</b> “10th Grade”	Somalia (Benadiri)	Maadi, Nasir City, Egypt	17	2006	4	1
<b>Zizu</b> 11th Grade	Liberia (Mandingo)	Laine, Guinea	18	2005	5	2
<b>London</b> 11th Grade	Sudan (Dinka)	Awar, Uganda	18	2006	4	2
<b>Shafac</b> “12th Grade”	Somalia (Bantu)	Kakuma, Kenya	19	2004	6	1
<b>Ade</b> 12th grade	Somalia (Bantu)	Tanzania to Kakuma	20	2004	6	2

<sup>3</sup> Most participants wanted to use their real name for this study. In three situations, family members questioned their consent because they thought the use of pseudonyms was dishonest. Through lengthy conversations (in one case, over several weeks), it was agreed that participants would be able to name themselves for the study.

In addition to the eight participants, I also interviewed their mainstream English teachers. Each of their English teachers were interviewed once, formally, and other teachers they named as influencing their writing were interviewed informally.

*Participants' English Teachers.* Four English teachers allowed data to be collected in their English classrooms: Ms. Clinton, Ms. Hamilton, Ms. Clay, and Mr. Dallas. They averaged 4.5 years of teaching. Ali and Panther worked with Ms. Clinton in 9<sup>th</sup> and Zizu in 11<sup>th</sup> grade English. Samuel and Shafac worked in 10<sup>th</sup> and London in 11<sup>th</sup> grade English with Ms. Hamilton. For six weeks, they were also mentored by a student teacher named Mr. Tully in Ms. Hamilton's room. Najm worked with Ms. Clay in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and Ade worked with Mr. Dallas in 11<sup>th</sup> grade English. English classes lasted for 70 minutes. Freshmen and sophomores took English every day while juniors and seniors took English every other day.

Ms. Clinton, a White woman, deliberately sought to teach at an urban high school and was in her fourth year at Robinson. She discussed that her academic experiences were "all White" (Interview, 03/02/10), yet she learned from her parents, who were special education teachers, "to respect diversity and to value inclusive education." She reported that she could not teach in a high school like the one she attended. She had a vivid memory when Robinson played football against her alma mater and several boys at her school waved a Confederate flag. They were never reprimanded for their behavior and this bothered her. Her experiences at college offered skills in literary analysis and she also minored in theater. She reported she had no classes on teaching writing to secondary students or for working with English language learners.



Ms. Hamilton was also a White female in her fourth year of teaching at Robinson. She worked several years as a substitute teacher in a suburban middle school and spent a number of years working as a social worker before she pursued a career into education. She earned a B.A. in English and her first master's degree in Education, where she became interested in alternative education. During the data collection, she worked on a second master's in English and also mentored a student teacher named Mr. Tully. She reported "culture shock" (Interview, 06/15/10) when she first began teaching at Robinson High School and that she had to "customize" her expectations for working with students. She loved the diversity of her classrooms but wondered if low expectations kept her students from aiming higher. She reflected that she wished she could take classes on teaching writing and had no training for teaching ELLs.

Ms. Clay was a mixed race, first-year teacher with a primary goal for her first year "to stay organized" (Interview, 01/20/10). During this study she received the guidance of a district supervisor who influenced the curricular decisions she made. She majored in English Education as an undergraduate and completed a master's degree in English. She had a student-teaching experience in a rural school that she reported scarred her from ever wanting to teach anywhere but in an urban district. In that experience, students made derogatory comments on her mixed-race heritage and called her ability to teach into question. She reported she felt more comfortable with the diverse student body at Robinson High School. She valued taking creative writing classes during both her undergraduate and graduate degrees but recognized that most of her studies were to learn literary criticism. She arrived in the high school classroom feeling she should be a "professor type" but adjusted her expectations over the year. The 10<sup>th</sup> grade class I

observed enrolled an English language-learning majority that she reported she had no preparation to work with. She had no classes on teaching writing in graduate or undergraduate coursework.

Mr. Dallas, a White male, was in his ninth year at Robinson High School and was tied for second with the most seniority in the department. His undergraduate major included English and education and he had a master's degree in education. He worked several summers with the ESL Department to offer programs to English language learners and reported learning a tremendous amount from the ESL teachers. Like the other three, he had limited training in teaching writing, but he had a reputation for being a strong writing teacher with parents, other adults at Robinson High School, alumni, and students. He often told his students, "Writing is a second language to all of us" (Interview, 03/02/10). Mr. Dallas's quirky sense of humor and playfulness were well received by students in his classes, and during every hour of the day they could be found in his room discussing writing with him.

#### *The Researcher's Role*

As a White, college-educated male, an urban high school English teacher, a National Writing Project consultant, and a volunteer with refugee communities, I needed to keep my subjectivities in the forefront of my thinking to be culturally sensitive throughout data collection and analysis (Eastmond, 2007; Duncan, 2002; Windance-Twine & Warren, 2000). To do this work, I needed to be critical of my Whiteness, my access to Western education, and my teaching experiences and how they influenced my understanding of participants' perspectives, especially through reporting my findings as ethnographic research. In telling the story of my participants' perspectives, I needed to be

self-aware of my own biases and subjectivities. According to Duncan (2002), reflective and critical research fosters “a consideration of the multiple viewpoints that may come to bear in the social construction of reality” (p. 96). This includes interrogating one’s own privileges. Throughout this research I reflected critically and often through the memos I wrote, the observations I made, and the ways I positioned myself as a researcher.

I am the first in my family to graduate from college and have found achievement in facilities of higher education. I have benefited as a successful reader, thinker, and writer in Western traditions of communicating in English that have allowed me access to additional activity systems of power. As a White man, I am conscious of how Western ideologies have been used for empowerment around the globe. Imperialism in Africa, the Middle Passage, the Civil Rights movement, and modern relocations of African people are historically connected to my Western ancestry, its Whiteness, and the institutional traditions that have operated to frame what it means to be “educated,” “able,” and “competent” in the world. The young men in this study saw me as White and often referred to me in racial terms. They introduced me to their friends and teachers as “my White nerd” (e.g., Field notes, 03/03/10), “my White man” (e.g., Field notes, 02/16/10) and “my White nigga” (e.g., Field notes, 01/19/10). My participants used a label of Whiteness to identify me to others. As diverse as the demographics at Robinson High School were, the young men were often in classes where the presence of White, American-born students were rare, although a majority of teachers were White. A majority of their classmates were U. S.-born African Americans.

Throughout this study, I have strived to be open and honest in recognizing the ways my Western subjectivities are displayed through my thinking, assumptions,

questions, and representations of what my participants reported. The intent of this research was to showcase their perspectives and to stay true to their reports of learning to write in the United States. Postcolonial theory reminded me that my European ancestry and its educational traditions evolved with hegemonic language practices, opportunities, and privileges, that, if left unquestioned, could recreate inequities.

The hardest bias to contain throughout this research, though, was a prejudice for certain kinds of writing instruction that culminated out of my teaching experiences and professional development. I began this study with over ten years of teaching writing in a state that used portfolio assessments (Hillocks, 2002; Russell, 2001) and, as a result, I had to be vigilant about interrogating my assumptions about what I saw as ‘normal’ writing instruction with diverse student populations. I had “to harness my inner teacher” (Memo, 01/16/10) so I was better prepared to hear my participants report on their writing experiences without judgment on what their teachers assigned or taught. As I conducted interviews and participation-observations, there were times I felt bewildered by what I was witnessing and, to be honest, this made the research difficult. The writing activities of participants and how they were treated were substantially different from what I knew and experienced in another state. I had to suspend my unwarranted perspective and keep in mind that what I knew from teaching was one variation of the profession. I did not discuss my experiences with individuals at Robinson High School unless I was asked. When prompted, usually by youth in participants’ classes early during data collected, I stated I was conducting research on writing in secondary schools. This relieved many of my participants’ classmates who reported thinking I “was an undercover cop” (Field

notes, 02/20/10) – another explanation, perhaps, of why a White adult stranger in button down shirts, dress slacks and ties was in the classroom.

My goal for this research was to hear the voices of the young men about their writing lives and I stopped periodically through data collection to ask, “What am I doing with this research? Why am I, an educated Western, White male, working with Black African male youth to promote their perspectives? How do my biases as a teacher, volunteer, and writer influence the way I am understanding what participants are telling me?” I recognize my personal writing activity systems have provided artifacts/tools, rules and divisions of labor that have privileged me and that this access has allowed me educational opportunities that are not the norm around the world. With this said, I needed to ask questions about how I viewed literacy, especially the locality of my own privileges I have been provided through education in Western society. My degrees have licensed me to be a secondary English teacher who took interest in English language learning populations because demographics of my own classroom changed. I am not a certified ESL teacher. As a teacher who experienced a diverse, heterogeneous, and multi-skilled classroom, I wanted to support writing for all students in mainstream classes.

#### *Data Collection*

The main sources of data collected for this study were interviews, participant observations, and samples of student writing. In addition, my experiences as a classroom teacher introduced me to writer’s notebooks (Fletcher, 1996) that I have used on a daily basis to collect my thoughts, ideas, and intellectual seeds. Data were collected during a six-month period between January and June 2010, but in the case of one participant, Zizu, interviews from the *Life Histories* project in 2009 were consulted. In this project, I

interviewed Zizu four times and co-wrote his life history with him. I consulted his interviews from this time after he agreed to participate and as he referred to the *Life Histories* project throughout this study. In addition, another participant, Ade, referenced a website that was co-created with a graduate student from the *Life Histories* project. Ade submitted his writing from the website in an end-of-the-year portfolio during this study. I chose second semester for this study because Robinson used a commercial reading and writing program during the first semester for 9th and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students, which meant the English teachers reported little flexibility with their instruction. I wanted data to represent classroom activities that did not come pre-packaged by outside sources. Data were collected in separate folders for each participant on my laptop and in files of my home and backed up onto an external storage device that was locked.

Throughout data collection, I used thick description (Geertz, 1973) and reflective observational field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Spradley, 1980), conceptual and theoretical memos (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Heath & Street, 2008), audio taped interviews (deMarrais, 2004; Chase, 1995; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Patton, 2002) and a collection of artifacts (including e-mails between participants and me, internet materials, teacher handouts, school documents, samples of lesson plans, and participants' writing). With field notes, I descriptively wrote portraits of classroom activities, reconstructions of the dialogue that occurred in classroom settings, details of the physical setting, accounts of particular events, and observational comments about what I was recording (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I took notes on a laptop computer and recorded the activities in five-minute increments to better understand the pacing of actions that occurred. In them, I described signs that hung on the walls, ways participants

interacted with others, discussions that occurred, lessons that were provided, books that were read, items that were written on the whiteboards and overheads, and any influences on classroom context that I could intuit. I also wrote extended field notes after having informal conversations with participants and their peers, classroom teachers, and others who interacted with the young men.

Data also included two, sixty-minute, semi-structured interviews (deMarrais, 2004; Fontana & Frey, 2000) with each of the eight participants. When possible, the first interview occurred at the beginning of the six-month period, but because of scheduling conflicts, two of the first interviews occurred midway through the study or later. I used a guided conversation protocol (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) rather than a specific list of questions so I could allow participants to lead the conversation. For instance, I would say, “Tell me about students at Robinson High School” or “Tell me about your memories of living in Africa.” This guided-question protocol allowed me to listen more attentively to the participants’ responses and to ask further questions from what they chose to report. During the first interview, I asked about the participants’ schooling experiences in Africa and the United States. I provided copies of the transcripts to them and asked additional questions, informally, to clarify responses I did not understand completely. At this time, participants could elaborate and/or clarify on how they responded to the interview. A second interview occurred at the end of the semester, in June, during which participants and I discussed specific pieces of writing and activities that helped them to compose written texts. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed by me. Again, the transcribed interviews were shared with the young men and they made clarifications and elaborated on what they reported.

In addition to the two formal interviews of student participants, I did participant observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Spradley, 1980) both in and out of school. Six of the participants had English class during first and second blocks and two of them had English class during the last block of the day. Maintaining an observational schedule to see all students in their English classroom a minimum of at least ten times required me to be in the school more than I anticipated – around three to four times a week from January until June. I wanted to observe each room at least ten times so that I might understand the instruction that occurred and how my participants worked in the mainstream class environment. An average of 12 observations for each participant was conducted for a total of 84 observations in mainstream English classrooms. In addition to these, I did 36 observations of participants in non-English classrooms such as Drama, Advanced ESL, and History after participants reported they had an influence on their writing.

The data also included one sixty-minute interview of each participant's English teacher as a way to gain an additional perspective on how writing was taught at Robinson High School and to provide further context about the classrooms I observed. Four teachers were interviewed formally, although many informal conversations with teachers at the school added to the data. These interviews were typed by a professional transcription service. I listened to the interviews twice to check for accuracy and to make corrections. I felt it was important to understand how the teachers designed classroom activities, provided particular tools for writers to use, and taught with specific discourses. These interviews helped me to learn about the choices teachers made for classroom activities. With the teachers, I also used a guided conversation protocol (Rubin & Rubin,



1995) to seek knowledge on Robinson High School, state assessments, their English teaching history, their views of participants, and the curriculum they offered. I asked how teachers approached writing instruction with students, how they defined writing, and about the training they received to teach writing. The four English teachers offered additional insights to the writing activities in their classrooms, especially in terms of the genres they assigned, the lessons they created, and the tools they used.

Although most data were collected at Robinson High School, I also learned from participants about out-of-school influences on writing through interviews and observations. Sixty observations occurred out of school at locations named by participants. These locations included athletic facilities, community centers, after-school programs, homes, neighborhoods, online communities, and malls. Three of the eight participants named people who influenced their writing out of school, and these individuals were interviewed formally one time. For these, I also used a guided conversation protocol (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). An additional two participants named individuals who were not interviewed formally. Instead, memos were written after we met. Finally, 158 pages of original student writing were collected, including assignments written for school, emails composed to me, Facebook postings, and miscellaneous texts participants wished to share. Figure 3.4 is a summary of data collected.

<b>Figure 3.4: Summary of Data Collected</b>		
Interviews	Field Observations	Other
2 semi-structured, 60-minute Interviews with Each Participant (n=16)	84 participant Observations of Participants in English class (at least 10 observations each)	Event programs, school newspapers, district documents, sample state assessments, handouts, lessons, articles, emails, Facebook postings, ETC.

1 Semi-structured, 60 minute interview with each Participant's English Teacher (n=4)	36 Participant Observations of participants in non-English Classrooms	158 pages of Student Writing (artifacts)
3 Semi-structured 60 minute interviews with individuals named by participants in the community (N=3)	60 Observations out of School (athletic facilities, parks, malls, tutoring programs, community centers)	
3 Informal, non-recorded Interviews with Individuals Named by Participants in the community (n=3)		

Additional materials were collected throughout the study, as well, including event programs, school newspapers, district documents, sample state assessments, teacher handouts, lesson plans, articles sent to me from the participants, and websites. In total, I collected approximately 1,430 pages of data from observations, interviews, memos, artifacts, and samples of student writing (this total does not include the writer's notebooks I kept throughout the study).

#### *Data Analysis*

Because of the multiple data sources used for this research, a data-gathering plan (Stake, 1995) was initiated to document the materials for each participant in the study. According to Stake (1995), "We try hard to understand how the actors, the people being studied, see things...the qualitative researcher tries to preserve the *multiple realities*, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening" (p. 12). Each observation, interview, and artifact was logged by date into a spreadsheet to keep track of the materials collected. I created an individual file on my computer to log data for each participant in categories of (1) in-school observations, (2) out-of-school observations, (3)

participant interviews, (4) teacher interviews, (5) interviews of community members, and (6) artifacts collected. I also collected dated materials on each participant in binders as a way to access the information when I needed it.

I began analysis with open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of the first interview transcript of each participant, reading for commonalities that led me to additional sources. I used qualitative procedures of inductive and interpretive coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to understand initial themes. According to Dyson and Genishi (2005),

Through analysis we are not on the trail of singular truths, nor of overly neat stories. We are on the trail of thematic threads, meaningful events, and powerful factors that allow us entry into the multiple realities and dynamic processes that constitute the everyday drama of language use in educational sites. (p. 111)

While I read transcripts of each participant's first interview, seven initial categories emerged: (1) biographical information, (2) historical information, (3) participant perspectives of writing in Africa, (4) participant perspectives on writing in English class, (5) participant perspectives on writing in other classes at school, (6) participant perspectives of writing out-of-school, and (7) personal opinions about writing.

This first phase of coding introduced the importance of history to each young man and included early childhood/family, relocation in hopes of coming to America, and limited or interrupted schooling. The histories the young men reported were central to how they saw themselves as writers in the United States. This led me to consult historical

texts so I would have a better understanding of their relocation experiences. I was better able to locate what they reported in relation to the historical texts I consulted. For example, after Zizu reported his memory of being burned during conflict in Liberia (interview, 01/11/11), I went to a library to read more about the Liberian war to supplement my limited knowledge of it. Although I am not trained as a historian, I wanted to situate my participants' perspectives on writing in relation to the conflicts that caused their relocation. I wanted to have knowledge about Liberia, Sudan, and Somalia so when the young men discussed specifics of their personal histories I would have a framework to understand their reports. Consulting additional texts offered me historical context for understanding participants' perspectives and helped me to build rapport with them. For example, Zizu shared a documentary with me about the Liberian war. After I viewed it, I was able to ask questions of him I would not have if I had not done further research. As we deconstructed the documentary, together, Zizu suggested I turn on my audio recorder (Memo, 01/20/10).

The influence of Western civilization on their nations became obvious as I learned more about colonialism in their countries and the conversations between us became more fluid. The economic and political role the United States had on these nations after World War II and after European nations withdrew their imperial rule was directly linked to the civil unrest that uprooted the lives of these young men. They are postcolonial subjects (e.g., Duncan, 2003; Gilroy, 1982, 1987), and their writing experiences cannot be separated from the history that spurred their relocation to the U.S.

The second interviews with participants asked about the writing I observed in their activity systems and the instruction that occurred. In these interviews, participants

discussed the activities that brought forth written outcomes and described in greater detail the purposes they had for writing in particular activity systems. Here, they discussed their experiences in the United States with learning to write. For the second interviews, I used the language of writing activity genre research (Russell, 2009) to code: (1) purposes, (2) outcomes, (3) tools, (4) rules, (5) divisions of labor, (6) community, and (7) rules. These seven categories gave me places to look across reports for similarities and differences. It provided a language to share their perspectives in others interested in writing research.

Throughout the six months, I wrote careful reflections and critical memos immediately after collecting data (Creswell, 1998; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In memos, I thought about the themes that emerged and interrogated the data in search of an “ethnographic a-ha!” (Heath, 2008, p. 30). This required introspection, consultations with history, and the adoption of critical friends to guide the findings of the study, including members of my research committee who critically questioned the ways I understood the data as a White, male researcher exploring the perspectives of Black African-born male youth. I used reflective memos to become more aware of my personal biases and judgments, to ask questions about the perspectives they reported, to interrogate the use of words and concepts that began to arrive from the data, and to help me become aware of emic/local and etic/scholarly knowledge (Heath & Street, 2008; Stake, 1995).

The research questions I asked guided how my findings are reported. I began with “What do the perspectives of Black African-born male youth with limited and interrupted formal education suggest for writing instruction in U.S. secondary schools?” As the young men shared their perspectives with me, I realized that the relocation experiences they reported as refugees were central to how they understood who they were as individuals in

the U.S.. As a result, Chapter Four, the first of the findings chapters, was written to offer a biographical profile of each participant and to account for the colonial history that caused relocation. In writing Chapter Four, I read through the interviews of each participant and, in the case of two participants, interviews with a member of their family, to offer detailed information about each young man. I also read field notes from visiting the homes of participants and from meetings with parents and siblings. Finally, I revisited articles a few participants sent me about life in their home countries, read books on the wars that caused their relocation, and viewed films they recommended. From these data sources, I began coding in categories of *national conflict*, *a need for relocation*, *educational experiences*, and *hope for new life* because they emerged as common amongst all participants. Cautious about creating one meta-narrative about Black African-born male youth, I emphasized the individuality of each participant through representing their experiences in their own words. As the biographical profiles were written, they were shared with each participant for their feedback. The young men helped me to edit these profiles by making parts of their history more clear and through guiding me to articulate particular points. Even within subcategories of Somalian, Sudan, and Liberian experiences, their stories and reports varied. They offered feedback on how I represented them in the profiles and guided how I wrote what they reported.

In addition to hearing participants' perspectives on writing, however, I was also interested in their processes as writers. For these reasons, I asked, "For what purposes do these young men write in the United States? What are the contexts for their writing? What tools do they use to compose?" After all data were collected and I began to have a better understanding of my participants' personal histories, I coded with the language of

writing activity genre research: purposes, artifacts/tools, rules, divisions of labor, and communities. During this phase, I was able to condense original data set of 1,430 pages to 400 pages with approximately 50 pages of tabled information for each participant. Following Corbin and Strauss (2008), I used theoretical memos to write about the ways I saw writing activities and genres being used in classroom and out-of-school activities. I also wrote conceptual memos and made visual diagrams to keep track of the complex ideas that accumulated from interviews, observations, and research in the field. More specifically, I paid more attention to how participants reported purposes for written communication and how this resulted in the written texts they composed. I used their reports and observations to see what tools benefited or hindered their growth as writers in all activity systems, and whether or not they felt they were useful to them.

The results of this coding are the findings presented in Chapter Five. As I began to look more closely at the writing activity systems of each young man, I started to see themes where participants' writing experiences were empowered or disempowered through the tools offered to them in their activity systems. Chapter Five reports the purposes participants had for writing, the tools that benefited and hindered their writing purposes, and the written outcomes that resulted. Here, I drew on postcolonial theory to be critical of how "language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989, p.7) through the rules and divisions of labor in activity systems in which participants wrote. I listened to their reports about where they felt most empowered by and most disconnected from writing instruction. Hearing the young men discuss their writing became a way to promote their

agency and authority as adolescent youth. The perspectives they offered counter the deficit views often placed on adolescents (Alonso, Anders, Su & Theoharis, 2009).

The two findings chapters that follow are the result of the research methodology I explained here. The use of activity theory and post-colonial theory provided a way to use participants' perspectives to make suggestions for writing instruction in U.S. secondary schools. Exploring multiple activity systems named by participants allowed this data to offer an additional narrative to what we know about adolescent writing practices, especially the processes employed by youth with limited and interrupted formal education who are enrolling in mainstream English classrooms.



#### CHAPTER FOUR: SUBJECTS AND THEIR ACTIVITY SYSTEMS FOR WRITING BEFORE AND AFTER RELOCATION

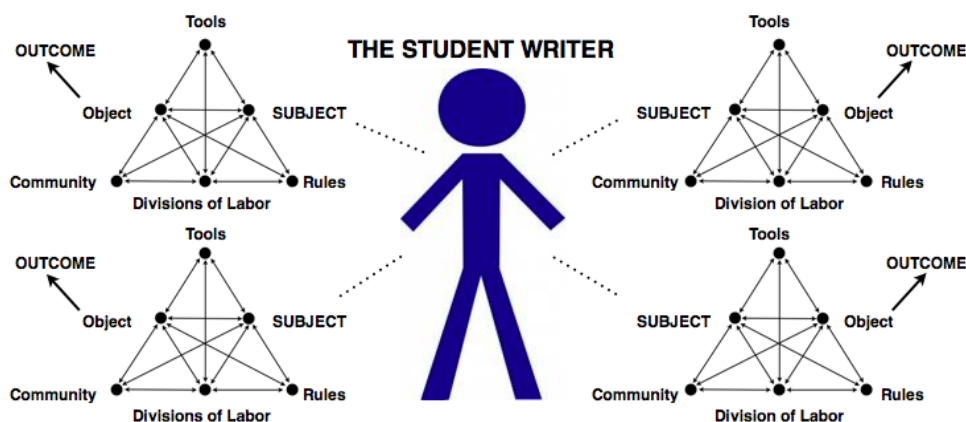
Chapter Four presents my participants in writing activity systems in which they participated before and after they relocated to the United States. I chose activity theory language to represent how an individual acts within a system. For the purpose of this study, I use “subject” to mean each of the eight young men who participated in activity systems as an individual, an agent, and a writer. The chapter was written to showcase each young man as a unique learner who arrived in mainstream English classrooms with life history (Perks & Thomson, 2006; Portelli, 1979/1998) and experiences that were influenced by multiple activity systems. According to Russell (1997), "An activity system is any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction" (p. 510). They are spaces where a subject negotiates purposes and utilizes tools available to reach an outcome (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Engeström, 1998, 2009). Activity is always an interaction between many parts of that system.

A family, for example, can be an activity system, when members negotiate where they would like to eat. The decision made by the family is mediated through purposes (object/motives) of the family (community) by the use of tools, rules, and divisions of labor to reach an outcome. A family’s option to dine out, however, is historical and socially conditioned (whether or not dining out is an option in a culture), availability of restaurants (if they exist in a culture), and affordability (whether the economic situation allows an out-to-dinner experience to occur). Eating is a biological function, but the act of eating out is social, cultural, and historical. For these reasons, an outcome results through social interactions that are historically connected to cultural situations. One

activity system is influenced by other activity systems to which a subject belongs, including prior activity systems that involve complex histories.

In Chapter Four, I chose to locate each participant (subject) at the center of his many activity systems with the intent to better understand the perspectives on writing he reported. Figure 4.1 depicts how I viewed each participant, the writer (subject), as located between several activity systems where tools, rules, divisions of labor, and community brought forth varying written outcomes. In my view, to understand each young man as a writer, I needed to consider his multiple activity systems and socio-historical influences.

Figure 4.1: Subject Centered Between Many Activity Systems for Writing



In the biographical profiles of this chapter I discussed limited school experiences in Africa, first experiences of ESL instruction, current enrollment in mainstream English classrooms, influences of other content classes, extracurricular activities, social networks, and community memberships. The young men were also influenced by other activity systems that did not have direct writing purposes (e.g., families, teams), but that had an impact on the writing they composed and how they saw themselves as writers.

Chapter Four draws from Russell's (1997) view that discourses are tools-in-use within activity systems for writing. They are socially situated behaviors, interactions,

thoughts, ways of talking, etc. that influence how a subject acts within an activity system. Discourses are products of social and cultural histories (Gee, 2008). In writing activity genre research,

The subject is the agent(s) whose behavior (including the kind of behavior called discourse) the analyst is focusing on. The identity of both individuals and groups is conceived in social terms as the history of their involvements with various activity systems. (Russell, 1997, pp. 510-511)

A subject's identity is a culmination of his/her personal history (including cultural and economic experiences), genetics (inherited traits), biology (race and sex), and interactions with other subjects and social histories within any activity system. Russell explained, "Individual identity – the uniqueness of each individual – results from the intersection of the person's history of involvements among multiple activity systems" (p. 510). Writing is often directly connected to one's identity in the United States (e.g., Mahiri & Godley, 1998) and, through education, it is a form of communication assessed, monitored, and taught to subjects so they can access additional activity systems. As Beach (2000) noted, identities are defined "within the context of activity" (p. 11). This was true for the eight boys; their involvement and participation in many activity systems made them who they were as individual writers. Schools, as activity systems, were locations of empowerment and disempowerment.

In this chapter I chose to group participants by country of origin so that similar histories could be shared and variations in experiences could be noted. The biographical profiles establish how historical conflicts in their home countries related to participants' writing experiences (or lack thereof) and the views they had of themselves as writers.

Each was born in war-torn countries of Africa in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and had limited schooling. They were adolescent, Black African-born male youth who relocated to the United States between 2003 and 2006. They attended a diverse, urban high school where they were enrolled in mainstream English classrooms after meeting basic language requirements. They were Muslim or Christian. They loved sports. They attended English as a second language (ESL) classes when they arrived as newcomers, and three of eight were still enrolled in an advanced ESL class at the time of this study, where they continued to receive support. Once they were placed in mainstream English classrooms, they were held accountable to the same standards as American-born youth. Through biographical profiles it was my intent to highlight the individuality of each subject within the historical framework of personal relocation.

#### Biographical Profiles

The following biographical profiles were written to present each participant's history, experiences with writing, and involvement in activity systems that influenced what he wrote. According to anthropologist Catherine Besteman (1999), "History is not just an assortment of shifting, competing fragmentary imaginings of the present: things of import *have* happened in the past, although they may be recounted differently by different people in different areas" (p. 48). These biographical profiles highlight participants' experiences and were not intended to be a grand narrative for youth from similar backgrounds or to encompass all of the complex histories that caused conflicts in three nations. Instead, they were written to provide a context for the young men's perspectives. Figure 4.2 summarizes the relocation histories they reported, including the number of

years they spent in Africa, the school experiences they had before relocating and their arrival to the United States.

<b>FIGURE 4.2 – PARTICIPANTS’ HISTORIES OF RELOCATION</b>			
<b>Participant</b>	<b># Years in Africa</b>	<b>Schooling in Africa</b>	<b>Arrival to U.S.</b>
<b>Liberia</b>			
<i>Zizu</i> 11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	13 years: Born 1992 in Monrovia, Liberia Fled to Ivory Coast in 2000, to Lainé refugee camp, Guinea, 2002	Kindergarten in Liberia. Attended 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> grade in Lainé, Guinea, refugee camp	2005 (age 13) entered 7 <sup>th</sup> grade ESL
<b>Sudan</b>			
<i>Panther</i> 9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	10 years: Born 1994 in Khartoum, Sudan Fled to Cairo, Egypt in 1998	1 year – kindergarten in Cairo, some classes in church, stepfather’s lessons	2003 (age 10) entered 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade ESL
<i>Samuel</i> 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	11 years: Born 1992, Kakuma refugee camp, Grew up in Kakuma, Kenya	“sometimes” church classes	2003 (age 11) entered 5 <sup>th</sup> grade ESL in 2004
<i>London</i> 11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	14 years: Born 1992 in Tonj, Sudan Moved to Awar, Uganda in 2004	No schooling in Sudan 1 <sup>st</sup> grade, age 13, in Uganda; no 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	2006 (age 14) entered 7 <sup>th</sup> grade ESL
<b>Somalia</b>			
<i>Ali</i> 9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	10 years: Born 1994, Hagadera refugee camp, Kenya; moved to Dagahaley refugee camp, Kenya; Fled to Kakuma refugee camp in 2001	“a couple of months”	2004 (age 9) entered 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade ESL skipped 6 <sup>th</sup> grade
<i>Najm</i> “10 <sup>th</sup> Grade”	14 years: Born 1992 in Mogadishu, Somalia Fled to Cairo, Egypt in 1998	Qur’an School, 2 years (sporadic), Arabic schools in Egypt 2 <sup>nd</sup> – 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	2006 (age 14) entered 8 <sup>th</sup> grade ESL, second semester

<p><i>Shafac</i> "12<sup>th</sup> Grade"</p>	<p>13 years: Born 1991 in Binta, Somalia Fled to Hagadera refugee camp, Kenya, in 1993 Fled to Kakuma in 2001</p>	<p>1<sup>st</sup> &amp; 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade, Kakuma</p>	<p>2004 (age 13) entered 7<sup>th</sup> grade ESL</p>
<p><i>Ade</i> 12<sup>th</sup> Grade</p>	<p>14 years: Born 1990 in Hamar, Somalia Fled to Haridari, Kenya in 1992 Fled to Morafa, Tanzania in 1995 Fled to Nairobi, Kenya in 1996 Fled to Kakuma refugee camp in 1997</p>	<p>4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Kakuma</p>	<p>2004 (age 14) 7<sup>th</sup> grade</p>

In the sections that follow, I elaborate each participant's history in greater detail, highlighting their perspectives as much as possible. I begin with Zizu because his nation, Liberia, was once considered a colony of the United States. I follow his profile with my three participants from Sudan, a refugee population I have worked with since 2001. I conclude these profiles with four young men from Somalia, where national conflicts have not ended, making relocation of Somali youth likely to continue.

#### *Displaced From Liberia*

Civil conflict has existed in Liberia, Africa's oldest republic, since 1847 when 10,000 freed slaves of the U.S. returned to western Africa and established a national state (Adebajo, 2002; Huband, 1998; Moran, 2006). Emancipated slaves who were educated in the northern United States returned to Africa with lighter skin, mixed Euro-African blood, and Western influences. For example, Alexander Crummell (1861/2004) returned to Africa to preach English language in Liberia and called it "the genius and spirit of a language" (p. 138) and the "language of freedom" (p. 139). Individuals who returned to the west coast of Africa formed the oligarchy known as the Americo-Liberians that ruled Liberia from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through 1980, a colony of the United States. Educated

in the United States, the oligarchy created American-influenced institutions that were viewed by indigenous people as elite.

Moran (2006) described the oligarchy as "the philanthropic project of a private, white, benevolent organization founded in 1816, the American Colonization Society" (p. 2). Americo-Liberians educated their children in western schools and brought back Western ideologies.

Liberia's very name, derived from "liberty," tells the story of its founding, as does numerous other place names like Providence Island, Monrovia (from U.S. President James Monroe), Bunker Hill, Philadelphia, and Baltimore Avenue, as well as Maryland Country itself. Missionary churches, still active or ruined and abandoned, replicate the familiar ecclesiastical architecture of the West, while domestic structures also arrive from prototypes of the American South. (Moran, 2006, p. 55)

Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 5% Americo-Liberian oligarchy ruled 95% of the indigenous ethnic groups in Liberia. In 1980, however, Samuel Doe (who was not a member of the Americo-Liberian oligarchy) led a successful coup with the support of indigenous people and overturned the government.

According to Adebajo (2002), ghosts of the past haunted Samuel Doe, and he removed his enemies in fear of an Americo-Liberian retaliation. He established a military regime that destroyed anyone who threatened his power – a regime that received the financial support from the United States in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ten years later, however, Charles Taylor, a son of an Americo-Liberian father, led another coup to overturn Doe's

decade of tyranny. Taylor, who was educated in the United States and once worked under Samuel Doe's leadership, replaced one violent regime with a more destructive one.

As a result of these two leaders, Liberia was at war from 1980 to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Taylor recruited and trained boy soldiers, farmers, and mercenaries and turned Monrovia, the nation's capital, into what Adebajo called "a graveyard of ethnic slaughter" (2002, p. 59). Over half a million people fled Liberia as a result and, by 1994, almost 80% of Liberians were displaced within the country and neighboring nations (p. 140). Included in this displacement were the Mandingo people, an ethnic group of Liberia who owned 70% of its wealth and who contributed to the local economy and infrastructure (Huband, 1998). According to Adebajo (2002), after Taylor's coup the Mandingo people were seen as enemies of Liberia because they were viewed as "a powerful group of Muslim traders" (p. 26) with close ties to Samuel Doe. They were murdered, tortured, and/or uprooted by Taylor's military.

Adebajo (2002) reported six key issues as central to the two civil wars in Liberia. First, the 133-year rule of the Americo-Liberian oligarchy excluded the rights and values of indigenous populations who would later rebel. Second, Samuel Doe rose to power on a platform that 133 years of oppression needed to be overturned. Third, Samuel Doe's power arrived through the distrust of multiple ethnic groups who resented Western influence. Fourth, Samuel Doe was brutal and inept and used violence to maintain his own authority. Fifth, Doe undid the military forces of Liberia as he received financial support from the United States to become both "Uncle Sam's Frankenstein" (p. 33) and a "Macbethian master-seargent" (p. 36). Sixth, Doe recreated distrust between indigenous ethnic groups, which allowed for the successful coup conducted by Charles Taylor.



In addition, small African countries, like Liberia, grew economically during the Cold War that occurred between the Soviet Union and the United States (Moran, 2006). Violent regimes received economic support by the political interests of two superpowers. According to Moran (2006),

[T]iny Liberia, with a population of two and a half million people and an area the size of the state of Ohio, was the “beneficiary” of the second largest package of the United States military aid in the world (after Israel). This was presumably to keep Liberia safe from the “communist threat,” but these were the same weapons that Samuel Doe turned against his own civilian population in 1986. (p. 20)

The finances offered by the U.S. during the Cold War to keep Liberia on the side of “democracy” established an economic dependency that created and supported Doe’s tyranny. When the U.S. no longer saw the Soviet Union as a threat, economic support was pulled, collapsing the nation’s infrastructure. Such unsteadiness also led to Taylor’s ability to succeed with a second coup. Liberia turned to violence and chaos. To call on Yeats (1920) and, subsequently, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (1958/1994), things fell apart quickly.

Because of the civil conflicts in Liberia from 1989 to 2003, formal education for youth was nearly impossible. An Americo-Liberian infrastructure supported by the United States that once saw 80% of its children in primary schools and 20% of adolescents in secondary schools crumbled during the two civil wars (Adebajo, 2002). As a result, families were uprooted, displaced, and relocated, including Zizu. Many youth in Liberia did not receive formal education during this time.

*Zizu*

<b>Participant</b>	<b># Years in Africa</b>	<b>Schooling in Africa</b>	<b>Arrival to U.S.</b>
<b>Zizu</b> <i>11<sup>th</sup> Grade</i>	13 years: Born 1992 in Monrovia, Liberia; Fled to Ivory Coast in 2000, to Lainé refugee camp, Guinea, 2002	Kindergarten in Liberia, Attended 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> grade in Lainé, Guinea, at refugee camp	2005 (age 13) entered 7 <sup>th</sup> grade ESL

Zizu was born in 1992, two years after Charles Taylor led the coup to remove Samuel Doe in Liberia. As a Mandingo youth, he lived in Monrovia, the capital city, for eight years and reported attending “kindergarten” for a year. His parents wanted him to attend school. He remembered coming home on the last day in tears, though.

