

The Skin We Ink: Tattoos, Literacy, and a New English Education

David E. Kirkland

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things.

—William Faulkner, 1949 Nobel Prize acceptance speech

A new English education is taking shape at the fluid axes of these changing times (Kirkland, 2008). While human beings—poets and writers—have long written with “an inexhaustible voice” and “a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance,” today’s youth are doing so in new and diverse ways—on computer screens and on the walls of buildings, on paper and on flesh (Brass, 2008; Jackson, 2006; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). Their expressions of human experience exist in multiple forms, which can present new challenges and possibilities for English education. Significantly, these new forms in which the human story is etched may raise important questions as to what counts as English teaching today. How might these forms be incorporated into the study of English? How might they help English educators see reading and writing in new ways? How might they change the way English educators think about literacy and the students they teach?

In this article, I explore these questions by examining the ways in which the tattoos of a young Black man, Derrick Todd,¹ speak to the quiet and often unexamined human story of literacy. This story, told in the workings of ink and flesh, illustrates a young man’s use of texts and tattoos to revise a shattered self-portrait. At the same time, this story posits a pow-

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erful critique of the words and worlds that surround him. The presence of Derrick's tattoos and the meanings etched into them do two things: First, they work to negate the often-silent yet ominous myth about the absence of literacy in the lives of young Black men (Tatum, 2005; Taylor & Dorsey-Gainses, 1988). While scholars such as Alvermann (Alvermann, Hagood, and Williams, 2001), Gilyard (1991), and Mahiri (2004) have rightly affirmed the literacies of Black males, there remains a hard-to-penetrate and persistent mainstream belief that many Black males lack literacy (hooks, 2004; Noguera, 2003; Tatum, 2005). Secondly, the recognition of Derrick's tattoos as literacy artifacts, if taken seriously, can help English educators better understand literacy as a practice not limited to technical, prescribed, or academic functions that privilege and serve only specific forms of texts and groups of people.

It is in this light that I view Derrick's tattoos as literacy artifacts. They illuminate the meaning-making necessary to write his life in a way not easily achievable using paper and pencil (Willis & Harris, 2000). They connect Derrick to the richness of his cultural heritage in ways that, as I hope to demonstrate in this article, extend the possibilities of print. They also give him a unique voice that speaks to and of the ascribed complexities of his social and personal circumstances. To this point, I document how Derrick's tattoos connect personal stories to larger social ones. This literate act, I argue, is also connected to a larger process of reclaiming an identity that is blurred in the public messages that have so often stereotyped most Black men as exotic and at times inhumane (hooks, 2004; Jackson, 2006).

For Derrick, getting "tatted up," his name for this literacy practice, affords him agency over inscription, over how he is perceived in public spaces, and over how he could place himself and his meanings within a larger human context. Not all youth actually write their tattoos themselves. Yet, their inscriptions are based on their choosing; thus, they too have agency over the form and its meaning. Here, literacy suggests much more than the ability to deliberately manipulate texts for the purposes of social participation and meaning-making. In this case, it implies a potential to make meaning and an opportunity to comment on one's realities through a symbol system that uses more than words. Literacy, in this way, speaks not only of how one uses words, but also of what one perceives as possible (e.g., the lengthening of human life and experience) through signs and symbols inscribed on paper or on flesh. For Derrick, this possibility was realized on various locations of his body, and as this article demonstrates, it highlights the humanity not only of a young man, but also of a literate act.

Statement of Problems and Theoretical Framework

New literacy theorists commonly conceive of literacy as a social practice (Gee, 1996; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007; Street, 1995) and illiteracy as a social problem (Raymond, 1982). Black males are generally refined to a rigid body of literature based in a description of their collective illiteracy (Taylor & Dorsey-Gainses, 1988). While the idea of illiteracy, particularly when applied to Black males, can be debated, literature that describes young Black men as literate is lacking (Willis, 1995). The literature that is available on Black males and literacy tends to paint a grim picture that profiles deficits (Tatum, 2006) and gaps in achievement (Jencks, 1998).

