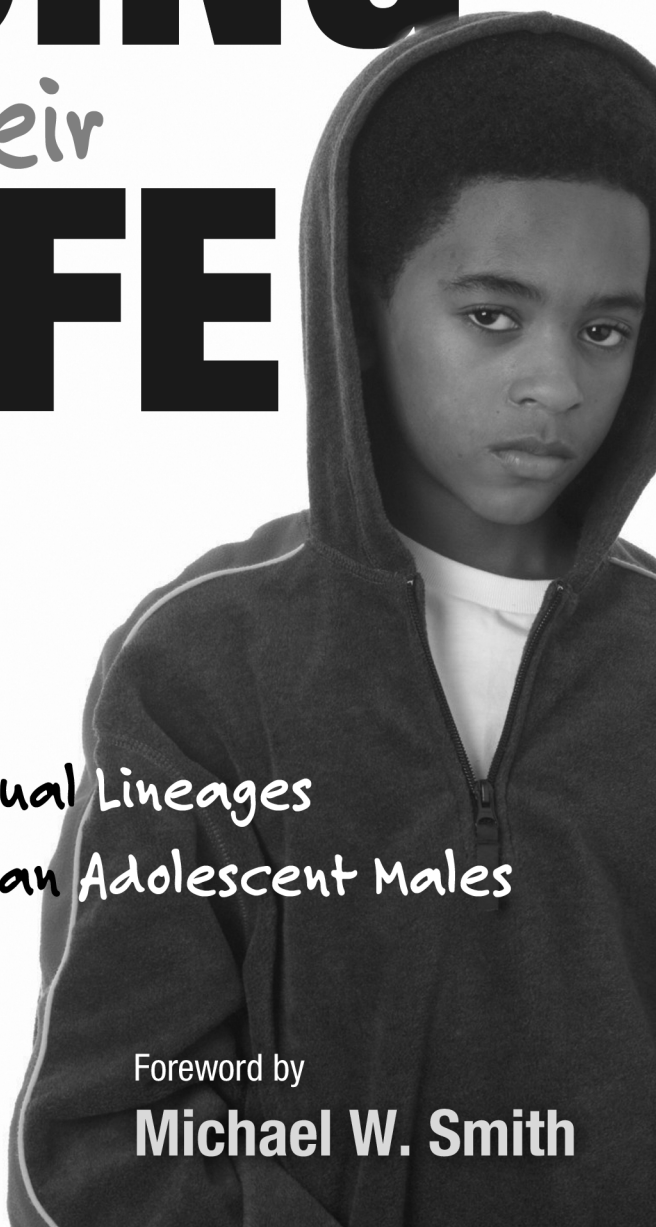
Alfred W. Tatum

READING for their LIFE



(Re)Building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males

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Portsmouth, NH

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www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Tatum, Alfred W.
Reading for their life : (re)building the textual lineages of African American adolescent males / Alfred W. Tatum ; foreword by Michael W. Smith.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-325-02679-4
ISBN-10: 0-325-02679-3
1. African American boys—Education (Secondary). 2. Teenagers with social disabilities—Education (Secondary)—United States. 3. Reading (Secondary)—Social aspects—United States. 4. African American boys—Books and reading. 5. African American teenagers—Books and reading. 6. African American boys—Race identity. I. Title.
LC2779.T37 2009
428.0071'2—dc22 2009021877

Editor: Lisa Luedeke
Production editor: Patricia Adams
Typesetter: House of Equations, Inc.
Cover design: Lisa Fowler
Interior design: Jenny Jensen Greenleaf
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
13 12 11 10 09 VP 1 2 3 4 5

Dedication

To Educators who work tirelessly to promote reading and writing
to our nation's adolescents

To the students of the Chicago Public Schools

Contents

Poetic Broadsides

■ **Essential question for students and educators:** How do I connect with my soul so that others and I benefit?

> It is impossible to create a formula for the future which does not take into account that our society has been doing something special against the Negro for hundreds of years. How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American life if we do not do something for him now, in order to balance the equation and equip him to compete on a just and equal basis?
>
> —Martin Luther King, Jr.

