
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Faculty Publications

Spring 2008

Intratexturealities: The Poetics of the Freedom Schools

Vonzell Agosto

University of Wisconsin - Madison, vagosto@usf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/els_facpub

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Education Policy Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Agosto, Vonzell, "Intratexturealities: The Poetics of the Freedom Schools" (2008). *Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Faculty Publications*. 8.

https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/els_facpub/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Intratextualities: The Poetics of the Freedom Schools

Vonzell Agosto University of Wisconsin-Madison

Freedom Schools, which operated during 1964 after the collaborative efforts of several Civil Rights organizations, provided an opportunity to understand how students can drive the curriculum to meet individual and collective needs within a community. The presence and use of poetry throughout the Freedom Schools was mysterious, given that it is virtually absent in the curriculum guide, memos, and documents prepared by the administrative staff members and teachers. Students' poetry not only revealed the intersections and layers of lived experience, society, and culture, but also their agency in the context of an anti-oppressive education project.

INTRODUCTION

In a revolutionary attempt to combat oppression in the social, political, legal, economic, and educational system, several organizations involved in the Civil Rights Movement joined efforts as the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to create the Freedom Summer Project of 1964. Member organizations included the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced "snick"), The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In 1963, Charles Cobb, a field secretary for SNCC, drafted a prospectus calling for the addition of an educational component to the previously established voter registration project. His proposal grew out of a broader mission to develop leadership in African American communities. This six-week education program operated in twenty counties throughout Mississippi with a curriculum devised to raise student's critical consciousness as a prerequisite for leadership. A Freedom Schools volunteer credited Otis Pease with developing the curriculum guide at a March curriculum conference in 1963 (Freedom School Curriculum Materials Transcript, "J. Ellin & N. Ellin Freedom Summer Collection 1963-1988," Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, University of Southern Mississippi; Lynd, 2003). According to Chilcoat and Ligon (1999), professors Otis Pease and Howard Zinn developed sections of the curriculum guide. In response to the interview question, "How was the curriculum created?" Director of the Freedom Schools Staughton Lynd replied, "Its constituent parts came from many sources" (Lynd, 2003).

Seldom discussed in recounts of the Freedom Schools is the role of students. Poems created by students provided insight into this history and served as points of entry into the inquiry on curriculum, pedagogy, and anti-oppressive/social justice education. This historical excavation broadened the understanding of education situated in the Civil Rights Movement and the local micro-level phenomena occurring between and among students, schools, and communities. How did poetry enter the Freedom Schools' curriculum? In what ways did it serve students? How did the students' creation and use of poetry affect education and the community? The students' poetry spoke to these questions and revealed a rich texture of community, culture, and history in the struggle for education and self-determination.

FREEDOM by Rona, 13

Freedom is like a note that rings out loud. Freedom is like gold, pounds for pounds.

Freedom is a road that never ends, that has no who, where, or when.

Freedom is like a poem that rhymes, that means freedom for his people, her people, yours and mine.

(Reprinted with permission from the Ellin & Ellin Freedom Summer Collection, 1963-1988 of the McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, at www.lib.usm.edu)

The poetry of Freedom Schools' students revealed their critical reflection on the theme of freedom. Students interrogated this theme, among others, through their references and allusions to the disjuncture between the idea of freedom and their experiences as African Americans. Their poetry communicated their developing subjectivity and critical social consciousness about the forces of oppression confronting African American communities.

What Does Freedom Mean? by Madeline, 24
 Whenever I think about sunlight and fresh air, or peace and springtime,
 I think about men wanting to be free.
 There are men who want freedom all their lives and never get it:
 there are men who have freedom all their lives and never know it . . . but I think men who
 know they are free and try to help other men get it show how precious freedom really is

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The term, intratextualities, represents the complexity of education, including its role and the role of students as agents in historical, social, legal, economic, and political (con)texts. This term combines the ideas represented by the terms *texture* as used by Williams (1988) to describe everyday life (its density, intensity, material constraints, and narrowness) and *realities* (as multiple and partial constructions and interpretations of texts and contexts). In addition, the theory of border pedagogy (Giroux, 1996, 2005) served to highlight student agency and center students' poetry at the intersection of socio-cultural and historical production. According to Giroux (1996), border pedagogy is

. . . not simply opening diverse cultural histories and spaces to students, it also means understanding how fragile identity is as it moves into borderlands crisscrossed with a variety of languages, experiences, and voices. There are no unified subjects here, only students whose voices and experiences intermingle with the weight of particular histories that will not fit into the master narrative of a monolithic culture. Such borderlands should be seen as sites for both critical analysis and as a potential source of experimentation, creativity, and possibility. (p. 209)

The resulting framework is harmonious and discordant, and therefore, reflective of this sociopolitical period in which the 'rules of engagement' were shifting from a pacifist to an increasingly militant philosophy that called for social change alongside an ongoing demand for an equitable system of education.

