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Hustle & Flow: a critical student and teacher-generated framework for re-authoring a representation of Black masculinity

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This article describes the formation and enactment of a student and teacher-generated framework for re-authoring a troubling representation of Black masculinity in a popular culture narrative. This data-driven framework highlights the ways students and teacher provided a means for literacies to serve students' desire to re-author images and words they found problematic in the texts they are most drawn to, in addition to fostering methods of critical consciousness, and empowerment. This work provides important recommendations for bridging the divide between in- and out-of-school literacy teaching/ learning contexts in several ways. First, it presents research on literacies, multimodalities, and youth to promote reflective practice and professional development in this area. Second, it explains the context for this work and bridges research on literacy with literacy practice in an after-school program. Third, it explains a co-constructed framework for engaging a problematic representation of Black masculinity in a popular culture narrative. Lastly, it presents a discussion of the importance of using popular culture narratives in literacy work, particularly with marginalized youth, both in and outside of schools. This framework provides an account of the ways so-called disengaged students co-devised opportunities to use literacy practices to centralize themselves through the social function of re-authorship.

Keywords: adolescent literacy; media; curriculum; action research; urban education

Introduction

Emerging studies of adolescents' literacy practices present important ideas about where and how youth engage in literacy work. These studies dare us to imagine literate activities that thrive within and beyond the walls of the classroom and in relationship to multiple texts (Hull and Schultz 2002; Knobel 1999, 2001; Mahiri 1997; Moje et al. 2000, 2004; Schultz 2002). This literature also presents new and generative questions for the field, i.e.: What happens when adolescents who struggle inside of school participate in literacy work in alternative contexts? How does adolescents' literacy work encourage critical consciousness, particularly in relationship to media? What social, cultural and political function does literacy work serve in the lives of adolescents, particularly those who are often socially, culturally, politically and academically marginalized within and by schools? And, how can literacy teachers and researchers build bridges across adolescents' teaching/learning spaces to understand frameworks for engagement? The decision to take up these questions, and position the reporting of teaching and research to characterize a range of inquiries into urban[1] adolescents' learning, engagement, and literacy work in and out of

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school, is critically pertinent to the field (Esposito and Evans-Winters 2007; Thompson 2007; Holmqvist, Gustavsson, and Wernberg 2007; Moustakim 2007).

Such a decision is politicized when it is coupled with active resistance to traditional tendencies in educational policy and research to conceptualize literacy as being either a school- or out-of-school-based practice. As such, opposing the 'tendency … to build and reify a great divide between in and out of school' learning is necessary in the quest to support the inclusion of students who are frequently marginalized by their learning differences, linguistic variations, social practices and cultural norms (Hull and Schultz 2002, 3). Abolishing this 'great divide' means constructing contexts for transformative literacy learning and research with young people, designing cooperative studies among teachers and students, and creating learning environments in response to Michelle Fine's (1997) call to action and vision of possibility. Fine writes, 'the burden is on [educators] to carve out spaces, to inspire a sense of the "not yet" and to reinvent schools and communities that are engaging for young people' (214–15). The project of 'carving out spaces' includes understanding the ways literacies and multimodalities function and the ways youth use these phenomena outside of school.

In this article I describe the formation and enactment of a student and teacher-generated framework for re-authoring a troubling representation of Black masculinity in a popular culture narrative. This description highlights the ways my students and I provided a means for literacies to serve students' desire to re-author images and words they found problematic in the texts they are most drawn to, in addition to fostering methods of critical consciousness and empowerment. Fostering these methods is important because critical consciousness is the sense-making employed to deconstruct the parameters and problematize the enactments of various implicit and explicit social structures (i.e. racial, cultural, linguistic, spatial, economic, religious and sexual) used to subjugate, repress, empower or authorize individuals, groups and/or ideologies. To promote reflective practice and professional development in this area, first, I present a brief review of the literature on literacies, multimodalities, and youth. Second, I present a discussion of why bridges between in- and out-of-school literacy work have been difficult to build, a description of the context in which such a bridge was constructed, and strategies that were used to encourage literacy engagements and re-authoring in that context. Next, I explain students' and my co-constructed framework for engaging a problematic representation of Black masculinity in a popular culture narrative called *Hustle & Flow*. This framework provides an account of the ways my so-called 'disengaged' students worked with me to co-devise opportunities to use literacy practices and centralize themselves through the social function of re-authorship. Third, I discuss the social function of re-authoring, some hindrances to engaging media in school and important recommendations for bridging the divide between in- and out-of-school literacy teaching/learning contexts. Lastly, I note the importance of using popular culture narratives in literacy work, particularly with marginalized youth, both in and outside of schools.