Lee (1991) contends that young Black males in contemporary American society “face major challenges to their development and well-being” (p. 1). For example, Black males perform well below other students in basic subject areas and are more likely to be remediated or placed into classes for students with learning disabilities (Noguera, 2003). In addition, many Black males are suspended from school more often and for longer periods of time than their peers (Fashola, 2005). Given these examples, it is not surprising that public perception of Black males is often bleak. It is in this vein that Raymond (1982) reminds us, “It is relatively easy for people in the United States to regard the illiterate campesinos of Central America as victims of unequal schooling rather than as moral or genetic failures; it is much more difficult for us to regard minorities in our own country with the same compassion” (p. 11).

Whether with compassion or contempt, there are many ways to explain the “trouble” with Black males. Perhaps Jones’s (2004) explanation captures the fundamental issue with which this article grapples. According to Jones, “One of the main reasons African-American youth do poorly in school is because of language differences between black and white children” (p. 1). Or as Smitherman (1977, 1999) and others (Ferguson, 2000; Foster, 2002; Hilliard, 2005) have written, Black students, particularly Black males, face academic, social, and political penalties simply for embodying African American language, culture, and identity. While their language and literacy skills are continually questioned by the general public, the real dilemmas facing young Black men have less to do with their abilities than with public perception.

The work of Cose (2002) and hooks (2004) offers disturbing yet astute insight into public perceptions of Black men. “Black men,” hooks writes, “may be hated, feared, admired, or made the object of sexual fantasy, but they are rarely loved—either by others or by themselves” (p. 6). hooks’s

sentiments parallel M. E. Dyson's (2004) description of the plight of Black men. According to Dyson, since Black men are seldom discussed in terms of their humanity, assumptions of their lack of literacy relate to assumptions of their lack of humanity. Important here is the idea that literacy is a human issue (Raymond, 1982), and by denying literacy, one also denies a person's humanity.

To reframe perspectives on literacy in these changing times, my interactions with Derrick have been helpful. From a critical perspective, I do not view Derrick as underdeveloped, but as "under siege" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993).² This shift in perspective seems important because it has allowed me to consider Derrick's entire humanity as opposed to its absence. Without acknowledging his humanity first, I argue that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to understand how literacy shapes his life. In Derrick's case, literacy cannot exist separate from human struggle, especially among under-siege groups (Freire, 1995). Hence, narrow definitions of literacy that

educational policies like No Child Left Behind (2001) endorse pose a unique social and educational threat to individuals like Derrick (Neill, 2003; Rudalevige, 2003; Willis, 2003). Such policies threaten English education as well.

To address the human question in literacy, which raises a need to expand current definitions, this article explores what I consider the politics of flesh, in this case, the body of a young Black male, in the act of literacy.

I use the work of Bakhtin (1993) to distinguish the literacy act as a performed deed that comprises an actual or "experienced" world. For Bakhtin, the uniqueness of this world exists only to the degree to which it is actualized. For Derrick, tattoos represent this actualization, a performed act or deed through which human beings develop a sense of identity. Identity, as Bakhtin describes it, does not belong solely to the individual; it is shared by all.

Following the pioneer works of Freire (1995) and Smitherman (1977, 1999, 2006), this article looks closely at the complex and critical aspects of tattoos as literacy artifacts. From such artifacts, one can begin to see how contested spaces such as bodies and permanent bruises act as sites of struggle and storytelling. Such artifacts are not just the province of urban African American males. Many females, Latinos/Latinas, and middle-class Whites use them along with piercings and other forms of physical iconography to express similar stories and ideas (Jetton & Dole, 2004). These literacy artifacts—the evidence of performed or human deeds—can be explored for radical content

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quite similar to how literary critics pore over texts for meaning. While this radical content can exist in many forms (e.g., scars, brandings, piercings, etc.), I focus exclusively on Derrick's tattoos to impart a sense of his stories.

As a researcher, my understanding of the body, Derrick's body in particular, influences my perceptions of power and bondage (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998, 2000). With this understanding, I see literacy as taking shape within "a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate" causes (Scott, 1990, p. 14) while serving contested public purposes (Raymond, 1982). Literacy is most often made acceptable—even standardized—when serving dominant group interests and unacceptable—stigmatized—when encouraging the perspectives of the socially marginal (Barret, 2006; Freire & Macedo, 1995). From a Bakhtinian view, literacy can also be described as a human activity with competing pulls. It subscribes to purposes that are public and personal, unremitting and human. It is with this latter line of thought that I am concerned. On one hand, Derrick may use his tattoos to situate himself in public against the standards of tradition and White, Western culture. On the other, he may choose to exploit the power of tattoos to document his personal story, which suggests a compelling human act of literacy itself.