FREEDOM SCHOOLS IN CONTEXT: MISSISSIPPI SUMMER OF 1964

The last recorded lynching occurred in Mississippi in 1959, just five years before the Freedom Summer Project began (Pinar, 2001). During the mid-1960s, SNCC's leaders were questioning whether militancy and, perhaps, violent action should replace nonviolent direct action (Glen, 1996). In his book, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (1964) James Silver described Mississippi as a state defensive to social change and enclosed within a doctrine of White supremacy. This is evident in the resistance to efforts to increase African Americans' participation in voting and education. In Mississippi, the percentage of registered voters and desegregated schools was substantially lower than in other southern states (Sinsheimer, 1989).

Charles Cobb described the Mississippi school system as “repressive and oppressive—not amenable to ideas” (John Rachal, Interviewer, “Oral History with Mr. Charles Cobb,” 1996, Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, University of Southern Mississippi). Prior to the Freedom Summer Project, it was common practice to arrest high school students for passing out pamphlets, asking the “wrong” questions, and marching in protest. Students at Burgland High in McComb marched in protest to the schools’ threat to suspend anyone who participated in sit-ins (“Freedom School Curriculum Materials” transcript, *J. Ellin & N. Ellin Freedom Summer Collection 1963-1988*, Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, University of Southern Mississippi). Under such conditions, is it plausible that students took advantage of any opportunity to widen and extend the space in which to indulge in creative expression for self- and public interest? Although Freedom Schools encouraged students to participate in the Freedom Summer Project by registering voters or helping during meetings, Freedom Schools did not condone student participation in public protests such as marches or sit-ins.

To intervene in the repression of creativity, the Freedom Summer Schools’ curriculum devoted much attention to arts, recreation, and culture. Central to the curriculum was the pedagogy of discourse between teachers and students, and teachers and staff. “The value of the Freedom Schools will derive mainly from what the teachers are able to elicit from the students in terms of comprehension and expression of their experiences” (“Freedom School Curriculum Materials and Non-material Teaching Suggestions” transcripts, *J. Ellin & N. Ellin Freedom Summer Collection 1963-1988*, Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, University of Southern Mississippi). The following section examines a few of the student poems to illustrate student agency in the context of Freedom Summer as a moment in the history of anti-oppressive and social justice education.

POETICS: INTERPRETATIONS OF COMMUNITY-CULTURE-IDENTITY-HISTORY

Freedom School students’ poetry—as well as the community, culture, and history of which they speak—are composed of “interwoven narratives, relationships, and experiences” (Bloom, Philbrink, & Blistein, 1961, p. 84). These poems, constructed with and against relations of power, reflect the ambiguous, porous, and elusive borders between curriculum and lived experience, text and context, and words and meanings. Furthermore, they represent the negotiation of education amid power struggles and violence. Their creation, usage, and layered meanings speak to present concerns about anti-oppressive and social justice education and youth activism. Two strengths of poetry as a pedagogical tool of empowerment are that it allows for flexibility in its form, content, performance, and function and invites multiple interpretations.

In interpreting poetry, Bloom, Philbrink, and Blistein (1961) suggested that one tries to learn the answers to such obvious questions as

What is the situation? What happens here? What’s the story? Who or what is being talked about? The answers to such questions will not, of course, completely analyze any poem for us, but they will frequently set us on the right road to a complete and useful analysis (p. 85).

Beyond content, as Ngara (1990) asserted, [deleted that] there are layers of the poetic text to consider. “In dialectical criticism content cannot be restricted to considerations of theme and subject matter only—it includes these as well as the historical conditions which give rise to the poem and also to the ideological dimension” (p. 14). In other words, with dialectical criticism, there is no simple separation of content (what is says) and form (how it says it) from context.