Literacies, multimodalities, and youth

Recent theoretical conversations discuss literacy practices as multiple and socially situated (Brandt and Clinton 2002; Gee 2000, 2001; Knobel 1999). While conceptualizing the plurality of literacies, New Literacy Studies theorists expand the generic concept of 'literacy' to include the many factors that influence one's practices of reading, writing, speaking and listening. People, both individually and communally, engage in literacy practices – intersections of reading, writing, speaking and listening with actions, values, attitudes,

culture and power structures – in their everyday lives (Mahiri 1997; Kress and Jewitt 2003; Moje 2000, 2004; Moje et al. 2000). Barton and Hamilton (1998) write that there are 'different literacies associated with different domains of life – structured contexts in which literacy is used and learned' (11). They posit that domains are 'discourse communities' – groups of people who are 'held together' through, or perhaps because of, their 'characteristic ways of talking, acting, valuing, interpreting and using language' (11). Kress and Jewitt (2003) furthers our understanding of literacy domains and discourse communities by suggesting a multimodal theory of literacy. This theory recognizes the 'increasing multiplicity and integration' of modalities wherein literacies 'have to be newly thought about' (Kress and Jewitt 2003, 35) along with the very notions of communication and representation.

By emphasizing and exploring the social nature of literacy practices, the research and theory emerging from New Literacy Studies highlights not only the range and variation of literacies, but also the multiple contexts in which they occur, and the communities of learning that are built as a result of them. These studies counter notions that literacy learning and engagements only take place in schools by explaining the ways they emerge and function within communities and homes (Heath 1983; Hull and Schultz 2002), community centers (Mahiri 1997; Moje 2000) and arts programs (Schultz 2002; Heath 1983). In addition, empirical work that explores the literacy practices of youth in out-of-school contexts suggests possibilities for imagining teaching and research that present youth as resources for co-developing frameworks for text engagements. Inquiries into the spaces where literacy learning and production occur offer portraits of youth whose out-of-school literacies flourish, and whose school literacies belie their otherwise literacy-rich lives. In fact, Hull and Schultz (2002) contend that:

> There is no better time for literacy theorists and researchers, now practiced in detailing successful literate practices that occur out of school, to put their energies toward investigating potential relationships, collaborations, and helpful divisions of labor between schools, formal classrooms, and the [literacy] learning that flourishes in a range of settings. (53)

To accomplish this goal, it is important to draw from rich descriptions of the ways literacies, multimodalities, and youth merge after school. Focusing on the ways youth use their literacies in the service of a particular social function is a prime point of entry to this knowledge base. This focus includes attending to the ways student and teacher-generated frameworks for text engagements can speak to literacy theory and research, by articulating the ways these constituents conduct literacy work in alternative contexts.

Bridging literacy research and a literacy teaching/learning context

> Inside of school, my students are called 'disengaged'. They are known as 'slow' and referred to as 'off task'. In their classrooms, my students cannot read. But after school, their names change. After school, different possibilities emerge. I am a witness. The possibilities bring new names … new identities … and make me re-consider the idea that my students are differently (l)abled in other spaces. Outside of school their identities are entwined with authority and specialized knowledge that are not privileged during the course of their regular days. Outside of school my students are called 'lyricist', 'master surfer', 'gamer', 'poet' and even 'cultural critic'. I understand now. There are possibilities for re-authorship on the outside.

> That is where I will go.

> (Jeanine, practitioner journal entry, January 2003)

I have worked as an African American woman teacher researcher in alternative, inner-city contexts for several years. During that time I have become very impressed with the strategies students co-construct to re-author new identities in relationship with media. I define re-authoring as self-reflective processes of naming and ascribing personhood. The processes I have encountered reveal students' desires and intelligence. They also affirm individual and collective power. Yet, teasing apart the many possibilities for adolescents' re-authoring outside of school is tantamount to untangling a web. This is due, in part, to the fact that 'out-of-school' refers to myriad territories. After school programs are only one out-of-school context in which students engage in literacy work to navigate texts and affect conceptions of personhood. Some other contexts are homes, community centers, playgrounds, athletic facilities, places of worship, movie theaters and arcades.

