

## **Poetry as a Bridge to Understanding the Social Contexts of Urban Youth** *A Case Study*

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Research shows that cultural relevance in the classroom is key to the teaching and learning process (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gutierrez et al., 2000). To improve the education of urban youth, critical educators not only recognize that students enter the classroom with loads of cultural knowledge, but also identify them as resources that can act as a bridge to academic development. In this case study, I examine one male, urban high school student in particular to demonstrate the role that poetry as a literacy practice plays in his life. I illustrate how this student's poetry can serve as a window to understanding the social contexts of youth who come from other similar urban settings. I describe how this knowledge may help facilitate the kinds of learning that would further recognize the salience of urban youth culture in the classroom.

Nazo is a sixteen-year old, Nigerian American junior who attends Bellevue High School in Northern California. With ten other siblings, Nazo dwells in a two-bedroom backhouse with his mother, stepfather, and seven-year-old brother named Isa; they live near the Fruitvale district of East Oakland, in the San Francisco Bay Area. According to Nazo, he gets his "quiet" or "me" time in this busy neighborhood by carving his own space and "drowning" himself in literate activities such as listening to music, reading magazines, and watching television. What a lot of people do not know about Nazo, however, is that he is a poet, has been for several years, and plans to continue to be one as long as he "can pick up a pen to write."

Nazo started writing poems in the eighth grade when, in the process of repeating a previously flunked English class, his summer school teacher approached him and positively commented on a class assigned poem, the very first piece he has ever written. Though now he reflects, “it was really not that good,” Nazo recognizes this experience as a critical moment which led to his current passion for poetry writing. Since then, he writes wherever and whenever he can, on the bus, BART<sup>1</sup> train, waiting in line for “something,” in restaurants, in class, at home, or just “out and about” everywhere. These omnipresent literate episodes, or what Heath (1982) calls “literacy events,” become a way of being. For Nazo, they consist of “reading the world” and jotting down words that “hit” him unexpectedly; and later, they turn into poems that more fully depict the way that he processes and makes sense of his surroundings. Not only do they reflect in writing what goes through his mind between social encounters, but these events also shape how Nazo processes his realities and, consequently, how such realities shape the way he responds to them. These thoughts-turn-into-poems manifest intentions and actions that illustrate what is meaningful to him. Out of such literacy events, Nazo develops a particular kind of practice that is embedded with and situated in his beliefs, a kind of literacy practice that Street (1984) purports as ideological in nature.

In his poetry, Nazo delivers strong statements about the world, American society and its cultures, that often reflect his personal values shaped by the very thing that he writes about. Like an ethnographer making observations, he records what he sees in relation to how he feels through his own or even visceral reactions about the power structures that confine society and create social inequities. He does so in a form of a poem (see Poem #1 and #2). A thought, a phrase, a line, a stanza, a rhyme, or “just

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<sup>1</sup> BART stands for Bay Area Rapid Transit.

anything that comes to mind,” Nazo marks words down in his personal poetry notebook which he carries with him almost all the time. Whenever this is not possible, he finds any available tools—from scratch, lined or unlined loose-leaf paper to napkins and old receipts—that can make do for the moment in order not to lose out on a “tight” idea.

To understand Nazo’s interest in poetry is to understand Nazo’s daily realities. Nazo is in school from 8:45 am - 3:30 pm everyday. He wakes up at 6:00 am, gets ready, and hops either on the bus or catches a ride from a friend to arrive at school on time for his first class. Sometimes he stays in Bellevue after school to do homework, or hang out with friends. He usually comes home about dinnertime, exhausted from his day activities. He likes to finish his homework before coming home so that he can enjoy some time to watch TV, read magazines, talk on the phone, play with his brother, or escape the world through his headphones. He listens to various types of music, from contemporary jazz to neo-soul, R&B, and Rap. Some of his favorite artists right now are Najee, Jill Scott, Alicia Keys, Case, Ginuwine, Beanie Sigel, and Talib Kweli<sup>2</sup>. He also watches music videos on BET or MTV, and sometimes engages himself with the History or Discovery channels. In addition, he also keeps to date with “who’s who” or “what’s hot” by reading Ebony, The Source, and Jet magazines, as well as maintains cultural awareness by reading African American texts such as the *Assassination of the Black Male Image* that his parents make available, or *Bearing the Cross* that his English teacher provides. It is evident that Nazo’s literacy practices are embedded and situated in sociocultural settings. Nazo extracts not only from his own experiences as a young African American, but also the “realities” of others from the images and descriptions

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<sup>2</sup> At the publication of this case study, Nazo is a senior in high school and listens to artists such as Nas, Pharell, and Missy Misdemeanor Elliott.

portrayed in such texts. He finds motivation for his poetry from the influences and the likes of contemporary musical artists and, according to him, other “cultural renaissance” makers of his time.