Framed within the above ideas, I seek to answer the following questions: (1) How does Derrick make sense of his life through his tattoos? (inquiry at the ethnographic level); (2) What might we learn about literacy from an analysis of Derrick's tattoos? (inquiry at the discursive level); and (3) How do Derrick's tattoos and his interpretation of them offer implications for rethinking Black males, literacy, and English education?

Notes on Method

This article is based on a larger study that examined literacy in the lives of six urban adolescent Black males. As part of that study, I visited Derrick and five of his friends twice a week for nearly 3 years. I followed them in the hallways of their school, sometimes to their jobs and homes, and anywhere else they invited me. This design for the study was initially accidental. As time progressed, it was made more systematic by my curiosities about the literacy lives of this group of young men who allowed me to "hang out" with them to "get to know them" better.

In the process of my visits, a more organized and formal study emerged. However, the initial lack of formality allowed me to witness Derrick's "multiple worlds" (A. H. Dyson, 2003), where he and his friends practiced literacy outside the purview of perceived authority. In these worlds, I was

able to observe the young men practicing “multiple literacies” (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995) that substantiated their humanity. Derrick’s tattoos helped me begin to understand the complex ways in which literacy functioned across multiple centers in his life.

Introducing Derrick Todd

I met Derrick in the fall of 2003 while visiting his high school ninth-grade English class. Derrick, a brown-skinned, tall, husky young man, proclaimed to me that he was a rapper who self-identified with hip-hop culture. He characterized hip-hop culture by its literacy artifacts—graffiti, raps, tags, tattoos (Alim, 2006; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007; Richardson, 2006). As a self-proclaimed “hip-hop head,” Derrick kept a journal where he wrote raps, poetry, and personal notes. The texts he composed, whether inscribed on paper or flesh, reveal some of his most intimate thoughts. While he has given me permission to use some of these texts here, I do so not to exoticize him, but to tell his unique literacy story.

Data Collection: Artifacts, Observations, and Conversations

I met with Derrick and five of his friends twice a week for approximately 4 hours per meeting for about 3 years, starting in the fall of 2003. We met at his home, nearby restaurants, and sometimes his high school. During our meetings, I documented the ways that Derrick and five of his friends practiced literacy and talked about schooling, reading, and writing. We also talked about books and other things (e.g., writing raps) that I felt dealt with literacy in their lives. I attempted to piece together their literacy biographies, collecting literacy artifacts such as the young men’s writings and readings and my observations of their processes of writing and reading.

I collected specific literacy artifacts from Derrick, even photocopying selected pages from his journal and taking portraits of his tattoos. I also took detailed and extensive notes on my observations of him and his friends. Usually within an hour of leaving the young men, I rewrote my notes as formal data entries into a field log (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) and indexed each literacy artifact in a separate file.

In addition to collecting literacy artifacts, I frequently talked with Derrick both individually and in the company of his friends about his interpretations of the data. These conversations were also recorded. With Derrick’s permission, I transcribed important episodes from our conversations, and whenever possible, I spoke with him and his friends about a common episode to gain multiple points of view.

Data Analysis: Scope and Procedures

For scope, I analyzed data at two levels: ethnographic (Emerson et al., 1995; Erickson, 1986; Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002; Wolcott, 1975) and discursive (Fairclough, 1995; Luke, 2002; Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005). At the ethnographic level, my goal for data analysis was to understand how Derrick made sense of his tattoos. At the discursive level, my goal for analysis was to describe, interpret, and explain Derrick's tattoos as textual and interactional items, governed by greater social inflections, like the accident in coping with tragedy. Both levels of analysis helped me to address the central questions that ground this article.

In terms of procedure, I organized data around three ethnographic themes: *struggles*, *stories*, and *symbols*. These themes emerged significantly in the data and loosely relate to Platt's (2003) work on basketball player Allen Iverson. I use the themes in this article as organizing categories to help readers make multiple connections among how Derrick's tattoos related to literacy, how literacy related to his humanity, and how each of these relations may reframe English education. The categories also helped me to answer questions specific to Derrick's humanity as a Black male and more generally about literacy in the lives of Black males.