Black Boy/ Mississippi Fed by Ida, 12

I am Mississippi bred, I am Mississippi fed. Nothing but a poor black boy.
I am a Mississippi slave, I shall be buried in a Mississippi grave, Nothing but a poor dead boy.

The author of this poem drew the history of enslavement into the 1960s and links to a future in which she, the slave, the boy, will be buried. The line, “nothing but a poor dead boy” is a figurative description, prediction, and statement about how those current and historical factors, such as race, class, gender intersect to determine his (and her) positionality and possibilities for (re)negotiating the borders between race, class, gender differentiations. The beginning references to being “bred” and “fed” are significant. They suggested a process of socialization by a powerful socializing agent—the state of Mississippi that began at birth, and positioned the subject as a receptacle.

The first sentences in both sections use the pronoun “I” to speak of identity (I am), whereas in the ending phrase in both sections “Nothing but a poor black boy” and “nothing but a poor dead boy,” the boy becomes a no-thing rather than a no-one: he is objectified. The removal of the pronoun of personhood and substitution with the reference to the inanimate limited the “boy’s” possibility for self-determination. The last phrase, “Nothing but a poor dead boy” suggested that the boy is poised to accept defeat rather than resist the conditions that reduced the viability of life for many young men in Mississippi during and prior to the 1960s. Aside from suggesting that oppression affected the author, this poem offered a glimpse into the social context and factors (e.g., racial, historical, economic) affecting the quality of life for individuals and their communities.

Dialectical criticism suggested that questions are raised regarding the ideological and social dimensions in which the author created the poetry. Assuming that the author (Ida Ruth) was female, why did she write in the first person as a boy rather than a girl? This poem called into question, gender relations and the possibilities for Black female expression in the context of a curriculum designed to train leaders. Although a sense of helplessness is present in the content, the creation of the poem reflected an opportunity taken by the author for creative expression, a focus of the curriculum as a tool of empowerment. According to Thomas R. Kendrick (1964), the words in the poem “are evidence not of resignation but of a developing revolution” (p. A6).

A traditional theory and practice of reading in African American culture, according to H. L. Gates (1985, 1987, 1988), was signification. This rhetorical practice allowed the speaker to argue indirectly and sometimes undermine and unbalance a master discourse. Signifying poets, through their oral or written poetry, repeat and reverse at the same time. Gates (1987) wrote, “[The] black poet’s primary task has been to create, by definition, reality for the members of his or her community, to allow them to perceive their universe in a distinctively new way” (p. 177). The following poem named and redefined.

I AM A NEGRO by Roslyn, 11

I am a Negro and proud of its color too,
If you were a Negro wouldn’t you?
I am glad of just what I am now
To be and to do things I know how.
I’m glad to be a Negro so happy and gay
To grow stronger day by day.
I am a Negro and I want to be free as any other child,

To wander about the house and the woods and to be wild.

I want to be Free, Free, Free.

(Reprinted with permission from the Harry J. Bowie Papers, 1964-1967 of the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI at www.wisconsinhistory.org)

This poem does not re-inscribe the too common association of the word Negro with immobility and sullenness found across U. S. literature. Rather, the word Negro is associated with the potential for physical movement (wander), joy (happy and gay) and a sense of pride (I'm glad to be). This reversal provides a humorous and light-hearted approach that played on the reader's (assumed to be someone other than a Negro) ideological and racial identity in asking, "If you were a Negro wouldn't you?" This poet asked the readers to question their reality and their place in humanity through the revelation of her own humanity and place in history. However, what was signified when one referred to one's self using the third person possessive ('its')? Should this be interpreted as an example of the remainder, internalization of inhumanness by the subjected, freedom of expression, oppression, repression, or simply an unintended grammatical 'error'? As this poem demonstrated, it is possible to unsettle a master discourse only to have its ideological underpinnings (i.e., racial inferiority) resurface through language. The author, jagodzinski (1992) suggested that getting to know texture requires "a continual coming back to the thing so that we might make it our own—make it familiar within our famil(y)arity" (p. 165).

A Gypsy by Etta, unknown age

A gypsy, a gypsy I would like to be

If only I could find one who

Would change his place with me.

Rings on fingers, Earrings on my ears,

Rough shoes to roam the world

For years, and years to come.

