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WRITING SUPERHEROES

CONTEMPORARY CHILDHOOD, POPULAR CULTURE, AND CLASSROOM LITERACY

Anne Haas Dyson

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Finally, I wish to thank the many others who have helped me venture further out into childhood and literacy. Colleagues have provided unexpected and much appreciated messages of support and encouragement—among others, Michael Apple, JoBeth Allen, Barbara Comber, Allan Luke, Marty Nystrand, Ellen Seiter, Carole Edelsky, and my longtime teacher, colleague, and good friend Celia Genishi. My mother, Athleen Haas, my siblings, Mary, Ruthie (and Peter), Joanne, and, of course, my big brother David, have all had a part to play too. And then there are the many, many fine students who have graced my life at Berkeley; to paraphrase Lena, one of the children herein, were it not for my students, always urging me on, I probably *would* be watching *Barney* (Leach, 1988).

Introduction

On the Trail of the Superheroes

> [A] new breed of developmental theory . . . will be motivated by the question of how to create a new generation that can prevent the world from dissolving into chaos and destroying itself. I think its central technical concern will be how to create in the young an appreciation of the fact that many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered, that negotiation is the art of constructing new meanings by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other. . . .
>
> J. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, 1986, p. 149

With these words, Bruner envisions children as potential superheroes, whose given mission is to save the world from itself. These are superheroes of a special kind, whose force is found, not in the sword, but in the word. And they are the sort of heroes needed to sustain a democracy, people whose transforming gifts bespeak the power of articulated ideas (Greene, 1988; Meier, 1995).

These words seem a bit melodramatic. Certainly small children, vulnerable youngsters, cannot assume responsibility for the world's disarray (although children have long served as symbols of adult hopes and fears [Steedman, 1992]). Still, strong statements are useful for shaking up taken-for-granted ways of thinking, a fact not lost on the child characters who people the literacy drama to be shared herein.

In truth, these children were sometimes superheroes, in two senses. In their creation of imaginary worlds on paper and playground, the children often imagined themselves heroes with powers rooted in accidents of nature or science. Their actions were responses to impending physical doom—most often,

the destruction of the world by evil others. But in their own social worlds, children sometimes became superheroes of another sort, ones with powers rooted in social circumstance. Their actions were responses to verbal constraints—they were not intent on saving the adult world, but on engaging in child imagined ones.

Consider, for example, the following classroom scene:

> The boys in Tina's second grade class have been writing stories about ninjas and X-Men (Lee, 1963) to perform in their classroom Author's Theater. Tina and her best friend Holly (both working-class girls of color) have been begging for a role in these stories—for a part to play—with no luck at all. Once in a while, their peer Sammy includes a girl to be rescued but then he picks Melissa or Sarah, both white middle class girls. Seldom is *any* girl chosen to be a tough superhero, a person who saves others, despite the presence of strong women, including women of color, in the X-Men comics and cartoons.
>
> Tina has had it. She and Holly decide to write their own X-Men story for a classroom performance. "And no boys," she says firmly to Holly, "'cause the boys doesn't let us play."

So began one critical event in the unfolding literacy drama in Tina's urban classroom. In this drama, many of her peers used popular cultural symbols—like the media superhero—to achieve a sense of personhood and social belonging, of control and agency in a shared world. In making use of these symbols, children could assume identities within stories that revealed dominant ideological assumptions about relations between people—between boys and girls, adults and children, between people of varied heritages, physical demeanors, and societal powers. These stories reflected the immediate values and interests of some children—but distorted those of others.

Thus, children sometimes became superheroes of another sort, able to take on powerful cultural storylines (Bruner, 1993; Lavie, Narayan, & Rosaldo, 1993). They campaigned for space in seemingly closed stories; they questioned taken-for-granted story characters, plots, and themes. Their powers were limited, however. Change in social and community relations could come only through the complex negotiations that might follow their actions—if the requested space, the voiced questions, and the child superheroes themselves were acknowledged.