Another way to understand what purposes poetry serves in Nazo’s life is to understand a particular discourse community that he participates in called Poetry for the People Too (P4P2). P4P2 began early in 2001, when two sophomore high school students were invited to speak and discuss their poetry as well as poetry writing processes at a conference sponsored by the National Council for Teachers of English. The duo group gradually grew as four other students joined in later classroom talks or presentations held at several locations including San Francisco City College, James Lick Elementary School, and U.C. Berkeley. Nazo was one of P4P2’s original members.

P4P2 is a student-teacher-poet (STP) group that convenes on certain occasions to make oral presentations of participants’ written poetry at different classroom sites. So far the group altogether has participated in five separate presentations. At the moment, it consists of about eight Bellevue high school students who have previously been involved with a university-based program called Poetry for the People (P4P), established by the late professor/poet/political activist June Jordan. It is a program in which U.C. Berkeley undergraduates concurrently enrolled in a university course serve as STPs to high school students in helping to teach, construct, and “workshop” poetry in their English classes; it is also one in which the high school teacher and a group of STPs with the guidance of June Jordan together collaborate to integrate standard English curriculum with the

objectives of P4P.<sup>3</sup> With their newly acquired and mediated knowledge, the eight members of P4P2 continue to follow the guidelines set forth and taught by P4P, and consequently have now taken on the role of STPs themselves. Similar to the notion of an apprenticeship (i.e., master-student relationship), these eight high school students initially acted as novice poets who looked to undergraduate STPs as experts or mentors in the construction of poetry. This negotiation would have not been possible without a context, a situated activity that, in this case, centered around the poet/poem-making process that occurred inside the classroom. For P4P2, what transpired as a result of this situated learning experience is a practice that began to extend beyond the classroom. Poetry writing as a learned activity became an integral part of these students' lives, what Lave and Wenger (1991) would identify as legitimate peripheral participation, a social practice that occurs in a more "historical, generative sense." Unlike the more consistent and structured schedule of P4P, P4P2 members find time to corroborate by way of occasional "invitation-only" presentations in high school and college settings, as well as spur of the moment exchanges during lunch at school. Most often, teachers and other instructors interested in incorporating poetry and poetry writing in their respective classes, as well as advocating to their own students the power of poetry, more specifically youth poetry, provide opportunities for such presentations.

As a whole, P4P2 members including Nazo write poems at their leisure, given the specific situations and experiences they find themselves in. Unlike in P4P, they do not base what they write about on assigned prompts; rather, they choose their own topics or themes. Much like in P4P, however, they construct poetic texts that tell the "truth" about

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<sup>3</sup> Poetry for the People's objectives are two-fold: (1) to create a safe medium of exchange, and (2) to democratize the medium of poetry to include "the people" (populations that been historically denied access and representation).

the ways in which they negotiate their social worlds that are often critical and ideological in nature. Telling the truth is one of P4P's guidelines in capturing one's innermost feelings and thoughts that provide the basis or meaning of poetry. As urban youth, their social realities are so forceful and powerful that how they negotiate and make meaning of them is relevant to how they shape as well as how their identities are shaped by external influences. Unfortunately, such realities are often not given priority in their social environments, particularly in school and inside classrooms. For Nazo, "extreme emotions" like anger, joy, and love cause him to pick up his special blue ballpoint pen and poetry book, and start to write what "comes" to him. "Wastes Away," a poem written about his older brother who died in January 2000, illustrates this type of negotiation and reality. Ironically, Nazo wrote it exactly two days prior to his brother's death. Since then, he has memorized a version of it which later appeared in a P4P anthology publication in the Fall semester of 2000 (see Poem #2).