A gypsy, a gypsy To ramble, and to roam,

For maybe, For a week or so, and then go hiding home.

(Reprinted with permission from the Howard Zinn Papers, 1956-1970 of the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI at www.wisconsinhistory.org)

This poem speaks to the idea of the Black Diaspora and the difficulty of being able to roam and return to a place one calls home. Human groups that are "historically dynamic, culturally ordered, with contingent social realities" present a

. . . particular challenge to efforts to delimit, define, and classify human groupings, a challenge that is both old and recurrent: how to name something that changes and by the naming provide a 'handle' for dealing with it, intellectually and practically, in a way that is more or less stable, if not permanent, over time. But, as human groups can and do change in their composition over time, whatever the rate, what is it that the name is a 'handle' on? (Outlaw, 1996, p. 138).

The following poem displays the historical change in naming—from Negro to Black—to represent the group that is now often referred to as African Americans.

As A Negro I Want To Be by Sadie, age unknown

As a Negro I want to be equal as every man

Able to walk hand in hand.

Able to live a happy life

As every other man's children and wife.
 I want to be equal and superior
 To those men that call Negroes Inferior
 I want to prove I'm just as good
 As any race and White man should.
 As a Negro I want to be
 As any other man on this earth, free;
 For I am like a White man, given a birth,
 Both Black men and White men are parts of this earth.
 (Reprinted with permission from the Harry J. Bowie Papers, 1964-1967 of the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI at www.wisconsinhistory.org)

Was it the intersection of race and gender that the author (Sadie) did not name—did not have a handle on? From man's wife to men she wanted to be equal and superior. In the absence of the word 'woman' and the presence of referents to females and children as male possessions ("man's [children and] wife"), this poet has said much about the intersection of gender and race in her day.

The following poems focused on the shared and public use of student poetry and its impact on the community, curriculum, social-consciousness, and change. An example of students' use of poetry and its re-entry into the curriculum was developed at the Mileston Freedom School. Students wrote, produced, and performed the play, "The American Negro" (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998). A narrator recited the following excerpted poem (author unknown) to tie the scenes together and serve as part of the historical narrative.

I Am the American Negro

I am the mind of a race of millions
 Who have suffered three hundred years
 Of mental and physical slavery
 My mind is sore and it aches
 Since I have known the sins
 Of two races, and carried the hate of one.

I have asked only that I
 Be recognized as a man, and in return
 I have been beaten like a dog.
 Of what I was and what I am now.

Additionally, after the last scene, another verse was recited that linked past and present challenges to racial equality:

I am the American Negro

Today we have seen three men disappear
 For joining in our fight
 My mind is weary with thoughts of the past.

According to Joanne Grant (1964) in an article in the *National Guardian*, "There were students who, like Joyce, wrote poetry" (p. 5). Freedom School student Joyce wrote the poem *The House of Liberty* for the opening of the McComb Freedom School that took place on the lawn in front of the bombed-out private home where the school was held.

Freedom School director, Staughton Lynd referred to the poem and its impact in a memorandum. “When Joyce’s poem was read to a secret meeting of a dozen Negro businessmen, they were moved to tears and a home was found for the school and its 100 students (“Lynd Memo,” Staughton Lynd Papers 1938-1997, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison). Lynd further noted, “the presence of a Freedom School helped to loosen the hard knot of fear and to organize the Negro community” (“Freedom School Curriculum Materials” transcript, *J. Ellin & N. Ellin Freedom Summer Collection 1963-1988*, Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, University of Southern Mississippi; Staughton Lynd Papers 1938-1997, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison). This instance of solidarity showcased the Freedom Schools and the poem as instruments of social change.

The following description of students’ reactions to the Ida poem (discussed earlier), exemplified the use of student poetry. In response to the poem, students engaged in critical discussion over its reference to slavery, and the then current conditions surrounding the right to vote and racial segregation. The Freedom School teacher, Allen Gould, shared his students’ reactions to the poem in the following excerpt from the *Washington Post* (Kendrick, 1964).

My kids got angry at first about the poem of the ‘Poor Black Boy’. He continued, “We’re not black slaves they said, but one girl got up and retorted, ‘We certainly are. Can your father vote? Can he eat where he wants to?’ It was quiet for a minute, then they all started thinking out loud. It was thrilling. (p. A6)

The use of Ida’s poem was an example of student poetry as a prompt for critical class discussion. Furthermore, it was a rarity in that the poem was made available to the public outside of the local context, and through a widely distributed medium.