After identifying ethnographic themes, I coded data by "breaking down fieldnotes even more finely" to uncover discourses, which reveal literacy as human practice. Using the following discursive categories—coping, connecting, and commenting—I sought to put Derrick's words in conversation with the research literature to illuminate the humanity that exists in literacy. This discussion addresses how Derrick made sense of life through his tattoos. Ultimately, the goal of my analysis was to generate as many ideas as possible about the nature of tattoos in Derrick's life as I sought to understand more deeply Derrick and his literacy practices.

Researcher's Role

I was careful in presenting Derrick in this article if only to reduce the catalectic impulse that some might have to unfairly question his culture and upbringing (Foley, 2002). My hope is that this article will raise more salient questions as to the cultural and discursive roots of his struggles over knowledge, literacy, and their equitable representations. As such, I exist in this work to reiterate the humanity of a young man I knew. Not only is Derrick steeped in complexity—complexities that he and I share as Black males—he also lives life more universally. His life rendered through my eyes

will hopefully reveal the primal vocation of all individuals who navigate between Fine's (1994) hyphen as a way to reinvent space and opportunities for discovering self. As a researcher, but also as an African American man, my sensitivity to Derrick places me in his stories. Nevertheless, I have done all that is possible to represent Derrick through his words, constantly interrogating myself in this work as I attempt to make sense of his struggles, stories, and symbols.

The Human Side of Literacy: Struggles, Stories, and Symbols

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Struggle

Below his abdomen, Derrick has a tattoo with the phrase, “Live or die.” According to Derrick, the phrase is his “motto.” He recalls, “That tattoo talks about the part of me that goes all out. We live in a world where hard work is rewarded.” Derrick continues, “If you Black, though, you got to give it your all or you gon die. That sums up my life. It’s about trying to strike a balance between life and death.” For Derrick, the balance between life and death is struck between struggle and strife. Such perennial themes are immortalized on Derrick’s body. Commenting on his life, Derrick’s tattoos also describe the things around him. For Derrick, “We are all out here on a quest to make it. We struggling every day. So that’s what this tattoo is about; it’s about struggle.”

Struggle is also symbolic of the act of writing/getting a tattoo (see fig. 1). The flesh reveals the pain that gets experienced in life. According to Derrick, “It hurts like hell sometimes when I do my tattoos, but that’s all part of life right. No pain, no gain. That’s what struggle is about.” Perhaps, Derrick—in his deepest sentiments—is drawing on the words of Douglass,⁵ who said, “The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle

... If there is no struggle there is no progress.” From wherever his sentiments arise, Derrick seems to share this understanding of life defined by struggle.

Story

Derrick’s tattoos also house a counter-narrative of tragedy, discontent, pain, and promise. Revealing the human side of literacy, Derrick uses his body as a tablet, which features not only his sublime philosophies but, in a fine Bakhtinian (1981) way, the *echoes* of others. The following



Figure 1.

excerpt taken from Derrick’s journal, which I quote in length here, gives voice to these echoes:

Two years ago, something tragic happened in my life that required me to go through a great deal of soul searching and life changing. It was a warm October day, and the rays from the Sun had awakened me. Everything was well, and my cousins were getting ready for school like any normal day. It just seemed as if life just changed in a blink of an eye. This was my tenth grade year, and it was also the day before the city playoff between my school and its cross town rival. While I was on my way to school, I got a call from my mother, telling me that my little cousin Clarence had been hit by a car on his way to school. Well, actually, he was waiting on the bus and this car jumped the curve and hit him. When the news hit me, it seemed as if my heart dropped into my stomach. I tried to be strong and hide behind my football body, but this didn’t work. As each hour ticked by, I tried to tell myself: “It’s just a broken leg or arm. He’ll be ok.” But doubt always stood in my mind . . . death. Later on that day, I tried my hardest to participate in practice, but my mind wasn’t with the team that day. After practice my uncle came and picked me up and drove me to Saint Robin Hospital. When I arrived there, I could hear blood curdling screams that sent tingles down my spine. There, I learned the worst news. My cousin would not live. The doctors told us that he had a fractured skull and many broken arteries. All we could do is pray and leave it in God’s hands. That next day, God called my cousin home. From that point on, I dedicated my next football season to him. I wore his birthday day as my jersey number: #26. I also dedicated my first two tattoos to him. Since he was young, I feel that it’s my way of making sure he lives on.