> And I know I am solid and sound,
> To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
> All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.
>
> —Walt Whitman

In *Changing Minds,* Howard Gardner (2006) writes, "a key to changing a mind is to produce a shift in the individual's mental representations—the particular way in which a person perceives, codes, retains, and accesses information" (5). Poetry is fast-moving text that can engage African American adolescent males and shift their mental representations of who they are and what they can become. Reading and writing poetry helps these young males

find and activate their voices. Poetry also triggers a new understanding about a wide range of topics from the political to the personal to the cultural. Sadly, very few young African American males can name a poem that informs them. Poetry is not part of their textual lineage. The power of poetry remains untapped in many classrooms.

I have carried the following poem, on typewriter paper now yellowed, in my wallet since 1991:

Black Man in America
by Julius Caesar Russell

Again I face the wall
A sight all too familiar in our lives
Sight which I no longer have
Still my vision is correct . . . I focus

The blood of yesterday has blinded me
My eyes have dried shut
Your grip upon my blindfold has tightened
As more nails are added to the scarf
My screams have yet to be answered

No man deserves this, my reasoning for enduring such torture
Another question I cannot answer
I have never pledged my faith to the God Forsaken country

My own brothers cannot see me
I know that they listen, they search, I will be found
Yes, I do have some last words

An opportunity to salvage this moment of silence

U do not deserve my children
You are unworthy of my wife
My existence in this hell on earth
Is an injustice to my manhood and my God

Yet and still
I will not quit, concede, or
I will not let you win
I will not let you win
I am a black man in America

The Shots Ring

A student gave me this poem when I was a college undergraduate. I was walking on the campus of Northern Illinois University when he approached me and said, "I want you to have this." I met the author of the poem (who was also the person who gave it to me) several days later. When I asked him why he had given me the poem, he said, "Because you need it." He had identified me as a young student leader, a self-described warrior fighting for the rights of African American students in my campus leadership roles.

Poetry has sustained me over the years. I used it as an eighth grade teacher, and I continue to use it in professional development presentations. I use poetry with young African American males to help them examine what it means to be human in today's context. During last summer's literacy institute, I had the young males wrestle with descriptors of African American males in order to put together myth-busting broadsides that moved them to define themselves. I also write poems.

Poems that are part of my textual lineage include Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" and "America"; Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son"; Amiri Baraka's "SOS"; and Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask." Several of these poems have been referred to as "poetic broadsides" (Reid 2002).

In Search of Poetic Broadsides

Teachers often find it difficult to activate African American adolescent males' voices and move them beyond intellectual sterility or intellectual reticence. A teacher's w*hat's the matter?* is often met by a *nothing* from these young males—an insurmountable impasse beneath which both teacher

and student seethe over the inability to build positive relationships in the classroom. Poetic broadsides—short and to the point—can break the impasse. "Broadsides should be prepared for quick reading and should be fitted easily into the back pocket, in case the reader has to stop and be revolutionary" (Reid 2002).

Poetic broadsides have a number of characteristics.

1. They acknowledge pain/poverty fatigue.
2. They are anchored by purpose.
3. They are written out of necessity.
4. They call for the next self-appointed leader—someone to build capacity among us.
5. They ignite protest against self or others.
6. They reject patience and waiting.

Historically, poetic broadsides have spoken out against

- lynching
- violation of black women
- oppressive conditions of humankind
- injustices
- church bombings
- murders of civil rights activists
- police brutality
- moral lapses that erupt as a result of social frustrations
- infiltration of dope into black communities

Historical broadsides, both conventional and nonconventional, were an attempt to fill a number of voids, such as

1. limited knowledge of oneself
2. limited knowledge of oneself in relationship to the rest of the world

3. limited knowledge of powers beyond one's control
4. limited knowledge about how to change one's destiny and the destiny of a people

Filling these massive voids today requires something deeper than what is often offered in classrooms. Poetry can be extremely—uncomfortably—political. Poetry can also be antideath, antiresignation, and anti-acquiescence.

