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Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms

Maisha T. Fisher

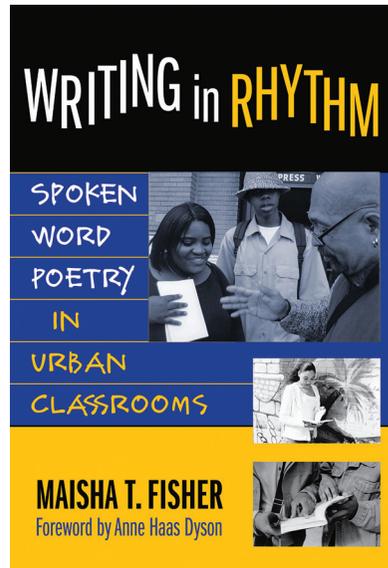
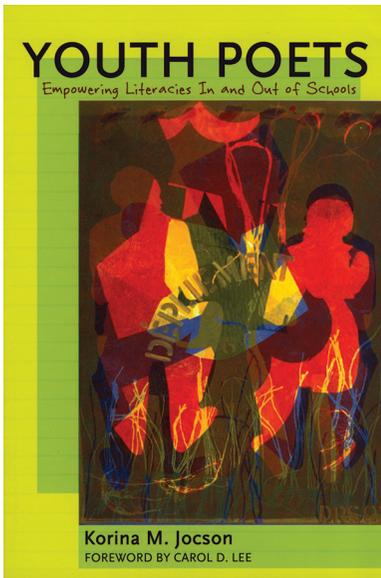
NY, NY: Teachers College Press, 2007. 128 pp.
ISBN: 080774770X. \$22.95

Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies In and Out of Schools

Korina M. Jocson

NY, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008. 214 pp.
ISBN: 0820481963. \$35.95

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Fisher and Jocson both make the case that those involved in public rhetoric and community-based literacy ought to pay more attention to poetry, particularly that created by urban youth. By tracing the roots of contemporary spoken-word poetry to hip-hop, blues, and the Black Arts movement, both studies suggest that poetry has long bridged out-of-school and school-based literacies. For these authors, poetry

is a rhetoric that at once celebrates the vernacular and builds coalitions amongst disenfranchised groups.

In *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poets in Urban Classrooms*, Maisha Fisher documents the year she shadowed Joseph Ubiles, a high school teacher and coalition builder in the Bronx. Fisher watches, and occasionally jumps in, as Ubiles leads a spoken-word class called Power Writers. Fisher's ethnography is a pleasure to read, with a brisk and vivid delivery of the poetry workshops and thick description of the cultural contexts that inform them. Her authority is often on display, as when she frames her observations with educational theories, such as Freire's participatory classroom, and history. But she wears that learning lightly and uses it to illuminate the day-to-day of the workshops.

The book's title might suggest that its message applies only to schools, but Fisher's previous works have addressed the knowledge and practices of poets working open mics at neighborhood institutions, particularly Black-owned bookstores in Northern California. One of her research questions probes the degree to which the literacies that operate in these spaces intersect with those in the titular urban "classrooms." Thus, *Writing in Rhythm* takes public ground not just when Joe Ubiles acquaints his students with the Nuyorican Poetry Café, the Cloisters, the Upper West Side, the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, or the Apollo Theater. It also makes the case that Joe's role as a literacy educator places him in the tradition of community memory-keepers, people like the book and magazine vendors of Greenwich Village, respected as "old heads" for the wisdom they have earned through their own experience and through witnessing the experiences of their fellows (83).

It is in this tradition of witnessing that Fisher places herself as she passes on Joe's and the students' idiolect. She writes, "the role of a worthy witness is keeping the naming actions of the community intact" (17). Chapter 4, "We Speak in all Tongues: The Politics of Bronxics" is thus particularly useful as a reminder of the power of "non-standard" English to name the communities in which we live. Bronxics, we learn, includes elements of both African-American Vernacular English and Puerto Rican- and Dominican-inflected Spanish. Echoing Joe, Fisher argues that this linguistic "gumbo" contains not just a lovely "magic" of rhythm and tone, but also the "money" that young people need to make their way through the day (45). Fisher reminds readers that the "civic" space of civic engagement does not always accept academic language as currency, and stresses "how important it was not to leave our students 'naked' when putting them out into the world," by stripping them of their home language (44). Accordingly, Joe teaches not academese or the vernacular, but both. As one of his students puts it, "[Joe]'s saying adapt to your environment. Let people know you are street smart and book smart" (44).