As much as his tattoos were personal, Derrick’s journal entry suggests that his tattoos were also about others. There are many ways to approach this journal entry. First, it is personal story brought to life on paper. What is intriguing about the story is that it extends the page, as Derrick admits

to using other forms of documentation to rekindle the lost memory of a loved one. While the story was told on paper, it is also told on fabric (jersey number) and flesh (tattoos).

Significantly, Derrick “dedicated” his first two tattoos to his cousin’s memory (see figs. 2 and 3). In this way, Derrick’s tattoos are more than

mere “body art.” For Derrick, they give him a way to represent his cousin’s memory and, hence, stand as emblems of strength (see fig. 3). Derrick explains, “As long as I got these [tattoos] on me, my cousin gon live forever, or at least as long as I live. He always gon be a part of me.” He continues, “the eagle represents my cousin’s strength.” It also gives a quiet eulogy to a young man that I never met yet knew because his story is written on Derrick’s body. In the eagle’s mouth is an epithet:

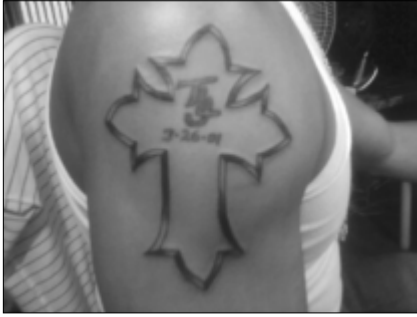


Figure 2.

“R.I.P. Clarence Douolley.” Clarence was his cousin’s name.

Derrick’s tattoos of a cross and eagle highlight an iconographic and deeply personal dimension of literacy that rarely is commented on (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000). Derrick reiterated this personal dimension in a conversation: “My tattoos mean a lot to me. Every tattoo that I got has a story. See this one here?” He showed me a tattoo on the left side of his chest. What struck me about our conversations about each tattoo is the theme of story that emerges. He finds it significant to narrate his life by making sense of it through body inscriptions. Yet, it is through symbols that Derrick has narrated his life.



Figure 3.

Symbol

For Derrick, each tattoo is a symbol that stands in place of stories. They can be read and received in multiple ways. Their rendering reveals yet another theme, the theme of symbol, which, in this case, involves a process of overcoming struggle and of storytelling. Derrick takes me through this process as he explains yet another tattoo. His brother’s nickname, “Boss,” prominently and permanently appears under the image of a bulldog (see fig.

4). Derrick narrates, “To a lot of people, this is just my brother’s name on me, but I put it on me after he was killed.”

Intrigued by Derrick’s use of tattoos to document tragedy and disrupt forgetting, I wanted to know the story behind the tattoo, the story of Boss and the bulldog. Derrick offered the following explanation: “Boss was more than a brother to me. He was like my father and my best friend.” According to Derrick:



Figure 4.

[Boss] was everything. He protected us, fed us when we were hungry. Did everything for us. When he died, I couldn’t take it. I wanted to be where he was, so I started doing stuff, acting reckless. I was always fighting, trying to die ’cause I was dying inside. My momma came to me one day and said, “I know you hurting.” I was. I just broke down right there . . . started crying, right in front of her. She started crying, screaming, “Why?” I didn’t know what to tell her. I wanted to know why myself, man. Why did God have to take my brother? He was a good guy. I didn’t know why he had to go. But seeing my momma crying was like, man . . . I had to be strong. I had to be strong like my brother was for me for my mother, my sister, and my younger brother.

The iconography of Boss and the bulldog blends the themes of story and struggle. It also reveals a human side of his literacy—heartfelt and heartbreaking. Like any of us who keep a journal or a diary to cope with pain, Derrick uses tattoos to help him deal with the deep feelings of grief and regret associated with his brother’s and cousin’s untimely deaths. In his words: “This one right here [pointing to his chest], this one did something for me. It helped me cope.” Derrick stopped, smiled, and continued:

[It] is helping me cope with my own struggles because I loved that dude, and he gone. But he ain’t gone. He is right here in my heart. That’s why I got his name and his image written on my chest . . . I take him wherever I go. He is alive in me.

Revealing Literacy as a Human Practice: Coping, Connecting, and Commenting

Discourses of humanity—coping, connecting, and commenting—symbolize the stories of struggle that characterize Derrick’s tattoos. This human side of literacy is best demonstrated in the ways that Derrick talked about literacy

and in the ways that other scholars have portrayed it (Dyson, 2000; Fisher, 2003, 2007; Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; Kinloch, 2007; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). Further, exploring this aspect of literacy is important as it positions Derrick as an agent, capable of shaping his life's circumstances, and not simply as a victim, being shaped by them.