I have challenged African American adolescent males to write poetry

- to stop one bullet,
- to stop one pregnancy,
- to stop one dropout,
- to bring one father home,
- to save one younger brother,
- to . . . (have them fill in the rest).

Poetry, on its way to becoming part of students' textual lineage, can be a clarion call. My poem below is a call for language to define oneself that counters other common descriptors of African American boys in literary and nonliterary texts.

Descriptors

They call me beast.
They call me monster.
I just want to be human.
Give me the language to make my case
Before I cuss you out,
Making you call me an *inarticulate foul-mouth fool,*
Doomed and damned by another descriptor.

In the early morning hours of August 11, 2008, I read the following article in the *Chicago Tribune*:

Maywood Families Mourn 3 Teens Killed in Shooting
Police Seek Clues; Boys Not Known to Be in Gangs

Kent Flowers Jr., 18, was the kind of son who sacrificed going out with friends to help his father build a closet.

When those friends stopped by late Friday night, Flowers went outside his home in the 1900 block of Harrison Street in Maywood and got into a car with them to visit. The night exploded with gunfire and he and two other 18-year-olds, Devin Stokes and Oscar Pritchett, suffered multiple wounds. All three later died at Loyola University Medical Center. The driver was critically injured.

The four were close, each striving for achievement, relatives said. Stokes was to attend Northeastern Illinois University on scholarship this fall, his mother, Theresa Stokes, said Sunday.

Pritchett and the injured driver, whom the Tribune is not naming because he is a witness, were working at O'Hare International Airport, and her son was going to try for a job there too, Stokes said.

"Everything was always about them being together," she said.

The injured man remained at Loyola Sunday, family members said.

He and Devin Stokes had formed the Young Money Club to encourage their peers to succeed honestly, Theresa Stokes said.

"Making money, but doing it legitimately, and not seeking out the gangs, and keeping away from violence," were its goals, she said.

As those close to the young men struggled with their grief, police said they had no information on a motive for the killings. The gunfire came about 12:15 a.m. Saturday. All that marked the spot Sunday were a few shards of glass and a small memorial of flowers, a poster and candles on a ragged elm outside the Flowers' home.

Residents worry these killings and other recent homicides, including one Aug. 4, are reversing a hard-fought decline in crime after several years of increases.

All but Flowers had graduated in the spring from Proviso East High School in Maywood.

Principal Milton Patch said the young men had avoided gangs and were aiming at college or working. Staff members will be "devastated" this week when they return to prepare for the start of the school year next week, he said.

"Things had been getting better, but we're in some sort of mad rash of shootings," Patch said.

Flowers, a visual artist who also rapped, loved schoolwork even though he had some difficulty in completing high school, his parents said.

"He came home, he did his homework—I didn't have to be behind him, because he loved doing his homework," his father, Kent Flowers Sr., said. "I mean, you couldn't ask for more than that. It was not a lot of hard work to get him to do what he had to do."

Upon learning his girlfriend was having a baby, he recommitted himself to school, working toward graduating this coming semester, his family said. Flowers wanted to become a psychologist, his father said.

"Things were changing. He was becoming a man," said his cousin Shunna Hale. "He knew what he needed to do to provide for his family."

Stokes was a chess champion who also was active in the high school drama club, Patch said. The eldest of three children, Stokes recently had been told he was in line for a promotion at the McDonald's in Lombard where he worked, his mother said.

Those who knew the four young men said they cannot point to any reason that they might be targeted. Police said they had no information on whether they had gang ties.

But Patch said they all had pursued their studies vigorously and appeared to have no gang ties. Pritchett, for example, had one detention all last school year, Patch said. Pritchett's family declined to comment.

Flowers had been pressured by schoolmates, his father said, and struggled to figure out how to respond.