The complex plot of the classroom drama to be presented herein came from the interplay among individual child writers, their social companions, and the wider classroom community. These were not young children turned into themselves, engaged in private explorations and creations of written meaning; these were children turned outward, engaged in public performances and text discussions. In their actions and reactions, they made visible to me, the adult observer, the social and ideological possibilities and constraints of child composing as a mediational tool, as a means for learning to "regulate their relations with each other." In this book, I examine the link between learning to compose and learning to be a community participant, and to do so I focus on the social and ideological processes undergirding children's use of media symbols—especially the superhero—as material for constructing textual and social worlds.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

The fact that I would compose a book featuring superheroes came as a surprise to me. This project began in the spring of 1993, during an informal visit to an East San Francisco Bay school, a school serving children from different racial and socioeconomic groups and one in which I had been involved since 1989 (for previous project, see Dyson, 1993). A young teacher, Kristin, who was new in the school, had invited me to drop by her room. Just before I did so, I stopped off in a first grade, where I overheard two young boys discussing media characters. They were clearly talking about superhero characters engaged in varied karate moves. But when I asked who exactly these superheroes were, the boys denied their own conversation: They had been talking, they said, about ocean creatures, you know, like dolphins.

After all, "why would anyone want to talk about fighting ninjas in school?" asked one boy.

"Yeah," said the other.

In their classroom, talk and writing about such figures were part of the children's peer-governed or unofficial social world; they were not welcome in the official teacher-governed one. This material, so central to many children's social and imaginative lives, is ideologically unsettling to many adults. As the "ocean discussants" suggested, these stories contain much physical aggression, often embedded in gender-stereotyped plots. For adults concerned about a world on the brink of chaos, these stories hardly seem good child fare.

In addition, as "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1973) in the knowledge economy of school, this material is of low value. Professed knowledge of certain symbolic substance—the stuff of school-introduced Greek myths, for example, relative to the stuff of Saturday morning cartoons—may position children within stereotypical class relations, which, in this country are interwoven with those of race (Bakhtin, 1981; Bourdieu, 1984; Buckingham, 1993; Levine, 1988; Willis, 1990). The ocean discussants were proper young men: They certainly did not discuss crude matters like fighting ninjas (at least not in front of teacher-like adults).

Nonetheless, superhero material was strikingly visible in Kristin's second grade room. She had a daily "free writing time," and the openness of that period was one reason why commercial culture became so visible. She also had

an optional practice called "Author's Theater," in which children could choose classmates to act out their stories. This practice encouraged the children to bring their peer play life into the official school world and, thus, to also bring the superheroes and other popular media figures. Like many people, young and old, the children appropriated commercial culture as play material, as material for exploring social roles and social identities (e.g., Fisherkeller, 1995; Jenkins, 1992; Moss, 1989).

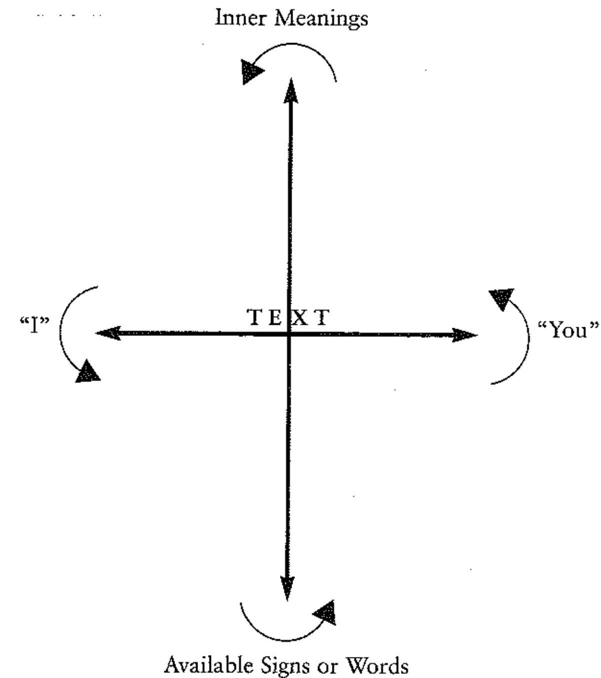
The charged nature of those media stories—their centrality to children's unofficial social lives, their clear ideological links to societal stereotypes, and their problematic relation to the official school world—made them compelling research material: The children's use of such stories provided an access to the social and ideological dynamics of school literacy learning, including how child composers used cultural material to orient themselves to each other within the institution of school. Thus, I began to observe Kristin's second grade classroom, paying close attention to children's use of media stories. Kristin returned to the school for the children' s third grade year, and so did I, continuing my observations.