Coping

Derrick's tattoos helped him "cope" with the tragedies of losing a cousin and a brother. Based on my interactions with Derrick, I define coping as a process of dealing with a concern or issue as to alleviate pain or discomfort. Derrick's use of tattoos (or any form of reading and writing) to cope suggests a personal dimension of literacy that Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) contend are "particular ways of knowing, being, and communicating that honor the strength of the self" (p. 15).

Personal literacies involve the critical awareness of ways of knowing and believing about self that comes from thoughtful examination of historical or experiential and gender-specific backgrounds in school and community language settings, and can stand as critiques to both school and community literacies. Personal literacies reflect both the ways students believe they *should* join in socially accepted discourse communities and the private ways they know they *can* and would *like* to be able to participate across communities, as well as the tensions between these views. (p. 15)

Gallego and Hollingsworth further explain, "More than simply 'images of self,' personal literacies affect the way students fix or give interpretive meaning to texts" (p. 15).

In using his tattoos to cope, Derrick was attempting to move beyond the reality of his circumstances and toward a place of healing. According to him, what is sketched represents something that is "personal" and "transformative." Hence, the transformative presence locked in the personal dimension of literacy gets fully actualized in coping—or in what Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) see as "critical awareness of ways of knowing and believing about self that comes from thoughtful examination" (p. 15). This examination, while not exhausted in his tattoos, is certainly captured in them. In symbolizing his human story/struggle on flesh, Derrick participates in the human act of literacy that moves the personal closer to the transformative.

Connecting

Derrick often spoke of his tattoos as connecting him to a present rooted in a past, to other people—dead or alive—and to their stories. Such a human

rendering of text reminds one of Faulkner's (1975) famous quote: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Through his tattoos, Derrick connects with people he no longer is able to access. Through his tattoos, Derrick's past is never dead. It's not even past.

This connection to others speaks to literacy's potential humanity, a "participatory" practice that one engages in solidarity (Fisher, 2005). Such participation in the lives of others and with others (i.e., documenting their stories; sentencing their lives) is defined in part by elements of the other such as a name, favorite animal, special quality, etc. Often the lines between becoming and connecting blur, but Derrick's tattoos help him to reach out to others while simultaneously helping him to reach within himself.

This dynamic kind of connection, which extends beyond others to self, is akin to what Fisher (2007) surmises as "cocreated traditions around words, sounds, and power" (p. 4). It is the humanity of community—the reasons and willingness to attach and commune as "branches on the same family tree" (p. 7). It is what A. H. Dyson (2000) calls "local negotiations" (p. 152)—a dialogic medium used as a means to negotiate with others' desires. In this case, desires give way to stories.

Commenting

Even in helping him to cope and to connect, Derrick's tattoos are always speaking, commenting not only on his life but also on his philosophy of life ("live or die"). In his tattoos, Derrick's sentiments are emotional. These symbols speak of a world where crosses, eagles, and bulldogs memorialize men. As much as they commemorate fallen lives, Derrick's tattoos beg a question: Why have these young men died so soon?

In Derrick's tattoos, human stories and struggles are not equivalent. I am not attempting to romanticize these physical expressions, though they speak to me. The images, not separate from his stories, are compelling like the "images of abandonment, decline, and strife" that according to Kinloch (2007) "are too quickly narrated into the spatial landscape of urban life" (p. 61). For Kinloch, "This narration . . . involves the documentation of stories, the ways people see relationships between power and politics" (p. 61).

MacGillivray and Curwen (2007) make a similar observation. Researching young adult Mexican American taggers (i.e., graffiti writers), they observe, "Tags can be a youth's signature moniker, a slogan, a protest, a message, and occasionally a lengthy tribute" (p. 358). Like Derrick's tattoos, tags, according to MacGillivray and Curwen, supernaturally speak.

Derrick's tattoos commented on what scholars such as Kinloch (2007) view as the human "stories of place, belonging, struggle, culture, and identity . . . often devalued in school" (p. 68).