Grasping the ways students re-author is also complicated because of covetousness and misjudgment. Many adolescents guard their time outside of school. I believe this is largely due to a desire to separate worlds in which they have competing identities. In the commonly monolithic world of 'school' many students are called 'struggling' and 'troublemaker'. Such names yield no power. However, in the worlds students develop outside of school, they have opportunities to re-author themselves with different names. The new names are: 'confident tutor' and 'skilled lyricist'. Because of a fear of co-option, opportunities to re-author are often subject to aggressive privatization. Or, they are missed by educators when regarded as irrelevant to literacy education or trivialized as adolescent 'play'.

Preparing to re-author: reading popular culture narratives after school

I was privileged to gain entry into an out-of-school context that supported students' re-authoring when I worked with 'struggling' African American urban adolescents in an after-school program. The Youth Leadership (YL) after-school program was held in a large comprehensive, urban high school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania every Monday–Thursday for three hours (3pm–6pm) during the entire calendar years spanning 2001 to 2003. The school has a student population of 1800. Approximately 58% of the student body attended classes on a regular basis. The school reflects its neighborhood in that 98% of the population is African American. More than half of all students qualify for free or reduced lunch, indicating the high rate of family poverty within the community. The 12 students in the program ranged from 14 to 18 years old. After school, students described themselves in a number of ways. They called themselves Hip Hop enthusiasts, athletes, lyricists and web surfers. We maintained a heterogeneous community in terms of interests and dispositions. Students became friends over the course of our tenure together. The athletes meshed with the artists and the gang member meshed with the straight-laced students because we practiced respect and pedagogical strategies for inclusion. All students self-identified as African American and each was school-identified as a 'disengaged' reader or writer.

'Disengaged' meant that my students resisted individual and collaborative interactions with texts (including conventional methods of reading and writing), participation in conversations with others about information found in texts, and producing works pertaining to, or answering questions about, what they did or did not understand about information within texts. Students elected to be a part of the voluntary program based on recommendations from in-school teachers who determined they needed additional support with reading and writing. The program's purpose was to motivate disengaged urban adolescents to interact with various texts (like films, the Internet and popular periodicals) along with traditional texts (like short stories and poems), and cultivate literacy practices. It was also designed to

research instruction and learning methods that might inform teachers in multiple contexts about different ways to work with students who are failed by schools.

To gain insight into my students' interactions with texts, I asked: 'What types of frameworks for engagements with media texts can African American urban adolescents co-develop after school?' I used transcripts of individual interviews and whole group responsive conversations, student journals, a teacher journal, student media projects and photographs taken by several student participants, to respond to this question. I integrated an interpretive framework to gain entry into the intersections of the data my students and I generated, to facilitate our work, and to draw conclusions about our accomplishments. I relied on the lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Out-of-School Adolescent Literacy Theories (ALT) to interpret data in which students generated inductive talk – like transcribed conversations and interviews. CRT forefronts ways to conceptualize and validate lived experiences and subjectivities in the context of storytelling (Crenshaw 1995; Delgado and Stefanic 2001; Gates 1997a, b). Theories about out-of-school adolescent literacies point to the developmental ways teenagers use media and technology to perform and shape new literacies (Hull and Schultz 2002; Greenleaf et al. 2001; Brandt and Clinton 2002; Gee 2000; Moje et al. 2000). Because my work with students relied on the ways individuals tell racialized, gendered, and class-referenced stories in response to media, these lenses helped me to understand better the ways students talked about their identities, perspectives and experiences when engaged with media texts and technology.

Critical Black Feminist Epistemologies (CBFE) helped me to tease out ideas students had about gender and sexuality. When confronted with archetypes and language choices that framed notions about femininity, masculinity and sexual orientations, CBFE provided ways for me to question and assist students' assertions and conclusions (Fine and Macpherson 1992; Haggis 1990; Harding 1987; Hawkesworth 1989; Hill Collins 1990). Since these assertions and conclusions were often private, I used this interpretive lens to investigate journal entries about gender and sexuality that were not shared with the group. To gauge the ways students recognized signs and signifiers – words and images that construct representations visually and give them meaning – I used Social Semiotics (SS). When students drafted media projects, took photographs, and juxtaposed images from websites, films, and television, I used theories about social semiotics to interpret their vantage points and understandings about these phenomena and their implications (Hobbs 2001; Piette and Giroux 1997; Buckingham 1996; Lemke 1988a, b, c; Lemke 1989a, b).

