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## Turn Up That Radio, Teacher: Popular Cultural Pedagogy in New Century

**ABSTRACT:** Synthesizing literature from critical pedagogy, sociocultural psychology, and cultural studies with popular cultural texts and experiences from actual classroom practice, this article conceptualizes the critical teaching of popular culture as a viable strategy to increase academic and critical literacies in urban secondary classrooms. Relying on scholarship that views youth popular culture as a powerful, but often times underutilized point of intervention for schools, these authors discuss the impact of using youth popular culture to reconnect with otherwise disenfranchised schooling populations. The authors rebut criticisms associated with the teaching of popular culture by showing how teachers can simultaneously honor and draw upon the sociocultural practices of their students while also adhering to state and national standards. Further, the article demonstrates the social relevance, academic worthiness, and intellectual merit of hip-hop artists such as the controversial Eminem and popular film texts such as the *Godfather* trilogy. They conclude with a call for postmodern critical educational leaders—vigilant advocates for students who are willing to combine academic content knowledge with a commitment to an engaging multicultural curriculum.

### INTRODUCTION

There is a growing gap between the levels of literacy learned in schools and the types of literacy skills demanded in an information age (Alvermann, 2001). This literacy gap, seen particularly in urban schools, carries serious social and economic consequences. School leaders are besieged on all sides (parents, teachers, district-level administration, state and federal

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policymakers, and the media) to improve the literacy performance of the most underachieving schools and students. As school leaders consider different policy options, they should not overlook a critical literacy resource in their midst—urban youth engagement and familiarity with popular culture. In this article, we draw from our experiences as teachers and educational researchers to argue that school leaders can join teachers to incorporate popular culture into the traditional curricula in ways that will increase the literacy development of underperforming students.

In the field of education, there is no problem more serious than the failure of urban students of color to acquire the literacy skills needed for academic advancement, professional employment, and active citizenship—we call these skills academic literacies.<sup>1</sup> These skills, quite simply, are the keys to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in our technologically advanced, postindustrial society. The challenge confronting students of color attempting to acquire academic, professional, and critical literacies is exacerbated by the growing cultural disconnect between the teaching force and the student population, which is changing rapidly, particularly in central cities (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Teachers are at a loss to enact engaging multicultural curricula with increasingly diverse student populations. The result is a curriculum, taught under the guise of standards and rigor, that lacks immediate relevance to students' lives. Urban students of color are generally less motivated by this culturally alienating curriculum and fail to achieve at comparable levels to their peers in more affluent areas.

This conceptual article examines the critical use of popular culture to confront these looming problems in the field of literacy education. Specifically, we consider the teaching of popular culture to develop academic and critical literacies in urban classrooms. In earlier work (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, in press-b; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, 2002), we have advocated for the use of popular culture as a bridge to traditional academic texts. Here, we make the case that the teaching of popular culture can be the centerpiece of culturally responsive literacy pedagogy in urban classrooms. We begin by providing a working definition of popular culture that is situated within cultural and critical perspectives. We then turn toward a theoretical discussion of literacy theorists who speak to the new and changing conceptions of what it means to be literate.

As new literacy theorists point out, advancing technologies are changing the literacy demands of the workplace. Professional literacy organizations such as the National Reading Conference (Alvermann, 2001), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 1996), and the International Reading

1. We use this modifier to distinguish traditional school literacy demands from popular cultural literacies.

Association have recently produced position papers calling for expanded conceptions of literacy in English/language arts classrooms (NCTE, 1996). We contend that popular culture provides an ideal site for study of new (digital, visual, cyber, media) literacies in the process of working to develop academic competencies. We further contend that many students who have problems acquiring academic literacy use popular texts in meaningful ways as part of their everyday activity. Educators, then, can draw upon these everyday experiences with popular culture to teach the ways of reading and representing texts that have currency in the academy and the new economy while also fostering the literacy skills needed for active citizenship.

Further, we make the case for the academic worthiness of popular cultural texts through analyses of texts that formed the core of several units that we cotaught in an urban secondary English classroom. We also challenge the resistance to teaching popular culture through analyses which reveal these texts to be intellectually challenging and generative of powerful literacy-related activities. We conclude with a discussion of teaching popular culture in an era of increased standardization and offer a challenge to school leaders, teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers to insist upon the teaching of popular culture in K–12 classrooms.

### **“PEEP THIS OUT”: USING POSTMODERN CULTURAL STUDIES TO RETHINK CURRICULUM**

We begin with a definition of popular culture inspired by the sociology of culture (Williams, 1995, 1998), cultural studies (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991; Docker, 1994; McCarthy, 1998; Storey, 1998), critical theory (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1999), and neo-Marxist (Gramsci, 1971) perspectives. Williams (1998) suggests that *culture* is one of the most complex terms in the English language. Critiquing sociologists, anthropologists, and “cultural” critics who only examine single components of culture, Williams articulates three components of culture that are essential to any thorough analysis of the subject. The first component is the *ideal*, in which culture is a state or process of human perfection in terms of absolute or universal values. The analysis of culture in this vein is essentially the discovery and description, in lives and works, of those values that can be seen to compose a timeless order, or to have permanent reference to the universal human condition (Williams, 1998, p. 48).

The second component is the *documentary*. Culture, here, is the body of intellectual and imaginative work in which human thought and experience

are recorded. An analysis of culture, then, is the activity of criticism, where the nature of thought and experience, the details of the language, form, and convention in which these are active, are described, deconstructed, and ultimately valued or devalued (Williams, 1998, p. 48).

The *social* component identifies culture as a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and “ordinary” behavior. The analysis of culture, then, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in particular ways of life. It also includes analysis of the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions that express or govern social relationships, and the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate (Williams, 1998, p. 48).