My father asked me what happened and I told him I failed. He asked my brothers, “Did you guys pass?” They said they did. He calmed me down, told me it was all right. I could pass it next year. “You’re just getting used to school. You will do better.” Then he beat me. I started passing ever since. (Interview, 02/03/09)

Zizu explained that physical discipline was “the way things were back in the day” and that his father’s reaction helped him to be academically successful. With a focus on personal achievement, Zizu was proud of his study habits and his drive to learn.

Zizu’s education in Liberia was cut short, however, when Taylor’s military moved throughout the nation and began slaughtering Mandingo people. According to Zizu, “The man in charge wanted to kill everybody. He wanted to be president and the guy who had the seat didn’t want to give it up. So, he took it by force, formed his own army, and took away the whole country” (Interview, 02/09/09). Zizu recalled that his father “went missing soon after.”

One night, me and my family, we got really hurt that night, cuz my mother was cooking. I was sitting there right by the fire. It was cold. And I was sitting there and somebody fired the gun and a bullet hit the pot on the fire. It was hot soup that landed on me. I was seven. I have scars on my legs from the burns.

Zizu's mother, fearing her husband was murdered, fled with her children to Côte d'Ivoire, a bordering nation colonized by France in 1843. In Côte d'Ivoire, Zizu traveled from village to village with his mother and sold potatoes and clothing. From 2000 to 2002, he did not attend school, yet the money the family made funded two older brothers to go. Schooling for the oldest boys to learn to read and write was all his mother could afford.

Zizu and his twin, Masa, did not attend school again until they arrived at Guinea's Lainé refugee camp in 2002 when they were ten years old. Zizu reported that the only writing he did in the refugee camp was copying words the teachers wrote on the board (Interview, 02/09/09). In the camp, Zizu's family waited to hear news they were selected to relocate to the United States. Once they were, they rehearsed their responses for being interviewed. It was 2005.

Our mother would tell us no matter what they do to you, do not change your answer. Do not listen to all the things they're going to tell you. Just answer the questions they ask you. We would practice one hour every night. (Interview, 02/09/09)

For Oga, one of Zizu's older brothers, the rehearsals were very hard. He spoke Mandingo and learned to read and write in French, but communication in a third language, English, was difficult. The eldest brother did not relocate with the family at this time.

In 2005, at thirteen years old, Zizu migrated to the United States and enrolled in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade ESL program. He and his twin, Masa, were promoted that year but chose to repeat the 8<sup>th</sup> grade so they could learn more English. They felt it would help them gain additional skills they needed. Zizu received ESL services through 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the year I met him through the *Life Histories* project and the year he had first entered mainstream classrooms with American-born students. “They are something bad,” he reported.

The teachers would, like, send them to the office, but they’d be sent right back. I was like, “Why can’t you punish them for that?” They said, “We’re not allowed to do that here.” I got confused. In our country, people have to pay a lot of money to go to school and American kids have it for free, but they don’t take it seriously. (Interview, 02/09/09)

Zizu focused on his academic success and reported he chose “not to behave like the American-born kids.” He discussed that many of his Liberian peers “make bad choices in America,” however, and were not as successful as he in school.

Homework and his Muslim faith were a priority for Zizu. He also enjoyed leisure activities like any teenager in the United States. He discussed, “I never sit down and just write. I’m too busy. We have online video games. We’ve got YouTube. Why write?” (Interview, 02/09/09). He did not view online composing activities as writing, although he spent two to three hours each day writing messages back and forth with friends on Facebook and avidly used text messaging on his cell phone. Zizu took pride in completing all work assigned to him on time and aggressively applied for several jobs where he filled out applications. He attended mosque regularly, worked during summer vacations, and strived hard to build a college resume.

Unlike other participants, Zizu's family received mentoring from an American-born, college-educated, White man named Carl who volunteered through a refugee relocation service to assist them in the U.S. "We were all afraid of him at first," Zizu discussed. "We were told not to trust Americans and they would use you and leave you" (Interview, 02/19/09). Zizu's family rented an apartment neglected by a landlord and Carl reported it to a local newspaper. Public housing offered to refugee families was often a dilapidated space. Zizu discussed,

The house we were living in was really bad. Like the bathroom, the kitchen, lights, no smoke detectors. Electric shocks. We try to turn the lights on, but they don't always work. No heat. We pay the landlord rent, but he don't want to fix the house. They investigated and said the house was unfit. (Interview, 02/25/09)

Unaccustomed to the winter temperatures in the northeastern United States, they often walked around wearing winter jackets indoors and wrapping themselves in blankets and comforters. Even so, Zizu described that living in the U.S. was "milk and honey" (Field notes, 03/09/10). He reported Carl and Carl's family quickly guided him to view education as important. He did well in school because he received mentoring from them.

At Robinson High School, Zizu was enrolled in Ms. Clinton's 11<sup>th</sup> grade mainstream English class with another thirty-two students. An average of 16 students showed each day, and the truancy caused Ms. Clinton much frustration (Interview, 03/02/19). Zizu, however, rarely missed class. He was one of six English language learners in the room and the only Liberian. He volunteered to read, let others copy his homework, and answered most of Ms. Clinton's questions. Zizu maintained the highest

average in English but remained opinionated about his hatred for writing. “Why are you always reading my writing, Crandall?” he joked during an observation, “Writing is the worst part of school” (Field notes, 01/19/10). Zizu appreciated literature written by African American writers assigned in Ms. Clinton’s room but disliked having to write about it in preparation for the state English assessment. He passed the examination with a 72 and when he took it a second time to raise his score he went down three points. “I don’t do well on tests,” he explained (Interview, 02/09/09).

Zizu also took part in a College Preparation Program (CPP), played for the varsity soccer team, and practiced with many club teams. He brought writing assignments to CPP and received support from their staff who provided a quiet space to write during the day and after school. In addition, his participation on the varsity soccer team required him to maintain a particular average so he could play although teachers complained that this rule was not maintained for all athletes (Interview, Ms. Hamilton, 06/15/10). Zizu felt being on the soccer team was a way for the young men, most of them refugees, to unite, especially when they played all-White, suburban teams and were called derogatory names. After outscoring them, Zizu reported he wished he could give them the middle finger and shout, “We are city kids, mother fuckers. And we just beat you” (Field notes, 04/22/10). As diverse as Robinson was, the presence of White, American-born students in Zizu’s classes was uncommon. His perceptions of White America came from his teachers, television, Carl’s support, and his soccer matches.

#### *A Participant from Liberia*

Like many Mandingo youth in Liberia, Zizu’s childhood was uprooted when Charles Taylor led a coup to take over the government. Under Taylor’s reign, violence

against indigenous populations, like the Mandingo, resulted in social upheaval and the destruction of the government's infrastructure. Families fled to neighboring countries of Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire for protection. A few applied and were accepted to relocate to the United States. Zizu arrived at Robinson driven to succeed. He often remarked he detested writing, but he did well academically and was inducted into National Honor Society. To him, writing was a platform to build skills for college and he used what he learned about writing in school to help his mother and her friends fill out applications, work with agencies, and request information. Through Carl's mentoring and the scaffold of the College Preparatory Program, Zizu felt his education was supported.

#### *Displaced From Sudan*

Sudan is the largest nation in Africa with a population of over forty-two million, but it has been divided between northern and southern territories for most of its history. The nation's name was shortened from the Arabic, *Bilad al-Sudan*, a degrading reference used to describe the "Land of the Burnt-Faced Ones" (Bixler, 2005, p. 39). A triad of Arab influences in northern regions, Black ethnic traditions in southern territories, and recent Western interests throughout Africa has created conflicts for over two thousand years (Deng, 1995). With close proximity to the Red Sea, cities in northern Sudan were established as trading posts for middle-eastern and southern-European businesses.

Christian kingdoms first established trade in northern Sudan in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and, as a result, conflict between European-influenced Christianity, Middle Eastern-influenced Islam, and animist traditions of indigenous people in the south began. In 1820, Muhammed Ali, a ruler in Egypt, moved his armies into Sudan with a belief that all Black people who were non-believers of Islam were barbaric. Muhammed Ali enslaved

Black individuals in southern regions of Sudan, including individuals from the Dinka tribe, and forced them to labor in northern cities of Africa. Simultaneously, Great Britain pushed into northern cities with its imperial desire for expansion. Britain battled with Arab nations to control Sudan during the 1800s. While Islamic armies of the north rode camels and threw rocks, British armies attacked with machine guns. They soon established imperial control over the nation and maintained peace between northern and southern territories until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Britain, which benefited from slave labor to build its own empire, ended the slave trade in Sudan in the late 1800s.

According to Bixler (2005), the history of slavery in Sudan is important to understanding the civil wars that occurred after World War II. Dinka, and other ethnic groups of southern Sudan who were enslaved, returned to southern homelands with a strong hatred of northern Arabs. Before and after slavery, the Dinka fished, herded cattle and goats, gardened, cultivated grains and used oral storytelling (Perry, 2008) to maintain traditions. John Dau (2010), a Sudanese man whose life story was told in *God Grew Tired of Us*, wrote,

Our legends say that God offered the first Dinka man a choice between the gift of the first cow and a secret gift called the *What*. God told the first man to carefully consider his choice. The secret gift was very great, God said, but he would not reveal anything more about it. The first man looked at the cow and thought it was a very good gift. "If you insist on having the cow, then I advise you to taste her milk before you decide," God said. The first man tried the milk and liked it. He considered the choice and picked the cow. He never saw the secret gift. (p. 13)



In the Dinka story, the secret gift of the *What* went to other societies. The *What* brought them new weapons, roads, schools, and a desire for expansion but also destruction, greed, and slavery to Dinka people (Eggers, 2006). The Dinka preferred a pastoral life of herding animals.

According to McMahon (2007), “the Sudanese have suffered more war-related deaths during the past 15 years than any single population in the world” (p. 12). These recent human tragedies culminated from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century slave trade in Sudan, the scramble for Africa during the age of Imperialism, the collapse of African nations after World War II, the political chess match between the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War, and, most recently, the discovery of oil in the south that northern Sudan and nations around the world desire. Two civil wars and genocide have resulted in two million deaths and the displacement of four million individuals (Bixler, 2005). The civil unrest has also caused interruptions in how youth are schooled.

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian missionaries from Great Britain introduced European innovations, including schools, to southern populations.

[T]he few southerners who attended the schools, mostly boys, learned to read and write and gradually realized how backward they were in comparison to other cultures. They saw that lack of education put them at a political disadvantage compared with northerners. (Bixler, 2005, p. 47)

Young men in southern Sudan embraced learning and sang songs taught by missionaries that celebrated education and, at least in Bixler’s account, viewed Western literacy practices as enlightening. Many Dinka people left animist traditions and adopted Christianity to protest against northern Arabs. The enthusiasm for getting an education,

and, hence, aligning with Christian beliefs, worried northern Muslims, and they became skeptical of schools in southern Sudan. They viewed these schools as obstacles to spreading the Islamic faith. As a consequence, when Britain retreated its imperialist rule after World War II, the north banned missionary schools and moved to take over.

Sudan's first civil war occurred from 1955 to 1972 after Muslim leaders expelled Christian missionaries and displaced southern refugees to nearby Congo, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Central African Republic (Bixler, 2005). Although Sudan established a short period of peace in 1972, financial aid from the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War reopened old wounds. In 1976, Sudan was the third-largest recipient of financial packages from the U.S., and Muhammed Nemeiri, the president at the time, was a prime beneficiary. He imposed shari'a law, strict interpretations of the Qur'an, through financial backing from the U.S. and returned the nation to civil war.

Sudan's second civil war occurred from 1983 to 2005 when northern territories went after oil-rich lands and waterways of the south. In defense, ethnic groups united and formed the Southern People's Liberation Army (SPLA). This time weapons introduced from the West were stronger and enabled fighting to become more violent (McMahon, 2007). The Southern People's Liberation Army raided villages and recruited young Dinka men to fight on their side. Government forces of the north bombed, burned, and looted dozens of villages, killing or capturing noncombatants in their path (Bixler, 2005). International relief organizations were restricted in Sudan and hundreds of thousands of Sudanese people starved. Millions of southern Sudanese people were displaced internally and fled to neighboring countries on foot.

Between 1987 and 1988, stories of the "Lost Boys" began to receive international

attention from human rights organizations that witnessed emaciated children entering Ethiopia (Corbett, 2001). These youth, ages six to eighteen, witnessed villages raided by northern armies, fathers killed, and mothers abducted. Approximately 17,000 boys walked over a thousand miles to reach refuge in Ethiopia, only to find civil conflict in that nation as well (Bixler, 2005; Corbett, 2002; Dau, 2010). They fled Ethiopia and sojourned to Kenya where, for those who survived, shelter was found at Kakuma Refugee Camp. Historical and personal accounts of the “Lost Boys” story have been documented in film (“God Grew Tired of Us” and “The Lost Boys of Sudan”), fiction (Eggers, 2007; Park, 2010), ethnography (McMahon, 2007); literacy scholarship (Perry, 2008, 2009; Perry & Purcell-Gates, 2005), memoirs (Dau, 2007, Dau & Akech, 2010), and even a comic book (Friedman, 2004).

Three participants – Panther, Samuel, and London – were members of the Dinka tribe, the largest ethnic group of southern Sudan. Dinka were displaced as a result of the second civil war. Panther’s mother no longer felt she could protect her sons in Khartoum. Samuel’s family fled after northern armies burned their village and they had nowhere to live. London’s father was killed while serving in the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), leaving him to care for a blind mother in his village until an uncle, who relocated to the U.S. as a “Lost Boy,” sent for him. Although the lives of the three youth were uprooted by the same war, their relocation histories varied.

*Panther*

<b>Participant</b>	<b># Years in Africa</b>	<b>Schooling in Africa</b>	<b>Arrival to U.S.</b>
<b><i>Panther</i></b> <b><i>9<sup>th</sup> Grade</i></b>	10 years: Born 1994 in Khartoum, Sudan Fled to Cairo, Egypt in 1998	1 year – kindergarten in Cairo some classes in church, stepfather’s lessons	2003 (age 9) entered 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade ESL

Panther was born in 1994 in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, to an art-teaching father and a musician mother. When he was four, his father died from a heart attack, jeopardizing his mother's ability to raise two sons in a nation of increasing conflict. Panther reported that his relatives advised his mother, "We see a lot of potential in your kids and we believe you should take them to America so they will get a better education" (Interview, 04/27/10). Panther's mother contacted a sister who fled to Cairo, Egypt, and made arrangements to move there. He described that his mother "would do anything to bring us food. I saw my mom suffering. She tried to hide it, but I saw it." Panther's family no longer had the economic stability they once had. She wanted to keep her sons protected and safe, so she left Sudan with them.

In Egypt, they were safer, but the economic hardships continued. His mother worked as a housekeeper, but her employers did not always pay her. "The rich families of Egypt would do this," Panther explained, "and as refugees, there was little my mother could do about it" (Interview, 04/27/10). Since education cost money the family did not have, Panther's educational experiences in Egypt were rare. He remembered, "We kind of went to school, but it wasn't really a school. It was like at the church. They did not teach you how to read or write or anything." Instead of school, Panther recalled, "we stayed at home, we cleaned up. When my mom comes home from work, we would go to church, attend those classes, and afterwards we either play soccer or horse play around the church." His mother made him memorize the names of ancestors that were given to him as part of his full name and instilled the importance of his Dinka heritage.

My mom said if you know your whole name, no matter where you go  
you'll never be lost. Cause the thing is, a lot of these kids who come [to

America], they forget their language. They forget who they are. They forget where they're from. (Interview, 04/27/10)

Panther could recite his ancestors from many generations as a reminder of his lineage and history in Sudan. He did not learn to read or write in any language, however, until he was eight years old and his mother remarried in Cairo. His new stepfather taught him basic skills in Arabic, but not enough for him to be able to read and write in Arabic today.

Panther, two brothers, his mother, and his stepfather relocated to the U.S. in the fall of 2003 through the sponsorship of a Catholic church. In the U.S., his family attended Catholic services, even though Panther reported he no longer went. He said,

Like, I still pray, you know, but only when I need to. I used to pray every day before I eat, before I sleep, and stuff like that. I stopped going to church, but I still pray. (Interview, 06/29/10)

Panther enrolled in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade ESL class with three Sudanese and nine Ukrainian students at a U.S. elementary school after he arrived. According to Panther, "Being Sudanese is basically my identity. It's who I am," and his ethnicity got him into "mad fights" (Interview, 04/27/10). He reported being jumped a few times by African American-born kids, and he stated, "It was the same way Egyptians treated Blacks in Cairo" (Interview, 04/27/10). With skin that was a darker brown than many of the lighter skinned people of Cairo and his classmates in the United States, Panther was often a target for bullying. His physical differences stood out, and he took on a defensive stance for protection.

In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Panther moved to a public middle school and reported, "I got to know the principal real well" (Interview, 06/29/10). He took pride in impish choices he

made and for building a reputation as a young man who was always in trouble. Even so, Panther loved middle school and remembered that his teachers taught John Dau's memoir, *God Grew Tired Of Us* (2007). The administration brought the author to the school, and Panther was framed as an expert of Sudan. Many classmates asked him questions about his relocation from Africa. "I sort of look at Dau as a mentor," discussed Panther, "because he is a Sudanese man who made his way in America. He isn't like other Dinka elders. He understands life here" (Interview, 04/27/10). Panther admired Dau's ability to achieve recognition in the United States. The principal at his middle school felt Panther would benefit by meeting John Dau (Field notes, 05/15/11).

Panther also enjoyed the writing workshops and Socratic seminars that his middle school teachers implemented and reported, "They're fun and I could relate. The teachers would make us write. They would push me. I always do more writing if the subject is interesting" (Interview, 04/27/10). Upon entering Robinson High School, though, Panther felt teachers did not know how to reach their students. They did not allow students to discuss and debate issues in the world, and he resented that teachers did not take a personal interest in him. Thrown out of class one day, he shouted, "Man, these teachers don't care about us" (Field notes, 03/09/10).

Panther was enrolled in Ms. Clinton's 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class with 26 others, including an African American-born male, J'Quan, who helped him in school.

We understand each other. In some ways we're different from everybody else cause J'Quan is not like everybody. Compare him to a different Black person, he's not into that hip-hop'ish stuff. He knows, like, his situation,

but he's striving for a better life. He don't want to blame his, uh, life conditions as an excuse. (Interview, 04/27/10)

To Panther, a negative connotation of Blackness in America was established by what he saw on television, in his classes, and from his personal experiences. Failing school and misbehaving were viewed as Black activities, while achieving was viewed as acting White. Panther looked up to J'Quan for his talents to do well yet described himself as "stubborn, lazy, and intelligent by choice" (Interview, 06/29/10). He worked only on assignments he saw as relevant to his life. He reflected that people come to

America with goals in their mind and then, ya know, they achieve it. But people in America don't take the time to learn from us. I know the world isn't like these American kids would think it would be, because education and everything is provided to you. I mean, if I grew up in America, I wouldn't care. If I grew up in America, I would be just like them other kids. I'd probably be in jail right now or selling drugs and I probably would drop out of high school. I know how it's like not to have things. I know what it's like not to have an education. (Interview, 04/27/10)

Panther recognized schooling as an opportunity in the United States, but he began to assimilate with members of a youth culture at Robinson who did not see themselves as achievers. In this sense, he became "at risk" and in danger of dropping out. The 26 students in his class included five refugees from Somalia and Bosnia. When he talked about being Sudanese, an African American girl asked, "Wait, isn't Panther African American" (Field notes, 03/16/10). She assumed he was born in the United States.

A large portion of Panther's English class chose not to work for Ms. Clinton; at one point during the semester when grades were distributed, only three kids were passing (Field notes, 05/11/10). Panther's admiration of J'Quan continued, but soon he began skipping classes like many of his peers. He did not completely disengage from school, however and reported returning to his middle school when he was truant to see his old teachers and principal (Field notes, 06/09/10). Their staff fused the diversity of the ESL students into their curriculum and Panther felt welcomed there. He returned because he felt respected (Interview, 06/29/10).

Panther failed Ms. Clinton's 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class at Robinson High School and discussed, "My mom doesn't know about American schools. She thinks summer school is a part of regular school. She doesn't know it's because I failed classes" (Interview, 06/29/10). In Ms. Clinton's class, Panther worked hard in the last two weeks, but it was too late to bring up his grade. According to him,

I choose not to always focus on the teacher because I understand most of the content that we do. I'm capable of doing the things that other students are doing and who study harder. I just don't choose to act that way.

(Interview, 06/29/10)

Panther chose not to get the work done until he realized he was about to fail.

Panther prided himself on being observant and as an original thinker. While being interviewed, for instance, he found a snake resting in a woodpile and noticed a hawk perched in a tree (Memo, 06/29/10). Even when he was asked questions about his writing and relocating to the United States, he was observant of details that were around him. He paid close attention to his world and expressed, "I want more people to see the world



through my eyes” (Interview, 06/29/10). Panther enjoyed debate and wished his teachers allowed more time for it. Outside of school, he often sat by the train tracks to reflect about his life and dreams. He discussed, “I love walking around the city and thinking about the world” (Interview, 06/29/10).

Panther ate with American-born kids at lunch and did not participate with the others at what they called the “African table.” He reported, however, “I’m definitely African” (Interview, 06/29/10). He was the only participant in this study who didn’t play soccer for the school, but in middle school he played basketball. His plan was to try out for the high school team when he was a sophomore. Panther continued to play basketball in a Catholic Youth Organization league, however, and spent a lot of time at the courts by his apartment complex playing pick-up games. There, he often gambled with neighborhood youth for money. With more education in the United States than other participants in this study, he assimilated the most to the American-born youth at Robinson High School. He was resistant to writing that did not connect with his individuality; he preferred assignments that allowed him to share opinions, to argue, and to entertain, but reported they were rarely assigned. Panther appreciated having choice but felt his high school classes restricted what students were to write.

*Samuel*

<b>Participant</b>	<b># Years in Africa</b>	<b>Schooling in Africa</b>	<b>Arrival to U.S.</b>
<b><i>Samuel</i></b> <b><i>10<sup>th</sup> Grade</i></b>	11 years: Born 1992 outside Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya Grew up in Kakuma	“sometimes” church classes	2003 (age 11) entered 5 <sup>th</sup> grade ESL in 2004

Samuel was the youngest of ten children. He was born in 1992 while his Dinka family fled from Ater, Sudan, to the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. His father, who

tended cattle before joining the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), died of an infection while in Kakuma. Samuel recalled, "I think I was two" (Interview, 06/30/10). Samuel lost two brothers and a sister in the camps as well as his father. His first 11 years of life were spent as a refugee in Kakuma, in which he described, "The schools there weren't really education. We only learned basic sentences in English because we might someday be able to come to America."

Samuel's older brother, Dominic, left Sudan as one of the "Lost Boys" in 2001 and worked in the United States towards a GED and a college degree in geology. Through part-time work and collaboration with an Episcopalian church Dominic sent money to bring his mother, four of his brothers, and a sister to the U.S. In 2003, when they arrived, Samuel entered a fifth grade ESL class, but a year later, he moved to a middle school where few English language learners attended. He remembered, "I got in trouble a lot, cuz I didn't know how to get along with others. They just make fun of me, the other Black kids" (Interview, 01/07/10). James, another brother, discussed how Samuel went "from a happy kid who made everyone laugh" to a "boy who got in trouble and didn't focus in school" (Interview, 06/22/10). Local newspapers ran stories about confrontations between Black African and African American-born youth during this time. As a consequence of fights, the district chose to transport populations separately (Field notes, 02/05/10). Samuel brought a knife to school in self-defense during this time and was suspended. He reflected, "I learned my lesson" (Interview, 06/30/10).

Samuel enrolled in his first mainstream English classroom in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and found the work difficult. Even so, his brothers reported he could do the work. The school he attended before Robinson High School and that had very few English language learners

failed to meet Annual Yearly Progress for several years. It was closed after he left. “Most of the time the kids were making too much noise,” Samuel remembered, “Teachers got upset at them and were kind of angry. Students are there just to be with their friends and not to learn. School was just a big social time” (Interview, 06/30/10)

When Samuel came to Robinson High School in 2008 he found more English language learners like him and chose to hang out with sports-minded students, “jocks” (Interview, 01/07/10), in his classes. He ate lunch at the “African table,” where he and his friends talked about sports and made “fun of each other.” Like Panther, Samuel had more education in the United States than other participants and reported,

I am a typical teenager in a typical high school. I am an average student.

I’ve failed a couple of classes a couple of times. I’ve failed English once, no twice. Global History two times. Math three times. I’m average. I guess Americans like to be just in school with their friends and not learn. I’m a jock. I’m average. (Interview, 06/30/10)

Samuel stated he was like most American students who didn’t do homework, skipped classes, and came to school to have fun.

Samuel’s older brothers felt a responsibility to push him to excel. James, who graduated from Robinson High School three years earlier and was described by an ESL teacher as “the next President of Sudan” (Field notes, 02/22/10), worried,

The way my family works is, when you are little the older guys force you want you to be successful. When I was young, my older brothers pushed me and now I have to push Samuel to be successful, too. I mean, our parents weren’t educated and stuff like that. My dad had to leave school

young to tend the cattle. Then, when the war broke out, he joined the army. But he's gone now. It's our job. (Interview, 06/22/10)

James was driven to achieve, but two of Samuel's older siblings, like Samuel, did not find success at Robinson. A brother and a sister dropped out. "I stay in school to play soccer," Samuel admitted, "and my brothers worry I will drop out like they did" (Interview, 07/10/10). When Samuel's report cards came home, Dominic and James reprimanded him. "Dude, you have to, like, pick it up," James expressed, "If we're going to allow you to do soccer, you're going to have to do your school work, too. You can have both, but you can't only have soccer" (Field notes, 01/20/10). They worried Samuel was becoming "too American" (Interview, 06/22/10), and they saw his choice to retreat to his room, act moody, and fail classes was not acceptable. Samuel reported he needed more space from his brothers: "I wish they would just leave me alone" (Field notes, 02/02/10). At times, Samuel asked me to defend him, but his brothers also asked me to talk with him. He reflected,

I didn't mind that they talked to you because I knew you would be easier to communicate with. They always say school is the most important and that's what they always think. But I don't think school is the only thing in the world. (Interview, 06/30/10)

The brothers worried that Samuel had lost touch with being Dinka and that American-born students' influences on him were negative. Samuel saw no problems with his choices, however.

Samuel was enrolled in a 10th grade English class with Ms. Hamilton who, like Ms. Clinton, was White and taught at Robinson High School for four years. Originally

there were 36 students in the class, but because of suspensions and attrition, only 16 to 18 attended regularly. In the last weeks of school, only 12 students remained (Field notes, 06/06/11). Samuel attended Ms. Hamilton's class but often skipped his other classes to hang out in the library. There, he read magazines about soccer, went online, or played cards with friends. Samuel had a strong aptitude for reading that afforded him glimmers of school success. He read adolescent novels like the Bluford Series (e.g., Langen & Blackwell, 2004) that his teacher loaned him from her collection. He easily passed the state English examination as a sophomore, one year before the test is usually administered, and received the highest score in his class. Even so, Samuel almost failed the semester. He hoped his English teacher would give him "the benefit of the doubt" (Interview, 06/30/10), which she did. Ms. Hamilton gave him a passing grade of 65.

Samuel also reported that tensions between Black African and African American-born students in his classes continued at Robinson High School. According to him, American kids don't care about the struggles that Africans have. You can see in their eyes. I mean, I know most American kids in my class. They don't care about your struggle. Or where you have been. (Interview, 06/30/10)

During one observation, an African American girl took air freshener off Ms. Hamilton's desk and sprayed two of Samuel's Black African-born classmates. Samuel yelled, "You spray too much of this," and the girl retorted, "Shut the hell up. Tell your people to take a shower" (Field notes, 03/24/10). The divisions between Black African-born youth and African American-born youth were obvious, but cross-cultural dialogue to address this was not observed in this study.

Samuel described himself as “lethargic” (Field notes, 02/03/10) and his brothers called him “lazy” (Interview, 06/22/10), but he rarely sat still. Samuel was on the varsity soccer team at Robinson High School and played on a club team at a suburban athletic facility. He was admired by teammates and established great relationships with his coaches. Many fathers of players on his mostly-White club team discussed that their sons loved playing the sport with Samuel (Field notes, 01/04/10). Samuel discussed his teammates were important to him, too. For instance, he helped raise money to support a White teammate whose father was diagnosed with brain cancer (Field notes, 04/04/10). Samuel’s soccer practices lasted three to five hours a day.

In addition, Samuel socialized with friends in school, on Facebook, and from cell phones he borrowed from others. He followed the 2011 World Cup like he was an ESPN reporter, and took note of every team as they advanced in the tournament. He reported he would be likely to write more in school if his teachers allowed him opportunities to communicate his passion for soccer. His failure to do the work was often because he felt disconnected from the assignments.

### *London*

<b>Participant</b>	<b># Years in Africa</b>	<b>Schooling in Africa</b>	<b>Arrival to U.S.</b>
<b><i>London 11<sup>th</sup> Grade</i></b>	14 years: Born 1992 in Tonj, Sudan Moved to Awar, Uganda in 2004	No schooling in Sudan Enrolled in 1 <sup>st</sup> grade, age 13, in Uganda; no 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade (lacked funds)	2006 (age 14) entered 7 <sup>th</sup> grade ESL

London was born in Tonj, Sudan, in 1992, where he lived for the first twelve years of his life with a blind mother, two sisters, and a brother. His father, who was active in the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army, disappeared the year London was born. He explained, “The majority of people killed were from the south. The southern people

didn't have guns. The Arabs in the north had guns and the support of the Afghans and Iraqis. We only had spears" (Interview, 06/29/10). London was told his father died while fighting and he described himself as "a good boy."

I took care of my mother. I farmed, me and my brother. Corn. I had to bring water to people, plus some snacks. Or maybe throw some seed. We just have to work hard. When you are there, if the mother has the children, and they grow up, then they can help out. That's what they're for.

(Interview, 06/04/10)

London questioned why refugees from Africa were located to urban areas, especially when they were used to a farming life. He did not go to school in Sudan but sometimes followed his brother, who did. He explained, "We weren't a rich Dinka family. We didn't own cows. We were poor," so they could only afford to send one son to school.

Like Samuel's brother, London's uncle arrived in 2001 with other Sudanese "Lost Boys." After his uncle learned he had a nephew in Sudan, he made arrangements to bring London to a school in Awar, Uganda, where another brother lived. "My uncle left when he was my age because of the war," London reported. "He grew up alone. He understands my story" (Interview, 06/04/10). For one year in Uganda, at age 13, London enrolled in a first grade class where he learned Swahili, Luganda, and English. He did not continue for the second year, however, because his American uncle did not send more money. London did not hear from his uncle again, in fact, until money was sent to him and his grandmother to relocate to the United States.

In 2006, at age 14, London arrived in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade ESL class during the last month of school and remained in ESL classes for the next three years. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, one year

before this study, he enrolled in his first mainstream English classroom. His grandmother who traveled with him to the United States, however, returned to Sudan. “Not that she didn’t like it,” London said, “but she just wanted to go back and be with her other children. They keep her active. I am older now and I always do school work. She can’t help me with that” (Interview, 06/04/10).

When London’s grandmother left, he moved out of an apartment and into his uncle’s home. His uncle’s family lived outside the school district, though, and he relied on public transportation to get to and from Robinson. As a result, London spent almost twelve hours a day away from his house. In addition, his aunt resented having another child. “She is the devil” (Interview, 06/04/10), London remarked, explaining that his time in his uncle’s home lasted less than a year. At the end of the study, London moved into Panther’s apartment. “Panther’s mother doesn’t like the way my aunt treated me,” he explained. Even though Panther made fun of London “for being a nerd” (Interview, 06/29/10), London felt life in this apartment was better. “They bought me a desk,” he said, “where I can study and do my work. African kids come hungry to succeed” (Interview, 06/04/10). London, unlike Panther and Panther’s older brother, Deng – a fifth year senior at the school – took all of his education seriously.

Members of a Catholic church where London attended offered him additional guidance. One of the men, a White, retired lawyer, drove London to cultural programs, sporting events, and church services. The mentor explained, “London used to attend [church] regularly, but stopped coming when he moved in with his uncle. It was too far away. We worried about him” (Field notes, 03/21/09). The congregation bought London



a laptop computer when he moved into Panther's apartment. In addition, London became involved with Sudanese elders through his church.

London was enrolled in Ms. Hamilton's 11<sup>th</sup> grade mainstream English class with four other English-language learners and 26 American-born students, with approximately 16 attending daily. He was driven to be successful, because in the previous year, he failed the state English examinations with a 44 (the test required a score of 65 to pass). Ms. Hamilton said, "That boy drove me nuts with his demands" (Interview, 06/10/10). Panther felt much stress.

I need to pass this English test. I need to pass this state exam. I am worried most about the English exam. English is my second language and the pressure comes to me. My time is running out. High school goes so fast. (Interview, 06/04/10)

Ms. Hamilton's instruction benefited London, however, and he passed during the time of the data collection. In fact, he scored thirty points higher the second time around and quickly switched his worries to the SATs. London did his schoolwork, took pride in maintaining high grades, and was an honor roll student. He shared his frustration about American-born classmates with his teacher. "Don't give yourself a headache talking to these kids," he told Ms. Hamilton, "It's them that's going to fail, not you" (Interview, 06/29/10). London reported that 25% of the American-born students ruined it for the other 75% who came to school to learn. "I'm an African kid. I have nothing," he reflected. "I've been in the country a few years and the American kids cheat off of me. It's silly." Unlike Samuel and Panther, London was afraid of failing in school.

London also worked closely with Mr. Cooper, an ESL history teacher, after he exited from ESL services and entered mainstream rooms. Mr. Cooper read London's writing and offered guidance to prepare for state assessments, school assignments, and college applications. He praised London's choices and recognized his potential.

According to London, Mr. Cooper

encourages me about writing, so he's a positive influence – a second guide to me in school. Like, he used to say I'm a good writer. I didn't call myself a writer. Like I don't see me like this. But he called me a writer. That's what every teacher should do – encourage students to believe in what they do. (Interview, 06/04/10)

In addition to Mr. Cooper's assistance, London, like Zizu, benefited from the staff support of the College Preparatory Program (CPP). They offered an additional audience and involved him in programs to assist his achievement in school.

Out of school, London reported he hoped to write a book about his life. He joined a writing group, but left when it conflicted with his track schedule.

I'm not a writer, yet. I haven't published any books. Somebody needs to notice you, that you're really good at something, but I'm really not good at writing. I'm just trying to get out of high school. I don't think of myself as a good writer. (Interview, 06/29/10)

London was self-conflicted about writing his story, although he wanted to, and admitted that before he moved out his uncle did not think he should share his Sudanese experiences with other people (Field notes, 03/25/10). Although he began a myth about a Sudanese dog, scripted poetry about Sudan, and began a memoir about his life in the

after-school program, London was hesitant about including his heritage in written work.

At Robinson High School, London was the captain of the JV soccer team and ran track. He sometimes sat at the “African table” at lunch, but more often he found teachers to help him with his schoolwork. He was well liked by his peers, but they often remarked that he seemed very sad and lost in the United States. Zizu, for example, told a story where London missed a bus to his uncle’s house and came to their apartment at midnight to ask if he could spend the night (Field notes, 01/20/10). Zizu felt bad that London never seemed to know where he was going and that he often acted confused about what needed to be done. In addition, London learned his older brother died of illness in Sudan just months before the study. As the only boy left in his family, he felt an immense responsibility to get an education so he could relocate his mother and sister to the U.S.

*Three Participants from Sudan.*

Panther, Samuel, and London relocated from Sudan to the United States but arrived with varying stories of displacement. All three have ancestry in the Dinka tribe of the south, indigenous people enslaved by northern Arabs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who worked pastorally as cow herders and farmers. The second civil war of Sudan affected the families of all three participants. Samuel spent his entire childhood in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya after his family’s village was burned. Panther fled to Cairo, Egypt, when it was no longer safe for Dinka families in the northern cities of Sudan. London relocated to Awar, Uganda after an uncle sent for him to have a better life in the United States. All three had limited schooling in Africa and reported they did not learn to read or write in any language until they entered American schools. Their Sudanese culture was important to them but made them different. With skin color much darker than their American-born

classmates, they were often ridiculed and teased.

All three participants reported that education was extremely important to their families, but only London reported a motivation to do well in school. For him, academic achievement was the way he would be able to get into college so he could make money to help his family. For Samuel and Panther, educated in the United States the longest, school was a social time. They identified with American-born students who did not take their schoolwork seriously. Their lack of school success was a source of frustration for mothers and brothers, but Panther reported it was not an issue for him because his mother did not understand how schools worked in America. The three young men wrote often on Facebook, but only London desired to improve his writing to achieve academically. Samuel was successful with his writing but was not motivated to write for school. Panther reported he would write more if he could share his opinion, but did not feel teachers in school cared about what students thought.

#### *Displaced From Somalia*

Somalia is a nation that remains one of the most insecure locations in the world (UNHCR, 2010). Of the 9 million people who live there, almost 500,000 refugees have fled and an additional 1.4 million are currently displaced within the country. Somali instabilities have resulted from a faltered economy and a historical, colonial tug-of-war between Great Britain, France, Italy, and bordering African nations (Besteman, 1999; Mburu, 2005; Razak, 2004).

Before a European mission arrived, ethnic groups from Kenya and Middle Eastern countries had already established divisions in Somalia (Mburu, 2005). In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, populations from Yemen crossed the Red Sea and established trade and businesses with

ports along Somalia's eastern coastline, including Somalia's capital, Mogadishu. These traders settled into northern Somalia and eventually established relationships with indigenous people. Some, like the Benadiris of the north, became a mixed race population of Arabs and original Somalians.