This framework allowed me to question our data in ways that can inform teacher education and literacy education for adolescents. It also helped me to configure ways to include students and encourage their literacy engagements through means that inspire them: modeled storytelling (CRT), use of technology (ALT), journaling and note taking (CBFE), and socio-photographic analysis (SS). As a result of this framework all students, regardless of their abilities, were able to participate in the after-school program fully. For instance, students who had trouble decoding print were able to forefront their abilities to talk, write, or deconstruct images while they gained practice interrogating documents. Similarly, students who were strong writers, but lacked confidence speaking publicly or exploring images critically, were given opportunities to draft journal entries in addition to participation in generative discussions. In any case, students had continual practice in reading, writing, speaking and listening – providing continual opportunities to engage and re-author.

During the first two weeks of our program, my students and I spent our afternoon sessions developing a system for text selection. We chose media based on several qualifying descriptors. As a result of these descriptors, I defined our media texts more particularly. I called them 'popular culture narratives'. Popular culture narratives could be films, television

programs, Internet websites or popular periodicals. First, these narratives portrayed nuances of social constructs. Race, class, gender, and sexuality were often at issue in the stories, advertisements, or journalistic reports. Second, they depicted archetypes – representative human paradigms that embody 'types' of identity. Third, the narratives mingled standardized English and variations of English. This mingling allowed characters the ability to texturize social situations and individuals in specific ways. Fourth, they produced visual representations that signified and complicated language. That is, compositions of rich, moving images were used to pictorially translate what was said. Lastly, my students chose to read media that provoked us to deeper revelations about human conditions and the complexities of personhood, place, word and image. This provocation was initiated by both print and visual texts. So, in addition to our local newspaper, *Essence*, *Vibe*, *XXL* and *Ebony* magazines, we also read movies like *Malcolm X*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *4 Little Girls*.

Impetuses for new names: strategies that encourage literacy engagements and re-authoring

Students directed me in conceptualizing popular culture narratives and we supported each other in adapting ways to engage and question them. Over time, and after several text engagements, students began to name themselves in opposition to in-school descriptors. Several pedagogical strategies supported this resistance. We practiced:

- Positive reinforcement. While I earned students' trust by consistently regarding their ideas and practices as credible and evidence of high aptitude, I praised them for sharing their knowledge. This kind of attention was valuable to them developmentally and personally. It affected the ways they negotiated the intersections of their personal and academic identities.
- Community respect. A culture of honor was cultivated from the onset of the program. In my authoritative role, I instituted an ethos of 'peace' students agreed to. Our culture made the after-school program safe for literacy work that might otherwise be humiliating. Reading print out loud, articulating one's deconstructed reading of difficult scenes, or sharing drafts of written journal entries, were understood as potentially vulnerable acts that required sensitivity from every participant.
- Individual freedom. Because the space of after school is subject to different rules, often those co-developed by students and teachers, a degree of autonomy and choice was valued in our program. I did not attempt to maneuver their meaning making or disregard their selection of texts.
- Acceptance of language variations. I accepted students' language choices, noting that slang, dialects and even expletives that were arguably used appropriately, could be utilized in our community. I also encouraged them to work on interchanging their language variations, and the variations we read, with standardized English and more socially sensitive terms. This practice allowed students to become familiar with whatever they found strange about standard English while maintaining a degree of ownership of their own voices.
- Text value. As we worked together, students and I remained conscious about the importance of images, signs, language and print as interconnected components in adolescent worlds. I did not depreciate their choices and renderings.
- Cooperative authority. My students and I collaborated from beginning to end. We discussed ways to structure our program, what to read, what counted as texts and how to remain reflective about what we did as a literate community. I did not prescribe our

reading experiences or dictate our literacy practices, yet I maintained high standards for participation. As a result, students became accustomed to the responsibility of providing meaningful contributions to our work through contemplative verbal responses and journal entries. This supported students' confidence in negotiating texts, in addition to communicating with peers.

As students became more self-assured about sharing their abilities and knowledge bases, possibilities for re-authoring became more evident. I found this to be particularly true when my students read movies and discussed issues of gender and race.