The following section broadened the scope of the creation and use of poetry by staff outside of the Freedom Schools and provided volunteers’ accounts of their use of poetry before, during, and after Freedom Summer. These accounts added insight into the inner workings of classroom discussions, including, student reactions to poetry, more generally.

POETRY ACROSS THE FREEDOM SCHOOLS

Several coordinators, administrators, and curriculum developers incorporated poetry into their personal writings, including Chude, Lynd, and Cobb, who was described as “a gifted creative writer” (“Freedom School Curriculum Materials” transcript, *J. Ellin & N. Ellin Freedom Summer Collection 1963-1988*, Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, University of Southern Mississippi; Staughton Lynd Collection—1960s, Kent State University Archives). In 1965, poems by staff (e.g., Stembridge, Gillon, and Cobb) were published in *The Student Voice 1960-1965* (Carson, 1990). Liz Fusco, coordinator of at least two Freedom Schools, gave a detailed account of personal experiences with poetry before the Freedom Summer in a letter containing notes on education, Freedom Schools, and Mississippi (*Liz Fusco Papers 1964-1965*, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison). Volunteer teacher, Liz Aaronsohn, reported that on returning to teach English in the North, she “used rock and roll lyrics to introduce poetry” and later, while working as a day-to-day substitute, she went to school with writings she had collected from local people in Mississippi including a poem by Stembridge (Aaronsohn, 1992). Despite the widespread creation of poetry by administrators, directives calling for the use of poetry were virtually absent. However, despite this absence, there was the use of poetry throughout the Mississippi Freedom Schools by youth and adult students in the community centers. Teacher Sandra Adickes recalled teaching adults and playing the record *Freedomways*,

which featured well-known poets reading their own work (“Sandra Adickes Oral History,” Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, University of Southern Mississippi). Volunteers who served as teachers described student interactions with poetry in their letters and mementos. Of the teachers’ reflections in journals, interviews, recorded conversations, reports, and memos, none referenced student poetry as the focus of classroom discussion. The only indication of student poetry inciting student-directed classroom discussion is the quote discussed earlier from the *Washington Post* (1964).

Chicana activist, Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez (2002) spent over a month in Mississippi talking with volunteers in every part of the state and collecting letters written by teachers to their friends and families. Within the collection, *Letters from Mississippi*, several teachers spoke of poetry in the classroom, students’ responses, and initiatives.

Letter from Indianola, August 17, 1965

I can see the change. The 16-year old’s discovery of poetry, of Whitman and Cummings and above all, the struggle to express thoughts in words, to translate ideas into concrete written words. After two weeks a child finally looks me in the eye, unafraid, acknowledging a bond of trust, which 300 years of Mississippians said, should never, could never exist. I can feel the growth of self-confidence . . . (Sutherland Martinez, 2002, p. 97)

Gluckstadt, in rural Madison County—Freedom School in a church, known as Mt. Pleasant Society Hall, Monday July 20, 1965, 14 students, ages 12-47

I asked one of the students to read an excerpt from a speech by Frederick Douglass. Asked three others to read aloud poems by Langston Hughes. When we finished, Arthur asked if he could take the Langston Hughes book home overnight. (Sutherland Martinez, 2002, p. 110)

Tuesday, July 21, 1965

Several of the boys went off by themselves and read Hughes’ poetry aloud. (Sutherland Martinez, 2002, p. 110)

Friday, July 24, 1965

‘Lectured’ on the Reconstruction period. Discussed the *Civil Rights Act of 1875*. The big hit of the week was the poetry of Langston Hughes. There was hardly a time during the when someone wasn’t reading our one copy of *Selected Poems*. (Sutherland Martinez, 2002, p. 111)

The following references to poetry were scattered among the volunteers’ personal mementos in the form of letters, notes, and journal pages. McComb Freedom School teacher, Landress wrote

I think the kids composed an excellent first newspaper. There were some exceptional poems, a good biography of Harriet Tubman and of Curtis Hayes, and many well-written news stories covering civil rights activities in McComb. (“Weekly Report, Jul[y] 25, 1964”, Harry J. Bowie Papers, 1964-1967, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison”).