In 1885, when the Berlin Conference awarded African territories to European nations, the "rhythm of life" that already existed in Somalia, including ethnic territories that were claimed by Kenyan and middle-eastern countries, was ignored (Mburu, 2005, p. 23). Europe's treaties to divide land were disregarded by pastoral, migrating populations within Somalia, as well, because the traditions for governing land and establishing ownership were not how the populations who lived there governed themselves. Although the Berlin Conference allowed Italy to take areas in the south and Great Britain to control areas in the north, nomadic people of Somalia crossed the artificial borders that were made for European use. Mburu noted, "it was not easy for Somali pastoralists who had heretofore freely interacted with their blood and cultural relations freely to suddenly observe an imaginary meridian" (p. 36). Like the imperialist practices in other nations, colonizers' encounters with Somalia were not smooth.

During the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Arabs, Portuguese, Italians, and Brits used the Zanzibar slave trade to relocate western Africans, including people from Bantu tribes, from Tanzania, Mozambique, and Malawi to labor in Somali plantations (Besteman, 1999; Roxas, 2008). Bantu slaves labored in textile industries, tended livestock, and served as concubines during the commercial boom of the nineteenth century. Even when slavery was abolished at the Brussels Conference of 1890, it continued in Somalia, and

there were few opportunities for Bantus to be educated or to advance economically (Roy, 2008). According to Besteman (1999), Somali Bantus became another migrating group of diverse identities and statuses who contributed to the flux and dynamism of an emerging southern Somali society in general, and to the fluid context of the Jubba valley in particular. (p. 69)

The Jubba valley of the south, colonized by Italy, became a region where Bantus were treated as second-class citizens (Roxas, 2008). These enslaved Africans worked to bring wealth to Europe, but after emancipation, were not treated as equals with ethnic groups in Somalia. As Roxas (2008) has written, "The Bantu were discouraged from sending their children to school, denied land rights, and denied political representation" (p. 3).

After World War II, when Great Britain and Italy retreated imperial rule, Somalia set out to erase the artificial boundaries that separated its people into British and Italian territories. The unification of Somali people "sent immediate ripples" (Mburu, 2005, p. 86). According to Mburu (2005), Somalia began to experience the influence of social bandits called *Shifita*, "apolitical brigands common in the periphery of many a pre-colonial politics, where the leaders were forever struggling to establish their legitimacy" (p. 11). *Shifita* departed from national authority long before imperial rule and lived lawless lives in resistance to any government.

When Great Britain and Italy retreated, a space was created for new governance. Pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial histories merged to cause war to break out. In 1969, General Mohammed Siad Barre, with the support of the Soviet Union, led a political coup to seize power with the mission of unifying the country. Barre used military action to make it happen. *Shifita*, however, established rebel groups against his

attempt at a centralized Somali government, and they received financial support from nations outside of Africa. According to Mburu (1995), "superpowers often used proxy wars as an alternative to direct military confrontation and were active in inciting and giving military support to guerrilla conflicts taking place in many regions of the Third World in the 1960s" (p.193). Barre courted the Soviet Union, and later China, to finance an additional arsenal of weapons that became available to the Somali military, but also to the vagabond troops who were resisting national authority. As in Liberia and Sudan, Somali also received financial support from the United States to counter Soviet influence. A Cold War friendship began, with violence in Somalia funded by other nations.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, however, the United States' interests in Somalia waned. Without the economic infrastructures or aid from global superpowers, Somalia's economy collapsed. Rebel groups representing Mohamed Ali Farrah Aidid overturned Barre's dictatorship in 1991, but political and military control over the nation was not reestablished. Instead, many young Somali men joined militant vagabond groups. According to Mburu (2005),

disillusioned, hungry Somalis have a choice; either to take up arms and feed themselves or to obey the law and starve. For a community whose dexterity in firearms is unrivalled in the region, brigandage is a better proposition than pastoral nomadism, especially given their harsh physical and political environment. (p. 239)

Somalia has become a nation without a central government and where warring gangs uproot populations targeted as ethnic inferiors, including Bantu villages in the south. Men have been murdered. Women have been raped. Land has been taken. In addition, recent

famine has spread throughout Somalia, and it is likely more people will need the support of refugee agencies.

Four participants, Ali, Najm, Shafac, and Ade, were uprooted as a result of the conflicts in Somalia and relocated to the United States between 2004 and 2006. Ali, Shafac, and Ade are Somali Bantu, with ancestry connected to the nation’s history of slavery. Their families fled Somalia in the early 1990s by foot and found shelter in refugee camps near the Somali border in Kenya. Ali was born and lived his entire childhood in refugee camps, while Shafac and Ade were displaced from Somalia when they were just two. Because the Bantu do not have a written language, many “experience difficulty in transitioning to U.S. schools where high stakes are placed on the ability to read and write in English (Roy & Roxas, 2011). As SIFEs, they present particular challenges to teachers. Najm was the only participant from Somalia who was born to a Benadiri family, also known as Reer Xamar. He lived in the capital city of Mogadishu until he was eight, but when bandits turned against people who owned businesses in the north, his family fled to Cairo. All four young men followed the Muslim faith.

*Ali*

<b>Participant</b>	<b># Years in Africa</b>	<b>Schooling in Africa</b>	<b>Arrival to U.S.</b>
<i>Ali</i> <i>9<sup>th</sup> Grade</i>	10 years: Born 1994 in Hagadera refugee camp, Kenya; Grew up in Dagahaley refugee camp, Kenya; Fled to Kakuma refugee camp in 2001	“a couple of months”	2004 (age 9), entered 3rd grade ESL; skipped 6 <sup>th</sup> grade

Ali was born in 1994 in Hagadera refugee camp, a site near the Somali border of Kenya, after his parents fled Somalia. He was the oldest of six children in his immediate family, but two died while in the camp. Ali’s father had a second wife, as well, with older



children, including a sister, Habiba, the same age, and her brother, Idris, who was a community leader. “I call myself Kenyan because that is where I was born,” Ali reported, “but I am definitely Bantu” (Interview, 04/02/10). The Dadaab Dahley refugee camps, which included Hagadera where Ali was born, were created to receive numerous families that began fleeing Somalia in 1991. Ali lived for seven years in Hagadera where his chore was to get water from what he called “the tuba” (Interview, 04/02/10), a pump where individuals from the camps met to fill buckets with water.

In 1998, Ali’s family moved to Kakuma refugee camp so they would have a better chance of relocating to the United States: “We knew if we wanted to come to America, we needed to move to Kakuma. They had an airplane. We wanted to come to America for a better education. My father wanted us to have a better life than his” (Interview, 04/02/10). Ali reported his father did not want his family “to live in the bush” like he once did or to remain in the refugee camps. Ali remembered the rumors he heard, “In America, they have shoes that help you ride the world and help you find your place in everything. You just have to put them on.” Ali moved to Kakuma with his mother, but his father remained in Hagadera with fear he would be forced to renounce his Islamic faith if he went to the United States. In Somalia’s history, Bantu men often adopted Islam as a faith to counter the Italian imperialist enslavement.

When Ali’s family arrived to Kakuma, food was already rationed and there were no beds. He reported, “Kakuma was not fun at all. I mean there was playing soccer and everything, but struggling through with hunger and little water was really hard.”

They didn’t have a school for us. They had nothing there. Only houses.

We organized everything when we came. The Somali Bantus. The

Somalians. The Sudanese. I didn't learn nothing to tell you the truth.

Schools in the camp cramped 50 students who sat on the ground, in chairs, and at tables. I didn't hardly do any writing. I didn't even know how to write my name. (Interview, 04/02/10)

Ali estimated he went to school for two or three months in the camps. His knuckles were lashed and he disliked attending. He enjoyed the rituals of singing in class, however, and remembered one song that he still could sing, "*Bye Bye Teacher/teacher until tomorrow/ I'm going home to see my mother/My mother asks for us/Good bye, Brother, I'm going home.*" Singing was commonly practiced in refugee camps (Roy, 2008).

In 2004, Ali relocated with his mother and three younger siblings. Idris, his older brother by his father's first wife, was already in the United States and helped them with the transition. Two years later, Ali's father joined them. His father's first wife remained in Kenya, so there would be "a wife in two nations," according to Ali (Field notes, 02/18/20). Idris advocated for Bantu families in both the refugee camps of Africa and in the United States. He helped establish a community center to provide tutoring for Bantu youth and classes for adults.

Ali enrolled in his first ESL class in 2004 as a 5<sup>th</sup> grader. Because of his age, however, he skipped 6<sup>th</sup> grade and took two more years of ESL in middle school. At Robinson High School, Ali had an advanced ESL class with Ms. Earley and an English class with Ms. Clinton. In Ms. Clinton's English class, Ali worked diligently and remained to himself. He was enrolled in the same 9<sup>th</sup> grade class as Panther, but was among the few who passed. According to Ali,

If you're from a different country they think you're a different species.

Like, we're all the same, basically, but they think that we're from Africa, and we don't do things as they are, and we got a different culture.

(Interview, 04/22/10)

Ali felt the students in Ms. Clinton's English class "fooled around too much," and that they never listened to their teacher. "We are supposed to learn more so we can teach our kids so they can advance," he stated. "We should use our freedom more wisely"

(Interview, 06/30/10). In Ms. Clinton's room, Ali worked closely with a young woman from Somalia and, a few times, with Panther and J'Quan. Ali lamented about having few opportunities to talk with American-born peers in class and reported they rarely discussed issues that were important to him. He explained,

The more you talk, the better you understand people. The better you understand yourself, the better you learn, too. If you talk, you're going to learn from other people. You communicate with them. We are told not to talk at all in school. They are always telling us to shut up, basically.

(Interview, 04/22/10)

Ali learned through conversation and he wanted to share his ideas with American-born students. He noted, though, that most of the work assigned to students required them "to be quiet in their seats." Ali maintained the highest grade in Ms. Clinton's English class, and he often entered while reading a book and dodging classmates.

In Advanced ESL class, and with friends and family, Ali was usually the center of attention. He had a charismatic personality, used his gregarious enthusiasm to co-edit an ESL magazine, and played as an aggressive freshman on the varsity soccer team. He used

his responsibility at the magazine to write about his culture and to encourage other ESL students to do the same. Ali ran track and broke the school's pole-vaulting record. When he wasn't voted most athletic by ESL students for the ESL magazine he co-edited, he said, "I will have to campaign harder next year" (Field notes, 04/21/10).

Ali was a frequent user of Facebook, too, spending hours beyond school chatting with friends online. He attended tutoring sessions at a community center for Bantu youth three times a week and benefited from the assistance. He played soccer with other Bantu youth in his housing development and, with an earned driver's license as a freshman, helped his father transport the family to varying locations. In his home, he prayed five times a day and looked after younger siblings. His family also took in a cousin for a short time who was bullied in another state. They worried if he remained at the other school, he might be killed. Ali did not enjoy having his cousin around, though, because he monopolized the computer and, hence, reduced Ali's Facebook time.

### *Shafac*

<b>Participant</b>	<b># Years in Africa</b>	<b>Schooling in Africa</b>	<b>Arrival to U.S.</b>
<b><i>Shafac</i></b> <b><i>"12<sup>th</sup></i></b> <b><i>Grade</i></b>	13 years: Born 1991 in Binta, Somalia; fled to Hagadera refugee camp, Kenya, in 1993; fled to Kakuma in 2001	1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade, Kakuma	2004 (age 13) entered 7 <sup>th</sup> grade ESL

Shafac was born in 1991 when the criminal attacks against Bantu people in Somalia first occurred. He was two years old when the war came to his village of Binta.

They were killing Somali Bantus so we had to run away to go to Kenya.

Escape. Bantus were slaves. They farm and they are not rich. They only live in villages. They don't live cities. The pirates come and take over the

people's foods that they planted. Every time the Bantus had a farm, gangs take it from them. (Interview, 04/04/10)

Shafac's mother escaped with her children at night in fear of being shot to the Hagadera refugee camp in Kenya where they remained for eight years. "I don't know where my father is. My mother don't know where he is," Shafac explained. "Cuz in the war, people spread out to save their lives. So he ran away. We don't know if he's still alive or not" (Interview, 04/04/10).

From 1993 to 2001 Shafac lived in Hagadera. When he first arrived, he was very sick and spent time in the camp's hospital. He reported, pantomiming a swollen belly, "My mother said my stomach got big." She thought his illness resulted from the fact that the name given to him at birth by his father was haunted. In the camp's hospital his mother gave him his grandfather's name, Shafac, which he said means "tea without sugar" (Field notes, 06/21/10). When she did, he grew healthier. Six of his siblings, however, lost life in the camp. He explained, "People in Africa, they die, you know. If you don't have no food, your stomach gets big. You need food to grow up. If you don't have it, your children die" (Interview, 04/04/10).

You have a lot of kids so the kids grow up and learn the Qur'an. The population goes up. We don't strike people. We don't steal. We don't do something that is bad. It is against Allah. We have lots of kids and we teach the Qur'an.

Shafac was taught that the more children a family has, the better the chances of having offspring who would survive allowing the teachings of the Qur'an to be shared.

In 2001, at the age of ten, Shafac's family relocated to Kakuma refugee camp in hope of a better life. He remained there until he was fourteen years old. Shafac reported

attending school rarely. As “the man of his family” (Field notes, 04/27/10), he stayed home to help make money. He discussed, “Kenya was a poor place to live.”

You have to get a fire, woods to cook. You have to go three or five miles to get water. The camp didn’t provide rice and stuff. You have to have money. It was a hard life. For a big family like ours, it was bad.

(Interview, 04/04/10)

Shafac stayed out of school to help his mother collect plastic bags that they sewed to make walls that protected families from Kenyan winds. The money purchased food. “I would tell my mom I would need something to eat,” Shafac remembered, “and Kakuma is the baddest place we ever lived in our life, so I refuse her to go to school.”

There was big holes in the street and when rain comes, it looks like a river.

You can’t go pass to school. If you go pass the school, the water pull you away. The schools only teach grammar. (Interview, 04/04/10)

Shafac was embarrassed that he did not have shoes and clothes in the camp, and he did not like the way he was treated by Somali children who were not Bantu. Similar racial discrimination of Bantus throughout history has been documented (Besteman, 1999).

Shafac checked the display boards every day to see if his family’s name was selected for relocation. He remembered the day it was there with enthusiasm, “I had to run and find my family, bring them together. We needed to go to the camp place for interviews. I was very happy” (Interview, 04/04/10). Elders advised his family about what the interviewers wanted and Shafac was told they selected only those “who had no food, who came to Kenya in 1991, and who ran away from Somalia” (Interview, 04/04/10). Somali Bantus who fought with guns were not selected, and he was informed,

“They only chose people who have scars on their bodies from the war.”

In 2004, at age 13, Shafac arrived in the United States with almost no schooling. From 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade he received ESL services and learned to write his first essays.

I already knew the alphabet, so I just need to start writing my mind. When I used to write paragraphs I had to number it, like put number one, number two, each paragraph, so I knew where to write. The teacher was like, “Don’t put number one and number two in paragraphs.” (Interview, 04/04/10)

Communicating in English, especially in writing, was difficult for Shafac because he needed to learn vocabulary, which he continually reported was his greatest weakness. He also had to learn how to use essays to communicate. “I wrote about Africa,” he discussed. “That’s how I could learn to write.”

At Robinson, Shafac was enrolled in Ms. Hamilton’s 10<sup>th</sup> grade mainstream English class with Samuel and in Ms. Earley’s advanced ESL with Ali and Najm. A 19-year old 12<sup>th</sup> grader, he took other classes that spanned many grade levels: a senior economics class, a history class for sophomores, a history class for juniors, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade math class, and an 11<sup>th</sup> grade science class. Ms. Hamilton called his schedule “a recipe for disaster” (Interview, 06/15/10) because his courses required him to take five state examinations necessary for his graduation in one year.

Shafac felt a tremendous responsibility to achieve in the U.S., but he struggled to do well. His mother needed him to finish high school so he could enter college, and she explained that he had to get a good job so he could support the family (Field notes, 04/27/10). Shafac lamented, “My mother doesn’t understand how I always get an A in

gym, but I don't do well in my other classes. She thinks I'm not working hard enough" (Field notes, 04/28/10). Shafac also advocated for a cousin who, he reported, was "born without ears" (Interview, 04/04/10). This cousin, Asad, was hearing impaired and attended a school district outside of the city. Many African-born youth in their housing development made fun of Asad and his difficulty with speaking. Shafac was supportive of his cousin, however, who was learning how to communicate in American sign language. He defended Asad from ridicule and often brought him to school events.

Shafac reported that American-born classmates made it hard for him to learn in school, and he wondered why African-American students disliked Africans so much.

African Americans kids don't like the Africans, the immigrants actually. I asked one of them a question, and they were like, "Fuck man. I don't know all this shit you talking about." I be like, "Okay, I will never talk to you guys again." (Interview, 04/04/10)

At the same time, Shafac reported being profiled as a Black male on the streets near his home. He discussed a time when a police officer stopped him and accused him of having a gun. "You can search me, man! I don't have nothing," he told the officer. According to Shafac, the officer replied, "Don't fucking lie to me, man. I've been working police for twenty years. Don't fucking try to tell me lies" (Interview, 04/04/10).

Shafac played varsity soccer, took care of paying family bills, transported relatives to their jobs, looked after siblings and cousins, and traveled monthly to purchase and slaughter goats in a nearby town so his family had meat. Throughout the study, he drove his family to Boston and Maine to see relatives who relocated there and he participated in events at the community center with Ali. He had a part-time job as a



busboy to earn gas money. Like Ali, Shafac tutored younger Bantu children and received tutoring from college volunteers. Shafac struggled immensely to put thoughts into written forms but benefited from tutoring help at the community center. The volunteers listened to him and helped him to organize his oral language into written forms.

*Ade*

<b>Participant</b>	<b># Years in Africa</b>	<b>Schooling in Africa</b>	<b>Arrival to U.S.</b>
<i>Ade</i> <i>12<sup>th</sup> Grade</i>	14 years: Born 1990 in Hamar, Somalia Moved to Haridari in 1992 Fled to Morafa, Tanzania in 1995; Fled to Nairobi, Kenya in 1996; Fled to Kakuma refugee camp in 1997	4 <sup>th</sup> – 7 <sup>th</sup> grade, Kakuma	2004: age 14, 7 <sup>th</sup> grade

Ade was born in 1990 in Hamar, Somalia, to Bantu parents. His mother and father had eight children together, and he was the oldest son. Ade's father had eight additional wives, though, with only one other than Ade's mother living in the U.S. Ade's family fled to Haridari, Kenya, when he was two years old. In 1996, they relocated again to Morafa, Tanzania, and reunited with relatives they initially thought were dead. Tanzania, like Kenya, offered safety to Bantu families who were fleeing the war in Somalia. Two years later, Ade's family returned to Kenya, this time to live in the capital of Nairobi. They finally relocated to Kakuma in 1997, where Ade began school for the first time as a seven year old. Ade spoke Somali, Swahili, Arlie Af Maay, Bemal, Zuer, Mai Mai, a little Dinka, and English, languages he reported needing throughout his life.

Throughout Ade's traverses his family remained faithful to the teachings of Islam. Ade reported that they attended mosques wherever they lived and that they prayed early in the morning, in the afternoon, and sometimes in the evening. He explained,

They teach me to be a very good brother. When you go to Muslim school you've got to read your assignment in the Qur'an. Then the teacher will stand up and tell everybody QUIET. He tells them, "Don't do this. Be a nice brother," so the students will follow the religion. (Interview, 04/22/10)

Ade discussed that the teachers in his mosque expected youth to read the Arabic of the Qur'an and tested their students to see if they could read correctly. If they could not, they were punished.

Ade's memories of writing in the refugee camp were unlike the other seven participants who reported writing seldom, if at all. The other boys reported copying notes written by teachers as the only writing they did. Ade, however, discussed he wrote to reflect on his days. In Kakuma, Ade left a Somali school to attend classes for Sudanese students because he felt the instruction there wasn't as strict and the lessons were more organized. Ade did not like the physical punishment of the Somali school.

Every day when I go to school on time there was this one teacher who would beat me. I would be, like, why are you beating me for being late to school? And the teacher would be, like, you're late every time. (Interview, 04/22/10)

Like the other participants, Ade reported harsh punishments made him afraid of school, but they disciplined him to take his education seriously. Ade remembered,

They didn't have textbooks. The teacher gives a lot of notes in Swahili. They don't have pen or paper like that. You come up with the paper and pen. The teacher writes in English. You copy what they write. They teach in English, but

explain in Swahili. Most kids can't read, so teacher reads everything for us. You copy. I couldn't write my own words so I copy theirs. (Interview, 04/22/10)

Ade recalled that a teacher required him to construct sentences in a notebook. "It was like a bellringer," he explained, a warm-up activity used by many Robinson English teachers.

We wrote what we did or ate for practice in writing...what you did yesterday at home or today on the way to school. That's what we have to write every morning. I write about how I go back home, eat, play soccer, go back to Arabic school. This morning I wake up. I take shower. I come to school. (Interview, 04/22/10)

Having such instruction was not the norm reported by the other seven participants. They did not create sentences to communicate their ideas. Instead, they wrote to mimic the letters their teachers used on the board.

Ade was notified of their selection to relocate to the United States in 2004. His family went through a long interview process to be considered, and like most families, they did not have birth certificates or written records. Ade explained that they had birthdays, but as a way to show alliance, elders recommended responding with the same date. He laughed and said, "They ask my mom, actually, and she was like she didn't know, but she know. They knew the year they were born, but they want to be one community, one Somali Bantu community. We all say January 1<sup>st</sup>, national birthday of African refugees" (Interview, 06/28/10).

Arriving in the U.S. in 2004, Ade enrolled in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade ESL class with five other ESL students, including Shafac, Zizu, and Zizu's twin, Masa. In middle school Ade learned a wider range of English vocabulary and how to write essays. He explained,

At first, I never knew how to write or spell – but when I starts writing, it changed me. Writing changed my life and who I am now. Before I couldn't really write and right now I can. I can't stop. (Interview, 04/22/10)

When Ade completed his 8<sup>th</sup> grade year of ESL, though, he was shocked to learn there was even more school. “My teacher was like, if you guys don't work hard, then you guys are not going to high school,” he reported. “I'm like what is a high school? I thought you graduated 8<sup>th</sup> grade and then go to college.” Education in the refugee camps ended in what he knew as the 8<sup>th</sup> grade year.

Ade was a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student enrolled in Mr. Dallas's 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class with twenty-four students. Mr. Dallas, a White teacher with nine years experience, was respected as an exceptional writing teacher. As a twenty-year old, Ade was one of two English language learners in Mr. Dallas's class. The class included a push-in special education teacher and two teacher aides. Like participants' other English classes, only half of the students typically showed on a given day. Students wrote multiple drafts of essays in Mr. Dallas's class. Ade reflected, “I'm not afraid to write. They say you write all the time in college and you read all the time, too” (Interview, 06/28/10). Ade was a hard worker who argued with Mr. Dallas whenever his grade fell below 100%. He would resubmit his work until Mr. Dallas gave him a perfect score. Yet, even with a perfect score in English, Ade was unsuccessful in passing the state English examination. He took it four times and, on the last attempt, missed a passing score by four points. He was given an alternative assessment at the end of the year and passed it on his first try.

Ade was a co-editor of the school’s ESL magazine with Ali and involved in numerous activities at Robinson, including playing soccer for the varsity team. He was the first in his family to graduate from a high school in the United States and was accepted to a four-year public university to major in nursing. He began attending college a week after he graduated high school and participated in an equal opportunity program. There, he wrote daily and reported positive feedback from his instructors. Ade drove his mother to her job, transported siblings to places they needed to be, translated English documents that came in the mail, and maintained a part-time job. For a while, he also tutored at the community center but had to give it up when his schedule became too busy. Like Zizu and London, Ade’s drive to be academically successful led him to find resources to improve his writing, including the mentoring he received from his English teacher and ESL teachers who continued to support him, even after he no longer attended ESL classes. Ade continued to receive an intermediate score on the state English language assessment, even though he did well in his mainstream English classroom.

*Najm*

<b>Participant</b>	<b># Years in Africa</b>	<b>Schooling in Africa</b>	<b>Arrival to U.S.</b>
<b><i>Najm</i> “10<sup>th</sup> Grade”</b>	14 years: Born 1992 in Mogadishu, Somalia Moved to Cairo, Egypt in 1998	Qur’an School, 2 years (sporadic), Arabic schools in Egypt 2 <sup>nd</sup> – 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	2006 (age 14) entered 8 <sup>th</sup> grade ESL, second semester

Najm, an Islamic name for “celestial body” or “star,” was born in northern Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1992. Najm took pride in having mixed Somali and Arab blood and claimed that members of the Benadiri people were the oldest inhabitants of Somalia. Najm reported he was attending Qur’an school when conflicts entered his city.

After the kids [classmates] left, my mom was supposed to pick me up. My big brothers left. I asked the teacher “Please, I have to leave. I can’t stay.” I was walking in the street, running. I saw fire, guns and bullets. I hide in the bushes until the war was over. Then they left and I went home. It was the worst thing I see in my life. (Interview, 01/11/10)

As he arrived home he heard his mother screaming that militants kidnapped his father. Assuming her husband to be dead, Najm’s mother contacted a sister who lived in Egypt. She relocated him and his siblings there to protect them.

In 2001, Najm’s family fled to Cairo where they remained for five years. Najm’s mother cleaned homes in Egypt to support the family and, similar to Panther, he described the city as a place where his mother was “treated poorly and not paid for her work.” Najm’s family had no plans for relocating to the United States, at first, but conditions in Cairo made them reconsider. He remembered,

My mom say life is getting harder in Egypt. A woman asked her if she was Somalian and that there was help for families like ours. They take care of us in the camps. My mother told the refugee people our stories and they listened. (Interview, 01/11/10)

As a result, Najm’s family moved to a refugee camp outside of Cairo.

“All my mother cares about is my education” (Interview, 01/11/10), Najm explained. Of the eight participants in this study, Najm had the most consistent schooling with the fewest interruptions. He attended 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade in Egypt and adjusted to the Arabic taught in school by Palestinian teachers. Najm’s Palestinian teachers wrote information on a board from a book, and he recalled,

What the teachers wrote was important. They gave us lists to write down and pop quizzes. There were 16 boys in class. If you didn't do your homework, you'd get beat up. Like, you know, with the stick. You turn around and they get your back. Boom. Like if there were ten questions and you did five. Boom. They stick you. (Interview, 01/11/10)

Najm studied to avoid a lashing from the teachers. His interest in global histories began in Cairo, and he recalled that he took a special interest in the United States, "especially about how slavery came to America from Europe."

In 2006, Najm's family was selected to relocate to the United States and he enrolled in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade ESL class one semester before he moved to Robinson High School. Najm was a minority within the Somali population at the school because he was a member of the Benadiri, Reer Xamar ethnic group. The majority of Somali students at the school were Bantu. Najm often thought about history, race relations, and the conflicts between African and African American students. He had Arab and African features.

This African kid say he hate all African Americans because all African American kids think all African kids are dirty. I ignore that guy. All Africans is not dirty. Even if they are, what's the difference? You're Black and you're Black. You guys are the same. I truly respect African Americans cuz they fight for rights for human beings in America. I respect them for that. (Interview, 06/23/10)

Najm admired Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Gandhi. He also promoted a belief in prophet Muhammed and discussed being Muslim was not difficult.

Those who believe pray five times a day. You have to be kind to your parents and don't say bad words to your oldest brothers and younger brothers. Treat people equally. Live with peace. (Interview, 01/11/10)

Najm spent a lot of his personal time reading about African and African American history. He often connected his experiences of life in Somalia and Egypt with the history of slavery in the United States and worked to piece together the inequities he saw (one reason he used the rap lyrics of Starchild that he alluded to in "Unity," the editorial I used to introduce this research).

Najm was a junior enrolled in a mainstream 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class taught by Ms. Clay, a first-year teacher. Of the thirty-two students in Najm's class, twenty-seven of them were English language learners, a demographic Ms. Clay felt untrained to work with. Unlike the other mainstream classrooms, most students in this classroom attended regularly. Before I began collecting data, though, Najm had an argument with Ms. Clay about a grade and reflected, "I'm not supposed to argue with her. I know the facts. She's ignorant. I just ignore her" (Field notes, 04/05/10). As a result, Najm protested much of the work assigned in her room by not doing it. Even so, he felt,

Writing is the best thing to do in life, but not that much in school. I write on my own. My own imagination. Writing brings my happiest moments. Like, I write in my book at home about how Africa used to be nice. I search the news about Somalia and the plights in Africa. And Palestine, too. (Interview, 01/11/10)

Najm was respectful and quiet, but chose only to do the assignments that appealed to him in Ms. Clay's class. Like Panther, he failed his English class during this study.



Similar to Ali and Shafac, Najm was simultaneously enrolled in advanced ESL with Ms. Earley with twenty-eight students who rarely missed school. In her room, he turned in all assignments, actively engaged with peers, and contributed to class discussions. Like London, Najm admired Mr. Cooper, the ESL history teacher:

When I was new to the United States, he helped me a lot. My English horrible. Terrible. But he taught me to use sentence and to set up the questions. He's like, "Najm, that's not how you write, how you answer questions." He modeled for me, and we talked about the news and what was happening. And he made me write. (Interview, 06/23/10)

Najm was reserved and introspective, but when invited, he would debate incessantly. Mr. Cooper used this to engage him to become a stronger writer. Najm discussed,

When I graduate, I want to be historian. I want to study about those old Africans, east Africans, that mixed with my family, especially where my mom is from. Cuz people say they were first Africans. Or I want to be a journalist and report the truth about the world. (Interview, 01/11/10)

Najm actively promoted his interest of history on his Facebook page where he would write mini-editorials about events in Somalia, Palestine, and Egypt. At times, he also posted what he called "quotes" on his page (Field notes, 03/30/10) – thoughts about the world that rhymed and followed lyrical patterns. Najm wrote more online than he did for school, mostly because it was an outlet for him to share his opinions and knowledge of the world. In addition, Najm played varsity soccer and summarized what Ali, Samuel, Zizu, London, Shafac and Ade had to say about the sport, "Soccer means life. When I play, I'm happy" (Interview, 06/23/10).

Najm missed a few weeks of school when his mother became ill during the semester and when she needed him to take care of her, his younger siblings, and the house they rented. Najm's mother lost her job during this time, too, and learned her husband, thought dead in Somalia, was alive but had started a new family after relocating to Great Britain. Najm's two older brothers attended Robinson, but one dropped out and the other was told he was too old to continue attending. This brother relocated to another state to finish high school on his own: maintaining an apartment, holding a part-time job, and getting good grades. Najm admired this. For him, the writing expected in school ignored students as people.

#### *Four Participants from Somalia*

Ali, Shafac, Ade, and Najm arrived in the United States between 2004 and 2006 as a result of conflicts in Somalia. Three of the four participants were Somali Bantu with ancestors brought to Somalia from eastern Africa as slaves to work for Italian, British, and Arab populations. The fourth was Benadiri with ancestors who were the original inhabitants of Somalia – a population with both Arab and African bloodlines. The lives of four young men and their families were disrupted when militant groups invaded villages and cities. Without a centralized government or military, shifta uprooted many people.

Ali, Shafac, and Ade were relocated to the United States through Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya and Najm arrived through refugee services in Cairo, Egypt. Except for Najm, the Somali participants were schooled in Kakuma refugee camp. While in Kakuma, however, Shafac and Ali reported rarely attending. Although Ade discussed he learned to write basic sentences as a Bantu student in a Sudanese school at the camp, the other Bantu boys reported they did not write except to copy what the teacher was writing.

Each emphasized that their education in the camps was nothing like the schooling experiences of the United States. In contrast, Najm attended refugee schools in Cairo that were taught by Palestinian teachers. There, he learned to read and write in Arabic, and also began to learn about American history. All four boys reported learning the Qur'an. Najm attended a mosque school before his father was kidnapped, and Ali, Shafac, and Ade attended mosque in their camps.

Western influences in Africa during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a history of slavery, the removal of European power after World War II, the economic influences of superpowers during the Cold War, and the destruction of infrastructures that occurred when financial support was removed from the nation resulted with disruptions in Somalia during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the governments of Italy and Britain departed, vagabonds began to overturn the nation. A centralized infrastructure has yet to be attained and Somalia remains a nation in violent conflict. There is likelihood that youth, like these four boys, will continue to relocate to schools in the United States and that teachers, like Ms. Clinton, Ms. Hamilton, Ms. Clay, and Mr. Dallas, will be responsible for instructing them in their mainstream English classrooms.

#### Black African-Born Male Youth As Subjects in Activity Systems of Secondary Schools to Promote Writing Growth

The biographical profiles presented in this chapter were written to introduce each of the participants as a subject within many activity systems. The experiences of living in Africa, relocating to the U.S. and having limited schooling influenced how each saw himself as a learner and writer. According to Lee (2001), knowing history is important to understanding a subject's involvement within any activity system and educators should

work “to understand the intersections between the ways that students use language and reason in their home and community experiences and the routine practices of classrooms” (p. 99). Building writing skills requires teachers to open their classrooms to the texts young people live, including the stories they tell about their culture, families, and traditions. To know these young men as writers, it was important to understand the historical conditions that caused their relocation. It was helpful to know them in context of their many activity systems, especially the lives they lived in Africa.

At lunch many of the Black African male youth sat at what they called “the African table.” They sparred with language about national identities, athletic abilities, intelligences, and personal styles. The boys reported the African table, which sometimes included a few young men from Bosnia, Iraq, Germany, and Vietnam also on the soccer team, was always loud and obnoxious. Samuel and London, for instance, were taunted about their dark Sudanese skin, “No wonder you’re always late to school. You wake up, look in the mirror, think it’s still midnight, and go back to bed” (Field notes, 02/02/10). Najm was called the “pirate” and the “terrorist” in reference to stories of Somalian vagabonds in the news and his Islamic pride (Field notes, 01/20/10). Ali, Shafac, and Ade were mocked with “Ban-threes and Ban-fours are way better than Bantus” (Field notes, 03/21/10). The Liberian boys who were described as “diesel” (muscular) were accused of taking steroids (Field notes, 01/22/10). The harsh humor united the group, but they admitted it sometimes went too far. For instance, Zizu called a Liberian friend “boy soldier,” an insult to infer recruitment to Charles Taylor’s army. Zizu explained, “It’s like the N-word. It’s really offensive (Field notes, 03/29/10).

In the language of activity theory, identities are constructed as individuals interact with tools, rules, communities, and divisions of labor to reach specific outcomes. Subjects are socialized within varying activity systems and bring their subjectivities with them (Beach, 2000; Russell, 1997). The Black African-born male youth with limited or interrupted formal education in this research wanted teachers to know their histories. Similar to the youth studied by Traore (2004), they “hoped to find ways to promote a more positive image of Africa and Africans” (p. 348). They wanted teachers to address African histories and to locate them, as African and Black subjects, within Western curriculum and school activity systems. The young men wanted to be respected for their knowledge of the world and to be given opportunities to share, communicate, and debate what they knew with others through writing and class discussions although they reported few opportunities for this existed in school. Using oral language for communication was important to them, and they appreciated adults, teachers, and tutors who listened to what they had to say and helped them transition their thoughts into written forms.

The participants also wanted opportunities to write about their passions – sports, culture, history, and music. They sought activity systems out of classrooms, like Facebook, so they had a forum to editorialize, debate, and entertain. They desired chances to teach others about their communities. With this said, it should not be assumed that all youth like these young men are open to writing about their histories and experiences. London, for example, was conflicted about sharing his Sudanese experiences. In addition, trauma caused by war and violence experienced by many refugee youth (Bates, 2005; Chrostowsky, 2010; Naidoo, 2008) should be considered with caution. Personal writing can evoke harsh memories. Allowing youth to gravitate to

topics that matter to them may provide a safer space to write, but awareness for the potential of assignments to evoke traumatic experiences needs consideration.

Chapter Four emphasized the history of each participant to establish the agency and authority each had as an individual. Knowing histories is helpful to understanding how a subject mediates written outcomes within activity systems (see also, Beach 2000; Lee, 2000; Smagorinsky, 1997), especially when the student is viewed centrally. Written forms of communication are not practiced by all cultures in the world and English, a hegemonic language, has been on a historical trajectory aligned with imperialism, colonialism, and power (Bhabha, 1984; Duncan, 2003; Gates, 1986; Said, 1978; Smith, 1999; Goodwin, 2010; López & Marzec, 2010; Luke, 2003; Spivak, 1986). Failing to address the history of who had access to formal education is a failure to recognize global and local inequities. As Smith (1999) argued, writing

has been used to determine the breaks between the past and the present, the beginning of history and the development of theory. Writing has been viewed as the mark of a superior civilization and other societies have been judged, by this view, to be incapable of thinking critically and objectively, or having distance from ideas and emotions. (p. 103)

Colonized subjects, or individuals born into locations with colonial pasts, either learned to read and write in the language of imperialist nations or failed to be seen as reasonable and intelligent beings (Gates, 1986/2006). Secondary teachers who work with similar demographics of Robinson High School should make themselves aware of how literacy traditions have benefited and/or excluded populations around the world and question how curriculum reifies oppression or empowers youth (Goodwin, 2010).