'Is niggaz *always* on hard times(?)': critical literacy work to re-author Black masculinities

African American men are continually represented in popular culture narratives in detrimental ways. Too often my students and I read films that portrayed Black men as criminally-minded, ignorant, hyper-sexed individuals with little regard for community, family, or self-improvement. When faced with this kind of representation, my students coined a popular refrain that signaled the need for a closer reading. With exasperation, they asked, 'is niggaz *always* on hard times?' (Bashir et al., whole group conversation, 14 October 2003). The question seemed ironic to me because it was used as a prompt to consider missed points of entry for re-authorship (which involves naming); yet, it employed a name that is historically regarded as deleterious and undermining to Black men. One of my students, Jason, explained this paradox. He said that students, particularly the boys, 'could use it if it was to do somethin' good' and 'if they knew it meant to look and listen hard to see somethin' new' (Jason, individual interview, 23 October 2003). Students used the rhetorical question as a cue to examine how re-authorship could be, or actually was, made possible within a text – reifying possibilities for new names, a revelation of desires, the cogent nature of intellectual work,[2] and the power of autonomy.

When reading movies chapter by chapter, we were able to co-devise a system for understanding. Our system involved ways for us to individually and collaboratively engage selected narratives. Students were encouraged to assume the name 'cultural critic' – an individual whose senses are heightened in relationship to particular occurrences or characters within a popular culture narrative and who practice ways of examining those phenomena closely to raise critical consciousness. Students drew from their years of expertise as purveyors of popular culture narratives to become critical of the social phenomena we encountered in our reading. To focus our reading, each student assumed a role. A student might elect to be a 'gazer' – an overseer of what was visually perceived. Another might decide to be a 'heavy listener' – a governor of what was heard. Someone else might want to be a 'recorder' – a documentary agent of what was understood. When we came upon a film chapter that moved or provoked or annoyed any one of us, we read it several times. For instance, when reading *Malcolm X*, many of my students were struck by the startling image and language shifts that became apparent when el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz journeyed to Mecca. Highlighting the hajj as a pivotal point in the movie, students honed in on it and re-read it over and over again. Below is an example of the framework we used to engage the popular culture narrative *Hustle & Flow* during a summer 2006 reunion.

Hustle & Flow

Hustle & Flow is a deeply criticized yet highly acclaimed Indie film. It debuted in 2005 and quickly evoked attention from the mainstream. The film is a popular culture narrative,

meeting all five qualifiers noted. *Hustle & Flow*, at first glance, is a story about members of an American sub-culture. It chronicles the lives of a pimp and three hookers. However, a closer read reveals a complex story about a strange social intersection. The intersection convolutes race, class and sexual power with the intense human desire for re-authorship. This film is primarily about DJay, a pimp in Memphis, Tennessee. As an archetypical character, DJay represents the 'poor, menacing Black man'. His character is meant to convey desperation and instability. He is intended to embody dreamlessness – a shadowed descriptor of Blackness and poverty.

DJay exploits a group of women throughout the film. The first woman is Shug, a prostitute. Shug represents the 'Madonna' archetype. She is a docile, nurturing, pregnant African American woman who eventually emerges as DJay's love interest. Nola is also a prostitute. She represents the 'Whore' archetype. Nola is a needy, younger white woman who longs for importance and attention. Lexus is a stripper who also works as a prostitute. She represents the 'Bully'. She is an African American woman who maintains an angry, intimidating temperament as a means for survival. DJay's disdain for his condition and desire for re-authorship caused him to manufacture an outlet through writing and rapping. In chapter five, scene one of *Hustle & Flow*, my students noted that DJay experienced a personal shift. An understanding of what it means to be modified, to move forward and be re-named, affected him. Although he did not say a word, it is in this scene that readers grasp DJay's longing to be called 'author', 'writer' or 'rapper'. It is clear that he did not want to be on hard times and that he longed desperately to be 'someone' as opposed to a 'pimp' or 'nigga'. The following co-constructed framework for text engagement and literacy work was used to support re-authorship.