Flowers Sr. said the neighborhood has seen violence before, largely because of drug-dealing spurred by people who view the nearby Eisenhower Expressway as an easy escape route.

continues

> Both the Flowers and Stokes families said they pray to be able to forgive those who took the lives of their sons. As she spoke to visitors Sunday, Devin Stokes' mother kept her hand on his Bible, which she had found open to a reading from Colossians, including this passage:
>
> "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."
>
> Family members want to see changes in their village, even though it can't undo the shooting.
>
> "Somebody knows who the perpetrator is. But nobody's saying nothing," Flowers Sr. said. "And everybody's going to keep their mouth shut. The same people keep doing the same thing over and over and over. Something has to be done."

I had heard about the shootings on the news the evening before and had spent a sleepless night. After reading the article, the poem below erupted from my soul.

Checkmate
by Alfred W. Tatum

He taught me how to play chess when I was younger
To make all the right moves
The rooks, the knights, the pawns, the bishops
I could castle and use my ~~bitch~~ my Queen to protect myself
All of these thoughts flashed in my mind when the car pulled up beside us
It's 12:15 a.m.
I am eighteen, sitting on the passenger's side
No where to move, no strategy
I thought about learning chess when I was younger
The young man in the other car lifts his hands—checker hands,
    TIC-TAC-TOE hands
I was no match for him
I thought my scholarship letter would save me—it was my next move
My buddies scream first
I'm hit next
Checkmate—game ov . . .

Using Poetic Broadsides to Activate the Writer's Minds

I shared the words of brother poets from the past with twelve African American adolescent males who participated in last summer's institute hosted by the University of Illinois at Chicago Reading Clinic, poems that I hoped would inspire their writing of poetry and remain with them for a long time. I chose these poetic broadsides as a starting point for building textual lineages because they are short and to the point, the issues they deal with suggested that our time in the institute was going to be serious and thoughtful, and they immediately connected with the students.

Black Art (1966)
by Amiri Baraka

. . .
We want "poems that kill."
Assassin poems,
Poems that shoot guns
Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
And take their weapons leaving them dead
With tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland,
knockoff poems
For dope selling wops or slick halfwhite politicians

◆ ◆ ◆

Untitled (1967)
by Don L. Lee (now Haki Madhubuti)

America calling.
negroes.
can you dance?
play foot/baseball?
nanny?
cook?

continues

needed now. negroes
who can entertain
ONLY.
others not wanted.
(& are considered extremely dangerous.)

◆ ◆ ◆

If We Must Die (1919)
by Claude McKay

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

◆ ◆ ◆

Questions
by Alfred W. Tatum

Why do you keep asking me so many questions?
Who gives you the right?
Your strange ways are irritating.

Let me ask you a question.
WHY DOYOU KEEP ASKING ME QUESTIONS?
No more questions.
Answers only.
Now, do you still want to talk?

I challenged these young men to read these poems from the perspective of a writer, not a reader. I asked them to use the following questions to guide their thinking about the poems:

1. Is there something about the writing that lingers in the mind?
2. Does the poem have energy?
3. Has the writer taken care to put just the right word or phrase in just the right spot?
4. Does the title match the poem?
5. Can you identify the platform(s) or social justice issue(s) being addressed?

After reading and thinking about the poems, the young men wrote their own poetic broadsides, raising questions about death, genocide, self-hatred, identity development, social responsibility, spirituality, and personal resilience. All but one of the poems below were written during the second day of a five-week institute.

I Am
by Brother Poet I

I speak therefore I think,
I think therefore I am,
Being of existence, I am a voice,
A voice in this world that should be heard,
Outspoken yet underspoken,
I have much to say, but nothing to say at all.