For the young men in this study, a slave trade within Africa and across the Atlantic, the colonization of African countries by European imperialists, and the political interests of African territories by the Soviet Union and United States post-World War II were directly linked to the civil conflicts that uprooted their families, histories, and cultural identities. After years of displacement in Africa, these young men arrived to the United States and entered urban secondary schools at a time of high stakes testing. Enrolled at Robinson High School, they were also subject to the obstacles associated with poverty in the United States and our nation's failure to invest in urban youth (e.g., Alonso, Anders, Su, & Theorharis, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Duncan, 2002; Lee, 1999; Morrell, 2007; Warshauer-Freedman & Appleman, 2009). In this sense, the negative impact of colonialism continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in urban schools that serve communities that have traditionally been placed on the margins of scholastic traditions valued by Western cultures. These are young men who have endured much.

The biographical profiles of this chapter were written to overview each participant's experiences as unique subjects within the historical contexts of their nations and to narrate their relocation to secondary schools in the United States. In addition to their limited experiences with writing before coming to the United States, they named (1) English classes, (2) other classes (e.g., Advanced ESL, Drama, Economics), (3) extracurricular activities like College Preparatory Program (CPP), ESL Magazine, and a writing club, (4) a Somali Bantu community center, and (5) their homes as having an influence on their uses of written communication. Composing written text, in the Western sense and within its genres of power, was introduced to the eight participants when they entered ESL programs between 2003 and 2006 in the United States. Soon after, they

enrolled in mainstream English classrooms with American-born peers and were held accountable to the same state assessments used to define many Black male youth as “at risk” of successfully writing in the United States (e.g., Kirkland, 2009; Mahiri, 1991; Murthada-Watts, 2001; Tatum, 2008; Vasudevan, 2009). This chapter allowed the young men to speak about their relocation experiences and to offer insight into how they viewed themselves within activity systems.

The eight Black African-born youth did not use written communication before arriving to the United States except for limited notetaking and copying in refugee camp schools. Communicating in written genres of the Western world was new to them upon arriving to U.S. schools. Learning to write meant they had an opportunity to learn Western genres of writing for the first time, allowing them access to additional activity systems with the potential to help their future, their families, and their nations. Schools became a primary activity system for these youth because they offered tools for communication in a new society. Success in school meant more empowerment.

In the next chapter I will present participants’ perspectives on purposes (objects) they saw for writing in their activity systems, as well as the tools they used, the rules they followed, the communities they belonged to and the divisions of labor that were made. In the next chapter the sociocultural influences participants experienced as writers is extended. Chapter Five continues to highlight the eight African-born male youth as subjects in many activity systems and uses their perspectives on tools used, rules followed, divisions of labor that occurred, and communities involved in building their writing skills. The young men reported they wrote for a variety of purposes.



## CHAPTER FIVE: PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVES ON PURPOSES AND TOOLS FOR WRITTEN OUTCOMES IN MULTIPLE ACTIVITY SYSTEMS

In Chapter Four I introduced eight participants as subjects, related their relocation history from three nations of Africa to U.S. secondary schools, and described the activity systems they named for writing. It was written to introduce the young men and their perspectives on writing. For this study, my primary question was “What do the perspectives of Black African-born male youth with limited and formal education suggest for writing instruction in U.S. secondary schools?” In addition to this question, I also asked “For what purposes do these young men write in the United States? What are the contexts for their writing? What tools do they use to compose?”

In this chapter, I present participants' perspectives on the purposes, tools, division of labor, community, and rules within activity systems that involved writing. According to Cole and Engeström (1993), knowing the interrelation of each component in an activity system provides a researcher a better understanding of “the collective nature of human activities” (p. 7). Studying activity systems and how subjects act within them is helpful to knowing how tools are used, rules are followed, and divisions of labor occur within a community to reach particular outcomes. For example, a family who is deciding where to eat for dinner may use familiar tools to arrive at an outcome of selecting a restaurant. The need to eat is biological, but the negotiation of where to eat involves numerous tools that are useful to the sociocultural purposes they serve. The division of labor for reaching an outcome relies on negotiations within the activity system and the rules a subject follows as they put the tools into use. The mother may state that she filled the minivan with gas, an act within the division of labor that enables transportation, a

tool, to be put into use. With a full tank, the family can drive to a restaurant to eat. The father may present a coupon for an Italian restaurant. The coupon has no usefulness without an awareness of how it functions, as a tool, to save money in a community that understands it; the coupon must have meaning to the restaurant in an exchange for services. The son may contribute, “You said I could choose where we’d go to eat this week,” to remind the family of prior conversations, another tool. He may recall that the family previously established him as the authority to choose a restaurant, a rule, within the division of labor for making the decision. The daughter may suggest, “I want to get take-out so I can be home for the basketball game.” Her purpose may be influenced by outcomes she desires beyond the family activity system. Tools used by subjects are both physical (e.g., the coupon and minivan) and mental (e.g., a son’s memory or daughter’s interests). They are shaped by culture, society, and history. They are put to use through purposes of individual subjects who work towards an outcome within a division of labor of an activity system.

Engeström (2009) wrote that a subject often becomes conflicted when the purpose in one activity system does not match the purpose in another. He referred to conflict of purposes as *double binds*: subjects may be motivated by more than one purpose, with more than one tool-set, to reach more than one outcome at any one time. The daughter who offers a suggestion for getting take-out, for example, may be influenced by her involvement in a sporting activity system with a pending practice or motivated to visit a friend who is employed at the take-out restaurant. Her suggestion may be influenced by her desire to improve her basketball game by fueling up quickly or to say hello to her friend. Calling on Engeström, Russell (1997) defined *double binds* as those tensions felt

by subjects when they are “forced to choose a direction away from activity systems of family, neighborhood, and friends that construct ethnic, racial, gender, and class identity(ies)” (p. 532). In writing activity systems at school, educators and students “negotiate *double binds* when they assign or write genres that are linked to activity systems far apart in the genre system” (p. 541).

Western genres for written communication became important to the eight Black African-born male youth once they entered U.S. schools. Before their arrival, the young men had limited and disrupted formal schooling in post-colonized nations of Africa. There, they mostly used oral and physical communication rather than written forms. Yet upon relocation they became accountable for achieving some communicative purposes through written genres. Russell wrote that genres used outside a classroom (e.g., conversational speech, lyrics) need to be bridged with genres expected in school (e.g., on-demand essays, academic papers). A subject’s ability to write requires a teacher to “construct scaffolds” (p. 542) and to provide tools that enable communication between community members through following rules and using tools that are valued. An ability to write in Western genres is empowering. It provides a way to communicate with others (e.g., teachers, employers) who have more authority within divisions of labor established by activity systems.

The language of writing activity genre research (Russell, 2010) provided a way to understand participants’ perspectives on writing and the purposes they reported more empirically. As discussed in Chapter Three, within any writing activity system a subject uses tools (e.g., language, genres, models) to accomplish written outcomes (e.g., an essay, a letter) for desired purposes (e.g., to get a grade, to entertain). The need to

communicate is biological, yet how a subject communicates with written language is socialized through one's history and personal experiences. Writing is a social process that is shaped by multiple activity systems to which a subject belongs, as well as the purposes one has for using written text. According to Smagorinsky (1997), writing is a tool that is useful to a subject only "when a writer values not only the tool of writing but the uses to which writing is put" (p. 68). A subject must have a purpose to communicate.

For my research, I used "purpose" synonymously with object/motive. The youth themselves, teachers, and other participants in the study used the term "purpose" most often to articulate the object/motive of written tasks in activity systems. I used the term "tools" to mean any material artifacts (e.g., books, worksheets) and mental means (e.g., memories, ideological frameworks) that were supported and/or employed in participants' writing activities to achieve those purposes. I used "rules" to describe the expectations provided to participants for writing. Rules for writing in activity systems were sometimes explicitly stated by others (e.g., teacher instruction, state assessments) and sometimes initiated by participants (e.g., Facebook, ESL magazine). I used "division of labor" to express who acted within the writing process and "community" to refer to others within the activity systems that took part in the writing act(s). These were individuals and the environment that influenced the outcomes of what was written. Finally, I used "outcome" to mean any writing composed by participants in their activity systems.

Chapter Five presents the purposes for writing named by participants in five sections. In the first section, Writing to Succeed in the U.S., I overview the primary purposes participants named for helping their families, finding employment, and preparing for their futures. Here, the activity systems named by participants are

discussed, as well as the tools that assisted these purposes. In the second section, Writing To Share Their Lives, I present participants' purposes for educating others in the United States, including their peers and teachers. The young men discussed that communicating about personal histories were important to helping their writing to develop. In the third section, Writing To Be Social with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Technologies, participants' perspectives on communicating online and with cellular phones are discussed in relation to the communities they established with digital activity systems. Section four, Writing To Meet School Requirements, elaborates the perspectives participants reported about what they wrote to pass classes and to meet requirements for state assessments. Here, the specific rules, tools, and divisions of labor used by classroom teachers are addressed further. In the fifth and final section of Chapter Five, Crevices in the Curriculum; Participants' Wishes for Writing Instruction, I present the purposes for writing the eight young men preferred and the wishes they had for additional opportunities to write. In and out of school, the young men saw *crevices in the curriculum* where the potential for writing instruction was there but went untapped. Their perspectives on writing suggest that teachers in U.S. secondary schools might benefit from listening to the purposes youth have for communicating.

#### Writing to Succeed in the U.S.

In this section of Chapter Five, the primary purposes for writing in activity systems outside of mainstream English classrooms are addressed. The young men reported writing more often out of school and in classes such as history than they did in their mainstream English classes. This finding countered the initial assumption that writing instruction would most often occur in mainstream English classrooms. The tools,

rules, community and divisions of labor within these additional activity systems were reported as benefiting their goals of succeeding in the United States. This success meant writing to support their families, writing to get a job, writing to be college educated, and writing to have a social life. All eight young men viewed writing as important, even if they were not successful in passing classes or achieving desirable scores on state assessments through their writing.

#### *Writing to Support Their Families*

As revealed in Chapter Four, the young men saw writing as an opportunity to provide for families, especially when members did not have the ability to read or write in English. Decapua (2010) explained that youth arriving in U.S. secondary schools with limited or disrupted formal education bring immense funds of knowledge, yet a “mismatch” (p. 163) occurs between sociocultural practices from home and the academic literacy expected in school. Adult reliance on youth who could read and write in English created a *double bind* in home activity systems and participants in my study were in constant negotiation. Elders needed their sons to help translate documents and to fill out written forms. The youth, though, often lacked the language tools needed to assist them because they were still learning written genres themselves. In addition, because they, like many immigrant children, had few opportunities to continue developing their native languages in a new nation where English dominates (Campano, 2007; Fox, 2008; Sumaryono, 2007), they often struggled with how to best translate for elders. Many genres parents needed help with were foreign to the young men, too.

According to Hyland (2003), “It is not the case that all genres are created equal, because they are associated with, and are used to regulate entry into, social communities

processing more or less prestige and influence” (p. 24). With the ability to use English more proficiently than parents came new responsibilities for understanding genres. For instance, Ade reported, “I translate for them, everything. They can’t do English. I try to help them. I write for them, everything” (Interview, 06/28/10). The tools the young men acquired in the U.S. for writing, in and out of school, were shared with their families and viewed as a way to empower status in a new country. Their success, as subjects who had access to additional activity systems, mattered to the home activity system and its communities. Unlike the individualism promoted in American-born youth, emphasis at home was placed on the boys to achieve so the group would benefit. The young men had access to systems of power through involvement with school activity systems where they learned some of the genres used in Western society. The families of my eight participants relied on their sons for brokering these, yet the written genres the families needed translated were not necessarily the genres they learned in school.

Midway through data collection, for example, Shafac, the 19-year old Somali Bantu senior, reported his mother wished to speak with me. He explained, “She wants to meet with you about me and our family’s future” (Field notes, 04/25/10). In their apartment, Shafac translated his mother’s Mai Mai so I could understand her concerns. His mother explained, quietly, “I can’t speak English, but I can hear it” (Field notes, 04/27/10). Shafac’s mother shared her worry that her oldest son was not going to graduate. She said, “I need him to go to college.” She held a pile of written materials in front of me that included bills, reports, and letters that she did not understand. She stated, “I need him to translate all these papers.” Shafac was the family’s accountant as well as language broker, and his mother was angry that he did not do better in school. A high

school counselor told Shafac he would need to do a fifth year at Robinson in order to graduate because he needed to pass two more state assessments. As a single parent in a new country with very little ability to communicate in English, his mother relied on her oldest son to help raise the other children, interpret the American culture, take care of the money, and drive the only car the family owned. She depended on his success in high school and expected him to attend college, to get a good job, and to make money to support the family and relatives living in Africa. His mother wanted Shafac to learn reading and writing skills in school that would help him to make sense of the written materials sent to their home. She hoped his high school diploma would better help him to provide for their family needs.

In contrast, elders sometimes perceived the young men's ability to use English as evidence they were becoming more American and losing their heritage. Although they remained Sudanese, Liberian, or Somalian, some elders felt their boys were not as Sudanese, Liberian, and Somalian as they should be. The young men were caught between responsibilities they had for their families at home and the roles they saw American-born youth playing at school. A *double bind* occurred for them in relation to cultural traditions of home and those of the United States. Similar to Ibrahim's studies (2003, 2008) of Black African-born youth in Canada, the young men in my study were at a location where they "produced their own culture where continental African memory and experience were amalgamated and missed with North American cultural and linguistic experience" (p. 64). They were young men mediating their agency and subjectivity in activity systems that were not always congruent. Ali, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Somali Bantu young man, discussed that his family grew angry with him because he was not



learning enough English to help them at home. He reported, “I can’t just open myself to them. They don’t talk to me much” (Interview, 06/30/10). Ali dreamed in English, he reported, and he stopped learning new words in his native tongue. His parents complained he “didn’t know anything.”

It is funny most of the time. A letter comes. I start reading. I’m like, I don’t know. They’re like, “what do you go to school for?” They’re letters from the Food Stamp company. They’re letters for the house bill. Everything. And then I get stuck with words. The translating from English to my language, Mai Mai. And they’re waiting for me to tell them. I’m telling myself, what is it talking about? (Interview, 06/30/10).

Without proficiency in the language of his parents, Ali’s translations were limited. “I try to tell them that teachers don’t teach experiences of the real world,” he reported. “But they don’t understand. They think I should know.” Ali’s home activity system required him to have knowledge about business forms and medical reports, genres he did not learn in school, and his home community grew frustrated with his inability to translate such documents. In the United States, Ali was positioned (via a division of labor within the home activity system) as a genre authority where he was expected to fill out forms and broker the language for his parents. Yet, school activity systems did not educate Ali on the real-world genres his parents needed to be translated. The genres at home were not parallel to the ones he experienced at school and, hence, a *double bind*, occurred.

Participants reported that a primary purpose for learning to write in the U.S. was to assist their elders who did not have access to written tools for communication. Any tool learned in additional activity systems assisted the family’s wellbeing. The genres

emphasized in school did little to help participants with the real-world forms their families faced and needed to be translated. This responsibility reversed divisions of labor because youth were viewed as having more ability to communicate in Western genres and a greater understanding of the rules they used. In this sense, my participants felt they lacked tools to be more useful to their elders. When the young men were unhelpful to their families, they felt like they had let them down. The boys held the most familiarity with English in their homes, but they did not have an exposure to the genre forms their families needed translated and filled out. *Double binds* resulted for the young men in their home activity systems.

According to Perry (2007), “While literacy brokering is partly about providing access to the meaning of a given text, more importantly it also is closely connected with literacy practices” (p. 267). Immigrant populations, like the Sudanese families in Perry’s research and the young men who participated in mine, benefited from knowing the social uses of a new language (cf., Fu & Graff, 2009). The boys needed to understand the mail sent to their homes and how to fill out forms at a doctor’s office. These were not the genres taught in school.

#### *Writing to Get a Job*

With a purpose to succeed in the United States and to assist their families locally and abroad, participants filled out many job applications during my data collection. Application forms were a new genre, and the young men were anxious about filling them out. All participants except Panther looked for employment during this study, and, because of my interest in their writing worlds, they often requested my help. Panther expressed he was too “lazy” to get a job. “If I had one,” he explained, “I’d have to give

all my money to my mother” (Interview, 06/29/11). For the others, seeking employment required that participants know how applications, as a genre and tool, worked.

Although families applied to come to the United States through an application form, the process was conducted through oral interviews where others scripted their responses into written forms. As reported in Chapter Four, oral responses were often rehearsed, practiced, and shared with the community. Work in the U.S., though, required their ability to write for themselves. London, the 11<sup>th</sup> grader from Sudan, reported, “I didn’t grow up learning what jobs are like or where people know how languages work.”

In America, people think that killing an animal is not a skill. The work that Africans do is not considered a skilled work. They think that if you’re White, and read books, those are skills that one needs for work. Those jobs, to get them, you have to read and write. (Interview, 06/29/10)

Literacy, noted London, brought employment and led to “White” work within career activity systems in the Western world. Divisions of labor, rules, and tools to achieve in Western society were different than those he knew in Sudan. His frustration about finding work as a recent immigrant reflected Gates’ (1986) analysis that writing has been used as an indicator of “man’s ability to reason” (p. 217) and Faraclas’s (1997) assertion, “In the modernist universe, the literacy worker is ‘enlightened’ and in possession of absolute truth” (p. 168). The skills and funds of knowledge London brought from Sudan were not valued for jobs of the Western world because he did not have the literacy skills he perceived as “White.” Within the division of labor in the U.S. workforce, London had to prove his abilities to be a reader and writer. He explained, “I don’t want to ruin that. I want to show people I can work.”

In the six months of data collection (and beyond), participants contacted me with questions about completing job applications and requests that I take them to locations that were hiring. In some of the applications, the young men were expected to compose short responses to questions such as, “Why would you be a good employee for this position?” or “Explain the unique skills you can offer this job.” As a genre, applications are used in a preliminary step of the division of labor process; employers don’t want workers who will not be effective on the job. The young men sometimes missed the social clues on the applications. For instance, Zizu wrote, “I’m extremely impulsive” on an application when he was prompted with “Would you consider yourself an impulsive person? Explain” (Memo, 01/29/10). I interrupted and told him to consider the purpose of the genre – an impulsive applicant might not be a good employee. Zizu had not considered this. The young men valued the written responses (outcome) on applications because they valued the purpose of finding a job.

My participants sought to earn extra funds to save for cars, to buy clothes, to eat with friends, but mostly to help relatives in the United States and abroad. As Shafac explained, “I have to get meat” (Field notes, 04/27/10). He needed money to pay for gas so he could travel out of the city to purchase goats. In Kakuma refugee camp, Shafac was responsible for providing meat to his family, yet in the U.S. goat meat was not available at his neighborhood supermarket. “Each goat costs \$130,” he explained (Interview, 04/04/10). Shafac filled out many job applications in hopes someone would call him. Eventually, he was hired to bus tables for a few hours a week at a coffee shop. With every hour he had to work away from home, he was distracted from his schoolwork. He

thus felt a *double bind* to economically contribute to his family while also maintaining his homework schedule to earn passing grades.

Zizu, the 11<sup>th</sup> grader from Liberia, similarly discussed that his maintaining of a part-time job made life easier for his mother. When he and his twin brother, Masa, had summer employment through the College Preparatory Program, they gave every other paycheck to their mom. Finding employment during the school year was difficult. He and Masa filled out at least twenty applications during this study, and relatives living in Liberia frequently called them with more requests for financial support. Zizu's father, who went missing during the war, reappeared but was disabled; he needed their financial assistance. "Man, I'm African. I'm poor. I'm supposed to be poor. I'm not supposed to have money," Zizu remarked after learning another application was denied (Memo, 01/20/10). He situated his inability to find employment during the school year as historically connected to his location as an African refugee. In this positioning, a Black African-born youth was not "supposed" to have access to work and, consequently, the financial stability in the Western world. Zizu interpreted his inability to find employment as inaccessibility to the tools used by other applicants: better English skills, reliable transportation to get him around, and more work experiences.

The young men appreciated advice on how to find jobs, especially through instruction at school, although such instruction was not common. Shafac and Ade discussed, for example, that projects assigned in a senior economics class helped them to find employment. Ade explained, "To graduate from high school students have to make a business card and resume" (Interview, 04/22/10), two usable genres that would benefit their future. The business card and resume were written outcomes that could be used as

tools to empower them in finding work. The economics teacher required youth to design a business card, create a resume, and establish a business plan. Shafac proposed what he called “The Somali-American Store,” where he would sell spices, clothing, and live animals. He proposed the store be built in his neighborhood, where Bantu families were relocated. Ade, who also recognized the influence his economics class had on his writing, used knowledge about business cards and resumes to start a small business for himself in the Bantu community. In fact, he created business cards and resumes (outcomes) for others. “I charged every person for my work,” he explained. “I charged them \$10 for ten business cards. I have to buy ink, papers, and the time to do it for them.” The genres were viewed as useful tools, socially, that could promote other Somali Bantus.

Holding a part-time job meant success for the young men because it offered additional economic resources to help their families in a new country. For this reason, participants were interested in how to write job applications so their purpose for finding employment could be fulfilled. For the two seniors, learning how to communicate through resumes and business cards offered additional genres and other tools to fulfill this purpose. Job applications, resumes, proposals, and business cards (outcomes) were valuable because they provided access to additional activity systems that benefited them and their families. Having employment meant they would, as subjects in their family system, be able to contribute economically and share some of the financial burdens. In the division of labor at home, holding a job meant they were better able to help out. Learning about how to write for applications, resumes, proposals, and business cards benefited the purposes they had for finding employment.

*Writing to Prepare for College*

All eight participants reported that learning to write in preparation for college was important, as well. They saw education as a vehicle for being successful in the United States and understood that writing provided access to additional activity systems. They wanted to learn academic genres that would help them fulfill this purpose.

Alumni made presentations on two occasions at Robinson High School where they offered advice about post-graduation success. The first occasion was at an assembly held for all 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. During the assembly an African American panel member declared, “Make your teachers make you write. Learn to write a research paper now” (Field notes, 01/07/10). The panel members emphasized the importance of writing in their college lives and made suggestions that teachers should better prepare youth to be writers. The second presentation was arranged for students enrolled in ESL classes. A young man from Congo discussed his experience at a local community college and reported that writing was his greatest challenge. He told the English language learners that he often used a writing center on his campus to receive assistance. The ESL youth heard a similar message – writing was important to their future.

Friends and relatives enrolled in college suggested to participants that they take challenging courses. Ade, the 12<sup>th</sup> grader from Somalia, discussed,

From what I’ve heard, there’s a lot of reading and writing in college and you have to write fifteen to twenty page papers. You’re going to have to be very good with writing. (Interview, 04/22/10)

Ade was preparing to leave for a four-year college soon after graduation and wanted as much writing instruction as he could get. He and the other upperclassmen in this study

were more anxious about their writing. They wanted Robinson High School to prepare them for the writing expectations they would face after they graduated.

Ade, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade Somali Bantu, and Zizu, an 11<sup>th</sup> grade Liberian, learned from friends and family who were enrolled in college that taking a challenging class would benefit them. Zizu enrolled in AP History during his junior year after he saw his friend, also a Liberian boy, accepted into a reputable college.

First of all, my friend taught me just to keep working hard in school. He has done a lot to get to where he's at: staying up all night, like 'till five in the morning, going back to school the next day. Doing the same thing again the next night. (Interview, 06/28/10)

Based on the friend's advice, Zizu took AP History in his 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, and reported that he wrote all the time for that class. "The AP was challenging, but good for me," he admitted. "I didn't get a lot of written work from my other classes. AP History was the only class that kept me busy. I would always carry my AP work with me and I worked on it wherever I was" (Interview, 06/28/10). Zizu did not achieve a desirable score on the AP examination – he lamented doing "really bad. I scored a 1" – but he benefited from the high expectations of reading difficult texts. The rigor of his class also provided more opportunities to practice writing for college level exams. With his purpose to do well in school and to continue on to college, Zizu felt the reading and writing experiences of the AP History class provided more tools he would be able to use later on.

Ade held similar appreciation for the high expectations of advanced curriculum. He felt his AP Psychology class taught the level of writing expected in college. Ade explicated arguments from academic journals and explained, "We have a lot of reading



and it's tough. Some of it I don't understand. I read and try my best. I use the computers to find out more information. And then I write about it for the essays" (Interview, 04/22/10). The teacher required students to summarize what they read, to analyze the arguments that were made, and to infer conclusions. These were writing tools Ade saw as important to his future. Like Zizu, Ade received a 1, the lowest score on AP's five point scale, but he reported it was the instruction he desired and not the college credit. The instruction meshed with his desire to write in ways that would benefit his future.

Ade was successful at being accepted in a four-year college, and this brought great excitement, but many fears. He felt the *double binds* around being the first in his family to receive a college education and the responsibilities that came with it. Ade reported his parents "didn't know how schools and colleges work and they were very nervous about how much it would cost them" (Interview, 06/28/10). He was enrolled in an equal opportunity program for extra support, but it required that he leave his family within days after graduation. Ade translated everything for his parents, including the financial paperwork that came with his acceptance and financial aid package. The acceptance into a four-year college meant he was closer to finding a career that would provide benefits to him and his family, empowerment in the division of labor. Ade kept some genres related to the college activity system secret from his parents, however.

Just this morning, they wake me up at 7 a.m. and were talking about my payment for college, my bill, but I didn't show them. I just filled out my insurance card and stuff. They were asking about my laptop money. This summer and next summer I have to pay that. They were, like, "When is it due?" (Interview, 06/28/10)

Ade reported needing time to make sense of the genres that arrived before he shared them with his parents. He did not feel they would understand what was being requested of them. His parents had “a three day party” to celebrate his graduation (Interview, 06/28/10), but the paperwork used by the new activity systems of their son’s world was completely foreign. It required Ade to be the authority in the process and, hence, more responsible in the division of labor in his family activity system. As a subject, he needed to process the rules and tools for applying to college because his elders did not have access, or language, to activity systems of higher education.

To receive assistance with the college application process, two participants, Zizu and London, were enrolled in a College Preparatory Program (CPP), a state-funded initiative that offered assistance to youth viewed as at high risk for dropping out. Within the division of labor at Robinson High School, CPP guided youth to aim high and to persevere with their academic work. Through CPP, Zizu and London received additional guidance and exposure to college life. CPP provided a room at Robinson for youth to attain additional academic support, especially with writing. Their staff often met one-on-one with students during the day and after school. As Zizu explained,

They help me with homework. Like, if we have study hall, they switch our study hall so we can do work in there. Instead of sitting in other classes doing nothing, they keep us busy. (Interview, 06/28/10)

For instance, when Zizu was assigned to write a college essay in an 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class, he raised his hand to see if he could go to the CPP room for help. There, the staff encouraged him and asked specific questions about how he relocated from Liberia. With their support, Zizu drafted,

I can still remember all my friends telling me that my family and I are coming to America. But I told them that there was more to it indeed there was. We had to go through a lot of interviews and a lot of paper works in order for us to come to America. With these interviews we had to be perfect with our answers, so every night after dinner we would sit down and practice for hours and hours every night. (Field notes, 01/09/10)

The CPP staff helped him to locate errors, including repetitive wording and sentence structure problems. They also served as an additional audience for what was written.

Like Zizu, London went to CPP when assigned to write a college essay. In his English class, Ms. Hamilton provided three models (tools) to students and assigned them to write one for a grade (rule). London reported he understood the college essay genre and why they were written. The models demonstrated features of the college essay genre that he knew he was expected to apply in his own writing to earn a grade. As a Sudanese youth with much ambition to attend college, London discussed, “College essays are supposed to entertain the people who are going to read them. Like, you have to write a good essay about your life. It has to be true” (Interview, 06/29/10). He reported the models used in his English class motivated him and showed him what needed to be written to gain entrance into college. London viewed the outcome he was expected to write, a college essay, as a way to earn a grade in his English class, but also to narrate his life to get the attention of a reader in a college admissions office.

London went to the College Preparatory Program, however, because he felt the models shown to him were unattainable for a refugee youth like him. “I can never write like those kids,” he worried. “I’m not White. They aren’t from a kid like me” (Interview,

06/29/10). Although London felt the models used in his mainstream English class were good for showing him the social functions of a college essay, they were not written by a Sudanese youth with only four years of formal education. London interpreted the model essays as being written by White youth who had greater access to the college activity system he desired. Therefore, London went to CPP to get additional guidance and support. They helped him *unbind* the tensions he felt. Like Black male youth in other research (Alonso, 2009; Davis, 2006; Kinloch, 2010; Mahiri, 1996), London demonstrated his agency to be successful in the United States through eliciting help from others. According to Kinloch (2010), Black youth often “feel disassociated from, out of place in, and ignored within school space” (p. 176). In this sense, they shared part of the writing process by providing tools for London to reach an outcome he desired. The staff at CPP asked London questions and allowed him to orally discuss his life experiences. They took notes and offered suggestions for organizing his thoughts into a college essay.

With ambitions to be successful in the U.S., several of the young men heard advice from community members – friends, alumni, and relatives – who promoted the importance of writing. The participants pursued additional activity systems to gain tools for writing that would benefit their futures because they wanted to be successful. Even with low scores on AP examinations, Ade and Zizu reported their AP classes provided beneficial writing instruction that would help them achieve a purpose for getting into college. London and Zizu also used the support of the College Preparatory Program to assist this purpose. They sought to be challenged and appreciated support and guidance. Involvement in additional activity systems them in gaining tools they needed to enter additional activity systems.

### Writing to Share Their Lives

In addition to purposes of succeeding in the United States, all eight participants reported they wrote often in activity systems to make sense of their personal experiences and to share their histories. The eight Black African-born male youth wanted to share their lives and to educate American people about the relocation of their families and the conflicts within their home nations. They wrote with pride about their Liberian, Sudanese, and Somalian heritages. They did this through participation in the *Life Histories* project, the creation of an ESL magazine, and at programs offered by the Somali Bantu community center.

When the young men were provided choices about their writing they almost always wrote about personal experiences. Having choice for what to write, and using lived experiences as a topic, was viewed by participants as a tool for developing language skills. Writing became a way to put thoughts into textual forms. Smagorinsky (1997) wrote, in relation to the young man he studied, “writing can potentially serve as a meditational tool depending on how the confluence of the writer’s goals and disposition operate within the constraints and affordances provided by the social context of writing” (p. 97). The young men named activity systems that allowed them to share their lives as most influential to their writing. These activity systems helped them to make meaning of lived experiences. Writing about the self offered the young men greater authority and agency. They felt others could be educated from what they had to tell. Activity systems that offered encouragement, an audience who listened, and mentorship around writing processes (e.g., brainstorming, planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) were

reported as useful. These were locations that allowed youth to collaborate on the rules for writing and shared with them how to develop thinking, as well.

I met Ade and Zizu at the *Life Histories* project. In this project, graduate students worked with youth who were enrolled in an Advanced ESL class that had limited and disrupted formal education. The *Life Histories* project was designed to assist SIFE students with their writing through offering an opportunity to co-write life narratives with graduate students like me. Throughout a semester, students who participated received weekly mentorship on their writing. Ade and Zizu reported that participation in the project influenced how they viewed writing in a new nation.

“Since the project,” Ade discussed, “I really made big change in my reading, writing, and speaking” (Interview, 04/22/10). Ade and his graduate school partner, for example, created a website where his life story was published. Ade’s graduate school partner interviewed him, recorded his responses on a digital recorder, and typed his answers. She brought transcripts to Ade, and he chose the most important information to include on his website. The two co-edited his narration. Ade then read this co-written narrative into a voice recorder. He also took photographs to accompany the writing. The photographs, his written text, and his voice recordings were finally uploaded to his webpage to share with an online audience. He reflected,

I shared the stories of my life experiences from Somalia to Kenya to the United States. I learned how it feels telling past life stories and how to connect life stories together. I remembered my past. (Interview, 04/22/10)

Ade used business cards to lead viewers to a URL with his online narrative. He boasted, “I can, like, Google my name, and find my website. I’m Google-able.”

While Ade decided to co-create a website, Zizu's chosen outcome for the *Life Histories* project was a poster. I interviewed Zizu three times throughout a semester and transcribed his responses for both of us to read. From the transcriptions, Zizu highlighted which stories he wanted to develop more. Like Ade, Zizu used photographs of his family in Liberia and the United States to help him narrate parts of his personal history. Zizu chose several pictures of soccer teams and mapped out his journey from Liberia to Côte d'Ivoire to Guinea (Memo, 04/04/09). He wanted an American audience to see how far he traveled before arriving in the United States. In the center of his poster Zizu used the quote, "Life is what you make it." He also wrote about "fishing for pumpkin fish," a "seriousness for school and achieving," "the scars" he "carried from Liberia," and his passion to "argue and win debates." A year after the project, Zizu's poster remained mounted at his kitchen table next to the poster his twin made in the same project (Field notes, 03/19/10).

As an activity system, the *Life Histories* project provided tools for youth to use personal experiences with purposes of sharing their lives with others (additional communities). The outcome of the project became a tool that they could display for others to see and that could be used to initiate communication with an American audience. Zizu, for instance, used his poster to present Liberian history to others at Robinson High School and in some of his other activity systems. He brought the poster to a local college where he had summer employment through the College Preparatory Program and talked with their staff about his experiences. He also used his poster during a multicultural celebration at Robinson High School and discussed, "My history teacher wanted to keep my poster, but I wouldn't let him" (Interview, 05/05/09). He used his

poster to showcase his relocation experiences and to share his life with others. In co-writing with me, he also established the rules for what he would include and not include; he was the authority on what he wanted to communicate to others. I was his guide.

Sharing life stories was important to other participants in this research, as well. In another activity system, an extracurricular club, Ali and Ade created Robinson High School's first ESL magazine, "Hope for New Life," to share the history of ESL youth with the school community. The boys proposed the magazine to an ESL teacher because they wanted a forum to write about who they were (Field notes, 02/18/10). "The magazine," Ali reflected, "was designed to show everyone we have a social life, too. He felt people at Robinson thought,

"Oh, they're Africans" and we don't really know nothing. Some people in school judge us by our looks or the way we dress and maybe our cultures.

We want them to know us. (Interview, 04/02/10)

The ESL magazine writers used the magazine (tool) to introduce ESL students to their school (community). As editors, Ali and Ade met with twenty ESL youth once a week after school and during two weeklong vacations. They established the rules for what would be included: articles, photographs, poetry, and biographies of the staff (outcomes) and who would do what for the magazine (division of labor). "Hope for New Life" became a magazine that showcased the writing they wanted to do. It was generated by youth with a purpose to share their lives.

The students began by making lists of the stories they wanted to include. They used the tool of brainstorming to generate ideas for possible articles, including a story about a performance being written and produced in the Congolese community. Ali chose



to write a short piece about the most recent newcomers arriving. He discussed keeping it short, “because the newcomers didn’t know many words.” He utilized his own rules because he wanted his article to respect the limited English his interviewees knew.

People come to America for many reasons. Some wait for a long time. We asked ESL students at Robinson why they came to the United States, how long they had to wait, and what their hopes for the future are. Their hopes and dreams were beyond what we expected. (Field notes, 03/24/10)

Ali interviewed newcomers from Bhutan, Myanmar, and Somalia, and organized their responses in a graphic organizer of three circles that summarized their reports in simple statements. In another article, “The Future is Ours,” Ali wrote about the Somali Bantu community center and interviewed the director, researched its history, and wrote many drafts, all which were tools to bring forth a final outcome. The six-paragraph article was the longest piece of writing Ali composed during this research. He did not write it for a grade; instead, it was written with a real-world purpose. It began,

American students are taught everything is possible. For many students arriving to America, the future wasn’t always open. In Somalia, for example, the oldest boys are taught to carry the family’s name and traditions yet, when war brok [sic] out in Somalia, traditions scattered. That is why Somali Bantus have found themselves in a new city of the U.S. and why the community center is important to us. (Field notes, 03/24/10)

Ali's purpose for the article was to express his appreciation for the help the center provided and to inform others of the support it brought Bantu youth. His article taught about Bantu history and why families, like his, were relocating to U.S. cities.

"Hope for New Life" gave English language learners, like Ade and Ali, a tool for publishing and sharing their writing. The school district printed the magazine and made copies available in the front office, supporting ESL youth in the division of labor process. As an editor, Ade wished the final edition would be "real, like a real magazine with lots of photos," but he was satisfied with the final product (Interview, 06/28/10). He felt their purpose for sharing lives with others was met and that the community of ESL students had an opportunity to use the magazine to showcase their written work.

The community center was not only a subject for Ali to write about, but also an activity system where three participants – Ali, Shafac, and Ade – wrote often. The young men discussed that the center brought Bantu youth to local events, including a conference for adolescent writers. Directors at the center, viewing their role within the division of labor as helping young Bantu youth to have access to more tools that might be usable in school, brought them to the conference months before this data was collected. Shafac, who went, discussed,

I decided to go and see how they doing...what they are doing. I even writed when they tell the kids to write. I even write like two pages! I never done writing two pages in my life! It was a lot of people and we had to write about our lives. Yes. We had to write about our lives. We could write about us. (Interview, 04/04/10)

Attendance at the writing conference was a special event for the Bantu youth. More typically, directors at the center brought volunteer tutors from a local university to assist youth with their schoolwork twice a week. The community center was an activity system that supported Bantu adolescents with math and English, and the young men viewed the tutors as mentors because they offered support for their academic work. They assisted and provided additional tools youth needed.

At the end of the school year, Bantu youth approached directors at the center to see if they could have a summer program that would continue to support their writing (Field notes, 06/09/10). At the community center, an out-of-school activity system, youth felt their input was respected and they were comfortable to suggest the direction they wanted the program to take. The directors collaborated with youth on creating a summer program that offered genres they wanted to practice. The division of labor at the community center was youth-driven. Through planning, the Somali Bantu youth brought a fiction writer, a poet, a Sudanese man whose life story was staged, and an anthropologist to the community center. Each offered writing advice and introduced new tools for the young people to use. Through the genres they introduced they also provided outcomes for communication they were not offered in school.