We enacted a system to develop this and other frameworks. First, we engaged a popular culture narrative once. Second, we decided what context to use for response. Contexts included: partnered conversations, whole group conversations, or individual journal free-writes. Third, we participated in the context for response. There were times we engaged more than one context for response simultaneously (i.e. four or five students journaled individually and others partnered off to discuss their responses to the popular culture narrative). Our decision depended on students' desire to focus alone or in relationship to another person. Fourth, one or two student volunteers organized our responses in a word or phrase bank on our chalk or whiteboard. Fifth, the student volunteers practiced turning statements and details into questions to consider. Finally, we worked together to place these questions within the guiding framework for particular listening, watching, questioning, imagining, recording and discussion. This framework can be utilized once students have watched and discussed a film, music video, magazine/newspaper article, or documentary at least once. By noting the 'main ways [they] interact[ed] with media' students isolated the actions of 'listenin', watchin', questionin' and imaginin'' as the most important (YL students, whole group conversations 18, 19 and 20 November 2003). I added 'recording' and 'discussing' to this list. Students and I co-developed the questions embedded below. They are designed to focus individuals in their roles for engagement.

A framework to re-author a representation of black masculinity in a popular culture narrative

As we engaged this chapter we remained in tune with the information we knew about the narrative's characters and their lived experiences. We remained honest by suspending our judgments. This was accomplished by 'making the strange familiar and the familiar strange' (Erickson 1986, 121). In addition, I often drafted brief written descriptions of film chapters

prior to re-reads. The one below was shared with students prior to re-reading the fifth chapter of *Hustle & Flow* as a preface that prompts serious deliberation. To invite readers into this process I ask you to go inside yourself quietly. Question what you think about 'niggaz', 'pimps' and 'prostitutes'. Consider what you understand and what you do not. This is intellectual work. See yourself in every word, picture and implication:

Opening and description: Chapter five (5) of *Hustle & Flow* – 2 minutes 17 seconds (2:17)

Picture this: Silence. Daylight. A church that is nearly empty. Stained glass windows and wooden pews. Key (DJay's childhood friend) is a producer. He sits in front of an electronic keyboard. He is surrounded by sound equipment. Nola sits two rows behind DJay. They are an audience of two in the pews. A small choir stands in the sanctuary. A young man sits at a piano. Key cues the music. The lead vocalist, an African American woman, begins to sing. Her voice reverberates off the high-beamed rafters. The choir hums softly behind her. DJay and Nola are still. They are both visibly moved by the melody and lyrics. Nola stars awestruck. Her eyes are wide. Her lips are parted. She breathes heavily. DJay sheds a tear. The characters do not speak. They listen to the words of the song:

I told Jesus it would be all right if He changed my name.
I told Jesus it would be all right if He changed my name.
Oh, I told Jesus it would be all right if He changed my name.
Jesus told me that the world would be against me if He changed my name.

Critical literacy work

Assume a role. Participate in the critical literacy practices(s) associated with the role. Allow your role to anchor your engagement. Be prepared to share with the group.

Listen critically[3] – What do you hear in this narrative?

• Consider the words that penetrate the silence of the church. What does the name 'Jesus' mean? What does it mean to 'change someone's name'? Why would the world be against someone who changes their name? Why are these references significant to DJay?
• Or, consider the silence. Juxtapose it with the raucous of DJay's daily life. What is the value of silence? What is its significance in this chapter?
• You may want to engage the scene once. The second time, if you wish, turn away and listen without watching.

Watch critically – What do you see in this narrative?

• What distinguishes the space you see from other spaces portrayed in this narrative?
• What story did you read on Nola's face? What is the story of DJay's tear? (That is, what does it signify? What does it mean to him and to the text as a whole?)

Question critically – What can you ask about this narrative?

• What does it mean to feel oppressed? What does it mean to feel liberated? Does DJay feel oppressed or liberated in this chapter? How do you know?
• What questions can you ask about oppression or liberation? (You may think of questions about DJay, Nola, Key or the choir members.)

Imagine critically – What can you envision about this narrative?

• Imagine yourself as an author of these characters' voices. You know them well. If Nola and DJay had a conversation after this scene, what might each say to the other?

<u>Record critically – What can you document about this narrative?</u>

● Notate what you read and what others say. What connections or disconnections have you noticed?

<u>Discuss critically – What can you say about this narrative?</u>

● Work as a facilitator. Draw some conclusions about what it means to change your name.
● Discuss the significance of having a new name. How can the name you determine for yourself change your life?