Maisha's and Joe's decision to honor these poets as "[t]rustworthy witnesses to love, heartache, poverty, violence, and struggles for understanding" pays off in the "blues" poems she brings forth in Chapter 6, which comment on these experiences with clarity and force (69). Fisher begins by deftly summarizing scholarly debates over the degree to which rap develops or departs from the blues tradition, and then argues that spoken word poetry has a "blues epistemology," and thus that blues and rap are "the roots" of contemporary poetry (68). In their poems, the Power Writers as often choose "standard English" as "the idiolect of the street" to testify regarding

cycles of young motherhood, drug addiction, intra-group racism, and the failures of state agencies charged with health and education (79). Throughout, Maisha sheds light on the students' poems by illuminating their cultural contexts, from Colombian cumbia to the use of "Spanish" as a local term for Dominicans or Puerto Ricans. One young writer states that "[t]he ghetto is indescribable to those who have never lived there," but with her help and Fisher's, readers of this volume develop a sense of the inner-city as a dispiriting "mental place" (75).

Fisher does not hide the difficulties for Power Writers in engaging with students' personal experience so searchingly, as when she narrates a class session in which students mock-cry and wail so as to avoid "carrying the weight" of a poet's sadness over her abandonment by her father. But Fisher also acknowledges that work's potential to promote a literacy that reaches beyond the classroom, for she argues convincingly that spoken-word poetry can move poets and listeners alike to upend the "confusing vernacular" of dominant narratives that speak of the failures and deficits of urban youth (31). Ubiles's students learn that poetry can be, as June Jordan says, a "medium for telling the truth" (*Blueprint* 36). And Fisher argues that such truth can begin to effect urgently needed social change. Indeed, perhaps the book's broadest message is that we all suffer, albeit unequally, from what Joe calls the "higher mathematics of America"—our society's disproportionate incarceration of urban youth, our stifling of their talent, and our ignorance of their knowledge (99).

Chapter 7 wraps up the monograph on a more hopeful note, extrapolating from the Power Writers program to make suggestions for other language arts programs within and beyond K-12 public schools. One such suggestion is that educators "create a curriculum for and with students that confronts issues that are relevant" to them (93). In Ubiles's case that curriculum is poetry, and one of his students marks out the difference between Power Writers and the typical class quote simply: "Poetry is about us. In English class the curriculum is about them. The school's work" (*ibid.*). Creating a student-driven curriculum is a difficult task, but Fisher argues that it is essential if educators are to stop using school language as a tool to "create distance between people and reify status and power" (98). Instead, Fisher suggests that students and teachers must make connections with one another and listen and respond to each other's stories in a process Joe calls "read and feed." Actions as simple as "[h]olding student work up for attention, even when it still needs improvement," Fisher argues, are steps that teachers as healers can take toward creating a more respectful society (92). How such affirmation can be squared with the gatekeeping function of writing programs, which are often charged with sorting students into "proficient" and "remedial" categories so as to more efficiently build their skills, is an open question. Reading this text in a graduate course in rhet-comp or teacher education would be useful in provoking literacy educators to face up to the costs of the gatekeeping and policing functions we serve when we neglect nonstandard English.

If there is one difficulty that Fisher glosses over, it is the challenge of translating the Power Writers' practices into other environments. As an experienced public school educator, Fisher must know that the individualized attention Joe gives to his students in this small elective course is more difficult to deliver in a standard thirty-plus student class. Fisher acknowledges that it is not enough to suggest that a given school could be saved if there were "10 Joes" or "50 Joes," but it is sometimes

difficult to imagine how Joe's knowledge and practices could transfer to other settings. For instance, one wonders how literacy educators that do not share their students' backgrounds can be as responsive as this "old head" is to writers' particular learning blocks or their resistance.

Korina Jocson's *Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies In and Out of Schools* would perhaps answer that last question by suggesting that universities make better use of the college students from underrepresented communities who are already in their midst. For Jocson, too, describes poetry workshops that take place in high school classrooms, but these workshops involve undergraduates from U.C. Berkeley's "Poetry for the People" (P4P) program as poets and teachers.

In her introduction, Jocson writes, "Dozens of poetry programs and organizations across the country have adopted P4P's blueprint" (8). Perhaps those imitators made use of P4P founder June Jordan's 1995 volume, *Poetry for the People, a Revolutionary Blueprint*. Though Jocson's study can be understood on its own terms, Jordan's earlier text more dramatically illuminates the larger shape and purpose of P4P, and readers interested in bringing poetry to the people in their own communities will find the earlier text more inspiring. At once irreverent and earnest, urgent and classic, the *Blueprint* opens with Jordan's manifesto on a people's poetry and follows with a range of useful P4P artifacts: Jordan's syllabi; her tips for effective teaching, for "staging a revolutionary reading," and for "getting the word out" through publicity; essays by poet-scholars like Adrienne Rich; poems written by the (now famous) alumni of P4P; and even several lists (now slightly outdated) of American multicultural poetry.

Jordan died in 2002, but P4P continues. The program's longevity is testament not just to Jordan's vision, but to the infrastructure she built: a "fully accredited, three-part series composed of three African American Studies upper division courses" (Jocson 8). In a university system that too often treats students as receptacles, P4P's educational model is indeed revolutionary; undergrads who stick with P4P through the second and third courses become Student-Teacher-Poets (STPs), first leading their college peers during poetry workshops, and later teaching poetry in local high schools, prisons, and churches.