The fiction writer, for example, modeled the tool of brainstorming when he led a writing workshop at the center (Field notes, 06/19/10). Ali, who participated in the ESL magazine and used the tool of brainstorming to outline a possible publication, understood quickly what to do. The author explained that his first novel, a book of 233 pages, took five years to write and that editing the book was a long, interactive process that involved many people. His discussion highlighted the social nature of his writing, especially when

he began to share it with editors and, eventually, readers. He described how he wrote the novel, an outcome, using various components of the writing process including drafting, writing, revising, editing, and eventually publishing. He used his book, translated into seven languages, as an example of how writing interacts with many communities. He explained, “Writing is like soccer. You have to keep shooting until you score. Your teachers get paid to read your work. The real world does not get paid to grade you.” The author, who also volunteered throughout the year at the Bantu community center, was familiar with the passion many of the young men had for playing soccer. He wanted them to imagine rules for writing that transcended school activity systems and to see purposes for written texts beyond the assessments they typically connoted with writing.

In the workshop, Shafac told his friends, “I want to write about the gangs in our neighborhood and all the violence,” and he drafted an introduction to a story about a young man pressured to carry a gun. Ali, also in attendance, began a story about a boy who was accepted to play soccer for college. In the fiction writer’s workshop, Ali drafted,

My name is Ali. I am from Kenya where everyone plays soccer. Yeah, I know what you’re saying. Not again. Another African guy talking about soccer. Well, soccer is not just a game. It’s the world, too. People I know were born to watch talent of soccer. I was born to play. (Field notes, 06/19/10)

In his opening draft, Ali imagined an audience he assumed would be frustrated by his choice to write about soccer, “again.” He empowered his character’s voice to talk back to an audience who might not see soccer as more than a game – perhaps his American teachers who discouraged him from writing about what he loved. Ali, a proud athlete who

wanted more opportunities to share his love for the game, later explained, “Playing soccer is a way for us to prove who we are to each other. It’s more than a game. It’s having your life on the line. It’s not just for yourself but for your whole family” (Interview, 06/30/10). Soccer was his metaphor for “the world.”

Similar to the ESL magazine and the *Life Histories* project the community center provided tools that allowed English language learners to share their lives. The young people, as subjects in these activity systems, shared the division of labor with adults who supported their writing. Drawing from Feez (1998), Hyland (2007) wrote that students writing in a second language benefit from adults who set a context for writing, model genres expected of them, offer opportunities to co-construct writing together, encourage independent writing, and reflect with youth on how their writing compares with other texts. Such scaffolding provides “a genre template which enables students to start, connect, and develop their texts appropriately while concentrating on what they want to say” (p. 159). These activity systems allowed an opportunity for youth to contribute to the rules on what they wrote and to make choices for their writing. They encouraged community amongst writers and provided spaces where personal histories were respected and supported. Participants felt empowered as writers when personal experiences and interests could be used as a tool for developing writing to audiences beyond a teacher.

#### Writing To Be Social with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Technologies

Another primary purpose named by all eight participants for writing was the use of 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies to be social. Participants’ discussions about online writing paralleled the report made by Lenhart, Hitlin, and Madden (2005) that today’s teenagers are “enveloped in a wired world” and they “are not only surrounded by the technological

tools that allow them to connect to the internet, but they are equally enveloped by friends and family who go online” (p. 11). Like many youth in the U.S., my participants communicated regularly online and via text-messages by using their cellphones.

All eight participants, although relatively new to digital literacies, were active users of social media and reported they wrote on computers and cellphones two to three hours each day. Similar to Lam’s (2009) research on digital writing and English language learners, the young men in this study reported a similar desire to “develop the literate repertoire” that enabled them to “thrive in multiple linguistic and semiotic communities and mobilize resources within these communities” (p. 378). They acknowledged writing more often online and with text messaging than they wrote in school. Their familiarity with technology, too, centralized their role in the division of labor of family activity systems. Families viewed them as technological experts who granted them authority to choose the technology brought into their homes. For instance, Ade laughed, “My parents don’t know electric machines and stuff.” He continued,

I don’t eat when I go home right away. I pray and then I go on my computer. Like two or one hour. Then go outside. When I come back home, I do my homework. From 9 to 11, I use the computer again.

(Interview, 04/22/10)

Similarly, Ali discussed,

I go online and chat. Yahoo or MySpace, chatrooms. Like Facebook, even.

I talk with people all over the world. Like last time, I met a person from

England, and then I met a person in Africa. (Interview, 04/02/10)

Ali, who lived his first ten years of life without electricity or running water in two refugee camps in Kenya, was surprised to learn that some in Africa had access to online communication. In this respect, he paralleled Traore and Luken's (2004) report that African-born youth also begin to view images of Africa in Western schools through the lens of colonial stereotypes. He drew from personal experiences in Kakuma and made the assumption that all individuals throughout Africa shared a lack of technology.

Participants communicated online with friends who relocated from camps to different U.S. cities. Zizu reported, "I use Facebook to chat with my friends from Guinea. Some of them are in North Carolina, Virginia, and in Georgia. I talk to them every night" (Interview, 02/25/09). Facebook was the preferred social activity system of participants to write. Panther, for example, posted an impish remark after his English teacher, Ms. Clinton, ridiculed him in class for not having a pen. That evening he posted on his Facebook page, "Why don't I have a writing utensil? Let's see. It's 8 a.m. They're lucky I'm even dressed" (Field notes, 01/15/10). Facebook was a forum to write beyond the gaze of school authority and one where purposes for writing were established by them. The network provided an online social space for written communication that established genres of messages, updates, news feeds, and events. Sometimes Panther used Facebook to write about his mood. "I know you hate me. I don't give a Fuuuuckkkkkkk," and "I used to care and now I don't" (Field notes, 06/10/10). Such writing incited attention from his friends. What he wrote textually incited social responses. The young men spent much time writing online because of social nature of the activity system. Their words incited reactions from others.

Najm, the Benadiri young man from Somalia, wrote often on Facebook to share who he was as an individual. He explained, “I would say writing is the best thing to do in life, but not that much in school, though. I write on my own. My own imagination” (Interview, 01/11/10). Najm used his Facebook page to editorialize about history. For instance, he uploaded a picture of a woman and wrote, “She is one of the greatest queens of ancient Kemet. Her name is Queen Hatshepsut” (Field notes, 05/01/10). He also provided a link to a short biography that explained her importance to Egypt, the country that first offered him refuge from the Somali war. Najm created a gathering space for his friends on Facebook, as well, and wrote, “I created this page for the African music. If u like African music, become a fan. Much love back to u. Africa up” (Field notes, 03/16/10). Najm used Facebook as a tool to establish community for individuals like him. With his African music page, he created a forum with the rule that all members must enjoy African music and have pride in African ancestry. Najm established a community for others, like him, to communicate through words, video, and photographs.

The young men aligned what they wrote in these Facebook genres, such as profiles and newsfeeds, with purposes that mattered to them like sharing African heritage and lived experiences. Najm used Facebook, for example, to publish what he called “quotes,” including what he entitled, “History should come first.”

I wish I can take you back, time,  
when African pride was still shining.  
African king was more than a dream.  
Consider it supreme and heart of the lion,  
before children suffer and are dieing,



before bullet was already flying

before leaders was already lying

killing wrong people so.

They know we would fight them,

before streets filled with blood,

before our hearts turn cold, then filled again with love. (Field notes, 01/16/11)

His “quotes” were often written about Somalia, Palestine, his Muslim faith, and a desire for global equity, writing that was less restrictive than the assignments he received in school. Najm, like the other participants, viewed friends as an audience and used Facebook to establish a community of readers. The division of labor on the social network was less hierarchical. They shared their thoughts through writing with others and controlled what they wanted to express. The young men, like Najm, used the activity system of Facebook as a tool to write for their social needs.

In addition, the young men debated and challenged one another’s logic on Facebook. For instance, Najm, Zizu and Samuel argued on whether lyrics or beats were most important to rap music (Field notes, 01/20/10). According to Ibrahim (2003), African-born youth in Canada “learned by taking up and repositing the rap linguistic and musical genre and, in different ways, acquiring and rearticulating the hip-hop cultural identity” (p. 57). As Black African-born male youth in the United States, my participants often did the same. Samuel, the 10<sup>th</sup> grader from Sudan, quibbled that the best rap music was not “about the words, but the ways the song made you want to dance.” Najm, however, rebutted that a song’s “meaning was more important, music that makes you think.” He argued with Samuel, using one of his quotes to make his point:

Don't be surprised at the fire in my eyes,  
 when I realized those leaders were tyrants in disguise,  
 the rhymes I supply are like lights from the skies  
 that are shining to expose all the lies they devise.

He advocated that writing strong lyrics was most important and demonstrated his own capabilities. On Facebook, the youth wrote to debate and argue.

In addition to communicating socially on Facebook, seven of the eight participants reported writing daily text messages on cellphones. The following is an exchange I had with Shafac, the 19-year old Bantu young man, while he was actively looking for a job:

Shafac – Hi, Bryan. What are you doing?

Bryan – Reading

Shafac – lol. I am filling out an application for a grocery store.

What does s – u – b- m – i – t. Mean.

Bryan – To give permission. To agree. To turn in.

Shafac – Do I submit to drug and alcohol test?

Bryan – You do if you want a job.

Shafac – Okay, Thanks. (Memo, 05/12/10)

As written outcomes, text messages were brief but productive, following genre rules that were familiar to youth (e.g., Jacobs, 2006, 2008; Lam, 2009; Lenhart, Hitlin, & Madden, 2005). These included writing with acronyms that shortened lengthier expressions. Najm, for example, used “lmfao,” and I had to ask him what it meant. Although I had some familiarity with the conventions used for text messaging, I was unaware of this one. He

reported, “it means I’m laughing” (Field notes, 02/02/10). I later learned, however, it had additional connotations (laughing my fucking ass off), but Najm was too polite to explain it in its entirety.

Samuel was the only participant who did not have a personal cell phone, but he frequently borrowed them from others. He initiated texts by letting his audience know that he was writing from someone else’s phone, as such a move was atypical given that most teenagers had their own phones. When I visited with Samuel’s brothers at their home, for example, Samuel borrowed my phone to send text messages to a girl he met at another school. He told me, “Don’t worry. I erased all the messages so you don’t have to read our teenage stuff” (Field notes, 05/17/10). In the messages he composed, he saw writing as youth-oriented and purposeful for the social lives they inhabited, and he assumed his “teenage stuff,” which included texts with the young woman at another school, would not be interesting to me, even though he knew I was researching his writing practices. He also didn’t want me in his private, romantic business.

The young men also used text messaging to make things happen with what they wrote. For instance, Zizu enlisted me to take him to see the film, *Invictus*, about the South African rugby team. By the time I arrived to pick him up, several boys were waiting. They explained that Zizu sent a text to organize the outing and “if they wanted to come, they needed to get to his place right away” (Field notes, 01/20/10). In friendship activity systems, the division of labor was accomplished between youth. Writing was used via cellphones, a tool, to make arrangements and to solicit action. Through texting, social activity was stimulated and events within the community were quickly coordinated.

Participants used text messaging to receive assistance on schoolwork, too. Early in the data collection, I received several text messages that asked me to define “demon.” During a practice English examination, youth were provided a quote from Janwillem van De Wetering, “Greed is a fat demon with a small mouth and whatever you feed it is not enough.” Students needed to interpret the quote that used the word in order to write an essay. I thumbed, “monster, evil spirit, gargoyle” (Memo, 02/05/10) in response, and unknowingly helped students to cheat. The use of outside assistance such as teachers or dictionaries was prohibited when students were taking practice exams, a rule the boys used their cellphones to circumvent. The young men also used cellphones to do research, as dictionaries, and as thesauri – a 21st century library in the palm of their hands. The tool was used habitually until services were cut off due to payment issues. They often changed numbers, service providers, and cellphones because of delinquent bills.

Participants reported spending two to three hours a day writing in online activity systems. Written outcomes involving these 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies had many audiences. The composing was purposeful and social. Division of labor within digital composing was not top-down, but rather side-by-side. Writing occurred between the young men, their friends, their romantic interests, and even with adults, like me, who were seen as supportive of their in-school achievement. Through online activity systems and with text messaging the young men wrote to entertain, to get things done, to organize events, to editorialize, to share history, and to express. Division of labor was on their own terms. Both text messaging and Facebook were used as tools to build communities.

#### Writing To Meet School Requirements

Participants reported that another of their primary purposes for writing was to

meet school requirements. More specifically, they viewed writing as a way to pass classes through assignments given to them and a way to achieve a passing score on state assessments. In mainstream English classrooms, participants prepared for the four essay tasks (outcomes) on the state English assessment. In addition, the school district required students to complete a portfolio of their writing to submit to English teachers at the end of the year. The young men articulated that some tools used in their mainstream English classrooms benefited them as writers, while others did not. As noted earlier, they reported writing infrequently in English classes and, consequently, they had little they shared with me. Except for a few pieces of writing that went through numerous drafts, the young men primarily filled out packets of worksheets.

#### *Writing to Pass Mainstream English Classes*

In mainstream English classes at Robinson High School, the majority of a 70-minute block was spent reading and responding to literature. Typically, participants in Ms. Hamilton's, Ms. Clay's, and Ms. Clinton's classrooms arrived, were greeted with an opening prompt to which they responded through writing in notebooks (10 minutes), read a piece of literature together (30 minutes), and answered questions in literature packets (30 minutes). The majority of observations in these three classrooms (n=74) followed this schedule, although there was more variation in the sequence at the end of the semester when students worked on writing portfolios, after most had taken the state test. Participants reported that in English class activity systems they read books together and worked on questions to help them comprehend the material. Mr. Dallas's English class differed from the other three. During ten observations in his room, writing instruction took place throughout the 70-minute block of time in relation to texts they read.

Literature selected for participants in mainstream English classrooms was chosen from what was available at the school, what existed on a district list, and a teacher's familiarity with particular texts. Books were used as tools to foster critical thinking skills and to provide knowledge about literary traditions. The texts students read were determined for each grade level by a district list. In this sense, classroom teachers and their students followed the rules decided for them by a district authority. This caused frustrations at times, especially as new programs were adopted that required teachers to become familiar with new books. Literature was taught to prepare youth for state assessments, and, for the most part, the chosen texts appealed to the eight participants. Ali, for instance, raved about *Fences* by August Wilson:

I liked the conflict because it relates to some of the conflicts of our generation. Like building a fence to keep people in and other people out. Like my father telling me to be what I don't want to be. (Interview, 04/02/10)

Ali wanted to become a teacher but his father wanted him to become an engineer, another *double bind* he felt at home. He connected to the play's conflict – a literary term emphasized in his English class – with his own life, and though he did not write or talk about this personal connection in class. According to Ali, “Teachers just tell us assignments they want us to do and when we're talking, they're like “shhhhh.” That's it. They don't let us talk that much” (Interview, 06/30/10). Ali felt that conversations with his classmates about the books they were reading could have helped him to do a better job of writing about them. Discussions, at least to him, could be a useful tool used in English classrooms to prepare his thinking.

Similarly, while Najm was reading William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* in his 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class, he talked about similarities he saw between the text, Somali history, and life in the United States. "Basically all conflict is pointless," he reported, "and there should not be war. Because you can see, like Al Qa'ida in the Middle East and the KKK in the United States. Conflict is still alive, but people don't see it. The boys on the island, they see it, though" (Interview, 06/23/10). According to Najm, they were not expected to write how they felt about books or to share thoughts with classmates. Najm felt his teacher, Ms. Clay, "wasn't interested in a lot of kids from different background" (Interview, 06/23/10). Instead, Najm reported, "She was interested in stuff that only happened in America. She didn't even ask us, the ESL students from different backgrounds, about our lives. Similarly, when Zizu was reading *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker in his 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class, he kept his Liberian ancestry quiet.

I liked this book because it talks about Liberia and Monrovia, although the Olinkas were not in Liberia. They were from Senegal, I believe. They went to Liberia, but they didn't stay there. When the slaves returned to Africa, most of them went to Liberia. (Interview, 06/28/10)

Like Ali and Najm, Zizu did not share his personal knowledge with his teacher or classmates as he read. When I asked him if he did, he reported, "Nah, they just made fun of me for being Liberian."

Many of the texts read in mainstream English class activity systems featured Black protagonists but the young men stated they rarely talked about Black culture in whole-class discussions. They did, however, talk about Black culture with African American classmates. As an example, at the end of the school year, every junior was

provided a copy of Sapphire's *Push* by the school district to read over the summer. London, the only Sudanese youth in his English class, sat with four African American boys and an African American girl. He told his classmates he never heard of *Precious*, the movie based on Sapphire's book, which spawned a debate between the African American students on whether or not a Black student from Africa watched movies about Black individuals in the United States (Field notes, 06/02/10). One African American boy asked, "Why would an African know about that movie?" The African American girl responded, "Just cuz he's from a different country, coz, doesn't mean he don't watch Black people movies."

Students' conversation about Blackness, analytical and relevant to the book being distributed, drew on similar skills as the arguments in class and on the state test, yet they rarely made similar moves during class discussion. Amongst themselves, they discussed Blackness to understand a text they were given. They thought analytically about its construction in relation to Sapphire's text and London's Sudanese ancestry. They used Blackness and text-to-self connections as a tool for making sense of their worlds, but discussions about Blackness were rarely observed. While texts written by African American writers were often used as a tool in mainstream English classrooms, a discussion of Blackness, and its historical roots, were not. As Awokoya (2008) discussed, the arrival of Black African-born immigrant youth does not align with the "rigid and dichotomous Black/White constructs through which racial and ethnic identities are based in the United States" (p. 50). London's presence in a U.S. secondary school, as a Sudanese youth, challenged how Blackness was understood in relation to a single Black identity construction. Youth in Ms. Hamilton's room, a Black majority, read literature



with Black characters, but discussions of Blackness, its heterogeneity, and how it was used in the novels they read were not typical in school. In most of my 84 classroom observations, in fact, students were discouraged from talking during class, even if it was about the books they were reading.

Najm, the participant who hoped to one day be a historian, reported the only time he experienced teachers talking about Blackness or Africa's history in mainstream classrooms was when they talked about slavery and Martin Luther King. Similar to what Traore and Lukens (2004) reported, the Black youth in this study felt they had few opportunities to learn about African history, its relation to White Western societies, and how it both connected and was different from African American classmates who all brought unique histories to their classes. "The way history is known in high school is terrible," Najm stated. "It's kind of bullshit."

We're not taught a lot of history at all in English. They [teachers] have to open their eyes, their point of view to other kids in their class...the kids in school. I mean, if they don't talk. I think they feel outsider. It's how I feel.

(Interview, 06/23/10)

Without a historical context to Africa, including its connection to racial histories in the U.S. and the African diaspora, Najm felt outside the activity system of his mainstream English classroom. He speculated that others felt the same. In his view, history of the world should come first, including constructions of Blackness and discussions of the African diaspora, as a tool for teaching youth how to be critical thinkers.

All eight Black African-born male youth reported they were more likely to talk about who they were as Black African male youth with ESL teachers and classmates.

“The ESL teachers let us talk about being African,” Shafac said. “They ask us questions about our lives” (Interview, 04/04/10). In the activity systems of ESL classrooms, the lived experiences of youth were used to help students with their reading and writing and as a tool for building community. Teachers familiarized themselves with their students’ histories and used them to assist instruction. In ESL classroom activity systems, the division of labor allowed youth to bring cultural experiences from home to be used as assets to learning in school. Instead of seeing a deficit of skills in the English language learners, the teachers saw resiliency, strength, potential, and expertise.

Students’ histories and personal communities were less likely to be explored instructionally in mainstream English classrooms. Teachers focused, instead, on literature as a tool to prepare students for the state English assessment. Typically, participants wrote short responses to opening prompts in journals or on loose-leaf paper but did not share or discuss these with others. As an example, Shafac and Samuel were given an opening prompt while reading *The Pearl*: 1) copy quote, 2) paraphrase quote, 3) Do you agree/ disagree? Why or why not? 4) Write a 4 – 7 sentence response (Field notes, 03/24/11). On a rare occasion, opening prompts were used for creative expression. For instance, Ms. Clinton required Zizu and his classmates to write a letter to God in the voice of Celie from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (Field notes, 05/10/1). Upon receiving the assignment Zizu asked, “Ms., Who came up with this assignment? I can’t write this English. It’s hard enough to write the English you people are teaching me, and now I got to write it the wrong way?” Zizu challenged the assignment using his humor, but completed it because of his purpose to maintain strong grades. He wrote,

*Dear Allah,*

*Mr's dad leave for home and Shug and I laugh at Mr. and he laugh with us. He ast Shug for a cup of water and she say get it yourself you lazy ass and he ast me to and I ran to get. When I got out Mr. took the water and went inside the house. Shug ast me why am I afraid of that fool? I say cuz he my husband and I have to do what he wants.*

Zizu's response was turned back the next day with 100% written on the top with no other comment. Like Celie, Zizu did what was expected of him. He parroted Celie's vernacular and received a desirable score. In the division of labor of the English class activity system, Zizu followed the rules because he wanted to receive particular grades. Zizu questioned the rules for the assignment but completed it nonetheless. He did not know why he was required to write like Celie (Interview, 06/28/10), but he proved he could. He wrote to "Allah," instead of God, and showed a subversive wit that challenged the assignment while accomplishing the work. In this sense, Zizu demonstrated a sense of agency and broke away from the *double bind* he felt for the writing task. Teachers often corrected his Liberian English to polish his ability to communicate effectively, yet here he was assigned to break the rules and to write incorrectly. As a subject in the school activity system, the directions from his teacher, whom he called "you people," represented the hegemony of Western teachers.

Participants reported that to pass mainstream English classes they also had to respond to questions about literature in what they called "literature packets." These packets were central to mainstream English classrooms. Regularly, the division of labor in English class activity systems required them to fill out the literature packets (a tool) in order to receive a grade. Mr. Dallas explained, "We've tried to deviate from literature

packets, but we sort of teach them as a fallback” (Interview, 03/02/10). The packets were individual worksheets handed out during each class. At times, they were provided all at once like the 410 questions Ms. Clinton gave when reading *The Color Purple* (Field notes, 05/10/10). Najm stated that the purpose of literature packets was to help him to “learn the details of the book to write the essay” (Interview, 06/23/10). In literature packets, participants described characters, sequenced events, defined vocabulary, and applied literary terms. The packets required them to write responses to prompts like, “What is a parable? What is a fable? What is a metaphor” (Field notes, 01/12/10). They also wrote more developed responses to questions like, “Discuss the concept of ‘songs’ and themes found in *The Pearl*” (Field notes, 04/26/10). The young men reported that a few students did the work and passed it along to others, a kind of division of labor devised by youth in this community to increase success in school activity systems. London and Zizu, for example, allowed others to copy their written responses.

Participants occasionally wrote personal essays, memoirs, poetry, editorials, and scripts in their mainstream English classrooms. For example, Ade was given an opportunity to share his life through a personal essay about an heirloom assigned by Mr. Dallas, and estimated he wrote “seven to nine drafts” of his essay entitled “Daah” (Interview, 06/28/10). Mr. Dallas guided Ade’s writing in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade class throughout many lessons. He used one-to-one writing conferences as an instructional tool and encouraged students to read and comment on the writing of classmates as well. Ade felt writing conferences were helpful. He reflected, “Because my other English classes, we just do one draft and the teacher marks it with pen. But in this class, I write it over and over and learn my mistakes. Each time I read it I find another mistake. It’s like never

correct” (Interview, 06/28/10). Ade was assigned to write the personal essay after he read August Wilson’s *The Piano*. In class, students discussed the importance of family heirlooms in their lives and how the piano was used symbolically. Mr. Dallas offered heirlooms as a theme for students to explore their writing. Ade wrote,

It hangs above my mother’s bed. It’s a white square with colorful strings and yarn that shines like a white scarf. Since it was made it has traveled from Somalia to Kenya to America and survived two generations. (Field notes, 5/06/10)

Ade’s essay described how his mother carried the *daah* throughout their relocation to refugee camps in Africa and how no one in the family knew she had it. He came home one day to see it hanging in the living room of his apartment. He “couldn’t believe” his “eyes.” The assignment aligned with Ade’s purpose to share his history and through writing “Daah,” Ade reflected on his past, his culture, and his personal experiences – purposes that mattered to him.

During one activity in the process of developing his heirloom essay, Ade drafted three possible introductions (Field notes, 04/28/10). Mr. Dallas encouraged his students to attempt variations in their writing style (tool) and met with them, one-on-one (division of labor), to discuss what they had written (Field notes, 05/12/10). In conferences, they weighed the benefits and weaknesses of each attempt. Ade explained,

He keeps telling me to write a lot of drafts. Just write it down. Don’t think. Just write and go back and fix it later. He talks to me, one on one, and tells me what I need to do. He’s not a confusing teacher. I feel comfortable asking whatever question I have. (Interview, 06/28/10)

Ade used conferences with Mr. Dallas to get advice and to set new goals. Mr. Dallas provided him with language tools to discuss his drafts with others, and his students used these tools when working with each other.

Mr. Dallas was not the only person in the room who provided advice and support to individual writers. Classmates supported one another, too, through a community of developing writers. While writing “Daah,” Mr. Dallas asked his students to get a blank sheet of paper and to fold it in half. While he conferenced with students, he wanted them to do the same.

Create a T-chart. Someone will read an essay to you. One will listen and one will read. The partner is going to write down the things they like and parts that are confusing. (Field notes, 04/30/10)

Ade read his essay to an English language learner from Bhutan and she recorded his typographical errors and made compliments on what she liked. Through reading his essay out loud, Ade also found mistakes. He marked places where he tripped and confessed, “If I can’t read it, how can you?” In this way, division of labor in this particular classroom became less teacher-driven.

Through the division of labor established in Mr. Dallas’s room, youth were encouraged to establish a writing community. They provided one another feedback for their writing and took part in being an audience for what classmates wrote. The teacher was not the only responder to student writing and, hence, the sharing of student work created a social context. Smagorinsky and O’Donnell (1998) reported, “a social context provides constraints that limit, channel, and enable a reader’s ways of thinking about, talking about, and representing meaning that they impute to written signs” (p. 221).

Division of labor in Mr. Dallas's activity system supported youth to learn from one another about how audiences understood what they had written. Through peer editing, they located places where they were unclear.

Similar to Ade's heirloom essay, Zizu expressed he learned to be a better writer when Ms. Clinton required him to write a memoir in his 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class. He focused on winning a soccer tournament and benefited from writing several drafts.

The night was now over and we shook hands with teammates, and went by smiling at the road ahead of us. I said to myself, "So this is how it feels when you win a championship? It is the best feeling every [sic] in the world." All of a sudden I heard my brother saying, "Yeah, man. It sure is."

(Field notes, 01/22/10)

Zizu estimated he wrote six to seven drafts of the memoir. He brought the memoir to the College Preparatory Program, another activity system, to solicit feedback because he was invested in the writing.

Before Zizu wrote the first draft, he reported reading models of memoirs with Ms. Clinton in his mainstream English class. They discussed the features (rules) common to the memoir genre: *a clear unifying theme, insight to a subject's life through detailed memories, use of vivid imagery, and proper use of language* (Field notes, 01/19/10). Ms. Clinton created a rubric to score the memoirs and involved youth in the division of labor of how the genre should be graded. Rather than taking on sole authority, she helped them to build a scaffold, together, of genre characteristics. In addition, Ms. Clinton required a self-evaluation and asked questions for them to reflect like, "Does my memoir have a good topic? Do I include at least five examples of descriptive language, including words

that appeal to the five senses?” Zizu explained his choice of topic was “perfect” and that he learned to write sentences like, “Hearing that last whistle blow was like putting cold water on my face on a hot summer day” (Field notes, 01/19/10).

Explicating the features of the genre established rules that Zizu could apply to his own writing. This practice paralleled activities at the Bantu community center and what Hyland (2007) suggested was effective practice for teaching English language learners to write in a second language. According to Hyland, “By categorizing and analyzing texts they ask their students to write, teachers become more attuned to the ways meanings are created and more sensitive to the specific communicative needs of their students” (p. 151). The memoir models offered Zizu a framework to discuss the genre and its rules. In addition, the classroom conversations about the genre provided a forum for him to explicate what those rules should be. Reading memoir models, extracting knowledge about memoir characteristics, and then writing a memoir helped Zizu to communicate for a purpose that mattered to him.

Participants also wrote creatively, on occasion, in mainstream English classroom activity systems. For example, while reading Walter Dean Myers’ *Monster*, a screenplay about a 16 year-old Black male on trial for murder, Samuel and Shafac produced screenplays as written outcomes. Ms. Hamilton and her student teacher, Mr. Tully, used Myers’ book and several short films as models of plots, characterization, story lines, dialogue, and camera movement. Teachers targeted the tools screenplay writers used and asked students to notice the features – or rules – of the genre. After viewing a short film about two old men, for example, students noted that the film was broken into segments and that the director chose visual cues to narrate the story (Field notes, 02/05/11).



Students in Shafac and Samuel’s 10<sup>th</sup> grade class also co-created a script with their classmates and Mr. Tully in an example of division of labor that was atypical for English classrooms. Instead of setting a topic for students and then asking them to brainstorm and to draft individually, Mr. Tully engaged the whole class in co-authorship of a single text. “What do we want the story to be about?” Mr. Tully asked the class (Field notes, 02/05/11). “A duck named George,” a boy shouted out. “Okay, George will be a male duck. Where?” Mr. Tully continued. “A pond called Lake Robinson,” a girl contributed. “We can work with that,” the teacher added. Mr. Tully used a co-written model to demonstrate how writers plan a story before they write. Students were given time in class to think about possible ideas for their screenplays, then they were divided in groups to talk about their ideas. In addition, the teachers provided a list of screenplay vocabulary that could be used. Shafac explained, “I used *Cut to* and *new shot* because they were on the paper. I used *Int.*[interior] because it was in *Monster*” (Field notes, 02/22/10). The language used in screenplays was modeled through the texts they read in class and from materials provided to students while they wrote.

Shafac’s script depicted a Somali boy who learned to fight from Muhammad Ali. It used flashbacks between a childhood in Somalia, life in a refugee camp, and bullying in the United States. As part of his script he wrote,

BOY

I don’t want to fight you, Muhammad. I want to be you, to be strong, to achieve, to dream and keep the faith.

*Cut to:* inside of a bus. Camera moves to boy, age eleven, traveling across Africa. His mother wipes sweat from her eyebrow.

MOTHER

You were fighting in your sleep again. (Field notes, 03/10/10)

Similarly, Samuel wrote about a Sudanese boy that arrived in a new school. His story, like Shafac's, involved scenes from two nations.

Cut to: Mother's face is panned with a focus on her eyes.

Cut to: Images of Sudan. Snapshots of departing. Snapshots of village and cattle. Women crying.

Cut to: Boy's face in front of school. Serious look and stern lips.

Samuel wrote about a high school counselor who greeted a Sudanese mother with disrespect. He depicted fights in the hallway and images of a school in complete chaos. Samuel's middle school experience where he was suspended for carrying a knife to protect himself gave him material to work from and, perhaps, the screenplay was one way to unravel the *double binds* of being a Sudanese youth at his school. His character wanted the mother to know he would be okay, even though he faced adversity.

Through deconstructing screenplay models in class, both *Monster* and the short films, Samuel and Shafac learned features, or rules, of the screenplay genre. Those rules were further codified and made explicit for them in a rubric that the teachers co-created with students – again, another unusual example of division of labor in mainstream English classrooms that gave authority to students (Field notes, 03/08/10). In doing this, the teachers established a community of screenplay writers who shared their writing processes and drafted outcomes with one another.

Both Shafac and Samuel reported that behavior of some of their classmates, members of their mainstream English classroom community, caused Mr. Tully and Ms.

Hamilton to lessen the number of writing assignments they were given. Even so, the use of models when they did write helped both to compose developed pieces of writing. Their screenplays demonstrated they could apply a screenplay's genre features. To do this, however, they needed to be assigned to write and taught how to develop their ideas.

Establishing community in mainstream English classroom activity systems was important to participants. If participants did not feel respected as subjects within the division of labor in a class, they were less likely to write, even when purposes mattered to them. One example from participants' reports came from Ms. Clay's class. After attending professional development on alternatives to assigning the traditional research paper, Ms. Clay assigned Najm's class to create brochures. Students researched a country that interested them and, with a purpose to share his history, Najm chose Somalia. Youth in Ms. Clay's room were told, within the division of labor, to do research on their own.

The outcome of the research required students to summarize findings through bulleted information, photographs, and concise writing. For two days, Ms. Clay demonstrated features of the brochure genre (rules) and shared models (tools). At first, Najm was excited, "I thought that assignment was going to be interesting because I finally have a chance to speak about my country and the struggle back home. Pride. I could research my pride" (Interview, 06/23/10). The enthusiasm faded, though, when Ms. Clay instructed, "I want a travel brochure that makes me want to vacation there. I want you to sell me your country" (Field notes, 05/26/10). Najm heard his teacher describe that she "didn't like dirt, preferred to be near a mall, and loved to stay in nice hotels." Ms. Clay, the teacher who would grade the brochures, established expectations (rules) that Najm viewed as authoritative and inconsiderate of the community, an English language-

learning majority. He refused to do the work, “If I tell her the truth of my country, she won’t go. What’s the point? She’d be killed there. It’s terrible. How am I supposed to convince her to travel? She’d be shot” (Interview, 06/23/10). He admitted he was stubborn and, in this sense, he felt a *double bind* between his Somali history and the brochure assignment. He was proud of his heritage and wanted African history to be discussed more in school, but he felt his teacher would not understand the conflicts that caused his relocation. In her defense, Ms. Clay discussed a *double bind*, as well (Interview, 01/20/11). She taught English language learners with limited and interrupted formal education yet reported her teaching preparation paid “zero” attention to the needs of diverse language learners.

Participants, except Najm whose class did not do the assignment, also expected to submit examples of their writing in a district-required writing portfolio. Writing submitted to portfolios needed to fit in five categories based on the language used on the state English assessment: (1) Reflective Writing, (2) Language for Meaning and Understanding, (3) Language for Literary Response, (4) Language for Critical Analysis and Evaluation, and (5) Writing for Social Purposes. The number of required pieces varied from room to room, as did the quality of writing. The rules established by the district for the portfolios were ambiguous, and participants’ English teachers interpreted the expectations differently. The division of labor required them to collect student writing for the portfolios, but a district leader did not communicate a purpose for their uses. Mr. Dallas told Ade’s 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class that teachers were the audience for portfolios.

I will offer comments and tell you where to pick them up. You won’t pick them up. I will keep the ones I want so I can teach them. Truth is, I am the

only one who will read this work. Most of it will be canned. It won't go with you unless you pick it up. If you don't pick it up, it will be recycled.

(Field notes, 06/04/10).

Further, Ms. Clinton discussed, "No one has the same portfolios. We're on different pages. No one looks at them, so we individually interpret the work that goes into them on our own" (Interview, 03/02/10).

The district-required portfolios were confusing for participants, too, especially as they were assigned to work on them in the last two weeks of school. According to Ali,

Ms. Clinton picked the best ones [pieces of writing] to put in the portfolio.

At the end, she grades them [the portfolio], I think. We worked on them only for three days to make it better. I don't know what she does with it.

(Interview, 06/30/10)

Teachers saved students' writing in piles around the room in anticipation of the portfolio. In the division of labor, they kept track of what students wrote and, as the semester came to an end, returned written work. Receiving piles of their writing – often on-demand essays assigned to practice for the state English assessment – overwhelmed some members within English class communities. When Ms. Hamilton returned writing to students in an 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class, London asked her, "How am I supposed to remember what these are? I wrote them last semester" (Field notes, 06/04/10). Samuel, enrolled in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade class, tried to make sense of the materials that were handed back to him. He explained to another kid in the class, "You have to do a Task I and a Task II and a Task III and a Task IV essay. Basically what you write on state tests. You type them and turn them in" (Interview, 06/30/10).

With a purpose to pass mainstream English classes, the young men typed their writing during the last days of school to meet the portfolio criteria. Although they reported writing infrequently throughout the school year, they were required to submit a lot of writing in the last two weeks of school. Many of my observations at the end of the year occurred in computer labs. The portfolio process was easier for those who had written consistently throughout the year and who saved their documents. “Basically, all I do is print the essays from my thumbdrive,” acknowledged Zizu. The same was true for Ade. Others scrambled to submit pieces to the portfolio because they did not have enough examples of writing. In the activity systems of English classrooms, the division of labor placed a good deal of responsibility on youth in the last ten days of school to write for the portfolio. If writing was seldom expected throughout the year, they had little to submit.

Throughout the school year, Panther seldom did the written work required of him. He needed to do well on his writing portfolio, however, to pass his 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class. In the last week of the semester, Panther wrote and typed many of the pieces he failed to do when they were assigned. With a last-minute purpose to pass his English class, Panther frequently called me at home to discuss the portfolio, requested writing conferences with me in school, and sent me drafts of his work on Facebook. Panther submitted eight pieces with his purpose of bringing up his grade. Unfortunately, this was not enough for him to pass.

Two of seven participants, including Panther, turned in a complete portfolio in accordance with district rules. The majority of participants had only a few examples of writing to submit. The quality varied, too. Writing, like Zizu’s memoir, Samuel’s, or Shafac’s screenplay, or Ade’s heirloom essay that demonstrated topic development,

audience awareness, and purpose was not the norm for what others submitted. Most often, participants typed a second draft of an opening prompt or one of the essay responses they practiced for the state English assessment. Many entries were five to six sentences long.