Freedom School teacher from Pleasant Green, JoAnn Ooiman, included history lesson plans from July 7, 1964.

Read Langston Hughes Poem (“What happens to a dream deferred?) which ends “Or does it explode,” + say that next time we’re going to talk about those who want it to explode violently-the Black Muslims. (*Joann Ooiman Robinson Papers 1960-1966*, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives)

Teacher Kirsty Powell, in a Freedom School report wrote,

On two occasions we read poems: Margaret Burroughs “What shall I tell my Children who are Black?” which produced really excellent participation, and Eve Merriam’s ‘To-morrow’s Footsteps’ and Naomi Nadgett’s ‘Midway’, which served to sum up and reinforce the thoughts of the summer in a very effective way. If a teacher likes poetry and has a few simple clues about how to present it, [I think] it is often very much appreciated. (Staughton Lynd Papers 1938-1997, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison)

Grant (1964) reported on students in Freedom Schools,

They were students who, like those in the rural community of Carthage, where there is no Negro public school, were exposed in Freedom School to e.e. cummings and James Joyce’s “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.” (p. 5)

Of the few references to poetry, most acknowledged that by well-known poets outside of the community such as Hughes and Burroughs rather than poetry written by the students or even staff members. It is worth noting that when students’ poetry was accessible to the community, it was through student newspapers (i.e., *Freedom Star*) and plays (an exception was the inclusion of the poem by Ida in the *Washington Post*). On the other hand, poetry written by staff members was more widely distributed through the newspaper associated with the project (*The Student Voice*).

CONCLUSION

How does one explain the gravitation of the teachers and students throughout Mississippi toward poetry and its infiltration into other sections of the curriculum guide? What compelled the Freedom Schools’ students to create and use poetry to the degree they did, and why was this the vehicle through which they participated in the direction of the pedagogy and the curriculum? The creation and use of poetry by students is indicative of pedagogical acts of student agency in response to the overlapping contexts (e.g., historical, geographical, social, political) in which they were situated, and multiple intervening acts of assistance and constraint in their educational opportunities or involvement (e.g., discouraging overt acts of resistance). Their creation, use, and infusion of poetry into the curriculum constructed knowledge as culture, identity, community, and history. Students seeking creative outlets gravitated to poetry because it can serve as a transitional space through which students carry their interest, culture, and history into the classroom to map the landscape and mark the space. [DELETED – WITHIN THE CLASSROOM. “Poetry, then, can evoke thought and press one to action: theory-building scholarship, perhaps; inquiry into the previously unexamined; or new examination of the taken-for-granted” (Wear, 1991, p. 262).

Students in the Freedom Schools influenced the content and direction of the curriculum. They supported and challenged the official curriculum (e.g., resistance to pedagogical and curricular staff decisions) by extending the presence and use of poetry. Thus, the students and the poetry embodied the spirit and purpose of the Mississippi Freedom Schools. The purpose of the Freedom Schools was to create an educational experience for students which would make it possible for them to challenge the myths of the society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives—ultimately new directions for action.

By infusing poetry throughout the curriculum, students altered the official curriculum to create a hidden curriculum as described by Giroux (1983) in his concept of dialectical critique or resistance theory. He described the hidden curriculum as multiple, and its contradictions as open spaces for students and teachers to resist mechanisms of social control and domination to create alternative cultural forms. The presence of poetry across schools in Mississippi suggested that

poetry came to play a more central role in the educational experiences of students attending the Freedom Schools than one would gather from reading the curriculum guide and related memoranda. It is conceivable that although student poetry was not a focus in the curriculum guide as part of the official curriculum, or formally, by teachers as a pedagogical tool, it mattered. The surfacing of poetry in the Freedom Schools rearticulates the curriculum guide as a text that is more, less, and something other than the intentions behind its conception. Tensions and contradictions provoke conditions that help a curriculum guide remain a guide, rather than a tool of social structure it tends to become. The (re)creation and interpretations of (con)texts demonstrate “that no object, no text, no cultural practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function: and that meaning, value, and function are always the effect of specific social relations and mechanisms of signification” (Frow, 1998, p. 61).

Untitled –Freedom Star Student Newspaper, July 23, 1964

Life, people, the mysteries of time, Commencing, ending, but not ending,
At times they are both terminated
Not by nature but by people
This is what mystifies us.