Indeed, P4P2 as a discourse community provides youth a space to mediate everyday realities through poetry. The production of poetic texts becomes the means of reifying the social meanings they make out of experiences from home, school, the streets, and places in between. For example, Nazo writes about his "crush" in a poem called "My Baby Girl" (see Poem #3). Here he hints at the anticipation of being as well as becoming the "man" he foresees himself to be. He uses meta-reflection to create a part of his identity that would allow him to pursue the girl he admires. In addition to the social meanings, what is also important here is the several stages of how the poem took shape. First, the "raw", untouched, and unrevised poem is what appears in Nazo's poetry notebook. The second incorporates constructive comments and suggestions from a P4P2

peer after a “workshop” which he later considers for revision. The co-construction of Nazo’s poem happens here as he considers another poet’s input. The third version transferred from his notebook to loose-leaf pages is a revised version which takes these exact comments into account to some degree. Though co-construction occurs, Nazo as the original poet still has control or the final say in what comments to consider in shaping his poem. The next stage of the process is to develop a more refined and typed, though not a final, version because as Nazo puts it, “A poem is never perfect.” It this typed version of a poem that is often used to illustrate samples of student work, distributed in classroom presentations or, in the case of P4P, as published in anthologies. Accordingly, Nazo’s poem “Wastes Away” has been re-touched since its publication. Nazo has added and deleted words here and there to “make it even tighter.” It is important to Nazo that he does not share his poems with the public unless they had been “workshopped”/revised at least once. This way he gains more confidence knowing that other STPs he trusts have carefully read and examined his written work, before sharing it to a larger audience.

The revision stage of a poem is quite relative. Similar to the P4P approach, P4P2 members exchange poems, or if one does not have a poem ready in hand, s/he simply asks another to listen at bay, or take home to read, comment on, and “workshop” a xeroxed copy of a poem without mutual exchange. When this happens, an informal “return” date is set, but it usually depends on the poet’s wishes.

Clearly, there are several roles involved in the actual writing process: the poet, the reader, workshopper, and/or listener. What P4P2 does with these roles may vary from poet to poet, but usually the poet writes, gives a poem version to a reader (or reads it aloud so the reader also becomes a listener), the reader workshops it, and returns it to the

poet for the process to repeat however many times the poet desires, or until the poem reaches a somewhat “perfect” level of flow and clarity. Then a “workshopped” poem is typed up, but this does not automatically mean that it is completely “done.” According to Nazo, poems are never finished, even though they may give the impression that they are. “Finished” typed-up poems still have places that could use improvement. For him, a poem could conceivably be cut or shortened to be more precise in length and meaning, or elongated to expand a point or “play up” a metaphor by including more specific details. Sometimes, a word may be added or changed for rhythm, rhyme, repetition, and other literary writing tools.

One of the things that Nazo cautions himself with is wordiness in his poetry. As another of P4P’s guidelines, poems should be clear and precise. Therefore, Nazo tries to use vocabulary words that relate his thoughts or mental images to written texts. For example, a verb like “see” can be changed to “glimpse,” or “show” to “instill.” With the help of a fellow P4P2 member, Nazo is able to re-construct his poem with stronger verbs—which he calls “more descriptive words”—to make his writing more impactful. He remembers from P4P’s guidelines that one difference between prose and poem is that the latter employs “a minimum number of words with maximum impact” in conveying purpose or meaning. In essence, Nazo like other P4P2 members learned a secondary discourse associated with literary language and poetry writing that allows him to participate in constructing realities or telling truths occurring in their primary discourse (Gee, 1996), and sometimes uses this newly learned secondary discourse to critique happenstances within secondary discourses as illustrated in Nazo’s poem “Wastes

Away,” where he depicts his brother’s dim world (struggle) through his own understandings of the society surrounding him.