In sum, the young men did not view mainstream English classrooms as activity systems for writing as much as they saw them as spaces for reading literature. When teachers worked with them on developing writing through purposes that mattered to them, they were more invested in developing the skills of what they wrote. Opportunities for such work occurred rarely, however. The district-required portfolio had the potential for encouraging more writing instruction throughout the year yet raising scores on the state English assessment placed reading and understanding literature as the primary focus (outcome) of most mainstream English class activity systems. Passing the tests was a primary concern. Because of high stakes accountability, administrators, teachers, and even students located the state assessments as the priority for instruction. Ms. Hamilton, for example, discussed that London “drove her nuts” (Interview, 06/15/10) with his demands for her to teach to the test. When she provided more creative assignments, she reported, he critiqued her that she was not doing her job. He needed the test score that would allow him to move forward.

#### *Writing to Pass the State English Assessment*

The majority of writing activity observed in classrooms at Robinson High School and reported by the eight participants was to help them pass state assessments. Participants reported that preparing for the exams occurred all year long and in every grade. Robinson High School required students to take the state English examination

beginning in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year to increase their chances of passing, although students at most other schools in the area, did not take it until their junior year. According to Ms. Clinton, “We give the state tests to everyone and their grandmother” (Interview, 03/02/10). According to teachers and administrators, students were required to take the test early as an attempt to improve passing rates. The state English assessment was offered twice during this study, January and June, and attention was placed on preparing students in every grade level all throughout the year.

Test-related instruction tended to focus on four writing tasks that were required by the state at the time of the study: (1) Task I – listening to an essay for information and writing to demonstrate one’s understanding, (2) Task II – reading for information and writing to demonstrate understanding, (3) Task III – reading two pieces of literary prose and writing a comparison through a controlled idea (thesis) with the use of literary terms, and (4) Task IV – analyzing a quotation and applying its meaning, as a critical lens, to two pieces of literature. The Task III and the Task IV essays, with the primary focus on literature, received the most attention in mainstream English classrooms. As a consequence, participants associated writing in English with the on-demand essay tasks and the act of analyzing literature.

Ms. Hamilton reported that English teachers wanted to implement other kinds of writing instruction more often with students at Robinson High School, but “the reality of the whole situation is, at the end, will the superintendent ask me what writing I’ve done outside the box or outside the state test? No. The tests speak” (Interview, 06/15/10). Zizu echoed Ms. Hamilton’s acknowledgement of test-dominated instruction, “We haven’t done that much writing besides the test. We use literary terms. I write it. They look it



over. They correct it. We basically do state test tasks and book responses” (Interview, 06/23/10). With two of the four essays requiring a student’s ability to analyze literature, more time was spent reading and understanding literature than developing tools for becoming better writers.

All participants, except Samuel, reported frustrations with the four tasks of the state English assessment. An avid reader outside of school who had seven years of U.S. schooling – making him what Freeman and Freeman (2009) call a long-term English language learner – Samuel described the state English test as “no big deal” (Interview, 06/22/10). He passed it as a sophomore and earned the highest score in his English class on his first attempt. In contrast, Shafac, who was enrolled in the same mainstream English class with Samuel, took the exam twice during data collection and failed it both times. He explained,

I little bit hate it. That quotation one. You know, what is this word.

Critical something. I could do it, but I don’t know how. I’m trying to know the big words, make it a big deal, but it couldn’t work for me.

(Interview, 06/15/10)

Although Shafac was prepared to discuss two pieces of literature, his lack of English vocabulary impeded his success. Shafac read the literature assigned to him in class but often lacked the vocabulary to comprehend it. He complained that on the state tests, “A dictionary is not allowed.” He often looked up words on his cell phone, a tool he used while he read, but during examinations the use of cellphones was prohibited, a rule that prohibited him from using a tool that supported his literacy.

Shafac's inability to understand one word in a critical lens quotation – like “demon” from the example discussed earlier – hampered his chance of a successful interpretation and, consequently, an essay response. The state assessment positioned Shafac, an advanced ESL student with a limited and disrupted formal education, in a precarious situation within the activity system of his mainstream English classroom. He worked hard, sought extra help, and made gains daily, but his scores on state English assessments were unsuccessful. He received one-on-one tutoring at his community center, but in the testing situation of school, receiving help was against the rules. The *double binds* caused him immense stress. He wanted to achieve for his family, but he continued to look like a failure on the state English assessment. When he acquired enough English to qualify for enrollment in mainstream English classes, he was instantly immersed in the assessments used to measure all youth. His mainstream English class teacher had little time to work with him, personally, on developing his skills through one-on-one instruction like he received at the center. Ms. Hamilton had thirty-two students on her roster, a majority of standard-English learners (Freeman & Freeman, 2009) who had behavioral issues and spotty attendance. Much time was spent by her during English class catching students up on the material they missed when they were absent or attending to disruptions caused by a few of the students. The English language learners who were in attendance were overshadowed by the truancy and behaviors of classmates.

Even so, teachers and participants were pressured to raise scores on the state English assessment for all students even if they felt that some of the writing tasks were unfair. According to Ms. Clinton, “There have been tasks, questions, ideas and quotes that

our kids don't have schema for. Sometimes the tasks are lofty" (Interview, 06/15/10). Ms. Hamilton also speculated:

These kids are asked to write about things that are unrealistic. They'll never do it in their life again. It's very, culturally, White. I mean, this year they wrote about organic foods. A lot of our kids aren't even exposed to organic foods. One year they had to write about tanning. Our kids are like, "You've got to be kidding."

She discussed that prompts about organic foods and tanning had a high probability for being socially, culturally, and historically irrelevant to the lives of Black youth at Robinson High School. Zizu, who already passed the state English assessment, but who took it again to raise his score, expressed similar concerns. After leaving from the examination, he reported,

I don't know. I'm from Africa. Exercise, health, nature, and participating in outdoor study programs in New York City parks have not been a part of my life. In Africa I lived outdoors, but in the United States an outdoor life is used on a state examination. (Field notes, 04/24/10)

Zizu recognized that the written outcomes associated with the state English assessment were part of the larger activity system of Western society, and where writing was measured by the state through four tasks governed by a particular set of rules. The assessments were used to measure students' abilities to be readers and writers. His personal purposes for reading and writing were not addressed by the state's accountability system, though. Any deficits revealed by his performance were attributed to him and not to the assessment, the larger accountability system, or any other activity systems beyond

the classroom or school. This included the deficits caused by his lack of access to literacy traditions of the Western world.

To prepare youth to achieve on state assessments, teachers provided tools that a few of my participants found useful. Participants named a “cluster paragraphing” tool taught by several teachers across the department as helpful when writing on-demand for the four essay tasks. London reported that cluster paragraphing helped him to plan his response with specific details. For instance, when working on a Task II essay he compared an article on text messaging to a graph. He read the article, made sense of the graph, and outlined:

*Topic Sentence:* Texting for teenagers has become both harmful and beneficial.

*Detail 1:* There are many ways texting is harmful. For example, texting leads teenagers to anxiety, destruction in school, failing grades, repetitive stress injury and sleep deprivation.

*Analysis/Explanation 2-5 sentences.* Texting is harmful to teenagers because they lose sleep. They are too worried about staying in touch with their friends. Instead of going to bed, they continue to text. Furthermore, teenagers text late at night when their parents are asleep. (Field notes, 05/13/10)

According to London, the tool taught him “to outline, to make a decision of the argument, to have at least two details to support this argument, and to analyze these details in two to five sentences” (Interview, 06/29/10). London’s score increased thirty points in five months from the use of cluster paragraph instruction. Similarly, Zizu reported, “When writing about something you read, you write about the details that led to the event. You

keep writing cluster paragraphs until you get a big essay. You use the clusters to analyze, not summarize” (Interview, 02/03/09). Although formulaic, the strategy helped him and others to meet requirements set by the rules of the state English assessments.

Shafac and Najm also reported learning helpful strategies for writing on demand in Mr. Cooper’s advanced ESL history class, another activity system named for benefiting their writing. In one exercise, students were assigned to “Describe how the United States has influenced world culture since World War II” (Field notes, 05/10/10). Mr. Cooper had students read an editorial about terrorism and the effects 9/11 had on Muslim populations. Mr. Cooper told the ESL students that an editorial like the one modeled might be part of the state Global History examination. He defined some of the words in the margin of the editorial to help guide their understanding. After they read the editorial on their own, they were divided into small groups and asked to talk about its content. Mr. Cooper wanted students to make personal connections. Najm told his group, “My last name is definitely Muslim,” and he shared a story about trying to go to Canada for a soccer tournament. Authorities stopped him because of his name. Mr. Cooper circulated the room and listened. When students finished talking, he centered everyone’s attention back to him and listed what he heard students saying about the editorial and from their personal experiences. He used their thinking to model a strategy for responding a writing prompt. The division of labor in the Advanced ESL History class supported the steps recommended by Hyland (2007) of setting a context, modeling, co-constructing, allowing for independent constructing, and comparing a response with what others have written.

Mr. Cooper then played “Political Science,” a 1969 protest song sung by Randy Newman. He provided a copy of the lyrics to students so they could read along. He also gave them a sheet of questions like, “What does Randy Newman mean by the big one?” and “Do you think Americans feel that military might is important? Explain.” Similar to the editorial exercise, students first made sense of the text independently. They then worked in small groups to discuss their understanding. Finally, they had a whole class discussion. Mr. Cooper explained that on the state Global History examination, they might have to compare an editorial with song lyrics. He explained that the state tests asked students to summarize and to compare two documents. He led the class through a process to co-create a written outcome about the two documents they had just read—again, dividing the labor of composition in a way that was not typical of writing instruction in English classes at Robinson. His modeling, in particular, was a useful tool to support the writing of English language learners.

Robinson High School, like other urban schools who are pressured to demonstrate an ability to meet annual yearly progress (Darling-Hammond, 2006; McCarthey, 2008), often taught to the test. According to McCarthey (2008), “Teachers in low-income schools are marginalized as power relationships become increasingly hierarchical and fixed with teachers at low-income schools becoming increasingly disenfranchised” (p. 488). Participants and their teachers acknowledged that their school district purchased packaged programs to increase scores. Teachers and students hated the packaged program, but in the division of labor of the district activity system, there was not much they could do about it. One teaching assistant admitted to a group of 9<sup>th</sup> graders, “I can’t keep up with all these programs your teachers are giving you. They keep changing and

they make no sense” (Field notes, 02/02/10). Similar to the low teacher morale discussed by Roxas (2010a, 2010b) in his study of Bantu youth, teachers in this study were frustrated by the numerous obstacles they faced.

With this said, writing on demand (Gere, Christenbury, & Sassi, 2005) is a reality of 21<sup>st</sup> century English classrooms to demonstrate proficient reading and writing skills. For young men like my eight participants, “cluster paragraphing,” a tool, and co-writing class responses (division of labor) within a community were helpful to learning how to write for the four essay tasks. The boys wanted to achieve on state assessments and desired lessons that helped them. The use of culturally relevant literature assisted the young men to make personal connections to what they read and, consequently, to have material to analyze on the state assessment. Less effective for developing how to write were the literature packets commonly used, although they did help them to understand literary elements used. The four essay tasks of the state English assessment established the writing (outcome) valued in mainstream English activity systems, by regulating the rules of how high school literacy was measured.

English teachers emphasized literature to prepare youth for achievement on these essay tasks. Succeeding on state assessments aligned with participants’ purposes of meeting school requirements but was often disconnected to the additional purposes they saw for their writing. The portfolio was an outlet for the additional writing they did, but it was an afterthought to the high stakes of state tests. The young men, their teachers, and the district were under pressure to demonstrate progress within the on-demand essay genres and this writing was the primary focus of instruction in mainstream English class activity systems. Through divisions of labor in school activity systems, teachers were

often forced to look at students through the lens of state assessments, alone. They were not afforded the same opportunities I had to listen to youth perspectives about their writing practices.

Crevices in the Curriculum;  
Participants' Wishes for Writing Instruction

In the final section of this chapter I discuss what I call *crevices in the curriculum*, moments in participants' activity systems where they may have benefited from additional support (tools) to write what mattered to them, but where the rules of particular assignments, or of Robinson English classrooms as activity systems more generally speaking, restricted the possibilities. According to Campano (2007) "how we [teachers] respond to diversity is both informed by and informs what we value as knowledge in the classroom" (p. 9). For him, using immigrant experiences as resources to learning helped fifth graders negotiate the second classroom between home and school. In this sense, his work with fifth grade immigrant writers helped youth to unravel their *double binds*. Similarly, I witnessed *crevices in the curriculum* where opportunities existed for writing to unbind conflicted spaces reported by participants, but where it did not occur.

This final section is organized in three parts. In the first, Writing to Explore One's Identity Texts and Personal Communities, I discuss how explicit connections to participants' personal interests and histories could have benefited the writing expected of them in English class activity systems. In the second part, Writing Through Inquiry; Having Choice When Writing Academically and Professionally, I address participants' suggestions for learning more about professional and academic genres of writing, especially through allowing them choices to explore personal interests. In the third part,



Writing to Explore Language and the Power of Words, I present activities that supported participants' understandings of language and discuss their desire for more opportunities to communicate with audiences beyond teachers.

*Writing to Explore One's Identity Texts and Personal Communities*

As addressed in other chapters, participants and their friends commonly referred to themselves as “the Africans” – a group of Black male youth born in Africa who met through ESL programs, classes, and athletic teams. Zizu explained, “We are Africans. We are refugees. We are Black. We are American. We are students. We are all the above. That’s who we are. That’s who we want to be” (Interview, 06/28/10). Each constructed his identity from his various communities. Their styles of language-use and personal appearance – what some have called *identity texts* (e.g., Ibrahim, 2008; Kirkland, 2009; Paris, 2010) – were the result of being subjects within multiple activity systems. Each system influenced who they were as readers, writers, and thinkers.

During lunch, in ESL classrooms, and outside of school, participants were vocal about their history and personal experiences. As noted in Chapter Four, they used their heritage to tease one another and to boast about national pride. Similarly, the boys reported a primary purpose for their writing in the United States was to share personal histories and experiences. In mainstream English classrooms, though, participants were more reluctant to share African history or interests with teachers and classmates unless they were assigned written outcomes in genres like memoirs or narratives. When opportunities arose in English class activity systems, though, such as when Zizu was reading *The Color Purple* or Najm was reading *Lord of the Flies*, they typically refrained from making contributions. They felt classmates and teachers in the English class

community did not care about their experiences. As Najm discussed, “Our struggles are real, but they’re unimportant in American schools” (Interview, 01/11/10).

Similar to the studies by Fu (1995), Skilton-Sylvester (2002), and Sarroub (2002, 2007) of English language learners in mainstream classrooms, the boys in my research often felt isolated from other learners in their classes. They felt, as Ali and Najm discussed, like others were similar to them, but there were few occasions to get to know them. The young men in my study felt tensions with African American-born classmates in ways similar to those reported by Traore and Lukens (2004, 2006). According to them, Black youth were seldom encouraged to question “White hegemony” in school or the creation of stereotypes that depicted “the African as living the jungle” and “the African American as existing on welfare, committing crimes, and abusing drugs” (p. 355). Instead, Black African-born male youth often fell victim to misconceptions of African American-born youth, and vice versa. Sharing a common history and struggle was not used pedagogically to unite Black youth populations at the school.

In a project assigned in Najm’s 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class, students printed lyrics of four songs and prepared a report about why these songs mattered to their lives. The project offered a possibility for youth to understand their social locations, and, as a writing assignment, it pushed against the test-driven rules of the activity system. Ms. Clay wanted the youth to have an opportunity to express who they were as subjects in her English classroom activity system. She assigned this personal writing while they read John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*. The song project promoted students’ use of a text-to-self connection, a tool to make sense of the text and their lives. Ms. Clay shared that because Steinbeck used music symbolically throughout the novel, she wanted her students to

reflect on music as a testimony to personal identities and as symbols of their lives, while connecting to the songs Kino, the main character, heard in the novel.

Najm, who resisted other instruction in Ms. Clay's classroom, completed the song-list project enthusiastically. He was required to choose four songs, but he prepared more. In his project, Najm included "Hey, Daddy" by Usher (to discuss that he lives in the United States without his father), "Mama Africa" by Chico Cesar (to share his pride of being African), "Redemption" by Bob Marley (to explain why he "emancipates himself from mental slavery"), "Zimbabwe" by Bob Marley (because he "fights for human rights"), "Baby Be Mine" by Michael Jackson ("because Michael Jackson's the king"), and two songs by Mohamed Mounir, "Shamandura" and "Ahmar" (music sung in Arabic, the language he first learned to read and speak) (Field notes, 04/01/10).

In addition to the writing, students in this 10<sup>th</sup> grade class were assigned to do an oral presentation about their choices to classmates. This activity did not go as well. When Ms. Clay asked for volunteers to present, only three of the five American-born students in the class raised their hands to present. Najm and twenty-six other English language learners ducked their heads. Throughout the school day many of them, including Najm, shared what they had written with me, but in class they pretended to be unprepared. After the three American-born kids presented and no one else volunteered to go, Ms. Clay made the class sit in silence for the remainder of the period. She shared her disappointment. Fortunately, she provided a second chance the next day. This time Najm raised his hand and volunteered.

Outside of the mainstream English class, Najm was an articulate, confident speaker who regularly debated global politics, world religions, and sports. During this

presentation in his mainstream English classroom, however, he barely whispered. He later reflected, “I don’t have any confidence to speak in that class and I don’t know why. I speak in other classes. But in English class, I don’t know what happens. I don’t speak. Maybe if we talk about what’s happening globally. I don’t know” (Interview, 06/23/10). Najm read the lyrics to “Redemption” by Bob Marley under his breath and sat back down. A mixed-race American-born male youth raised his hand and commented, “I didn’t know that students from Africa listened to Bob Marley” (Field notes, 04/29/10). This initiated dialogue between the few American-born youth in the room with the English language learners – the only time I observed a class discussion in fifteen visits to Najm’s English class. The talk was silenced, though, so presentations could continue.

The song assignment connected the personal lives of students to a piece of literature they needed to read in English. It was a tool they used to develop a piece of writing (an outcome) that expressed how the music they listened to represented who they were. This resonated with Najm, and he did the work. Yet the class did not analyze the lyrics of their choices together or discuss how their music, as representations of their identities, paralleled the music Kino, a non-White character featured in Steinbeck’s novel, heard. The assignment succeeded because youth wanted to express the music that represented them, but the written outcome did not fully allow the use of personal connections as a learning tool. Students did not have a chance to talk with one another about their choices and, consequently, their community was not built. The social process of the writing did not occur. For this reason, it was a *crevice in the curriculum*.

Like Najm, Ali and Panther wanted to celebrate African culture in school and suggested that teachers allow students more opportunities to share their personal communities with each other. Ali explained, “Teachers don’t teach you the history.”

I lived in Africa and I don’t even really know my country’s history. I know there was war, but I wasn’t even born. When I saw a map of Africa I didn’t even know where Kenya and Somalia was. (Interview, 06/30/10)

Similar to participants in studies by Trueba and McLaren (2000), Ibrahim (2003, 2008), and Traore (2004), Ali wondered why African histories were not more central to curriculum in secondary schools, especially for African-born youth like him who could help educate others about global realities. Similarly, Panther critiqued, “Teachers need to understand more about where we come from.”

It’s important to know people from different backgrounds. They need to have people teach them about the ways we lived and how we lived. And encourage them to know more about their world. (Interview, 06/29/10)

Panther commonly discussed race as an identity marker with his friend, J’Quon, an American-born Black male but the two rarely challenged the negative constructions they used to describe African American-born youth. Panther described J’Quon as unlike other African American youth because “he came to school to achieve” (06/29/10). Panther saw his lack of achievement as “Black” and J’Quon’s success as unlike other “Black” youth in school. They talked about race but did not develop their analysis to their shared history or why deficits were positioned on Black identities.

The young men and their classmates did not explore the inequities caused by colonialism and imperialism or the negative impact history has had on constructions of

Western Blackness (Awokoya & Clark, 2008; Kirkland, 2008; Vasudevan, 2009).

Instead, they viewed American Blackness negatively without challenging how historical activity systems have denied subjects, because of race, access to the empowering tools of literacy. White institutions established laws (rules) for denying Black people access to activity systems of power for much of Western and U.S. history (Price, 2000). The youth in the study participated in African American culture through literature assigned in classes (e.g., plays by August Wilson), listened to African American male musicians (e.g., Lil' Wayne, Jay-Z), watched African American television (e.g., *The Boondocks*, BET), attended classes with African American students, and lived in public housing in predominantly African American neighborhoods. Yet, they commonly discussed Blackness of African American peers in deficit ways. For instance, Zizu reported, "Some Liberian kids try to act like Black Americans. Turning their pants down. Selling drugs. Stabbing each other. Running in gangs" (Interview, 02/03/09). American-born Blackness for him meant partaking in criminal behaviors, underachieving in schools, and behaving inappropriately – depictions born out of colonialism (Gates, 1986). Rather than seeing Blackness as a source for achievement, triumph, and cultural contributions (locally and globally), he associated Black American-born culture in negative and deficit ways. The failure to address these deficits in school was another *crevice in the curriculum* where students could have written about their feelings on race, history, and the positioning of Black youth. Colonial and racial stereotyping could have been addressed.

As data throughout this chapter highlights, Black African-born male youth wanted to write from personal experiences and to share with American audiences their African histories. Like Smagorinsky's (1997) case-study participant, the young men were eager to

write when subjects mattered to them. They felt a *double bind* when sharing their history with classmates, though. On one hand they wanted others to know about their experiences, but on the other hand, they were wary about how they would be perceived by classmates. Similar to the young men in Kinloch's (2010) research, they valued the opportunities to share out-of-school knowledge within school but did not feel their personal lives were appropriate texts for conversations in their classes. In other words, they did not see the value of their lived experiences in the context of learning history, gaining language skills, and developing critical thinking. The inhibition to contribute personal knowledge was another *crevice in the curriculum*.

With high achievement in school and strong memories of Liberia, Zizu wished he had a chance to write "in ways to make the world a better place" (Interview, 06/28/10). "I want to write more for the people I see in America. I want to help them," he discussed.

Like, just walking around the neighborhood and see what's up and write about it. Fights. Cops arresting people. People trying to steal from stores.

Getting jumped. People in the community don't see any other way.

Zizu wanted to write in ways that would allow him to take action. "I am L.I.B. for life," he explained, "and writing about Liberia is very important. It can help people know that working hard will make their life better."

Najm, too, felt youth were empowered by writing about their communities. He reported, "Teachers should talk about African history and the Asian history, about the kids in their room, so they can learn something about themselves. I would say, please, I think history should be first" (Interview, 06/23/10). He continued, "Writing, to me, is how I think. When I write I'm not just speaking for myself. I am writing for my

background. I am speaking for others.” Najm was interested in how he, as a relocated Black African-born male youth, shared similar histories with African American classmates. Yet, he wondered why there were not more lessons on the “brotherhood between them” and no opportunities to write about their similarities and differences existed. He explained, “I mean, we all come from different backgrounds and there is struggle. You got to ask them what their struggle is, what is happening [in their lives]. That would give us confidence in the room” (Interview, 06/23/10).

Participants wanted more opportunities to learn the history of Blackness, including their roots in Africa and the diaspora of Black individuals around the world. They wanted chances to learn from American-born Black youth and to have spaces in their classrooms where they could talk openly about who they were as individuals. They wished their lives out of school mattered more within the activity systems of mainstream English classrooms. The young men desired more social opportunities to learn about their classmates as they read the literature assigned to them. In the language of activity theory, the young men reported that more community building needed to occur within the activity system, connected to and alongside reading and writing.

*Writing Through Inquiry; Having Choice*

*When Writing Academically and Professionally*

Additionally, participants reported they wanted more opportunities to have choices about what they wrote in school. They wanted to explore more topics that interested them. They valued writing because they saw how it could provide access to additional activity systems such as future employment and higher education. As Samuel articulated, “Let us pick something we like to do and see if it’s, um, related to anything



we like, instead of a teacher picking out something for us to do. Like trying to pick something we like to do” (Interview, 06/30/10). Samuel wished his teachers provided more flexibility with assignments. When I asked him what he would write about if given a chance, he claimed “Soccer. Soccer, and well, Soccer.” Another *crevice in the curriculum* was the failure to tap into youths’ passions and interests.

Black African-born male youth who participated in this research debated players, teams, and statistics on a regular basis. In many ways, they demonstrated the analytical skills expected of them to deconstruct literature in their mainstream English class activity systems. Their passion for the game and the literacy they demonstrated around it paralleled findings reported by Mahiri (1998) about African American youth and basketball. With the World Cup held in South Africa during the time of data collection – the first time it was hosted by an African nation – the young men were especially enthusiastic about the sport. “The World Cup is an African holiday,” Shafac explained on a day I found him watching a game during class. “We’re not supposed to be in school” (Field notes, 06/10/10). In Africa, they listened to radios for BBC updates of their favorite football teams and became members of a soccer-loving community. Several of the boys, including Shafac, reported sneaking into places where they could watch a game on the few televisions that existed near the camps. “They would let me stay if I cleaned up afterwards,” Shafac explained (Interview, 06/29/11).

The young men brought sports magazines and newspapers to school, analyzed them and their statistics, and used specific details to debate about best players and teams. Najm wrote on Facebook, “If you are an African rooting for a non-African team during the world cup. Guess what...We cant be friends until the World Cup is over” (Field notes,

06/02/10). Off the field, the young men did research, calculated numbers, and prepared themselves to debate others about the game. On the field, they participated in drills to build skills so they could earn bragging rights among friends. At the many practices, scrimmages, and games I attended, I began to see soccer as a metaphor for teaching writing. In the sport they loved, the young men were taught to stretch, warm up, and get prepared. Then their coaches offered drills to tune particular skills. As athletes, they worked on drills until they saw improvement in their playing ability. When it was time for performance, they applied the skills they learned in the actual game. Afterwards, coaches pulled them together to reflect on what worked and did not work for them. The instruction used by Mr. Dallas when working with Ali on his heirloom essay, Ms. Clinton when she taught memoirs to Zizu, and Mr. Cooper when he prepared ESL youth for on-demand essays, followed a similar *stretch, skill, drill, play* and *reflect* method. This resulted in more developed writing from my participants because there was more coaching through writing processes that used genre features—the rules of the game, so to speak – for those particular forms of writing.

In addition to wanting more choice when writing, participants wished they had more instruction around genres that had clear connections to activity systems beyond school. With four years of schooling in the U.S. and one year in Uganda, London was most worried about “catching up” to his American-born peers and having the skills to compete in a future workforce (Interview, 06/29/10). He felt a responsibility to be successful, to get into college, begin a career, and make enough money to bring his mother and his sister in the U.S. with him.

I wish they'd teach the writing you need to do outside of school inside of school. Like to get experience. You don't have to read it to know it, but you experience it. To be job like. Sometimes it's good by doing it, you know. I like doing. (Interview, 06/04/10)

London wished his mainstream English classrooms offered more opportunities to write in genres that would benefit his educational and career goals. Ideally, the district-required portfolio might have fostered such writing, but it tended to be overshadowed by state assessment preparation. London wanted to learn how to do research and to write papers like he would one day have to do in college, but this did not occur.

Ade, too, was focused on an immediate future and the ability to write successfully upon graduation. He reported, "My friend told me her first year [in college] killed her. She says she wrote a lot" (Interview, 06/28/10). Ade wished, like Samuel, that more choices were given to him in school where he could apply his writing to subjects that interested him. For example, while reading about the Milgram test in his AP Psychology class – a study that measured the willingness of individuals to cause physical pain to others when prompted – Ade made a connection to how Somali Bantus were treated during the Somalian war.

People treat others bad. They all are the same. Even when people say stop, they say no. I want to write something that relates this experiment, to what was done in the past, to what happened to Bantus. I want to help my family understand. I want to teach them. (Interview, 06/28/10)

As Ade processed what the Milgram experiment taught him about being human, he saw how he could connect the research to his personal history. Like Zizu's desire to offer his

Liberian experience to others, Ade wanted to put his knowledge into action. He wanted to write for a Bantu audience to help explain the atrocities they once endured. He speculated that an opportunity to merge his new learning with his personal experiences might benefit his family in the United States, but it was not assigned.

Black African-born youth with limited and disrupted formal education who were enrolled in mainstream English classrooms benefited when the written outcomes assigned to them allowed them to use their lived experiences, as a tool, to make a choice about what to communicate. They were intellectually engaged with the world, but their interests and thinking were not always tapped by the writing expected of them in school. They wanted to write more often in school, especially within genres used in higher education of the Western world and for careers, so they could access additional activity systems. Opportunities to write in these ways were few. They saw *crevices in the curriculum* where their lives and the expectations of school intersected, but they often felt this did not matter to the learning expected in Western schools.

*Writing to Explore Language and the Power of Words*

After he attended a writing conference for adolescents with others from the Somali Bantu Community Center, Ali reported he wished teachers would “hold hands with their students to help them get through the assignments they make them do” He benefited from instruction on developing writing at each stage of the process, and stated,

Like when you’re starting an essay, or a story, I need a topic to pick.

Sometimes there are so many, I don’t know what to write. It’s hard for me to choose. I want to learn how to decide what to write. (Interview, 06/30/10).

Ali wished his mainstream classroom teachers offered him better strategies on how to plan – a wider range of tools – to support the written outcomes that were expected. He wanted more ways to harness his ideas, to organize his thoughts, and to focus his knowledge. In essence, he wanted his teachers to share more of the labor around writing with him until he could better control the process independently.

Like Ali, Shafac needed more help with how to plan, but he also wanted his teachers to help him use language more effectively. This required more emphasis on vocabulary as a tool. Having taken the state English examination unsuccessfully twice, Shafac was frustrated. He wished that teachers took more time to teach students the power that words have.

Teachers need to know how to teach students to write their essay and speak English well. Using the big words. Some teachers say those big words, but they don't explain them much. Give them, like, break it down.

The words. You know, until they understand. (Interview, 06/29/10)

Shafac was overwhelmed when the English used in mainstream classrooms was too advanced for him. He appreciated that his advanced ESL teachers often defined words in the margin of handouts to assist his comprehension.

All the participants spoke favorably about activities where they were encouraged to play with language and share what they had written with others. Their reports about writing paralleled the findings of Fecho (2006) and Fisher (2007) who also studied language use in urban classrooms. As Fisher wrote, “We are all Americans and what we speak is American English, as what we live are American lives. The work then becomes a process of defining our students relationship to language” (p. 102). Throughout the six

months of data collection, the eight young men acknowledged instruction where opportunities to perform language were allowed and where a relationship to language was established.

Zizu, for example, reported that when a playwright visited his drama class, it was “the best class of the year.” The playwright provided tools that helped Zizu see himself as a writer and to value the effectiveness of the language he chose when writing.

He told us to keep writing, everything that gets assigned to you. Don’t just write the way they want you to write. Write the way you feel like writing. Writing is something bigger. It’s not just school. (Interview, 06/28/10)

The activities in which Zizu participated during the playwright’s visit transcended the school-based writing he was accustomed to. As a self-described “hater of writing,” Zizu reported he learned from the visit “to see how words are experienced by others” (Interview, 06/28/10). Through activities of writing monologues and dialogues (outcomes), and from exercises to encourage improvisation and physical performance (tools), Zizu learned that his writing could be creative. He admitted when the playwright began, “I don’t even know what a monologue is” (Field notes, 03/26/10). They were given a scenario (tool) from which to write: *Your name is Nella Lovejoy. You are talking to a drunk driver. Nella is the drunk driver’s personal assistant. There must be a slap. Betrayal must have occurred. Something violent must happen. The color yellow must be used.* At first, Zizu wrote a narration, a genre he was more familiar with.

Nella La joy is a personal assistant who was walking to the bathroom at 2:12 a.m, after being betrayed by her boss. She was wearing her favorite

dress which was yellow when a drunk driver came and slapped her on the ass and started running. (Field notes, 03/26/10)

Yet, after students shared what they had written, Zizu had an epiphany about monologues, “It’s like you are telling a story to someone.” The playwright’s choice to allow youth to share what they had written demonstrated what monologues, as an outcome, were. Through listening to his classmates read their drafts, a division of labor within this activity system, Zizu was quick to note the genre’s features and recognized the flaw in his narration.

In a second part to the workshop, students wrote dialogue. This time they were prompted to name a color, a place, an object, a job, a human quality, and another human quality. They shouted: *green, Atlantis, chicken, stripper, kindness, and hater*. The playwright assigned them to write a dialogue between person A and person B using the words provided. Students used the words as tools for creating a conversation, an outcome, between two characters they imagined. Zizu was confused – he did not have a model – but after he looked at another student’s work, he announced, “It’s like two people talking to each other.” He quickly drafted,

B: You told me we could go to Atlantis for vacation.

A: I know I did, but the chicken got sick.

B. When the chicken gets better, can we go? I will wear my green dress.

A. I don’t like that green dress. Other people be looking at you.

Within a couple of minutes, and without having prior experiences with writing dialogue, Zizu established tension and a potential plot. Again, when the playwright used the

instructional tool of asking students to share their work aloud. Zizu gained additional knowledge of the genre. The activities were social. Oral communication was encouraged.

A final part of the playwright's workshop required students to perform physically and to use facial expressions through the tool of improvisation. Zizu was assigned to perform as a man walking a dog. The playwright gave directions and clapped his hands, "You're walking the dog" (clap). "The dog is hit by a car" (clap). "It starts to move" (clap). "The dog licks your face" (clap). With each directive and each clap, Zizu contorted his body and face to become the action the playwright shouted. The playwright then asked students to form their bodies into poses of a cheerleader, a professor, a baby, and so on. When the playwright blurted, "Individual at a nudist beach," all of the students covered their bodies in embarrassment. I sat in the audience with other adults laughing. Zizu and his twin brother, Masa, did not perform like the others. As Zizu recalled, "We stood there nodding our heads and smiled while looking at all the ladies. It made everyone laugh" (Interview, 06/28/10).

The improvisational games and exercises for composing monologues and dialogues offered Zizu playful ways to think about and build his writing skills. The drama class activity system encouraged youth to play with words and to experience the effect they had on others in the community. They were encouraged to practice ways of writing, but also performing. For bodily-kinesthetic learners (Gardner, 1992) like Zizu, who was often physically active, the movement and performance of language helped him to see how oral and physical communication can be transferred into written forms. It demonstrated how written forms incite communication. With the playwright's activities, words came alive to Zizu visually, aurally, socially and physically. Students could have



been pushed to go further textually, even to include the material they wrote in the district-required portfolio after revising and reflecting on it, but they were not asked to do so. The playwright's visit remained a discrete activity in the space of the drama class, an activity system that was already distinct from that of Zizu's English class. Consequently, he did not pursue the writing he began beyond the single day of the visit. To harness the power of the playwright's visit would have done more than offer a genre for the portfolio beyond those parallel to the state testing tasks. Like the soccer field, Zizu's drama class activity system became a space where youth were coached. Zizu explained, "I also learned that writing is fun" (Interview, 06/28/10).

Although Panther was not enrolled in the same drama class as Zizu, he also reported he preferred when teachers let students write for each other and when they were allowed to perform in front of their peers.

It's [writing] not only what's important to me. It's like what's important to the audience, you know? Like if you give me an article, I read it and try to think of ways to make it more better for those who have to read it.

(Interview, 06/29/11)

Panther's preference for a peer audience was demonstrated during a class activity when they were given scripts to perform. Panther became the class's residential director and, unlike other days in his 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class where he often followed the rules passively, during the script exercise he became a leader as part of the new division of labor. When students read with no expression, Panther gave advice like, "I'm not believing you. You've got to picture where you are. You've got to perform what the words are telling you" (Field notes, 02/02/10). He modeled for them what he meant, and

his classmates listened to his advice. Through physical performance, he helped others to make the language they were reading come alive. Playing with language (cf., Delpit, 2002; Souto-Manning, 2010) was a useful tool for developing writers, but it did not occur as much as they wished it did – more *crevices in the curriculum*.

On one occasion during data collection, a teacher brought a spoken word poet to her classroom and, although my eight participants were not enrolled in this particular class, word spread about his lesson and a poetry slam he advertised. Ali, Zizu, London, and Najm asked if I would take them. Najm reported,

Poetry is in our blood. I grew up watching poetry. Some poets used to speak for the lands and the original people. The poetry used to speak about the beautiful ocean, traditions, cultures, the dresses that the women wear. That's what they used to talk about. I didn't expect the slam to be good. I expected it to be bad, I mean. But it was real. (Interview, 06/23/10)

Like activities in Zizu's drama class and Panther's participation with Ms. Hartford's scripts in an English class, the poetry slam introduced an entertaining purpose for writing. "They don't teach poetry in school. Little poem that is like five lines," critiqued Najm. "Poems in school is just an assignment. I don't call it nothing. I call it waste of time." The failure to look at writing creativity was another *crevice in the curriculum*.

At the slam, Ali, Zizu, London, and Najm heard poets recite memorized pieces of spoken word prose with passion, physical movement, and energy. Ali reflected, "Wow. It was amazing. Something like I've never saw in my whole life."

There was all different kinds of poetry: sad ones, happy ones, humor ones, and they were contesting each other. We wanted to see what was going to

happen afterward, and we wanted to listen to more and hear more of their writing. We were so into it. (Interview, 06/30/10)

The oral performance resonated with the young men. They cheered for their favorites and hollered at the judges when they disagreed with a score. I did not anticipate they would want to stay for the entire slam, but they insisted. On the way home from the event, they tried to outdo one another with impromptu lyrical rhymes. Similar to drama exercises, they experienced how language transcends text through poetic performance. They wished they had more opportunities to do this.