(Reprinted with permission from the Harry J. Bowie Papers, 1964-1967 of the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI at www.wisconsinhistory.org)

Further investigation into the uses of poetry for students is critical as “teenagers from all backgrounds and from all over the country are picking up the pen and taking hold of the microphone in large numbers that cross racial, class, gender and sexual orientation lines” (Youth Speaks, 2003, p. xii). Meanwhile, schools are engaged in the censorship and criminalization of students’ (self) expressions in order to deter violence and promote safety. Whose interpretation matters? Answers to this question have consequences for students today given the increasing risk that contexts will infringe on their personal freedom, regardless of whether their poetry regulates violence as a therapeutic device or not. Their poetry, even as a tool of critical inquiry, can result in expulsion or incarceration—losses of freedoms. The broader implications of the loss of freedom(s) for students become discernible through the words of Brazilian social justice educator Paulo Freire. He wrote, “Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth: It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion” (Freire, 1970, p. 31).

The process of educating students to agitate for social change poses a challenge for teachers: to recognize forms of student agency (e.g., the creation and use of poetry) as poesis (creation) and as autopoiesis (self-creation). Additionally, teachers face the challenge of facilitating in a way that is not repressive or oppressive, confronting their reluctance to allow youths to (re)create (con)texts, to (re)work the system, and modeling the examination of that which is not always readily visible or audible to help make processes and ideas more transparent.

The interlaced and multilayered texts (e.g., poems, curriculum guides, letters, memos, journal entries, interviews, newspapers) helped educators to understand the Freedom Schools as a dynamic conglomeration of factors affecting how pedagogy and curriculum unraveled and how students (intentionally and unintentionally) signified and shaped community, culture, history, and individual–collective identity in the creation and use of poetry. Regardless of whether the student poets of the Freedom Schools perceived themselves as historians, they served as recorders of history by documenting events and ideas (through poetry). The choices students made about which parts of which truths they would record and make available for public

consumption, affected their and the community's safety and wellness. Intratextualities and border pedagogy reflect and support the poetics of critical negotiation involved in creating, attending, understanding, writing, and representing the Freedom Schools as a moment in the history of American education, social struggle, and student agency.

APPENDIX

Sample List of Student Poetry from the Freedom Schools

<i>I Am the American Negro</i> (featured in student play, see Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998)	Unknown student	Mileston
<i>What is Wrong?</i> (Sutherland Martinez, 2002)	Unknown, 12-year-old	Biloxi
<i>Freedom</i> (Bowie papers, <i>Freedom Star</i> , 7/23/64)	Unknown	Meridian
<i>Freedom</i> (Ellin & Ellin papers, <i>True Light</i> , 7/24/64)	Rona, 13	Hattiesburg
<i>AS A NEGRO I WANT TO BE</i> (Bowie papers, Wisconsin Historical Society)	Sadie	Meridian
<i>A Gypsy</i> (Zinn papers, <i>The Pratt Freedom Press</i> , 8/21/64)	Etta	Jackson
<i>House of Liberty</i>	Joyce, 16	McComb*
<i>I am Mississippi Fed</i>	Ida., 12	Harmony-Carthage*
<i>Why did I my Donts</i>	Sandra, 17	Jackson*
<i>A Negro Soldier</i>	Lillie	Pilgrim's Rest*
<i>Freedom in Mississippi</i>	Davis, 16	Indianola*
<i>A Leader</i>	Roosevelt, 16	Indianola*
<i>Who What Dropped When?</i>	Unknown student	Moss Point*
<i>I AM A NEGRO</i>	Rosalyn, 11	Meridian*
<i>Because I'm Black</i>	Ruth, 16	Meridian*
<i>Our Largest and Smallest Cities</i>	Nettie, 14	Jackson*
<i>Who am I?</i>	Sandra	Hattiesburg*
<i>Isn't it awful?</i>	Edith, 15	McComb*
<i>A Negro Condition</i>	Lillie	Pilgrim's Rest*
<i>Why do they Hate us? What has the Negro Done?</i>	Florence	Gulfport*
<i>What Does Freedom Mean?</i>	Madeline, 24	Hattiesburg*
<i>Three Strikes to Freedom</i>	Mary	Gulfport*
<i>Segregation Will Not Be Here Long</i>	Allan	Clarksdale*
<i>Don't Give a Subject</i>	Shirley, 17	Jackson*
<i>Time</i>	Shirley, 17	Jackson*
<i>Once I wanted to fill the earth with Laughter</i>	Lynda	?*
<i>Lonely</i>	Wilma	Clarksdale*
<i>Fight on Little Children</i>	Edith, 15	McComb*
<i>Mr. Turnbow</i>	Lorenzo	Mileston*
<i>November 22, 1963</i>	Arelya .	Holly Springs*
<i>Other Children</i>	Airvester	Mileston*

*Indicates poems are published in Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. (1966). *Freedom School Poetry*, New York: Packers Press.