We used this framework to re-read several chapters in *Hustle & Flow* and practice re-authoring. Students responded to the framework by reflecting on their experiences with it. In several conversations students commented on our framework. Overwhelmingly, students appreciated three primary components of the framework – opportunities to assume a role, re-read texts, and 'practice expertise':

Jeanine: Ok everyone, let's debrief. How are you feeling about the framework? What do we need to revise?
Cherie: I like that we have a role. It help me focus more. Now I think of one thing to do at a time when I'm doin' my [literacy] work. That help a lot. I don't get confused with this.
Jason: I'm down with the second chances. This frame is less stress 'cause I know I'ma get another chance to read. I know we can read over and over with it so I don't get nervous about missin' somethin'. That's good.
Gerald: I like the re-readin' too. The one thing I can say is that we should work the frame more. We should use our responses in our [media literacy] projects.
Bashir: I wanna do more than that even … the framework is so dope. I like the way we get to practice our expertise, you know? I wanna hold a rally or somethin', really show everybody how much we know … how much we changed.
(Whole group conversation, 11 December 2003)

Students' responses demonstrate their pride in co-construction and implementation. They also explicate what was most important to them. Co-constructing and implementing this framework helped students to become more confident in their text engagements and re-name themselves as experts. Gerald and Bashir's suggestions were taken up. Students used their responses and the artifacts they generated when using the framework (such as journal entries, notes, and audiotaped recordings) within their media literacy projects. Later, Bashir took our work further, as he suggested, and created a social justice project as an 'activist'.

Using popular culture narratives in literacy work with youth: the social function of re-authorship

Using this and other frameworks for media text engagements, my students could consider how DJay might (and began to) re-author a different name and identity. Over time, these types of engagements not only produced techniques for deconstructing and understanding information found in popular culture narratives, they also gave literacy a social function. That is, reading, writing, speaking and listening became useful in critiquing social constructs, notions, and labels that were troubling, humorous or ill-fitting to members of our community. For instance, when Bashir applied portions of this framework to representations of his favorite rap mogul, he saw ways to re-name the man 'vegan', 'innovator', 'businessman' and

'father' as opposed to 'misogynist' or 'opportunist'. After reading this person differently in periodicals and music videos, Bashir encountered the mogul differently. Accordingly, he began to critically re-imagine his own name. Bashir started to identify as 'activist' and initiated a focus group of young men students. Their charge was to engage popular culture narratives that story African American men, practice re-authorship together after school, and plan an assembly, complete with documentation of their work, to publicize their new names.

Through this framework for engagement (and others), students also began to question what a 'nigga' could be and the 'hard times' they are purported to endure by subjecting them to analysis and change. My students developed their abilities to re-author by assuming ownership of our frameworks and using them within their own lives. One young woman, Cherie, noted, 'ya'll [African American men and boys] ain't *always* on hard times. It's always a way out … it's always a dream bein' born. You can pick any name you wanna call yourself. You can do it anytime you ready' (whole group conversation, 3 December 2003). Through the power of re-authorship, our pressing question: 'is niggaz *always* on hard times?' finally yielded an answer. It was a resounding 'no', because we discovered our right and ability to use our literacies to re-author.

Hindrances to engaging popular culture narratives and supporting re-authorship inside of school

The literacy work and re-authorship students do after school is dynamic because it is rife with stimuli. The after-school program I co-constructed with my students was led by them; each strategy, role, and question was co-developed with them, stamped with their approval or omitted as ineffective or too intrusive to processes that support re-authorship. In-school teachers can encourage re-authorship by imagining ways popular culture narratives might be engaged by adolescents outside of school. However, I urge colleagues to be careful in their work with students, media, and literacy work that supports re-authoring. There are several hindrances to productivity and success.

Media texts are a source of enjoyment for adolescents. Accessing them heightens the potential interruption of students' pleasure. This is dangerous ground for teachers. When unchecked, restrained, counter-innovative teaching can incite the habits of a killjoy and compromise the fight for fun. It is important to gain students' permission and full participation when co-constructing frameworks for engagement. Secondly, media texts themselves are valued not only for the kinds of feelings they produce, but also for their inviolable nature. They are often seen as separate or even off limits, securely out of reach of schools' and authority figures' prying eyes. The confiscation of that which is sacrosanct in adolescent worlds cannot be taken lightly. If it is, concerns about trust are inevitable, making mutual and reciprocal acts of learning nearly impossible. To further promote trust, it is important to note that popular culture narratives inherently deal with issues that are particular to identity construction. To avoid uncomfortable teaching/learning moments, it is crucial that teachers prepare for, and participate in, ongoing critical self-reflexivity. One should also choose carefully what personally valuable contributions one can make to the work of re-authoring.