◆ ◆ ◆

Is This What We Have Become
by Brother Poet II

After all the fight and struggle for freedom
Is this what we become
Killing and fighting one another like animals
We should take charge and do something with our lives
If not, what's the point of being free it can do no good for me

bang bang
by Brother Poet III

you hear guns go off
more bodies drop
but
the clock still
goes
tick tock

◆ ◆ ◆

I Hate You
by Brother Poet IV

I hate you
I hate you
I don't like you
You make me sick
You make me feel like I'm getting hit
With a stick
In the head,
Getting sprayed with mace in the face
You make me feel like I'm getting snatched from god's holy grace
That's why I hate

◆ ◆ ◆

Untitled
by Brother Poet V

"Look into my eyes"
With age comes wisdom . . .
So look into my eyes . . .
With every wrinkle in my face, another story lies . . .
I look at you . . . and I see myself . . .
But in an immature state of mind
So eager to enter the world
But, not knowing what the world hides . . .

Beauty isn't just skin deep
It is developed in the mind
Not knowing how truly beautiful you are until you see the ugly inside . . .
I'm confident in myself
And to you I ask why??
Why??
Why kill off your own race?
It's just a form of genocide
My brother I beg you look into my eyes
With every wrinkle in my face another story lies
DAMN IT!!!!!
YOUNG BRUTHA LOOK INTO MY EYES!!!

◆ ◆ ◆

Who's the Man?
by Brother Poet VI

Look at me
Do you respect me?
Am I powerful with this barrel down your throat?
Or are you just intimidated?
I think I'm a man.
At least this is what I see.
They never showed me differently.
Shoot him down so I can get my soccer ball
Or he'll think I'm cool and let me in the gang
Maybe that bully won't bother me.
So please show me what is a man!
Before I pull the trigger again.
BANG!

Poetry and Humanity

In 2001, I worked as a reading specialist in an elementary school on Chicago's West Side. I always attempted to use texts in powerful ways to model instructional practices with teachers. I wanted them to be transformed by text—have a mind-altering, affective experience—during our

professional development sessions, because it is difficult to model the power of text if your listeners don't experience that power. I selected Margaret Walker's poem "Lineage" to model using a semantic map.

However, I began by relating a personal anecdote about my favorite uncle. Then I read the poem aloud.

Lineage

My grandmothers were strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil.
They moved through fields sowing seed.
They touched earth and grain grew.
They were full of sturdiness and singing.
My grandmothers were strong.
My grandmothers are full of memories
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands
They have many clean words to say.
My grandmothers were strong.
Why am I not as they?

After they had listened to the poem, I asked these teachers to close their eyes and think about a favorite relative and a favorite memory they had of this person. Then I asked them to write about this relative the way Margaret Walker wrote about her grandmothers.

The first volunteer to share her story was a woman of German descent. She began to talk about her grandfather who was murdered during the Holocaust. Several lines into her reading, she began to cry uncontrollably. Her colleagues comforted her, as I stood near the front of the room in tears.

The semantic map was abandoned; there was no need for it. The power was in the poem, twelve lines written by Margaret Walker, that led us to embrace one another. We became human together not because of some standard-based need to interpret poetry, but because we recognized the need to connect in the moment we shared together. I am indebted to Margaret Walker for that moment—her poem was worth reading.

It is my hope that we share poetry worth reading with African American adolescent males, poems that will become part of their textual line-

age, poems that will move us closer to them as they get to know themselves—even the ones who are having difficulty in life. A young brother poet who participated in a summer institute reminds us of the need to pay urgent attention to the immediate.

Life Is
by Brother Poet II

Little
Inconveniences
Full-blown
Emergencies
Life is hard
Love
Inspiring
Fate
Everlasting feelings
Life is wonderful
Living it for the now
In the spirit of the moment
Fun
Exciting
Life is breathtaking

To me there is no real definition for life but whatever it is, it's worth living. Are poems now a vital part of his textual lineage? Only time will tell. But he's off to a good start.

Productive Starting Points

1. Reconnect African American adolescent males to their rich poetic tradition. Find ways to incorporate poetry into discussions of literary and nonliterary texts.
2. Read poems to students to nurture an appreciation for the genre.

3. Encourage African American males to use poetry as a tool for communicating—that is, to find ways to use language in beautiful and melodic ways.

4. Encourage students to write poetic broadsides they can revisit when times and events dictate.