REFERENCES

- Aaronsohn, L. (1992). Learning to teach for empowerment. *Radical Teacher*, 40, 44-46.
- Bloom, E., Philbrink, C., & Blistein, E. M. (1961). *The order of poetry: An introduction*. New York: Odyssey Press.
- Carson, C. (Ed.). (1990). *The Student Voice, 1960-1965: Periodical of the Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*. Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project. Westport, CT: Meckler.
- Chilcoat, G. W., & Ligon, J. A. (1998). Theatre as an emancipatory tool: Classroom drama in the Mississippi Freedom Schools. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 30, 515-543.
- Chilcoat, G. W., & Ligon, J. A. (1999). "Helping to make democracy a living reality": The curriculum conference of the Mississippi Freedom Schools, *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 15, 43-68.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Frow, J. (1998). Economics of value multicultural states. In D. Bennett, (Ed.), *Multicultural states: Rethinking difference and identity*, (pp. 53-68). London: Routledge.
- Gates, H. L. (1985). "Race," writing, and difference. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gates, H. L. (1987). *Figures in Black: Words, signs, and the "racial" self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gates, H. L. (1988). *Signifying monkey: A theory of African-American literary criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (1983). Theories of reproduction and resistance in the new sociology of education: A critical analysis. *Harvard Educational*, 53, 257-293.
- Giroux, H. A. (1996). Resisting difference: Cultural studies and the discourse of critical pedagogy. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 199-212). New York: Routledge.
- Giroux, H. A. (2005). *Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of education* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Glen, J. M. (1996). *Highlander: No ordinary school* (2nd ed.). Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Grant, J. (1964, August 29). Freedom Schools open a door to the world. *National Guardian*, p. 5.
- jagodzinski, j. (1992). Curriculum as felt through six layers of an aesthetically embodied skin: The arch-writing on the body. In W. F. Pinar & W. M. Reynolds (Eds.), *Understanding curriculum as phenomenological and deconstructed text* (pp. 159-183). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kendrick, T. R. (1964, July 20). Freedom Schools cast off old Negro myths. *The Washington Post*, p. A6.
- Lynd, S. (2003). The Freedom Schools: What were they, what happened? *The Rouge Forum*, 11. Retrieved January 15, 2008, from <http://www.rouge.forum.org>.
- Ngara, E. (1990). *Ideology & form in African poetry: Implications for communication*. Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya.
- Outlaw, L. (1996). *On race and philosophy*, New York: Routledge.
- Pinar, W. (2001). The gender of racial politics and violence in America. New York: Peter Lang.
- Silver, J. W. (1964). Mississippi: The closed society. *The Journal of Southern History*, 30, 3-34.
- Sinsheimer, J. A. (1989). *The freedom vote of 1963: New strategies of racial protest in Mississippi*. *The Journal of Southern History*, 55, 217-244.

- Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. (1966). *Freedom School poetry*, New York: Packers Press.
- Sutherland Martínez, E. (2002). *Letters from Mississippi: Personal reports from Civil Rights volunteers of the 1964 Freedom Summer*. Brookline, MA: Zephyr.
- Wear, D. (1991). Poetry and curriculum inquiry. In G. Willis & W. H. Schubert (Eds.), *Reflections from the heart of educational inquiry: Understanding curriculum and teaching through the arts*, (pp. 257-266). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Williams, B. (1988). *Upscaling downtown: Stalled gentrification in Washington, DC*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- YouthSpeaks Poets. (2003). *My words consume me: An anthology of YOUTHSPEAKS POETS*. Winnipeg, Canada: Westcan.

AUTHOR

VONZELL AGOSTO is a doctoral student in the School of Education, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

All comments and queries regarding this article should be addressed to vagosto@wisc.edu