Rethinking Literacy, Humanity, and the Body Politics

While Derrick uses his tattoos for multiple literacy purposes, such etchings are not exclusive to Derrick. Strength and survival, story and struggle are common themes inscribed on the bodies of many urban Black males. Theirs

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is an unusual story of literacy that Platt (2003) tells when he explains that basketball player Allen Iverson's tattoos (e.g., "soldier"; "strong"; "survive") narrate how he has overcome various lived struggles. According to Platt, many urban Black males are like Iverson, finding ways to write and rewrite their struggles and triumphs through their tattoos. Pratt argues that tattoos serve a personal function of narrating complex

existences, which may lie in the middle of the ironic poles of nihilism and hope (West, 1995). For Pratt, tattooing is a way for Iverson to document his pain, speak of and back to a difficult past, and surrender that pain in the ascribed strength of symbols.

Using Boss's name, Derrick inscribed himself, who he wanted to be, and his brother's memory—all at once—in ink on flesh. His brother, whom he perceives as "a better man," represents for him a dialogic unity, a synthesis between self and other. Through his brother, Derrick inherits a renewed sense of self—a self/other compromise. The tattoo articulates this aspect for (and of) Derrick. It allows him to appropriate the name of Boss and revoice his brother beyond his name. The name and the bulldog characteristics that once belonged to Boss now belong to Derrick.

While sociocultural theorists commonly discuss the social practices of literacy (Gee, 1996; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Street, 1995), such practices for youth like Derrick are often much more extensive—much more collaborative (Kirkland, 2006; Perry, Hilliard, & Steele, 2005). Indeed, a tattoo artist is the one who inscribes the tattoo, yet the tattoo itself is filled with the intentions of the inscribed, emanating from individual imagination. Individuals choose a tattoo, a semiotic form and literacy artifact, that in some ways makes sense to them. The tattoos that tell Derrick's story disrupt myths about literacy and Black masculinity. When "reading" Derrick's tattoos, one witnesses literacy in Black masculinity that submits ever so delicately to the same human

impulses. Hence, in thinking about the educational dilemmas facing young Black males, my interactions with Derrick have proven helpful. Living in the human pulse of the moment, the deep meanings hidden in Derrick's tattoos bear witness to his literate self. By writing and rendering selves (i.e., unique; corporate), Derrick's tattoos personify flesh with meaning and feeling.

As this is the case, it is important to reconceptualize literacy as a human practice and expand English education to study its multiple forms. While it is fair to argue that literacy is social, I also acknowledge its personal complexity (Kirkland, 2006). That is, while literacy is practiced beyond the self to achieve social goals, it works within the self to achieve personal and emotional ones. It would serve English educators and English teachers alike to employ a study of the humanity that exists off the page. In these changing times, youth like Derrick must learn a new kind of reading that sees exploring the body as a significant modern literacy act.

This rethinking of literacy as it relates to the body is, perhaps, long overdue. Throughout history, bodies have been the site of struggle and contestation. hooks (2004) maintains that Black male bodies, for example, have historically been a place of antimony, given their public presentation of strength that lacked dignity. During chattel slavery, European regimes quite literally stole Black bodies—many of them female—and manipulated them for their own desires and intents.

The body, therefore, has been an important location for understanding the self in the human story of literacy because through the body, the self may render particular meanings of its own. Spillers's (1994) discussion of "flesh" is helpful in this regard. She makes a critical distinction between the body and the flesh, which, for her, is central to understanding captive and liberated subject-positions. For Spillers, before the word, there is the "body," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of literacy (Spillers, 1994, p. 457). If English educators begin to think of the body, for example, as a primary narrative, then they must begin to prepare English teachers for a serious reading of this narrative and its tragic and promising revealings. According to Spillers, readers of the Black body, for example, will see it as complicated by a "seared, divided, ripped-apartness," as a type of iconography that reveals "its personal, physiological, and historical narrative" (p. 457). Spillers further explains that portraits of African captives involve brutal bruises, wounds, and scars that tell of the bondage and broken histories suffered by Black people.

What Spillers terms the "flesh" is, in other words, what White and White (1998) discuss as the surface of the body on which "in freedom,

as in slavery . . . the struggle between black and white was often cruelly etched, and on which the record of that struggle may be read” (p. 126). As an example, White and White cite the story of an ex-captive named Sandie, who mutilated his body and threatened to commit suicide in front of White witnesses who were attempting to return him to bondage after documents attesting to his freedom had been burned in a fire. White and White recount how years later Sandie, by then a successful farmer who was distinguished for his physical strength, still bore the signs of his struggle for freedom on his body or, in Spillers’s terms, his flesh.