To make sense of these observations, I drew on the dialogic vision of language developed by Bakhtin (1981, 1986). In this view, learning to use language involves learning to interact with others in particular social situations and, at the same time, learning to be, so to speak, within the dominant ideologies or "truths" about human relationships; that is, it involves learning about the words available in certain situations to a boy or girl, to a person of a particular age, ethnicity, race, class, religion, and so on.

Thus, our texts are formed at the intersection of a social relationship between ourselves as composers and our addressees and an ideological one between our own psyches (or inner meanings) and the words, the cultural signs, available to us. In Figure 1, the social relationship mediated by the text is represented by the horizontal axis, the ideological one by the vertical axis. The arrows suggest selves who move in sociocultural space, positioned in relationships with diverse others, with different aspects of their own identity foregrounded or muted, with different possibilities for speaking.

Composers, then, are not so much meaning makers as meaning negotiators, who adopt, resist, or stretch available words. For example, in Kristin's class, Sammy was the most consistent composer of superhero tales; by learning to exploit a familiar storyline, a lonely child could affiliate with the boys, few of whom could resist being a tough good guy. But the boys' available words, reflecting dominant ideologies about gender, were resisted by Tina, the classroom's most consistent social activist. She responded to her marginality in their texts by reworking an all-too-familiar storyline. On the edges of media tales were children like Melissa and Sarah; as the literacy drama evolved, they responded by distancing themselves from the unruly players of superhero texts.

Figure 1. *Composing as a dialogic process: Its horizontal and vertical dimensions.*



In Kristin's classroom, the Author's Theater functioned as a kind of public forum. In that forum, authors presented their texts and, in so doing, the ideological echoes of those texts could become immediate social voices who "talked back" (hooks, 1990). Moreover, that forum had official rules about respectful listening, an enforced public pressure for fairness, and an instructional focus on composing, which emphasized that texts were crafted and could be crafted differently. Thus, deliberateness about authorial choices potentially could become linked to deliberateness—thoughtfulness—about the classroom community in formation.

As classroom observer, I documented the interplay between individual children's writing processes and products and their participation as social players and community members in their classroom. Along with the children themselves, I learned of their common desires for adventure and action, security and place, power and love. Whatever their particular and collective differences, they could work toward common visions of what was good, be it in a story or a real world. Since this was a human, not a superhuman world, the children did not achieve a "happy-ever-after" ending—human superheroes, unlike some of the commercial variety, are complex, contradictory, and subject to the demands of the moment.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

In this book, I intend, first, to add to our understandings of child literacy in a way consistent with a "new breed of developmental theory," to return to Bruner's words. In this new sort of theory, children are not featured only as individual inventors of pre-existent knowledge systems (cf., Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), nor only as novices in adult-guided activities (cf., psychologists inspired by Vygotsky [1962, 1978], e.g., Brown & Palinscar, 1982). Rather, they are active contributors to evolving communities that both draw on and influence larger cultural systems (see also, Corsaro & Miller, 1992; Ochs, 1992).

Moreover, this new breed is not an attempt to provide a reified or detached account of children's development, of "natural" evolution. It is a "motivated" account by adults who hope to have some influence on the developmental projects children adopt. The present motivated account is grounded in the challenges of the historical moment: Ours is an ever-smaller world of ever-increasing sociocultural diversity, a world requiring a developed appreciation of the fragility of human life and of the possibility of reinventing, rewriting, ways of living together.