Indeed literate practices such as poetry writing are shaped by multiple negotiations present in one’s social practice; thus, like Nazo said, a poem is never finished. Nazo and the rest of P4P2 have created a discourse community within communities of practice that engage them in participation through and reification of poetry. The presentations or talks they themselves participate in shape how others (i.e., audience) might employ similar practices in their lives. In other words, Nazo has learned ways to participate in poetry writing, actively exercises this access by participating in presentations, and influences others to participate if they choose to, thus expanding present day communities of practice. P4P2 is a community of practice in its own, within larger communities of practice, that engage in producing meaning, molding identity, sustaining practice, and defining community (Wenger, 1998). For Nazo, P4P2 asserts these elements not only illustrated in his own poetry writing, but also in his actions as an STP in other classroom settings.

Despite his confidence in his abilities as a student, there are still times when Nazo feels disengaged for whatever reason in his own classes. So, instead, he writes poems to get him through the hour. He jots down what comes to him, smiles at its “potential,” and keeps it in his notebook. Perhaps rather than waiting to be read and shared at the next P4P2 presentation, these “hidden” poems consisting of “hidden” realities should be provided space inside classrooms. Perhaps then a mere literacy event such as a written haiku on the bus or a “dope line” on scratch paper can serve as an impetus to expand more communities of practice that engage students in thinking about how their realities

are relevant to teaching and learning. Nazo intends to continue growing and developing a more sophisticated way of expressing his “extreme emotions” through poetry; in the meantime, P4P2 as a discourse community will provide this critical space which his current classes do not offer.

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Poem #1

**Hung on Past Ideas**

Rage consumes me  
as the noose of past generations  
is tightened around my neck

Am I the southern Negro here to prance around  
with a grin from ear to ear  
like Amos & Andy

*Yessa, ssorryssa, can I get that fo yasa*  
Feeling like a boy  
avoiding the whip of his father

Or am I the Negro with the caliber at my waist  
protecting my 20-inch chain  
and my ounce of dope  
because they mean more to me than my 5 year-  
old son on welfare with my baby momma

Or am I just the Negro who knows to stay  
in place  
Pushing the envelope is impossible

Or if I ever get over  
it's because I play football or act

I get thrown off the edge  
10 years later my obituary says  
Hung by past Ideas

Poem #2

**Wastes Away**

As he twists & turns through life  
His soul spins from divine to unkind  
Will he forever be punished  
For past sins of his lifetime  
As he dies I see the whites of his eyes  
Burn red from greed  
He feels the need to lie, cheat and steal  
All to make that bill he thinks  
He needs so badly  
But doesn't he see that while he's a G  
His gun is destroying equality for you and me?  
Doesn't he realize that he's erased the tracks  
Made by the broken backs  
Of his ancestors  
But as he proceeds his family bleeds  
The pain which he causes  
And as time pauses  
He falls into a cycle of ill-begotten dreams  
That shatter like glass  
That last for a lifetime  
He say he cherishes his life  
But cold enough to take another  
Demand his family to love each other  
But slap around his baby's mother  
He's running for cover  
As the cold, hard wind of reality hits his face  
And the sun rises up, shines away  
The last strand of darkness  
He hides from the light  
Afraid that his mask will decay  
And dare I say  
He wastes away

## Poem #3

**My Baby Girl**

I first glimpsed your way on the corner  
as you chatted with your girls.  
Something inside me flew.  
I wanted to chop it up, but I couldn't  
perfect precious words to give to you.

I glanced your way again  
at a friend's party  
and I knew that I had to meet you.  
Introduce myself,  
Excuse me, my name is...  
Wait, aren't you that same cat  
on the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Drew?

Yeah, but...  
*Why didn't you speak to me?*  
Before I could utter a single note,  
you laughed,  
patted my hand and motioned me to sit.  
I never left your side since.

You're my baby, my one, the only one.  
In your eyes, the sun never sets.  
The love you instilled in me  
has forever changed my life.  
You never left me when sh%# got rough  
and what we got together I know will stand tough.

You're my lawyer, judge, water for the flower  
in the garden of my life  
to grow and flourish.  
How much I need you you'll probably never know.

My fu%#-ups force me to fret  
worry that I might lose you  
but your claim rings true.  
You're in my heart for the long run.  
And I'll never forget that.  
I'll come back with all the love  
I can muster.  
Put your trust on my shoulders.  
You'll know I'll never falter.

You're my girl, my might and  
soon you'll be my wife  
to make things right  
and for you to know that forever  
you can call me your man,  
and I can forever call you  
my baby girl.