Soon after, teachers held a poetry event at Robinson High School. Recognizing the enthusiasm of students, they extended the school day to host an open mic event where students could share their poetry. Around fifty students attended (Memo, 04/19/10).

Shafac, who was apprehensive and scared to read in front of others, stood at the microphone to share a poem he wrote in a workshop at the community center. A tutor worked with him on using rhyme and repetition to create rhythm and encouraged him to use words that were important to his world. Shafac drafted,

He who is courageous, said Muhammed Ali,  
accomplishes much in life.

I had to learn English: *hello, hi, good morning, how are you?*

and pray on my knees to God on soft rugs

at the home of worship,

bent bodies, and hope.

School is my mosque and mosque is my school,

trying to be cool, use it as a tool,

don't want to be a fool,  
Allah is my fuel  
for me and my family...  
six African kids with a single mother.

I have to be a courageous brother. (Field notes, 04/12/11)

A couple weeks later, Shafac admitted, "I was so scared up on that stage. I never do anything like that in my life" (Field notes, 04/28/11). The word "courageous" that he used in his poem, in fact, was one he needed to have defined weeks earlier when he came across it in a Task IV essay prompt (Field notes, 03/24/11). The event extended the routine of mainstream English class activity systems and allowed youth to showcase their poetry for an authentic audience. For Shafac, who wished for teachers to help him build his vocabulary, poetry helped him to experiment with language. Youth shared writing that mattered to them at the open mic and broke away from the analysis of poetry they were accustomed to doing for state assessments. Instead of writing *about* poetry, they celebrated their ability to *write* poetry. Reflecting on the event, Ms. Hamilton reported, "Our poetry thing was awesome. Kids keep coming up to me and asking when are you gonna do it again? Can you do it every marking period" (Interview, 06/15/10). As an outlet for performing written texts, the open mic night connected with the writing students desired to do and built a sense of community amongst the youth who attended.

Events like the playwright's visit, the poetry slam, and the open mic, inspired the young men, but were uncommon within mainstream English class activity systems.

According to Fecho (2000),

By allowing students to systemize and intentionalize their own informal inquiries into language, teachers help students to see language codes less as a prescribed set of rules that somehow constrict and inaccurately define their lives and more as a system of possibility over which they have some control. (p. 392)

The writing composed in most mainstream English classrooms was a solitary act that became an exchange between youth and teachers – a prescribed set of rules that constricted the young men. The events of the guest poet and playwright, however, invited some of my participants to share language with one another and encouraged community performance. The young men experienced how words come alive when spoken to audiences and saw language codes as tools. This resonated with the oral traditions they were used to within their families and home cultures. Listening to language and viewing performances helped them to understand particular genres are beyond those they were most used to in preparation for the state English assessment. The sharing helped them to see how words communicate to others and it also provided youth an opportunity to share with one another in a community. The lack of language performance opportunities was, perhaps, the largest *crevice in the curriculum*. Youth desired to write and to communicate but were inhibited by the limited writing expected of them and the parameters placed on them by the looming influence of the state assessments.

#### Summary

The eight participants demonstrated to me that they had active minds, many opinions, and much insight about what could have been assigned for them to write in their mainstream English class activity systems. Their reports articulated that they are,

indeed, writers; that they write often in activity systems beyond mainstream English classrooms; and that they would benefit from writing instruction that would allow them to develop more purposes that mattered to them. The privileging of literature on the state English assessment limited the writing instruction they received. The writing expected by the state did not necessarily allow youth to develop additional writing skills. The focus on particular tasks made it less likely that teachers would develop writing in other genres, including those in the district-required portfolio – writing meant to have a real-world focus and to support personal, creative, and academic skills.

As activity systems, mainstream English classrooms influenced the purposes (object/motive) for writing (outcome) that the eight Black African-born male youth (subjects) composed. For the most part, written outcomes in mainstream English classrooms were linked to the need to meet school requirements. Students did the work because they wanted to pass classes. Time in English classrooms was spent reading books and answering questions. Participants needed to compare two pieces of literary prose through a controlled idea and to interpret a quotation to be applied to two pieces of literature in order to pass their English classes. Participants sometimes wrote personal essays, narratives, memoirs, screenplays, poetry, myths, letters, editorials, persuasive essays and research reports, but there was much less emphasis on these genres. They reported, and teachers concurred, writing instruction was limited, perhaps even disrupted, by the state English assessment.

The young men felt comfortable in activity systems that recognized who they were as individuals. These activity systems showed a respect for personal histories, cultures, and experiences. Advanced ESL classes, the community center for Bantu youth,

the College preparatory program, and Facebook were activity systems where the young men felt their purposes for writing were best supported. These were activity systems that established a safe space to write, that offered mutual respect between youth and adults, and that bridged *double binds* (Engeström, 1988; Russell, 2009). The tools and purposes of the boys, as subjects within additional activity systems, were used to scaffold instruction and to support their writing needs. Here, each writer as a subject was valued.

Specific tools were named as helpful to their writing. These included, (1) teaching skills at each step of the writing process (e.g., how to brainstorm, how to plan, how to drafting, how to edit, how to revising, how to publish), (2) using models to demonstrate genre features and their uses, (3) utilizing culturally-relevant materials, (4) creating exercises that allowed oral and physical communication to interact with written communication, (5) letting students write independently, with peers, and with adults to co-create written outcomes, (6) co-creating rubrics, (7) allowing students to share work, and (8) establishing choice. The methods paralleled the practice of coaches on soccer fields and on basketball courts. In this sense, the young men would improve their writing when they had chances to warm up, they were mentored to try new things, they put their writing into practice, and finally, they reflect on the processes they used.

Throughout Chapter Five, the purposes for writing reported by participants were presented, as well as the tools they felt best supported them as writers. The rules of the state English assessment, however, inhibited them from receiving writing instruction that could benefit their additional purposes. The district-required portfolio had the potential to challenge some of the divisions of labor in English classrooms, but both teachers and

students reported tensions, *double binds*, between the writing instruction the students needed and the reality of how writing was assessed by the state.

In Chapter Six, I discuss implications of these findings for writing instruction in U.S. secondary schools. In addition, I reflect on my use of activity theory to understand perspectives youth have on writing. I address the limitations of my work and suggest areas for additional research.



## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We come to this country for many reasons. The first reason is to get an education. There is good education in Africa but my parents could not afford the money for all of us, my sisters and brother and me. That's when my parents decided to come to this country. The most important reason that my parents wanted to come to this country was to get peace. But it wasn't easy to get to here.

~Ade, age 20

## Revisiting the Intent

I begin Chapter Seven with an excerpt from Ade's heirloom essay, "Daah," composed after he read August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* in Mr. Dallas's mainstream English classroom for 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Ade's 758-word heirloom essay resulted from his teacher's attention to the writing processes of adolescents, class discussions of Wilson's play, and several conferences about his writing with others. "Daah" was written to highlight an heirloom important to Ade and his family, a colorful cloth made by his grandmother that "survived two generations" while it "traveled from Somalia to Kenya to America" (Field notes, 05/22/10). As a personal piece of writing, Ade's essay reflected history, conflicts in Somalia, the displacement of his family to Tanzania and Uganda, and his relocation to the United States. Ade was proud of the time he spent writing and revising "Daah" because it was one of the most important pieces of writing he completed in high school. His writing represents what a young man like him can compose when coached through models, drafts, conferences, revision, and meaningful purpose.

For this research, eight Black African-born male youth graciously shared their relocation stories and writing with me. They arrived in mainstream English classrooms with rich knowledge accumulated from lived experiences, personal history, and cultural pride. Their perspectives on learning to write are valuable resources for secondary educators with a potential to inform curriculum, instruction and research (e.g., Appleman, 2003; Cushman, 2003, Moje, 2002; Schultz, 2003). They are a small sample of young people arriving to secondary schools with limited and interrupted education – SIFEs – enrolled in mainstream classrooms. I advocate understanding youths’ purposes for writing benefit writing instruction in school. In this sense, I followed the recommendation of Moje (2002) when she called for literacy researchers and theorists to consider how youth

learn increasingly complex literacy practices required in disciplinary discourse communities, how they reinvent literacies for unique contexts, and how they use literacy as a tool to navigate complex technologies and fragmented social worlds, then we might learn more about literacy learning among children and adults. (p. 99)

The young men in this study were interviewed and observed so that I could become more knowledgeable while working with writers and teachers, refugee services, and scholars interested in the composing processes of adolescents, as well as so I could contribute to the larger body of scholarship on this topic.

The primary question I asked throughout my research was “What do the perspectives of Black African-born youth with limited or interrupted formal education suggest for writing instruction in secondary schools?” Drawing primarily on activity

theory, I asked “For what purposes do these young men write in the United States? What are the contexts for their writing? What tools do they use to compose?” The two findings chapters I presented demonstrate that these young men had much to say about writing, especially when the purposes for writing mattered to them and when they were respected as individuals and human beings with personal and cultural histories.

Chapter Six is divided into four sections. The first section, *Listening to Black African-born Male Youth with Limited or Disrupted Formal Education as Writers*, summarizes participants’ perspectives and makes suggestions for writing instruction in U.S. secondary schools. The second section, *Locating Subjects in the Center of Multiple Activity Systems For Writing*, offers implications for using writing activity genre research and postcolonial theory to highlight participants’ perspectives as both authoritative and informative. The third section, *Directions for Future Research; Locating Subjects in the Center of Multiple Activity Systems for Writing*, provides my reflection on this work, addresses this study’s limitations, and makes suggestions for further research. The fourth section, *Concluding Thoughts: Hearing Global Histories to Inform Local Literacies*, brings this scholarship to a conclusion (for now).

*Listening to Black African-born Male Youth  
with Limited or Disrupted Formal Education as Writers*

The Black African-born male youth participants who arrived in mainstream English classrooms with limited or disrupted formal education and who participated in this study reported multiple purposes for writing in the United States. As discussed in Chapter Five, when a purpose for writing mattered to their personal goals, they were more invested in learning how to write. Perhaps this is most evident in their reports of

spending two to three hours writing in online social networks and through text messages. In school, however, they reported writing much less. They recognized that their success with writing had the potential to benefit their families, both in the United States and Africa. Learning to write was important to them, and they heard the advice of Robinson alumni about writing. Even so, they discussed seldom writing in school.

In the most general sense, the findings parallel other studies that have reported writing is a neglected subject in U.S. secondary schools (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Fu, 2007; Hillocks, 2002; Yancey, 2008). Although adolescents are sometimes assigned to write in school, they are not always taught how to write. Youth need real-world writing opportunities and instruction in secondary schools, but it is not as common as we might think. I anticipated I would find the most writing instruction in mainstream English classrooms, yet I found that literature and literary analysis frequently received greater emphasis in those classes. In English, the writing assigned was typically to practice for two of the four essay tasks given on the state English assessment that emphasized literary pieces. Daily, the young men answered questions about literature, completed literary packets that guided what they read, and responded to prompts connected to what they were reading. The district required a writing portfolio, and Robinson teachers reported a desire to provide students with more opportunities to communicate to a variety of audiences. Even so, the reality of high-stakes assessment resulted with most teachers instructing youth towards literary interpretation and writing for on-demand purposes. Further, teachers reported that the school district adopted new programs each year to close achievement gaps in literacy. Their reports about shifting curriculum paralleled what other scholars have written about literacy programming in urban schools (Alonso,

Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2006; McCarthy, 2008). District leaders' apparent intention to use portfolios to provide youth more authentic writing opportunities was secondary to the pressures of teaching literature and on-demand in response to the four essay prompts on the state test.

With this noted, the eight participants wanted more writing instruction, saw the power of writing, and acknowledged that although writing instruction was limited in school, some instructional practices benefited them more than others. To be fair, the classroom teachers I interviewed felt the same. Teachers and students, alike, were under institutional pressures to address writing as it was assessed by the state. Almost half of the youth at Robinson High School had not reached the proficiency mark on the state English assessment in previous years. This could be interpreted that young people at Robinson High School could not write, lacked skills in writing, and were deficiently prepared with written communication, yet my study shows this is not the case. Youth did write successfully when they had a purpose and audience for communication that mattered to the worlds they inhabit. They were less successful with state tests.

Participants reported they became better writers when they were allowed to compose for audiences they wished to communicate with. They did this most often on their own time composing online and through text messages with social purposes. Such writing is demonstrative that youth do write, have reasons to write, and use writing to get things done – an echo of recent reports made by the Pew Research Center (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). The issue these findings seem to present is that youth are writing more than ever

before, but they are not writing to demonstrate their proficiency on national and state assessments that are used to measure writing.

Several assertions can be made through a synthesis of what the young men reported. First, having an authentic audience for written communication is important. Second, instruction that provided models of particular genres; explicated genres as a class; discussed genre features; required youth to apply genre features to their own writing; and encouraged youth to reflect on learning to write in these genres, benefited my participants most. In other words, when mentored through all phases of writing processes (brainstorming, planning, writing, editing, revising, and even publishing), my participants felt more confident with what they composed. Third, the young men discussed they benefited most when their cultural identities as Black African-born male youth with limited and disrupted formal education were respected. They were proud of their ancestry, had tremendous respect for elders, and wished they had more opportunities to learn their cultural histories. In the following section, I elaborate on these ideas further with suggestions for secondary school instruction.

#### *The Importance of Audience*

As already noted, all eight young men wrote to socialize with friends on Facebook and via text messaging. These digital activity systems were spaces that benefited youth communities with purposes to debate, to inquire, to learn, to socialize, and to educate. Participants' perspectives on communicating through 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies concur with Lam (2009), who wrote that online communities allow English language learners to “develop the literate repertoire” that enables them “to thrive in multiple linguistic and semiotic communities and mobilize resources with these communities” (p. 378). Through

Facebook, blogs, email, and text messaging, the young men had opportunities to participate in activity systems that were not graded by teachers and did not require correct uses of language. Instead, these technological spaces belonged to youth and allowed them to use a variety of languages for purposes with meaning to them. More importantly, such writing incited action in others. It had an authentic audience who responded quickly and, consequently, the young men wrote often.

Despite reports of a digital divide for marginalized populations in the U.S. (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlen, 2005; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Zhao, Lei, & Conway, 2006), my eight participants did have access to online communities and texting tools. When they did not have personal access, they accessed technology in libraries, in homes of friends and relatives, or at school if adults were not monitoring them. The online networks and text messaging activity systems were communities where writing, as a social act between writers, was understood. The written outcomes were purposeful because they connected, authentically, with real audiences that mattered to the young men. Najm's quotes, for example, inspired friends, entertained them, and initiated textual dialogue. Similarly, Shafac's, Samuel's, and Zizu's text messages sought help from others, arranged events, and even initiated courtship. This suggests that youth use writing because they understand its social values, especially when writing inspires others to respond, act, and reply to what they have written.

Classroom teachers may benefit from exploring the social purposes writing has with students. They may explicate how writing in their discipline and fields is used to get others to *respond*, *act*, and *reply* – the same social values already in use by youth. Classroom teachers might ask students: *How do scientists write lab reports to*

*demonstrate new findings to other scientists? How do artists create statements that explain creative processes to audiences who will view their work? How do every day people demonstrate civic rights through editorials or letters to the editor and what techniques do they use so they are heard? How do mathematicians use numbers to communicate important ideas to others? How is writing a social process?*

Participants' reports concurred with Dean (2008), too, who wrote that a "genre approach" to instruction "is invaluable. It can help teachers clarify for students that the kind of writing valued on tests represents a limited perspective of what counts as effective writing" (p. 6). High school graduates are unlikely to spend the rest of their lives writing five paragraph, on-demand essays. Instead, they will be expected to communicate in a variety of genres that may include cover letters, proposals, emails, and, perhaps, personal writing. They will have to understand the social purposes of the genres used to communicate and they need practice with them. For these reasons, more instruction for real-world writing is needed. Participants shared what they learned in school with the rest of their community and school instruction helped them to broker language with elders at home. The young men did not teach parents and elders, however, to do literary analysis; instead, they helped them with forms and applications. Writing instruction in school needs more practical application.

In addition, participants developed writing the most when they wrote about experiences and shared stories with American audiences. Such writing helped them to validate who they were as individuals and allowed them to teach others about cultural history. In the district-required writing portfolios, personal pieces that told the story of relocation and/or refugee experiences were stronger than the on-demand, re-typed essays



written for practice on state examinations. Participants also reported they felt more authority when they wrote about the lives they lived and their opinions of the world. All, including London who debated about whether or not it was his responsibility to share personal experiences, discussed the importance of writing about relocation, culture, and Africa to educate an American audience. Participants reported, too, they felt validated when given opportunities to tell their stories (cf. Campano, 2007; Perry, 2008). Campano (2007) wrote, "Storytelling is one way in which students can begin to understand and perhaps gain a degree of control over past experiences that may not have been fully intelligible at the time of their occurrence" (p. 52). Teachers should not underestimate the power of storytelling. In addition to having youth analyze texts and documents in our classrooms, educators should encourage young writers to analyze the worlds they inhabit.

Audience was extremely important for the eight participants. In the *Life Histories* project, for instance, Zizu created a poster to be displayed at community events and Ade created a website made accessible online. At an open mic event, Shafac reported how proud he was to read a poem to a live audience and, with classmates, encouraged teachers for more events to share writing. Panther wished his teachers let students communicate more with one another in a Socratic seminar fashion he enjoyed at his middle school. Zizu and London acknowledged the College Preparatory Program helped them to learn more about admissions committees and how college essays are received. Ali and Ade boasted their ESL magazine presented English language learners to others in their school community. Having an audience beyond a teacher benefited how the young men envisioned written communication. In each example, participants took interest in writing because they communicated to audiences beyond school and state examinations. They

valued the purposes and audiences, and, hence, they wrote more. A critique offered by participants regularly is that teachers were the only recipient of they wrote – a complaint the teachers made, too, when they discussed how they were the only ones to assess district-required writing portfolios. The district did not require teachers to analyze, share, or reflect on student writing together, and they may have benefited from professional development to look at student work (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 2007).

Participants' perspectives suggest that they grew as writers when teachers encouraged writing as a social process and initiated conversations about writing processes collectively as a community. This occurred for Zizu when Ms. Hartford taught him to write a memoir. Samuel and Shafac reported co-writing when reflecting on Mr. Tully and Ms. Hamilton's script unit as they read *Monster*. Mr. Dallas's instruction consistently encouraged social processes of writing where he required peer feedback and multiple drafts. This resulted in Ade's pride of "Daah" and how he valued opportunities to develop writing in a community through a series of writing workshops. Mr. Cooper and Ms. Early's collaborative writing in advanced ESL classes, too, made practicing for on-demand writing a social activity in which youth learned in collaboration of peers. An authentic audience for writing, including peers, helped participants to experience how writing was received. Writing as an activity in these examples were social events.

With this noted, it would be a failure on my part to ignore the reality of on-demand writing assessment (Gere, Christenbury, & Sassi, 2005; Hillocks, 2002) and the pressures teachers face to prepare youth for state tests (Applebee & Langer, 2006; Weigle, 2007). Participants' English teachers readily discussed the mandates that were placed on them to improve scores. Yet, as Simmons (2005) wrote in his exploration of

writing instruction in secondary schools, “It’s not the students or the teachers, but the conditions of high school teaching that seem to be at fault” (p. 75). The activity systems, themselves, are partially to blame. Assessments establish the rules and divisions of labor for reaching written outcomes and are often created within activity systems beyond a school’s control. Many secondary teachers have large classroom sizes, issues of truancy, diverse learning populations, and heavy workloads. Teachers are given tremendous responsibilities to create mini-miracles that our American society, at large, has yet to figure out, especially in terms of educational inequities (Alonso, 2009; Morrell, 2005). For these reasons, I argue that states need better writing assessments that are useful to youth and their teachers. The assessments, after all, shape much of the curriculum youth will experience. Teachers should work with school administrators, district leadership, and state departments of education to remind others of classrooms conditions and to help find solutions for better curriculum to meet the needs of their students.

All of the young men in this study (except for Samuel who passed easily on his first attempt) and the English teachers described extreme stress caused by the state English assessment. Performance on the four on-demand essays had immediate consequences for teachers and students. Some youth, like London, badgered teachers for test-only instruction. For him, the test became a direct link to the additional activity systems he wanted to be part of, including college. It is unknown, though, whether or not he would ever write in the genres of the four essays after high school. London expressed to his teacher that the only audience that mattered for his writing was the state education department. State assessments are, indeed, one audience for written text, and they do have a purpose for measuring a student’s proficiency with written language. Yet, on-

demand writing is only one form of written communication; it should not be the only genre assessed and, consequently, emphasized in school. For these reasons, I feel teachers should locate the on-demand writing genres most often used for state assessments within the larger contexts for written communication. Individuals are empowered when they have an ability to express themselves in a variety of written forms. To limit instruction to on-demand writing alone hinders youth, including English language learners, from apprehending the larger purposes, and power, writing has in Western society. Teachers should look beyond tests and prepare youth for the real-world writing they will most likely experience.

Because of my participants' reports, I am now wondering how educators can best assist youth in a time of high stakes accountability. In the near future, I want to study classrooms where teachers both prepare adolescent writers to communicate with many audiences in a variety of genres *and* teach youth to communicate for the reality of on-demand assessments. Rankie-Shelton and Fu (2004), for example, demonstrated that teaching to a state assessment had no effect on developing stronger scores for 4<sup>th</sup> grade writers. Instead, they found that instructing youth to write beyond the test built agency in both teachers and students. Their analysis revealed that young writers gained skills needed for the state examinations through having multiple opportunities to write for purposes that mattered more to them. These skills carried over to testing situations. Najm, one of the two participants who failed a mainstream English class, most likely would agree with their findings. He felt disempowered by test-driven assignments that he saw as disrespecting his individuality. He chose not to do most work in his English class because he felt his lived experiences were irrelevant to the curriculum. The focus on literature in a

mainstream English classroom impeded his love for history and writing. In contrast, his ESL teachers recognized his struggles as an English language learner and respected his relocation experiences to assist his growth as a writer. Although his failure to pass his mainstream English class may create an impression of his inability to write in English, this inability was partially, if not significantly, created by a lack of cultural awareness in classroom pedagogy.

In this sense, respecting youth as an audience for instruction is as important as having adolescent writers imagine the audiences they want to communicate with. Teachers should design instruction to meet the specific needs of their students. This requires they engage with their students as individuals, and not only as test takers. Participants' perspectives suggest teachers might do a better job of listening to youth. They reported that teachers who knew the histories of their students were more likely to offer useful tools that benefited their growth as writers. Audience matters. Not only is it important for youth to build skills to communicate to others in a variety of genres, it might also benefit teachers to understand their students' lives more so they can better communicate with them.

#### *The Importance of Using Models and Supporting Writing Processes*

To harness ideas into written forms, the young men discussed that some of the tools used in their activity systems were more beneficial than others. Similar to what I have already discussed, writing should be presented to youth as a social act that makes communication possible (Beach, 2000; Herrington & Moran, 2005; Russell, 2010). The prefix, *commun*, that begins *community* and *communication*, after all, means to share. Writing is an activity meant for sharing thoughts with others. The young men felt better

informed about writing when genres were presented with the social purposes they served. Activity systems that modeled a genre, discussed and explicated features of the genre, co-constructed a class model together, and provided opportunities to apply genre features to their own writing were most helpful to my participants.

Secondary school teachers who serve English language learners in mainstream classrooms should be explicit about genres and their features. I argue that the following is good practice for teaching writing to all youth. First, it benefits a teacher to survey a class about previous experiences with a particular genre before one is assigned. Second, students benefit when they see an example of a genre they are expected to write. Third, students benefit from discussions about genre features and their rules. Fourth, students benefit from co-constructing a genre class sample together. Fifth, students benefit from applying genre features to their own writing. Sixth, students benefit from reflecting on writing in a particular genre and being metacognitive about what they learned. Such *stretch, skill, drill, play* and *reflect* practice is what I witnessed participants' soccer coaches using on the field and what Mahiri (1994, 1998) observed in a basketball program serving youth. All youth, including male youth (e.g., Fletcher, 2006; Newkirk, 2002; Smith, 2002, 2004; Tatum, 2005, 2008), need opportunities to build competence, to be challenged, to be encouraged and to be guided.

In addition, teachers should encourage youth to find a writing process that works best for them and to be open to heterogeneous, multilingual cultural views that go beyond a single writing method (Escamilla, 2009; Hyland, 2003, 2007; Matsuda, 2004). In this sense, a *teacher as writer* model encouraged by the National Writing Project (Freedman, 2007; Whitney, 2008, 2009) may be useful, especially if teachers are encouraged to

explore their own writing processes with their students. In this model, educators write alongside students in an attempt to avoid what Gallagher (2007) calls the “Grecian urn approach” (p. 52). This is when polished pieces of published prose produced by professionals are modeled without a demonstration of the many processes that go into the actual writing. In my own interpretation, such teaching is akin to bringing a child to New York City to observe buildings, people, lights, and movement, and then relocating them to the middle of nowhere with the instructions, “It’s your turn. Recreate NYC in the space provided.” Chances are, the child is unlikely to be successful.

Participants in this study reported the best practice for learning to write in new genres came from those teachers who provided a variety of models. As Shafac and Samuel learned through the creation of screenplays, the use of many models provided a discussion about genre features that they could choose to employ in their own writing. In contrast, London used CPP for help when the models he was provided in his English class failed to represent perspectives of youth like him. As populations grow more diverse in urban schools, so should instructional models for writing. I agree with Eisner (2008), who wrote, “I don’t think there is one destination that several roads will lead you to, but there are, rather, multiple destinations which require multiple roads” (p. 22). Youth need varying models that demonstrate how language(s) are used so they are prepared to use language(s) to communicate in a variety of social settings.

With this said, teachers also need a better understanding of how languages are used to privilege and inhibit diverse learners, and they should critically explore how schools uphold and/or discredit particular language communities. Diversity of heterogeneous classrooms, and all their Englishes (Kirkland, 2010), should be tapped for

the multiple ways language might be used to communicate for a variety of purposes to varying audiences (Fecho, 2006; Haddix, 2009; Hill, 2009; Kinloch, 2010; Morrell, 2007). As Hill (2009) wrote, “Teachers should provide nonthreatening spaces for negotiating and applying nonstandard and Standard English and recognize that home language is linked to student identity” (p. 120). Instruction in school must allow for youth to discover and learn who they are in relation to society, history, traditions in education, and personal communication. My participants were positioned to better assist themselves and their families when assignments allowed them to bring personal experiences (and language) to school. When they were respected, they respected curriculum.

Secondary school educators should remember that an inability to use language in particular ways was historically used to oppress Black individuals assumed to be incapable of reason, intellect, and thought (Fanon, 1967; Gates, 1998, Gilroy, 1982; Gordon, 1999; hooks, 1991). At the same time, control of particular languages often empowers people. For these reasons, all teachers in U.S. high schools should think of themselves as language teachers. For example, Alice Walker’s use of language in *The Color Purple*, a book that Zizu connected to in his English class, challenges a standard use of English as it conveys a story about history, human perseverance, resiliency, and hope. Exploring uses of language, however, was not how Zizu was instructed to read the novel. Instead, Zizu was provided questions in a literature packet. Instructing students to read critically about racial constructions and language uses may have provided Zizu and his classmates with what Appleman (2009) calls a *critical encounter*. They could have explored both African and African American history as they read Walker’s novel and wrote, collaboratively, to explore the text’s themes as it related to their own lives. They



could have discussed *The Color Purple* as a model of dialect used to communicate in non-standard ways. In this sense, locating voices of the teenage diaspora (Gunderson, 2000) in curriculum may have benefited the instructional goals by demonstrating diverse language practices and variety.

Fisher (2007) has written that teaching our students to be literate “becomes a process of redefining our students’ relationship to language. Print is more than an encryption of the auditory form and thus requires a kind of cognitive mapping” (p. 102). For the Black African-born male youth with limited opportunities to read or write in any language before they arrived in the U.S., chances to orally and physically express themselves in school helped them to link traditional forms as communication such as songs, stories, and prayer with expectations for written language. Encouraging dialogue and physical movement before, during, and even after the young men wrote benefited the ways they understood writing. After all, language, whether written, spoken, or physically performed, is a means for understanding culture (Smitherman, 2007). The activity systems that provided spaces for the young men to perform, hear, and play with language made writing activities more accessible. Teachers in secondary schools might look to improvisational performance (Sawyer, 2004), theater, traditional dancing, storytelling, and songs to assist English language learners in mainstream classrooms.

For example, Zizu, Najm, London, and Ali learned how writers use language to stir emotions in listeners while attending a poetry slam. The language used by poets was performed orally to stir emotions and this resonated with them as an audience. The theatrical games encouraged by the playwright in Zizu’s drama class, too, showed him how to brainstorm ideas before writing through physical action and to use imagination to

think about how words are received by readers and performers. Similar to Perry's (2008) report on Sudanese adults, my participants described oral genres (e.g., storytelling, prayer, song) and physical movement (e.g., dance, athleticism) as primary forms of communication in their refugee camps before relocating to the United States. They appreciated instruction in school that offered tools for transitioning these oral and physical communicative forms into written ones. Communication is not textual, alone.

### *The Importance of Community and Respect*

Participants' perspectives on writing in the United States also suggest that researchers and teachers need to link history and global realities to instruction in various writing activity systems and should better understand the complexities of race given changing demographics and how languages are used to privilege and inhibit diverse learners. The very presence of refugee youth enrolled in U.S. secondary schools during the 21<sup>st</sup> century is evidence that not all populations worldwide have had access to formal education and, therefore, global inequities exist. Written communication, as it occurs in Western society, is not universal. Youth, like the young men in this study, remind us that injustices are severe and that lives continue to be disrupted as a result of modern conflicts with colonial roots. As reported in Chapter Four, relocation of African-born youth to the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has partially resulted from European imperialism, institutions of slavery, and Cold War politics of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Participants' experiences in refugee camps in Egypt, Guinea, and Kenya stand in direct contrast to the prosperity experienced by many in the Western world, but they are connected.

Educators might use the presence of changing demographics in U.S. secondary schools to ask critical questions like: *What does it mean to be educated? Who has access*

*to education? Has it always been this way? Who doesn't have access to education? Why? Does education empower everyone?* Recent uprisings in Libya and Egypt are evidence that the legacy of imperialism, colonialism, and globalization will likely spur additional conflicts in the near future (as *Occupy Wall Street* protestors also remind us). Global realities need to be part of secondary school instruction and anything else would reify inequities that already exist (cf., Freire, 1970). Participants' perspectives stand as reminders that U.S. privileges are not norms around the world. Participants' reports (and samples of writing) suggest that teachers should better link history and 21<sup>st</sup> century modern realities to curriculum. The presence of such students in our classrooms means teachers cannot ignore world history and global politics.

Similarly, novels like *The Color Purple*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Secret Life of Bees* and *Monster* that were taught in participants' English classrooms have the potential to be used to help youth become critical of Western constructions of a Black identity through challenging any assumptions made about a singular Black community. Such stories might be a location where youth from many backgrounds question how race has historically been determined without consideration of the multiplicity of Blackness. As Awokoya and Clark (2008) discussed, Black African-born youth have specific needs that have not been addressed in research because the conceptual frameworks commonly used by Western scholars limits the understanding of Blackness within a White/Black U.S. dichotomy; it fails to view the diversity that exists within Black communities around the world. Each of the eight participants, who represent only three nations of African-born youth in the United States, help to embody Awokoya and Clark's critique. They are Black youth enrolled in Western schools influenced by varying national, ethnic, and religious cultures.

They identified with Blackness, however, when arriving to the United States, but they differentiated their Black identities as African-born in respect of their histories. They viewed themselves as different from American-born classmates and claimed they were influenced by ethnicity, language, nationalities, religions, birth order, and gender. They were Black youth, but their constructions of what this meant varied between them and their peers. The use of culturally relevant texts (e.g. Freeman & Freeman, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2002; Souto-Manning, 2010; Tatum 2005, 2009) that highlight racial, cultural, economical, and social worlds is extremely important; at the same time, recognizing the diversity of youth in our classrooms – and the perspectives they bring – need to be historicized, as well. Educators should recognized heterogeneity within youth cultures and avoid cultural assumptions and essentialism.

In mainstream English classrooms, participants often felt a connection to African-American characters in the books they read, but they wondered why more lessons were not provided that taught Black histories, especially in connection to Africa. To them, a failure to address African history and Blackness, thematically, reinstated a lack of importance to school. Rong and Brown (2002) wrote,

Educators who work with immigrant children need to move away from the simplistic notion that race relations in America are mostly binary.

Although this may still be true in many parts of the country, immigration in the past three decades has redrawn the racial and ethnic composition in many communities. (p. 269)

In other words, the Black/White binary at Robinson High School resonated somewhat with the young men, but they felt this divide was more complicated. They wanted more

dialogue in school about racial histories, especially in relation to their national and religious cultures, because Black and White identities were more robust, diverse, and complicated. More specifically, participants wanted African American and African history to be discussed together in relation to global history. They desired lessons to address what they experienced and knew every day in their communities.

Similar to other research (Traore, 2004; Traore & Lukens, 2006), participants in this study rarely learned African histories or discussed issues of Blackness in classes. Panther reported he discussed Africa only in middle school when reading *When God Grew Tired of Us*, and Ade recalled talking about race only once (in a biology class). For these reasons, I agree with Awokoya and Clark's (2008) assertion that a failure to investigate racial constructions "assumes a certain type of homogeneity of thought, experience, and value, thus ignoring or downplaying the unique perspectives, experiences, and needs across the myriad of Black immigrant groups, including African Americans" (p. 56). Fanon (1967) expressed that non-European individuals continue to be colonized when European cultures and traditions are upheld as superior and when anything African is rejected. It could be interpreted that the lack of African history in U.S. schools is evidence that colonial oppression continues.

The lack of formal education and the relocation of my participants are historically connected to colonialism, the scramble for Africa by European nations during imperialism, and the economic involvement of the U.S. in African nations after World War II and throughout the Cold War. The young men had experiences, knowledge, histories, and insight before arriving to the U.S., but needed a safe space in which to share what they knew. Educators in the U.S. who work with Black African-born male

youth have the opportunity to “restore the history, dignity, validity, cultural contributions, and global significance” (Appleman, 2009. p. 90) through providing opportunities for such youth to share and build cultural pride. Teachers need professional development that helps them learn the history of youth populations they serve. My findings concur with Njue and Retish’s (2010) argument that

to alleviate the challenges that teachers face when teaching diverse students is to institute an ongoing teacher training program in order for teachers and administrators to keep abreast of changes within the student body. (p. 368)

Teachers need more training on the diverse languages used by youth in the United States and the histories of world cultures that are changing classroom demographics. My participants wanted to be respected for their histories and lived experiences; when they felt respected in a classroom, they were more likely to respect the work assigned. For these reasons, having knowledge of youths’ other activity systems beyond school may help teachers provide stronger lessons in school.

Like Mahiri (1998, 2005) discussed with an after-school basketball program and Kinloch (2010) reported through research with two young men on the gentrification of Harlem, a majority of the skills desired in U.S. classrooms are also mentored and supported in environments (activity systems) beyond school, including clubs, athletic programs, and families. The analysis my participants did throughout the 2010 World Cup, for example, drew from statistics, online articles, and knowledge about soccer. Each young man made a case for the “best team” through online debating and face-to-face arguments. They used rhetorical devices such as hyperbole, alliteration, and metaphor

that could have benefited their writing in school. The same analytical skills desired for state examinations (e.g., to deconstruct poetry, to editorialize a time in history, to support an argument) were already being used by the young men in other activity systems. Out of the classroom, they analyzed music, deconstructed television shows, and interrogated personal moments in their lives.

Similar to what other researchers have reported (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Fu, 2005; Mahiri, 1998; Moje, 2000), much can be gained from acknowledging youths' out-of-school lives. Perhaps teachers should look for collaboration with youth-centered programs outside of the school or seek ways to include more family participation in school. I felt fortunate that I witnessed the additional instruction and support that Ali, Shafac, and Ade received at their community center. I was privileged to hear elders talk with me about their wishes for young people in their communities. Teachers might have gained insight about the Bantu community had they invited the community center's directors to speak with them at school. Ali wanted his teachers to know that he was learning at the community center, too. Out-of-school communities need to be tapped as resources to positively affect in-school instruction.

In secondary school classrooms of the United States, *double binds* (Engeström, 2009; Russell, 1997, 2009) experienced by youth might be unbound if teachers made better choices to recognize youths' second classrooms (Campano, 2007) – the spaces between out-of-school and in-school worlds. This requires respect and knowledge of activity systems youth participate in beyond the parameters of a school day and the ability to tap personal histories and lived experiences within instruction at school. The inclusion of youth experiences through a respect of their home cultures counters the

colonizing force of traditional pedagogies because it advocates for multiple histories and perspectives, including those of marginalized youth, as worthy of school content and as valuable resources (Goodwin, 2010). Youth who wrote for the ESL magazine with Ali empowered themselves through writing their worlds. They educated others about refugee relocation experiences and rather than feeling ostracized as new language learners they advocated lived experiences as a resource to teach others.

Similar outlets for publication might benefit teachers who work with diverse student groups. As examples, a history teacher might design a magazine called *Hero* where students are assigned to interview and write a biography of someone important to them. An art teacher may establish a museum tour where students can display artwork with artistic statements. A chemistry teacher may have students write position papers on alternative forms of energy where they hold a forum to debate opinions. A math teacher might have students conduct a survey and teach them how to graph results and shape them into an editorial that makes an argument about the findings. The argument here is to listen to youth and guide their interests into writing that assists them to develop communicative skills they will most likely encounter throughout their lives.