Korina Jocson was herself a STP, and both her earlier articles and this study grow out of that work. Here, Jocson addresses the youths' poetry as "process, product, and practice" by gathering a rich set of data: field notes; interviews with students, teachers, and STPs; secondary students' poetry notebooks and anthologies; and students' academic records (57). Using these, the study makes good on its claim to "make sense of poetry as a cultural form present in urban youth culture" and to highlight poetry's promise for "culturally relevant teaching in various learning settings" (27). Much like Fisher, Jocson argues that poetry "legitimizes students' sense of knowing" and "provide[s] students the opportunity to critically examine the sociocultural world in which they live" (30). And it does so in a form that, according to June Jordan, demands "the utmost precision in the use of language, hence, density and intensity of expression" (36).

It must be said that the book, which clocks in at about two hundred pages, takes its time laying out its theory and methodology in the early chapters. Jocson pulls from a wide and impressive array of literacy scholars including Vygotsky, Scribner

and Cole, Emig, Bakhtin, and Brian Street. But as in much academic work, this diverse literature can become a liability to a reader wishing to tie the book together under what Elenore Long might call a “guiding metaphor.” That is, Jocson accurately applies others’ theories of literacy to P4P but is not interested in providing a new theory through which to view literacy. It is sometimes unclear which of the many theoretical traditions she draws from best explains P4P’s work at Bellevue High. The result is that Chapter 2: Critical Multiculturalism and Ethnography, which clearly lays out how the author’s background as a child of immigrants and a graduate of an urban public school prepares her for this work, is less clear about the ways in which “critical multiculturalism” shapes that work or how it might shape the work of others investigating community-based literacy.

Readers looking for a quicker read might thus be forgiven for jumping into the thick of things in Chapter 3, which introduces the study’s primary site—Bellevue High. The school tells a depressingly familiar story: 80-90% of its White and Asian graduates are eligible for admission to California’s state colleges based on their high-school coursework, but only about half of its Latino and Black graduates can say the same. This diverse school, Jocson argues, “implicitly resegregates its students on the basis of race, class, and ability” (63). P4P intervenes in the education of students of color at Bellevue by bringing college poets to their classrooms. Three times a week for six weeks, they join in workshops to pen poems whose topics include racial profiling, democracy and love. Each six-week session culminates with a public reading.

Jocson does not shy away from documenting the occasional missed connections between undergraduates and high school students, but what appears most clearly is the undergraduates’ success. Jocson suggests that P4P poets, many of whom identify as underrepresented minorities and some of whom attended high schools similar to Bellevue, are well-equipped to help the younger students grow as writers and to make the college connection. “[E]thnic and cultural composition matter,” Jocson argues, as students “begin to build social relationships” that inform their literacies (104). She adds that the STPs’ “shared knowledge about youth popular culture” and “youthful demeanor” enables them to reach the younger students in ways their teachers find difficult (174).

The book’s tour de force is Chapter 6, in which Jocson focuses on the richly literate lives of the seven youths she tracks. She finds them writing on buses, reading magazines, taking notes on underground artists, writing poems to family members and peers, performing at poetry slams (one student advances to regional competition), and even interning at a youth-run radio station. These multiple forms of literacy suggest that the school is only one of many sponsors in a city-wide literacy ecology not unlike the one Goldblatt finds in the Philadelphia of *Because We Live Here*.

Maisha Fisher’s *Writing in Rhythm* is the more gripping text. It sustains its focus on the Power Writers’ eloquent poetry. And its transcripts of classroom conversations vividly present how a skilled teacher “feeds” burgeoning poets and cultivates young people’s ability to do the same. However, for the reader looking for guidance in stepping back and considering how such teacherly virtues might be applied in a different context, Jocson’s book has the edge. For Jocson’s final chapter offers explicit suggestions to those who would adapt P4P’s methods—and not all turn

on poetry in the secondary classroom. For example, community literacy practitioners will appreciate Jocson's suggestion that we "keep up to date with local youth groups and literary arts organizations," their events and publications (177). And readers of this study (and Jordan's *Blueprint*) will come away with a logistical understanding of how Berkeley's partnerships develop "extracurricular" literacy practices like spoken-word poetry. This is not to say that P4P's strategies can be easily replicated. It takes time to create poetry performances that gather larger audiences, and it takes money to sponsor competitions that do the same (many of these students submitted their work for the \$1,000 June Jordan poetry prize). But the thought-provoking poetry that Jocson showcases throughout her monograph makes a strong case that such efforts pay off.

Indeed, it is hard to put down either of these volumes without the abiding conviction that poetry can once again play a central role in public rhetoric. As June Jordan writes, "Good poems can interdict a suicide, rescue a love affair, and build a revolution in which speaking and listening to somebody becomes the first and last purpose of every social encounter" (3). Together, these volumes allow readers to listen to the too often neglected voices of urban youth, delivering both the weight of their insights and the force of their critique.