In a new English education, the body (as in the flesh) can represent a site of radical inscription, where a sort of hegemony of norms may gain purchase. It follows that such inscription can be rewritten to represent resistance to such norms, as we have seen in the case of Derrick. When he marked his flesh, Derrick was not only shaping symbols, he was also shaping a self. This shaping implies that the body can be experienced as a canvas that many youth like Derrick turn to in order to script new narratives. This act of scripting might reveal new avenues into which the study of English can venture.

Conclusion

Using Derrick as a case study, my hope has been to broaden the lenses through which English educators see literacy in the lives of young Black men. In doing so, I have looked deeply within the aesthetics of Derrick’s tattoos as they represent personal literacies, motivated only in part by larger symbolic forces. Such forces delved deeply into the corral of Derrick’s consciousness and contributed, in part, to sustaining him. In his own words, tattoos helped him to “cope.”

Analyzing the body as a critical site upon which literacy could be practiced suggests its own identity (Gee, 1989, 2001). Thus, I have come to better understand relationships between literacy and humanity through the body in what Bakhtin (1986) characterizes as an “act.” In the case of Derrick, the individual who performs an act or deed creates a unique place within the architecture of her or his being (Bakhtin, 1986). Since the body is such an important site for identity formation, and because uniqueness is both given and achieved, the individual, through the body, can actualize uniqueness, identity, and humanity.

There is an important link to be made between the body and the human act of literacy. Evidenced in Derrick’s tattoos, the body may be a site of textuality, which expresses the individual’s ability to cope, connect, and

comment. Consequently, the individual embodies a distinct view of the world through meanings, relations, and intentions. Identity may determine and be determined by personal formations suggested in the symbol itself—“live or die” or simply “R.I.P.” (“rest in peace”). Literacy is both a material product and social practice fettered to a particular time and place. It encompasses the worldview of the individual juxtaposed against multiple worldviews in society.

As much as it is a social practice, literacy must also be conceived as personal, a practice in which the individual engages to negotiate and articulate the human aspects of self. In these changing times, bodies mobilize selves through embodied texts. Such texts reveal complex personal perceptions and trajectories and multiple and oftentimes tenuous realities and sometimes harmful fictions. Bodies can also render personal identities visible. While such identities are produced, they can also be volubly voiced and made known through the debt of human testimony in flesh.

When reading and writing take place on flesh, the depth of the human experience is expelled in other ways—in Derrick’s case, in a journal and on a jersey. This promiscuous textuality in the practice of literacy offers Derrick a reprieve from tragedy, multiple ways to read and write, and a possible release from a hijacked identity. Further, both literacy and identity, while producing publicly contested artifacts, function privately for Derrick as a way of helping him reflect on valued narratives of self and others. While intimately connected to his immediate social world, Derrick’s tattoos extend the page to provide him another place to practice literacy and to etch personal narratives. They also allow him to make his personal commitments and curiosities about life, which he reveals through written flesh.

The field of English education stands to learn much from these insights, potentially opening a new connection with students around unexplored writings that make all of our lives more visible. They offer us a way to connect with and see students who are not always visible in traditional light. Perhaps most important, they give us another way to search the human soul for its compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

Notes

1. All names of people and places in this article are pseudonyms.

2. Aronowitz and Giroux (1995) use the term *underseige* to describe what they see as a conservative and liberal assault on education. According to them, “Conservatives and radicals alike have condemned public education from different sides, but have drawn the same blood” (p. x). For Aronowitz and Giroux, “Their response to alienated youth is the tightening of their arbitrary authority as adults, and is surely inimical to reproducing democratic values and institutions” (p. xi). I would add that

their response to youth like Derrick is rooted in an idea that certain youth have not fully acquired human status.

3. This quotation is taken from a speech delivered by Frederick Douglass on August 3, 1857, at Canandaigua, New York. Entitled the “West India Emancipation,” the speech has become widely quoted (and misquoted). It is unclear whether or not Derrick was familiar with it, but it is likely that he was familiar with a famous line: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.”

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David E. Kirkland is an assistant professor of English Education at New York University. His email address is: dk64@nyu.edu.