Thus, through analytic narratives of the literacy actions and reactions of Sammy, Tina, and their peers, I situate child writing within the social and ideological complexity of children's lives and contemporary times. I hope to contribute to and extend sociocultural visions, which portray learning to write as learning to use the medium to participate in cultural life in socially appropriate ways (e.g., Heath, 1983; Moll & Whitmore, 1993; Rogoff, 1990). I illustrate that children's ways of writing are shaped, not only by their interaction in adult-guided worlds, but also by their social goals and ideological positioning in peer-governed ones. Moreover, social identification and social conflicts, not only social interactions, make salient new kinds of writing choices, newly imagined ways of depicting human relationships.

Interwoven with this theoretical intention is a second and pedagogical one: to illustrate how classroom diversity is a potential classroom resource for individual and collective growth. Given this goal, gender, race, class, and other constructed categories must be presented as more than "variables" that may make literacy development problematic (cf., Knapp & Associates, 1995; Needels & Knapp, 1994). They must be constructed as potentially critical aspects of children's sense of, and expression of, self and other.

In forming imagined worlds on both paper and playground, children reveal their sense of the social world; their unfolding stories reflect deeply embedded cultural storylines about human relations (Gilbert, 1994). To become conscious of these ideological assumptions, children, like adults, benefit from the dialogic response of those for whom the world works differently (Greene, 1988, 1993; Perry & Fraser, 1993). Such dialogues themselves benefit from the potential of texts to hold imagined worlds still for joint reconsideration, for reimagination (Freire, 1970).

In Kristin's classroom, these social dialogues occurred intermixed with much social fun—a quality often missing from discussions of diversity and urban schooling. It was the joy of imagining worlds of pleasure and power and, moreover, of performing those worlds that kept the community in formation and individual members engaged. Energized by the desire for inclusion, child superheroes initiated (and a teacher superhero guided) explorations of social fairness—of access to power and pleasure—and, indeed, of the very nature of power and pleasure; at the same time, they experienced the possibilities and the responsibilities of writers.

Finally, an intention both theoretical and pedagogical: I hope this close examination of children's media use will both complement and complicate discussions of children and the popular media. Many adults worry about children's engagement with the popular media's images of power and pleasure, with its depictions of human relations. Discussions of the reasons for these concerns, of their sources in our consumer culture, and possible public remedies are found elsewhere (e.g., Kline, 1993; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1994). In most such discussions, children are constructed as victims of current commercial media and potential threats to the future social order. (For rich discussions of adult views of children, see Thorne, 1987; Wallace, 1995; Zelizner, 1985).

And yet, the commercial media are central to contemporary childhood. The media—not adult storytellers (or readers)—provide most U.S. children with their common story material. Thus, herein, I aim to contribute to discussions of contemporary culture by portraying ways in which young children, like their older counterparts (e.g., Fisherkeller, 1995; Jenkins, 1992; Willis, 1990), are active interpreters of the media, who "reconstruct its meanings according to more immediate [social] interests" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 35). Indeed, sometimes children themselves are superheroes who overcome the ideological constraints of media offerings, not to save imagined others, but to live more equitably and/or more harmoniously with real others. Moreover, I aim to argue that educators may both foster and influence these interpretive processes if school curricula are "permeable" (Dyson, 1993)—not impervious—to children's playful appropriations and critical examinations of diverse cultural material. Teachers and, more broadly, communities do have a responsibility to make judgments about, and provide the young access to, valuable cultural products—but they also have a responsibility to attend to those cultural materials children themselves find accessible and meaningful. To fail to do so is to risk reinforcing societal divisions of gender and of socioeconomic class.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 1, I present the conceptual tools—the theoretical lenses—used to shape this analytic study of the social and ideological dynamics of child composing. I present as well a discussion of the methodological tools—the procedures and

techniques of interpretive research through which I gained access to the study's rough material, the children's talk and texts, their actions and interactions in and around stories.