Yet, we must maintain a balance. When working with media, many teachers feel a need to over-teach, directing and prescribing ways to perceive what is encountered, as opposed to working with students to co-construct practices, guidelines and choices for engagement. This is a dangerous practice. It detracts from the sense of freedom and autonomy that students establish outside of schools. I have found that they will not give up such ownership without a fight. A natural consequence of teacher-centeredness is usurpation of student

agency and choice. Without encouragement in formulating decisions that gain the respect their new names denote, students may not remain motivated to engage, or find an appropriate degree of self-efficacy, when grappling with the popular culture narratives they are otherwise drawn to. Lastly, many teachers are stalled by their inability to co-select controversial or potentially offensive stories to read. Some of the narratives students engage outside of schools are weighty in their images, words, and ideas. Discovering ways to read these texts with respect to regulations about gratuitous works is tricky. At times, it involves cutting chapters or skipping excerpts. However, all these hindrances can be negotiated within a literate community where power and ideas are shared.

Recommendations for facilitating re-authorship in any context

When working with urban adolescents of color who appreciate popular culture narratives, it is important to:

- Become a student of students. Access youth with sensitive and respectful questions about what they do with media and how their literacies and modalities assist them in conducting intellectual work.
- Learn to read the media students favor. It is important to spend time engaging media that adolescents like. Knowing their tastes and preferences can provide valuable insight into text selection.
- Learn to embrace the benefits of students' reading, writing, speaking and listening in alternative contexts. It is important to communicate with tutors, teachers, librarians, community workers, parents and other educators who facilitate youth's literacy work.
- Create teacher networks that focus on the intersections of media, literacy and adolescence. Include students' voices and attend to them seriously over time.
- Devise spaces inside of school that mirror after-school spaces in upholding freedom, expression, appropriate risks, community-building and popular culture criticism.

The framework included here and the recommendations above provide implications for in-school teachers. When students are given opportunities to demonstrate their engagement after school and re-author their identities as literacy brokers, they take on a different relationship with literacies that are sanctioned in school. When I interviewed my students' in-school teachers at the close of Youth Leadership, four out of five teachers reported that students expressed more confidence and enthusiasm when introduced to developmentally appropriate literacy work in class. The same group also stated that students found parallels between processes of engaging media texts after school and traditional texts in school. For instance, when asked to read plays in their English Literature I class, Bashir and Jason began to question, imagine, and record critically the characters and situations depicted in the canonical texts.

By noting a correlation between these texts and scripts for films and music videos we engaged after school, these students were able to practice various levels of engagements with peers in school. These tactics assisted their understanding and reader responses. Over the two years of our program, students' relationship to media changed as well. In exit interviews, 10 out of 12 students stated that they felt they earned the name 'cultural critic'. Cherie explained the impact of this name by stating that she 'began to look at stuff [media] with a different eye from before … with more critical consciousness' (Cherie, YL student). As twenty-first century literacy theorists and practitioners, it is up to us to provide spaces in which adolescent literacies and opportunities for re-authorship can emerge unscathed,

unaltered and undone, ever moving toward their heights of transformation and providing the possibilities of new names in students' dynamic literate lives.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. In this article, the term 'urban' refers to portions of the inner-city in which racial, social, economic and linguistic segregation are rampant. It also refers to those citizens, particularly students of color, who are underrepresented in education research and underserved within, and often excluded from, teaching/learning communities.
2. Intellectual work is the synergy of socially situated literacy practices and culturally situated knowledge produced at the intersection of adolescent literacies and popular culture narratives. This phenomenon is 'intellectual' because it is inspired by the complexities of local knowledge. It is 'work' because it is exerted through tensions within and among activities that happen in relationship to meanings and messages of various types of texts. Then, intellectual work is manifested when people are motivated to engage with texts and nurture a positive self-efficacy in relationship to activities that are meaningful to them. The results of sustained intellectual work are often evidenced by production of layered understandings and critical consciousness among individuals and/or groups.
3. The category 'Listen critically' was not used when engaged with a print popular culture narrative like an *Essence* or *Vibe* magazine article.

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