My participants sought opportunities where their histories of being Black, being African, being English language learners, being new Americans, and being athletes could be shared with others through discussions, reading, and writing. They thrived in writing activity systems that appreciated who they were as individuals (subjects) and that respected their out-of-school lives and personal histories. Finally, they appreciated teachers who reached out to them with a willingness to learn more about the world. To become better writers in the United States, participants felt more importance needs to be



placed on history, global realities, and the multiplicity of experiences of youth. They belong to a variety of activity systems in and out of school that shape the languages and traditions they used for communication. These activity systems need to be recognized.

Directions for Future Research; Locating Subjects in the Center  
of Multiple Activity Systems for Writing

In the *Handbook of Writing Research* (2006), Englert, Mariage and Dunsmore argued for more scholarship on how classroom activities develop writers and recommended, “research should also examine how teachers create writing contexts that support new participating structures, roles, rules and collaborations” (p. 217). In the same handbook, Hayes (2006) called for more activity theory “to describe purposeful actions that a person or group of people undertakes by relating the actions to the environments in which they take place” (p. 37). As another contributor, Ball (2006) suggested, “we are still seeking cross-disciplinary approaches to the study of writing that will inform a broad research agenda to assist us in effectively teaching students from culturally diverse backgrounds in critical and creative ways” (p. 293). Using writing activity genre research (Russell, 2007) and locating each of my eight participants (subjects) at the center of his many writing activity systems was my attempt to address these suggestions.

I argue that adolescents’ writing is influenced by multiple activity systems and that an awareness of these varying activity systems can only benefit writing instruction in U.S. secondary schools. Throughout this study I have been privileged as an educator because I have had the affordance of time to work with youth in and out of school. Additional studies may replicate this with other populations of young people or might try to locate teachers as subjects at the center of their multiple activity systems to better

understand the tools, rules, community, and division of labor that are promoted in classrooms. I believe activity theory provided a language for using participants' perspectives to make suggestions about writing in U.S. secondary schools and for empowering the young men as writers, thinkers, readers, and individuals.

Throughout this research, the eight young men and their perspectives validated much of what is already known in scholarship: (1) a poor diet of writing instruction exists in secondary schools (Hillocks, 1996, 2002), (2) writing instruction in secondary schools is mostly in preparation of state assessments (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hillocks, 2002, 2006; Scherff & Piazza, 2005), and (3) students who are already marginalized become further marginalized from poor writing instruction (McCarthy, 2008; McCarthy, Garcia, Lopez-Velasquez, & Guo, 2004). Opening my study to the writing lives of the young men beyond school, however, offered more encouragement. They recognized the importance of writing and wished for more writing instruction in school. They sought resources to assist writing skills and to help broker language with their families.

In designing this research, I wanted to hear youth as authorities of their writing. Instead of relying on national and state assessments to produce a picture of adolescent writers, I wanted to hear from them. The use of activity theory allowed me to do this because it provided a framework to understand participants' perspectives and to bring forth new voices in the United States of a demographic that has received little attention. Engeström (2009) wrote that researchers are drawn to activity theory because it helps them to see what might be changed in activity systems to achieve the greatest outcomes, especially in regard to the tools offered, communities built, rules established, and ways labor is divided.

Acknowledging postcolonial theory, though, reminded me to also be critical of the tools, rules, divisions of labor, respect for communities, and outcomes of the activity systems I observed. Postcolonial theory gave me one way to promote the individual histories of each participant and to place a greater emphasis on them as individuals (subjects) in multiple activity systems. In this sense, I was able to discuss participants' perspectives on the tools, rules, communities, outcomes, and divisions of labor that worked for them, and make connections between in- and out-of-school writing.

In future research, I hope to learn more thoroughly how English class activity systems might better promote critical thinking about schooling, language, and power as a tool for producing written outcomes with youth (Kirkland, 2010; Morrell, 2007; Vasudevan, 2009). I am interested in how critical thinking can challenge the constructions of what it means to be intelligent, smart, creative, and successful in school while enhancing youth participation in learning. Five of the eight young men in my study expressed views consistent with Ogbu's (1991) theory of voluntary minorities and saw educational opportunities in U.S. schools as a way to advance themselves and their families. Ali, London, Zizu, Shafac and Ade believed that hard work in school would pay off. Shafac struggled more than the other four with language, but he too worked hard so he could support his siblings and mother. All eight articulated, though, that American-born classmates, who were predominantly African American, did not see value in school. Panther and Samuel, who were schooled in the U.S. longer than the other six, self-identified as "typical" American youth who wanted to have fun and who sporadically did assignments. They were intellectually capable of high achievement, yet they did not see value in doing schoolwork. Panther respected his friend, J'Quon, for a determination to

achieve but described him as unlike other classmates. Najm, who also did not do well in his English class, felt disrespected and refused to do most of the work. There were variations in how these voluntary migrants viewed learning in the United States. For these reasons I am interested in how teachers might better influence youths' views of achievement in school, especially in relation to Ogbu's theory. The eight participants viewed success as Whiteness and articulated Blackness through deficit constructions born out of a racist past (Fanon, 1967; Gates, 1986; Gordon & Anderson, 1999; hooks, 1991; Kirkland, 2008). I want to know how U.S. teachers might better establish a curriculum that advocates for all youth, including Black youth, and challenge the negative connotations associated with racial and ethnic heritages. Teachers need more models where youth are taught to question inequities in the world, where youth write for self-discovery, and where personal histories are celebrated and upheld.

*Is This English? Race, Language and Culture in the Classroom* (2006) by Bob Fecho offers one glimpse of how such curriculum may be implemented. Fecho wrote, "Reading and writing are so much more than reading and writing" (p. 109) and proposed that English classes should be spaces where youth are encouraged to question language and its uses as a method to construct and reconstruct the world. "Language becomes not a prescribed set of rules," he contemplated, "but rather a topic of inquiry, discussion and multiple perspectives" (p. 50). Like Campano (2006) and Kinloch (2010), Fecho encouraged young writers to think critically about language and helped them to make personal connections between multiple communities – an argument Najm also made throughout this study. As noted in the previous section, such classroom practices have the potential to help youth to work through *double binds* between home and school. Allowing

youth to discuss language and its uses with one another, what Smagorinsky and O'Donnell (1998) referred to as an *intercontextual* connection in their study of writing activity, and allowing them to relate new learning to other texts, what Smagorinsky and O'Donnell (1998) called an *intertextual* connection, provides youth a way to work towards written outcomes. In this study, Ade successfully bridged cultural contexts when he used school knowledge of resumes to teach others in his Bantu community. Zizu connected contexts between oral traditions and writing when the playwright helped him to realize that scripted dialogue was a practice of placing spoken words into textual forms. Young people need opportunities to communicate about their home and school lives with one another as a means of making sense of the many activity systems they inhabit. Teachers need to acknowledge additional activity systems of youth and use them to inform and improve instruction and curriculum.

Campano (2007), Ibrahim (2003, 2008), and Sarroub (2002, 2007) wrote about social spaces that exist for immigrant youth between home/school cultures and new cultures/old cultures, what others have referred to as third spaces (Bhabha, 1988/2006; Gutiérrez, 2008; McCarthy, et. al, 2004; Moje, 2004). For participants in this study, writing instruction that assisted the negotiation of second classrooms (Campano, 2007) – in-between spaces or third spaces – provided the best tools for written communication. ESL teachers in Ali, Shafac, and Najm's advanced classes, for example, effectively guided students through activities where historical content, personal experiences, and best practices for writing (Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2007) were employed. Six of the eight participants in this study named the ESL teachers as most influential in teaching them to write. Participants' reports and my observations suggest that ESL classrooms

were successful with youth because instruction occurred at the location of 2<sup>nd</sup> classrooms: between home and school, between local and global histories, between English and non-English communication, and between personal and academic ways of knowing.

Mainstream teachers have much to learn from ESL teachers.

### *Limitations*

Data collection for this study occurred over a period of six months in one particular area. The research focused on eight participants, alone, and is only a small representation of immigrant youth enrolling in secondary schools with limited and disrupted education. These participants were chosen because of my prior knowledge and work with other refugee groups from Africa. The sampling does not include other refugee populations at Robinson High School who arrived as SIFEs from other nations of Africa and parts of the world. Instead, it is a representation of one young man from Liberia, three young men from Sudan, and four young men from Somalia.

Concomitantly, if I conducted this study when I taught in Kentucky I speculate my classroom observations, my participants' perspectives, and the teacher reports about writing instruction might be different (although some may argue common national standards may homogenize curriculum across the nation). I feel any study on writing in U.S. secondary schools is always limited to the time and location of where it takes place. At the time I taught in Kentucky, writing was central to pedagogy (Hillocks, 2002). Teachers were provided benchmarks in 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades that modeled samples of writing in multiple genres. Students wrote many drafts, revised work often, and interacted with others to develop written outcomes because this is what the state of Kentucky assessed at the time. In contrast, preparation for on-demand essay tasks was most used by

teachers while data were collected for this study. The point I wish to make is that rules established at the state level to assess writing creates the divisions of labor, tools, communities, and outcomes experienced by youth and their teachers in everyday classroom activity systems. Gaps reported by state assessments may not reside in youth and teachers alone; the deficits and disparities may also arrive from the writing assessments used to measure writing. On-demand writing assessments do not measure what youth can do when they are provided opportunities to develop writing through processes and purposes that are important to them. Successful written outcomes, like Najm composed online through his quotes or that Ali published in the ESL magazine, were not included in the district-required writing portfolio or for a classroom grade. The writing was stronger and more developed than the pieces they wrote on-demand or as class assignments, but not a part of in-school accountability. Research on school writing, alone, does not consider the other activity systems where young people write.

My choice of ethnography is another limitation. Stories are told from particular viewpoints and, according to van Maanen (1998), those who write ethnographies are “never free of doubt and ambiguity” (p. 120). Ethnography provided one way for me to share the stories my participants provided. In using ethnography, though, I made decisions on how to tell the story about writing through using the perspectives of Black African-born male youth with limited and disrupted education. Ideally, the goal should be for youth, themselves, to write their own stories without the influence of an adult – in this case, a White, male researcher privileged by Western education – to filter what they have to say. I recognize that with the choices I made in narrating these perspectives, a part of their stories may have been lost. I am sure, too, that the young men I worked with would

have more to say if space and time allowed. Although a goal for this work was to bring forth voices like theirs to literacy scholarship, postcolonial theory reminds me that it is critical to note that I am the one who is sharing their lives with the field.

Similarly, whereas the language of writing activity genre research (Russell, 2009) helped my reporting of what the young men discussed, it brought forth negative connotations when I considered postcolonial critiques. The use of the term “subject” to describe each young man – a term commonly used in activity research (Engeström, 1998) – summoned an authority in my position that I wanted to avoid. I strived to bring forth participants’ perspectives as much as I could so they were not subjected within my research. Perhaps an alternative term to use in activity theory might be “agent” instead of “subject,” to elicit the more active roles each participant took in his many activity systems. My intent was to have their perspectives come forth as authoritative and informative. As my findings chapters revealed, though, the eight participants were often subjected within multiple activity systems as son, brother, student, and friend. In addition, because of age, my role as a researcher, and my location as a Western-educated individual, I remained in an authoritative position. The authority of my writing resided in the choices I made as a narrator and the objective gaze arrived from my decisions.

Another limitation of this study is that I did not observe participants’ classrooms for an entire school year and collected data only during second semester. The research would have benefited if data were collected throughout an entire academic calendar or longer. Had I collected data this way, I would have learned more about district-mandated curriculum implemented the semester before I arrived – curriculum that both students and teachers said required little to no writing. In addition, this study looked broadly at a 9<sup>th</sup> –



12<sup>th</sup> grade spectrum rather than specifically at one grade level. It may have benefited my findings to focus on 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, or 12<sup>th</sup> grade alone. In my observations, however, I found little instructional variation existed between the grade-levels I observed. Literary terms to prepare the young men for state assessments reoccurred at each grade.

Further, I only listened to a small representation of youth within one high school. Ms. Earley, the Advanced ESL teacher, told me midway through data collection, “You know the other kids are jealous, especially the girls. They want to have an opportunity to talk more about their lives with you, too” (Field notes, 03/30/10). I may have had different findings had I included more youth in my participant pool, including the perspectives of female students with interrupted formal education. In contrast, a focus on fewer participants may have allowed me to understand the writing lives of participants more deeply. For these reasons I call for more research on the perspectives of youth, especially from those who represent changing demographics in the United States.

Another shortfall of this research is that the majority of my data collected came from mainstream English classrooms. The young men, however, reported they wrote most often in content area classes. It might have improved my design if I had conducted more observations in classes other than English and witnessed instruction provided by other teachers in other disciplines. I arrived to this research with my English teaching experiences and assumed most writing instruction would occur in English classrooms. The fact that youth reported otherwise is a finding that needs further exploration. More can be learned from writing instruction in other classrooms. In future work, researchers might ask questions like, “What do the perspectives of Black African-born male youth with limited and interrupted formal education suggest for writing in biology classrooms?”

or “What do the perspectives of Black African-born male youth suggest for understanding how to write in U.S. history classrooms?”

In addition, the close relationships I established with my eight participants most likely influenced how I reported their perspectives. According to Ceglowski (2000), doing qualitative, ethnographic research runs the risk of losing objectivity because the work is “caught in a researcher muddle” (p. 16) of strong relationships that are established through close work with participants. For six months, I invested time in listening to participants’ perspectives and observed them working in multiple activity systems. I became a cultural and language broker (Perry, 2009), and they became informants of their lives. The trust built was a benefit, but it is a limitation, too. I feel fortunate they shared their lives with me and, like Najm, I feel a “responsibility to speak out.” Through interviewing and observing my participants, I was afforded insights that are not readily available to most classroom teachers. I have stopped collecting data for academic purposes, but the youth have continued to enrich me with knowledge, lived experiences, questions, needs, humor, and stories. Some may see this as a threat to objectivity, but I argue these young men helped me to see my scholarship more clearly.

#### Concluding Thoughts: Hearing Global Histories

##### to Inform Local Literacies

Through experiences as an English teacher in an urban school district I learned the importance of listening to youth. From my volunteer work with refugee families in two states, I realized I needed more knowledge of global history to understand the changing demographics where I taught. With participation in the *Local Literacies* project, I experienced how value comes from allowing youth who have arrived in the United

States with limited and interrupted formal education to share stories. Listening to youth should be a priority when helping U.S. secondary schools improve instruction.

A history that has allowed me to pursue higher degrees in education is complicit in the civil unrest that caused my participants' lives to be disrupted in three nations of Africa. When I graduated high school in 1990 and was the first in my family to enter a four-year college, Ade, the 12<sup>th</sup> grade participant (also the first in his family to graduate high school and enter college), was born. In 1992, when I was an undergraduate interrogating the effects of colonialism on literature in Western society, Ade and Shafac were fleeing Somalia in fear of *shifita* militants. When I was interrogating Caliban's role in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Najm, London, Samuel, and Zizu were born in African nations where colonial histories were culminating in civil unrest. During the years I completed a teaching certification and found employment in an English classroom at an urban high school, the young men of my study were living in refugee camps, occasionally attending schools, and practicing oral interviews for a chance to relocate. In reflection of colonial history, my participation in it, my choices to be an educator of high school English, and the knowledge I gained from my participants, I feel it is important to question English teaching traditions and how they may or may not reify global inequities. It is my stance that teaching youth to write offers them tools to empower their future.

I believe teachers should be encouraged to talk more about student demographics, especially those that are changing, and to question constantly how their curriculum supports or hinders youth in their rooms. Educators should ask whether or not they provide resources that allow students to achieve or that teach "them about their (in)significance and place in U.S. society" (Goodwin, 2010, p. 3112). Local and global

inequities exist. Youth do not arrive to classrooms with equal resources, tools for success, traditions, and cultural capital. European traditions that brought schooling to the United States came from the same nations that divided Africa and Asia for economic and political gains. We share a history that caused civil upheaval in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that uprooted the lives of the young men who participated in this study. Having global awareness is a start, but we must be willing to learn the worldviews and opinions of similar populations. Instead of viewing deficits in young people, we should encourage them to share their knowledge through better writing assignments that tap into the rich resources they bring.

Had I not asked the young men about their perspectives on writing I might have failed to learn about Liberia, Somalia, and Sudan. I may not have been invited to their soccer practices to learn how their coaches encouraged athletic mastery through skills, drills, and practice. I probably would not have discovered books written about refugee children and the resilience they demonstrate as survivors. I would not have learned about the support provided to youth within a community center or how a college preparatory program offered one-on-one instruction that supported their goals. I probably would not have experienced the expertise of ESL teachers, either, and I would not have learned the many purposes these young men had for writing.

I began Chapter One with an editorial, “Unity,” written by Najm the year before this research occurred. He shared this piece of writing at his second interview because he wanted to be sure I knew that he loved to write – he just did not like to write in his mainstream English class. “Unity” demonstrated the importance Najm placed on writing beyond school and, to close this research, I wish to reference his words again.

When I write, I'm not just writing for myself. I am speaking for others.

That's what I do. I tell others what's going on. I speak for me. I speak for them, too. The background where I'm from. I speak globally. (Field notes, 06/01/10)

As a Black African-born male youth with disrupted formal education Najm desired to speak *globally* about his lived experiences and wanted to share them *locally* with teachers and classmates. For these reasons, I believe global histories have the power to benefit local literacies within U.S. secondary schools.

Drawing on Najm's editorial, I feel that U.S. secondary schools would benefit from listening to youth about the "intrinsic" desire they have to communicate and the "emotional" and "spiritual" connection they feel when they are able to be part of a writing community. From hearing reports of youth, like my participants offered here, U.S. secondary educators may also think about how they can be more "strategic" with assisting diverse language learners in mainstream classrooms. Writing instruction should prepare youth to communicate in many genres that benefit the "economic" and "political" stability they hope to one day have. Teachers and researchers have much to learn from writers like Najm when they speak to us about their worlds.

To reach *unity*, we first have to listen.

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Reading and Language Arts Center  
 Syracuse University; Syracuse, New York (2012)  
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#### **M.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies**

Kentucky Institute for Education and Sustainable Development (KIESD)  
 University of Louisville; Louisville, Kentucky  
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Kappa Delta Phi, Education Honor Society  
 University of Louisville; Louisville, Kentucky (1996)

#### **B.A. in English Literature**

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 Binghamton University; Binghamton, New York (1994)

### **ADDITIONAL EDUCATION**

**Kentucky Fellow, Bread Loaf School of English:** Santa Fe, New Mexico (2006);  
 Middlebury, Vermont (2005)

**Louisville Writing Project:** University of Louisville; Louisville, Kentucky (2002)

**English Speaking Union Scholar:** Cambridge University Shakespeare Program;  
 Cambridge, England (2001)

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## SECONDARY TEACHING EXPERIENCE

**High School English Teacher:** J. Graham Brown School (Louisville, Kentucky) (1996 – 2007)

**Grades Taught:** 9<sup>th</sup> Grade English, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade English, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade English, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade AP English, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade AP English

**Extracurricular Activities:** Senior Class Sponsor, Senior Prom Sponsor, Senior Trip Sponsor, Senior Awards Coordinator, Senior Culminating Projects Director, Writing Cluster Leader, Writing Portfolio Coordinator, Graduation Commencement Chair, Roskilde Lille Skole Cultural Exchange Leader, Moonbeam/All Stars/Fireflies Mentor Program Leader, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Class sponsor, Camping Trip Coordinator, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity: *Men of Quality Program* liaison, JV Volleyball Coach

**Committee Work:** Critical Friends Coach, School Based Decision Making Council: Teacher Representative, Communications Committee, Diversity Committee. Scheduling Committee, Kentucky Teaching-Intern Program Mentor

## PUBLICATIONS

Crandall, B.R. (2010). Venglish. In M. Robins (Ed.) *The pressures of teaching: How teachers cope with classroom stress* (pp. 13-24). New York: Kaplan Publishing.

Crandall, B.R. (2010). [Review of M. Overmeyer (2009). *What student writing teaches us: Formative assessment in the writing workshop*]. *Education Review*.

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Crandall, B.R.(2006) *Under the Zia sun* (poem). *La Miga*, Breadloaf School of English.

Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Crandall, B.R. (2006). *You can't write a poem to teach us how to write poetry*, *Journal for Literacy Leaders*, 2(1), 18-23, Kentucky: University of Louisville

Crandall, B.R. (2003). *Song for the Lost Boys*, opus I. (poem), *The Journey* (article) & *Monday Morning* (ten-minute script). *Ring of fire: A Louisville writing project chap book*. Kentucky: Louisville Writing Project.

Crandall, B.R. (1998). *Environmental English; Sustaining the environment through the marriage of earth and words*. In *Omnibus*. Greater Louisville English Council

### CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Chandler-Olcott, K., Crandall, B.R., Nieroda, J. (2011). "*Uncomfortable in a completely good, I've got to grow way*": *English teachers perspectives on co-teaching in a summer writing institute*. Paper presentation at Annual Meeting of the Literacy Research Association. Jacksonville, Florida.

Crandall, B.R. (2011, February). *Lost voices in an American high school: Sudanese male English language learners' perspectives on writing in and out of school*. Paper presentation at the NCTE Assembly for Research Conference, Madison, Wisconsin.

Crandall, B.R. (2010, December). *Perspectives of African male English language learners on their writing in and out of high school English classrooms*. Paper presentation at Annual Meeting of the Literacy Research Association, Fort Worth, Texas.

Crandall, B.R. (2010, February). *Putting Humpty together again; Teaching point of view and analysis in the language arts/English classroom*. Central New York Reading Conference, "Renewing the Focus on Literacy," Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R., Munger, K., & Morris, P. (2010, May). *Creating a professional portfolio online*. Session at Future Professoriate Program/Preparing Future Faculty Annual Conference, Hamilton, New York.

Crandall, B.R., Watson, A., & Years Stevens, E. (2010, April). *The importance of local literacies and documenting life histories of students with interrupted formal education*. Session at 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Central New York Conference on Public Scholarship in Graduate Education, Syracuse, New York.

Montero, K., Crandall, B.R., Mwambari, D., O'Toole, Stevens, E., & Watson, A. (2009, December) *Local literacies, global visions: Documenting SIFE's' learning histories using oral history methodology*. Paper given at the National Reading Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Crandall, B.R. (2009, April). *In Memory of James A'kech Mangui: Africa, junior English*,

*and the shrinking world.* Session at the National Writing Project Conference for Urban Educators. Louisville, Kentucky.

Crandall, B.R., Chandler-Olcott, K., Hinchman, K., Cullen, K., & Willard, C. (2008, December). *Teachers' shared space in inclusive humanities-based literacy instruction.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Orlando, Florida.

Crandall, B.R. (2006, January). *Imagining the analytical; Focusing on analytical writing in Kentucky.* Session at the Louisville Writing Project Winter Conference. Louisville, Kentucky.

Crandall, B.R. (2005, September). *The ten minute play: From drafts to festival.* Session at the Louisville Writing Project Fall Conference, Louisville, Kentucky.

Crandall, B.R. (2003, January). *One step at a time: Working with content area teachers to gain quality portfolio pieces.* Session at the Louisville Writing Project Winter Conference, Louisville, Kentucky.

Crandall, B.R., & Robinson, R. (September, 2003). *Getting started: strategies for finding the stories that must be told.* Session at the Louisville Writing Project Fall Conference. Louisville, Kentucky.

Crandall, B.R. (October, 1998). *Environmental English; Finding sustainability in the English classroom.* Session at the Greater Louisville English Council Conference, Louisville, Kentucky.

Crandall, B.R. (September, 1997). *From the experts; A conversation with veteran English teachers with advice to teachers beginning their career.* Greater Louisville English Council. Louisville, Kentucky.

Dittmer, A., Wicks, D., Crandall, B.R. (December, 1996). *Student perspectives on interdisciplinary master's degree with environmental strand.* Paper read at the North American Association of Environmental Educators Conference. San Francisco, California.

## **UNIVERSITY PRESENTATIONS**

Crandall, B.R. (November, 2010). *Tutoring the neglected "R".* Syracuse University Literacy Corp. Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (August, 2010). *Exploring perspectives in literacy.* Invited by Dr. Marcelle Haddix for Summer College, Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (August, 2010). *On the road to find out; The perspectives of African-born adolescent males on their writing in and out of English classrooms.* Invited by Dr.

Christine Welsh, LeMoyne College, Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (June, 2010). *Saying yes to writing*. Invited presenter for Say Yes Summer Institute, Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (March, 2010). *No more violence and the secondary English classroom; Exploring socio-cultural influences of violent events in young adult literature*. Invited by Dr. Marcelle Haddix for SED 611. *Adolescent Literature*, Syracuse New York.

Crandall, B.R. (March, 2010). *Becoming a digital story; Writing in the frames of sonic and visual literacy*. Invited by Elizabeth Years Stevens for RED 746: *Perspectives on Literacy and Technology*, Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (February, 2010). *Developing your FPP portfolio*. Invited by Dr. Barbara Applebaum, Future Professoriate Program Liaison for the School of Education, Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (January, 2010). *Normally, we're abnormal: An introduction to reading dis/ability in adolescent literature*. Invited by Dr. Marcelle Haddix for SED 611: *Adolescent Literature*, Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (January, 2010). *Tapping into the art(s) of the local community: Zora Neale Hurston, the Syracuse Lost Boy Cow Project, the Brown Art House and the importance of every basket*. Invited by Dr. Felicia McMahon for ANT 300: *Folk Arts, Festival and Public Display*, Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (November, 2009). *At the "corp" of literacy; Tutoring the neglected "R" – writing*. Syracuse University Literacy Corp, Syracuse, New York.

Munger, K. & Crandall, B.R. (October, 2009). *Creating an online portfolio using free online software*. Syracuse University, Graduate Career Services, Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (June, 2009). *Differentiation through visual literacies*. Syracuse University: Say Yes To Education Summer Institute. Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (June, 2009). *Say yes to writing*. Invited presenter for Say Yes To Education Summer Institute. Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (May, 2009). *Interview workshop – mock interview*. With Lois Agnew, Syracuse University, Jeffrey Chin, LeMoyne College, David Bozak, SUNY Oswego, & Sharon Dotger, Syracuse University at the Future Professoriate Program/Preparing Future Faculty, Minnowbrooke, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (April, 2009). *Reflections on teaching poetry*. Invited by Dr. Marcelle Haddix for EDU 614: *The Composing Process*, Syracuse, New York.



- Crandall, B.R. (November, 2008). *An I-full; Hopeful for visual stories in narrative inquiry*. Invited by Dr. James Rolling for EDU 600: *Arts-Based Research Methodologies*, Syracuse, New York.
- Crandall, B.R. (October, 2008). *Blogibilities; The Possibilities for using blogs in constructing lessons on the Holocaust*. Invited by Dr. Rachel Brown for RED 602: *Comprehension and Composing I*, Syracuse, New York.
- Crandall, B.R. (November, 2008). *Was it ever lost? Reclaiming identity through the Syracuse Lost Boys of Sudan Cow Project*. Invited by Dr. Felicia McMahon, *Honors Symposium on Migration*, Syracuse, New York.
- Crandall, B.R. (August, 2007). *Teaching & learning strategies for graduate student teaching assistants*. Teacher Assistant Orientation, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

### **WORKSHOP PRESENTATIONS**

- Crandall, B.R. (November, 2010). *Opening the magic box: Poetry and the license to imagine*. Hughes School, Syracuse, New York.
- Crandall, B.R. (October, 2010). *Creating a critical friends group for supporting middle school writing*. Professional development for Bishop's Academy at Most Holy Rosary, Syracuse, New York.
- Crandall, B.R. (November, 2009). *What are we talking about? Using dialogue in script, story & narration*. *Writing For Ourselves Conference: A community writing event for 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade writers*, Syracuse, New York.
- Crandall, B.R. (January-June, 2009). *Creating a Critical Friends Group for writing instruction – Towards a district-wide writing plan*. Sidney Central School District, Sidney, New York.
- Beverine-Curry, H., & Crandall, B.R. (November, 2008). *The Collins writing method & the power of rubrics*. Syracuse City School District, Syracuse, New York.
- Crandall, B.R., & Stevenson, A. (May, 2004). *The Senior culminating project: Giving back to the community through research and high standards*. South Oldham High School. Crestwood, Kentucky.
- Crandall, B.R. (September, 2002). *Content area writing and the English teacher dilemma: Getting the conversation to the table and building strategy within*. Video created for Jefferson County Public Schools Professional Development, Louisville, Kentucky.

### **POSTER PRESENTATIONS**

Hinchman, K., Chandler-Olcott, K., Crandall, B.R., Willard, C., & Cullen, K. (May, 2010). *A spatial analysis of co-teaching to address literacy needs in seventh grade humanities*. Poster presentation at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Denver, CO..

Montero, K., Crandall, B.R., Mwambari, D., O'Toole, J., Stevenson, E., & Watson, A. (April, 2009). *Listening to the voices of newcomers in Syracuse: Oral histories on immigration and education*. Poster presentation at the Syracuse Showcase, Syracuse, New York.

Crandall, B.R. (May, 2009). *In memory of James A'keck Mangui: The Syracuse Lost Boys of Sudan Cow Project*. Public Scholarship Forum, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

### **RADIO PODCAST PRESENTATIONS**

(2011) NWP Radio – The Pressures of Teaching; How Classroom Teachers Cope with Stress. <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/3462>

(2009) Teaching the New Writing: Kevin, Bryan, Marva, Troy, and Dawn Mix It Up! Teachers Teaching Teachers: <http://teachersteachingteachers.org/?p=216>

### **AWARDS/RECOGNITION**

**State of Connecticut** (2011). \$50,000 to support Connecticut Writing Project

**School of Education Research and Creative Grant:** *African-born English language learners' perspectives on writing in an American high school*. (Fall, 2010: \$1000)

**Joan N. Burstyn Endowed Fund for Collaborative Research in Education:** *Writing Our Lives: Identifying effective curricular and pedagogical practices for teaching writing to Black adolescent males via the validation and support of African and African American linguistic and rhetorical traditions* with Dr. Marcelle Haddix (Spring, 2010: \$1500)

**Syracuse University Graduate Fellowship** (2007 – 2010)

**Future Professoriate Program at Syracuse University** (2009)

**Scholarship In Action Mini-Grant Recipient** to work with *Writing as Art; Transitions, Culture and the Syracuse Clay Cow Project* (Fall, 2008: \$500)

**Peter B. Mosenthal Scholarship Recipient** for Reading and Language Arts graduate student dedicated to working with minority populations (2007 & 2008)

**Kentucky Humana Scholarship** for Bread Loaf School of English (2005 & 2006)

**Teaching Award for M.A.C.S.** (Muhammad Ali Center Students) (2006)

**Disney Teacher of the Year Nominee** (2005)

**Zora Neale Hurston Outstanding Teacher Award** (2004)

**Jefferson County Public Schools Brotherhood/Sisterhood Award** for promoting diversity and equity in urban schools. (2003).

**Louisville Writing Project Teacher Scholarship** (2002)

**Kentucky English Student Union Scholarship** - Cambridge University Shakespeare Summer Program. (2000)

**Beargrass Creek Mini Grant Award recipient** (1998 & 2001: \$1,000)

**Kentucky Institute for Education and Sustainable Development Internship** – University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky (1996)

**Beargrass Creek Task Force Graduate Assistantship** - University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky (1994 – 1996).

**Teaching Apprenticeship.** Modernism and Its Others. Dr. Leslie Heywood. Binghamton University, Binghamton, New York, (1994).

## **COURSES TAUGHT**

- **EN 411: Literacy Learning and the Composing Processes – Teaching Writing in the 3-12 Classroom.** Fairfield University (Fall, 2011)
- **EN 11: Texts and Context 1 – Writing as Craft and Inquiry.** Fairfield, University (Fall, 2011)
- **EDU 600: Literacy Learning and the Composing Processes.** LeMoyne College (Summer, 2010; Spring, 2011)
- **EDU 508: Supervisor for Student Teaching in English Education.** (Spring, 2011)
- **EDU 614: The Composing Process.** Co-taught with Dr. Marcelle Haddix. (Fall, 2009)
- **SED 413/613: Methods and Materials in Teaching English.** Co-taught with Dr. Kelly Chandler-Olcott (Spring, 2009)
- **EDU 508: Supervisor for Student Teaching in English Education.** (Spring, 2009)
- **EDU 508: Supervisor for Student Teaching in English Education.** (Fall, 2008)

- **SED 415/615: Teacher Development in English.** Co-taught with Dr. Kelly Chandler-Olcott (Fall, 2008)
- **ENG 100: Introduction to College Writing.** Teacher Adjunct: (Bellarmine University, ACCESS Program. 1998 – 2007)
- **ENG 200, Introduction to Literature.** Teacher Adjunct: (Bellarmine University, ACCESS Program. 1998 – 2007)

## **PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

**Responding to the Common Core: An Introduction to the Literacy Design Collaborative.** Invited by the Louisville Writing Project at the Annual Meeting for the National Writing Project, Orlando, Florida.

**Session Chair. Content Area Texts and Instructional Grouping.** *60<sup>th</sup> National Reading Conference*, Ft. Worth, Texas, December, 2010)

**Early College High School Summer Writing Institute** (Coach/Instructor, July, 2010)

**Conference Proposal Reviewer.** The Literacy Research Association Annual (formally The National Reading Conference, March 2009; March, 2010).

**Table Leader. Intergroup Dialogue:** Fayetteville-Manlius High School and Nottingham High School. (February, 2008; February, 2010)

**Session Chair. Heritage language literacy practices.** *59<sup>th</sup> National Reading Conference*. (Albuquerque, New Mexico, December, 2009)

**Site-Director for Say Yes To Education Summer Program.** (Roberts School. 2009)

**National African American Read-In Day.** (Levy Middle School, February, 2009)

**Session Chair. Innovative approaches to literacy instruction.** *58<sup>th</sup> National Reading Conference*. (Orlando, Florida. December, 2008).

**Academic Facilitator, New York State Council for the Humanities “Together” Program.** (Northern Onondaga Public Libraries, August – December, 2008).

**Upward Bound English Educator.** (Lemoyne College, Syracuse, New York, Summer, 2008)

**Portfolio Reader.** (Syracuse University, English Education, 2007/2008/2009).

**Summer Literacy Clinic Assistant.** (Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York. 2007)

**Portfolio Consultant** (Syracuse City School District. Syracuse, New York, 2007)

**Treasurer, Student Organization of Literacy Educators and Researchers (SOLER).** (Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York (2007)

**Teacher Collaborator for the Collaborative for Teaching and Learning,** Instructional DVD, “Teaching the Writer” (Louisville, Kentucky, 2007)

**Kentucky Writing Advisory Committee.** The Kentucky Department of Education, Frankfurt, Kentucky, *Kentucky Writing Handbook, Helping Students Develop as Proficient Writers and Learners* (2005 – 2007)

**State of Kentucky Writing Portfolio Teacher Trainer,** Jefferson County Public Schools. (Louisville, Kentucky. 2004 -2007)

**Jefferson County Public Schools Writing Diagnostic Team.** (Louisville, Kentucky. 2003)

**Teacher Liaison.** Mentor Project between high school seniors and Graduate Students in the M.A.T. program: (University of Louisville, 1997 – 2002)

**Student Teacher Mentor:** (University of Louisville, Spalding University, Bellarmine University. Kentucky, 1997 -2007)

**Teacher for READ 180 Summer Program.** (Louisville, Kentucky, 1999)

**Board Member.** Kentucky Association of Environmental Educators (1995 – 1999)

## TEACHING CERTIFICATIONS

**Kentucky Teacher Certificate**  
Grades 7 – 12  
English/Language Arts

**New York State Teacher Certificate**  
Grades 7 - 12  
*Conditional*, English/Language Arts

## STUDENT THEATER/POETRY/ART PRODUCTIONS

- **Poetry Slam! Wham!** (Spring, 2010)
- **Sponsor of student-written/directed ten-minute festival:** *SNAP!* (2007), *TEN.* (2006),  
*Commedia del Arte!* (2005), *Pastiche* (2004) & *These Are Teens* (2003)
- **Improv Coach:** *Imrov 4 Quarterbacks* (2007)
- **Poetry Slams/Coffee Houses** (1999 – 2007)

## VOLUNTEER WORK

- **Somali Bantu Summer Writing Group** (June – August, 2010)
- **Mentor for African refugee youth** in the City of Syracuse (2009-present).

- **Syracuse Lost Boys of Sudan Cow Project** (2007 – present)
  - Schweinfurth Art Center: Folk Arts in Central New York, Auburn (October, 2010, October, 2009, October, 2008)
  - LeMoyne College Parent’s Weekend (September, 2010)
  - Stone Quarry Art Park, Cazenovia, New York (August, 2010)
  - Walk For Water: DeWitt, New York (June, 2010)
  - STAND for Darfur: East Syracuse-Minoa High School (May, 2010)
  - ANDAAZ (April, 2010)
  - St. Joseph’s Hospital Diversity Expo (February, 2009)
- **Sudanese Lost Boys mentor** (Kentucky Refugee Mission, 2001 – 2007)
- **Hoops 4 Hope** (2000 – present)
- **No More Violence Project** (1998 – 2002)

## PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS AND AFFILIATIONS

The Literacy Research Association  
 National Council of Teachers of English  
 Bread Loaf School of English Teacher Network  
 Coalition of Essential Schools Teacher Network  
 National Writing Project Network  
 Louisville Writing Project  
 Kentucky Writing Project Network  
 Phi Delta Kappa, Professional Education Fraternity  
 Greater Louisville English Council  
 Critical Friends Teacher Network  
 Kentucky Association of Environmental Educators  
 Foxfire Teacher Network  
 New York Central Reading Council