In Chapter 2, I set the stage for, and introduce the main characters of, the literacy drama to be presented herein. I first provide a brief tour of the school playground, pointing out the forms of child play (and configurations of child players) visible there. Then, along with the child players, I enter Kristin's classroom; I describe the language arts activities available there, especially the composing period, with its community forum of text, drama, and talk. (The conventions used in the presentation of these transcripts are presented in Table A1 in Appendix A.) Finally, I formally introduce the two focal children—Sammy and Tina; these children were my primary access to, and reference points within, the evolving literacy drama.

Beginning with Chapter 3, I present the drama itself, detailing the interplay between the dynamics of children's classroom lives and the changing nature of their authorial decisions. Chapters 3 through 6 feature children appropriating media superhero stories and, in so doing, constructing and reconstructing their relations as boys and girls, as people of different races and classes, in and out of stories. Chapter 7 features children exploring, not superheroes, but boyfriends and girlfriends. The children's sensitivity to these stories, which could situate them within gender *and* race relations, illustrates both the potential revelatory power of the text and its capacity for silence, for circumvention. (Publishing information and descriptions of all media stories appropriated by the children are included in Appendix B.) Finally, in Chapter 8, I explore the pedagogical implications of this project about childhood identities, ideology, and learning to write. In so doing, I draw on the dialogues of a teacher study group in which both Kristin and I participated (Dyson, 1997). The group grappled with the complexities of permeable curricula, including their own ambivalent feelings about children's cultural materials.

Kristin's means of responding to such material—her pedagogical practices of open-ended composing, public performing, and community discussions—may not yield the same sorts of dynamics in other classrooms populated with different configurations of children. The qualities and consequences of any particular *pedagogical* practice depend on how, as *sociocultural* practice, it engages children's sense of purpose, their linguistic and experiential resources, their motivated grappling with text features and forms (Comber, personal communication; Dyson, 1993; Heath, 1983; Jacob & Jordan, 1993). The practices presented herein, then, are not models but illustrations of children engaged in both learning to write and learning to participate in a complex community of differences, a community in which they were sometimes superheroes.

ON LIMITS AND STRENGTHS

The children featured in this book could have given rise to other empirical but motivated accounts of childhood. For example, the children might have emerged as victims of a society that tolerates poverty, that is uncomfortable with difference (e.g., Children's Defense Fund, 1994; Polakow, 1993). The vision constructed herein is rooted in a way of working that aims to situate children center stage in the world as they see it (Geertz, 1973). Such a way of working has its limits, particularly since ours is not a society that pays close attention to the views of children.

And yet, when observed inside their own fields of action, *child* strengths emerge—strengths born of ordinary human inventiveness and of commonplace empathy. Moreover, when that creativity and that social sensitivity are given supervised play in a public forum, they may reveal a new childhood strength—a growing consciousness, deliberateness, about the social consequences of words (Bakhtin, 1981; Volosinov, 1973; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978).

These strengths are all needed in a world that, unfortunately, lacks obvious angels, a world where good guys and bad ones can be hard to discern. In the words of another author worried about a world in disarray, this one an educator, Deborah Meier:

> We cannot assume everyone will react the same way to the theory of evolution, the "discovery" of America, the Gulf War, or the value of "life-style" choices [nor, I would add, to X-Men (Lee, 1963) or Power Rangers (Saban, 1994)]. Differences make things complicated. But dealing with the complicated is what training for good citizenship is all about. . . . [Public schools] could provide an exciting opportunity to use our often forgotten power to create imaginary worlds, share theories, and act out possibilities. This time not just on the playground but in all the varied public arenas in which we meet with our fellow citizens (1995, p. 7).

These powers, these strengths, are all in evidence in the chapters ahead. They are used by young children who are not unidimensional cartoon characters, found on a television tube. They are complex, contradictory human ones, found in classroom scenes. Their literacy drama is presented herein in the interest of fostering other such dramas, in other classrooms, where superheroes of a human sort are waiting for their cue.