Each of these components is represented in our analysis of the critical teaching of popular culture. We analyze popular culture as it relates to the expression of ideal universal human values, namely the desire and struggle for freedom from tyranny and oppression. We also document and analyze elements of the body of intellectual and imaginative work that comprises popular culture such as hip-hop music, popular film, and mainstream media articles. Finally, we examine popular culture as the everyday social experiences of marginalized students as they confront, make sense of, and contend against social institutions such as schools, the mass media, corporations, and governments.

It is relevant here to briefly explain the concept of hegemony as it is critical to understanding modern analyses of popular culture. Hegemony is a cultural concept developed to explain the absence of socialist revolutions in Western capitalist democracies (Gramsci, 1971). It refers to a condition in process in which a dominant class does not merely rule a society but leads it through the exercise of moral and intellectual leadership. In this sense, the concept is used to suggest a society in which, despite oppression and exploitation, there is a high degree of consensus and a large measure of social stability. Cultural theorists locate popular culture as a site of struggle against hegemony; a place of contestation between the forces of resistance of subordinate groups in society, and the forces of incorporation of dominant groups in society. Popular culture, they argue, is neither an imposed mass culture, nor a people’s culture; it is more of an exchange between the two. The texts and practices of popular culture move within an equilibrium of compromise. Those who examine popular culture from this perspective view it as a site of ideological struggle between dominant and subordinate classes expressed through music, film, mass media, language, customs, and values.

We do not advocate for the blind and uncritical celebration of popular culture in literacy classrooms, but we recognize its centrality to the lives of youth. We further recognize that the relationship between popular culture and urban youth is too complex to advocate wholeheartedly for its celebration or denigration. However, we also understand that the relationship is too far-reaching in depth and scope to ignore. Giroux (1996) addresses the crisis confronting youth where they are enmeshed in a *culture of violence* coded by race and class. He speaks to the negative connotations of youth culture, promoted in popular media, that propel youth toward mistrust, alienation, misogyny, violence, apathy, and the development of *fugitive cultures*. These same media commercialize the working class body and criminalize youth of color.

#### **“Y’ALL BETTER RECOGNIZE”: THE GROWING RELEVANCE OF POPULAR CULTURE**

Many of the early cultural theorists (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1999) saw popular culture solely as a tool of the culture industries, used to sway the masses toward consumption and conformity. However, the postmodern influence on cultural studies, with its critiques of meta-narratives and honoring of multiple perspectives, created the space for alternate conceptions of the role of popular cultures in capitalist societies. Turning from its original attack on mass culture, many theorists began to celebrate aspects of commercial culture, arguing that some cultural products have quasi-political messages and empowering effects on the masses.

It is important, however, not to overlook the coopting potential of popular culture. Those who choose to study popular culture must simultaneously be conscious of its relationship to and critique of dominant ideologies and dominant markets (During, 1999). In our own work, we insist that educators keep the duality of cultural products central to the discourse and analyses in their classrooms.

Docker (1994) questions the manner in which modernist critical theory has made sense of 20th-century mass culture and suggests that postmodernism may promise more illuminating approaches. Modernism, he feels, has demonized mass culture as the chief danger to civilization. Postmodernism, on the other hand, does not ascribe to popular cultural phenomena any single commanding meaning or purpose. It does not assume any easily explicable relationship between popular culture and its audiences, and it does not see audiences as transparent in their desires and consciousness. It also does not see a hierarchy of genres in culture in general. Postmod-

ernism, rather, is interested in a plurality of forms and genres, a pluralizing of aesthetic criteria, and a respect for the interacting, conflicting, and contested histories of these genres. Postmodernism sees popular culture as a frequent site of flamboyance, extravagance, excess, parody, self-parody, and sometimes, even resistance.

Storey (1998) offers a set of concrete definitions for popular culture. He asserts that popular culture is always defined implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories such as folk culture, mass culture, or dominant culture, and argues that

1. Popular culture is culture that is well liked by many people;
2. Popular culture is what is left over after we have decided what is high
3. culture (the notion of popular culture as substandard culture);
4. Popular culture is mass culture;
5. Popular culture is that culture which originates from the people;
6. Popular culture is a neo-Gramscian concept.

Using a neo-Gramscian analysis, popular culture can be viewed as the cultural products created by women and men as they make sense of their active consumption of the texts and practices of the culture industries. Youth cultures, for example, are able to appropriate for their own purposes and meanings the commodities that are commercially provided. For instance, in popular musical genres such as hip-hop, it is possible to have anticapitalist politics articulated in the economic interests of capitalism. The music may be lubricating the very system that it seeks to condemn (Lipsitz, 1994). Storey (1998) argues that cultural theorists must be aware of the simultaneous possibilities of the production of popular culture for subordinate groups. It has the potential of empowerment and resistance, but it can also lead to passivity and consumption of the hegemonic ideals promoted by the traditional intellectuals of the dominant class.

Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) argue that the curriculum can best inspire learning only when school knowledge builds upon the tacit knowledge derived from the cultural resources that students already possess. It is not a question of substituting popular culture for traditional high-culture topics. Instead, traditional curricula must meet the test of relevance to a student-centered learning regime where "relevance" is not coded as the rejection of tradition but is a criterion for determining inclusion. It is the task of the teacher to persuade students that this knowledge contributes to helping them learn what they need to know. The canons are no longer taught as self-evident repositories of enlightenment. Rather,

the teacher is obliged to encourage students to interrogate the values underlying a work of literature. Educators, through this process, are forced to rethink the nature of legitimate knowledge as they also rethink curricular content and pedagogical practices. We contend strongly that popular culture should be included in these reconsiderations.

### **“GET WIT’ IT”: THEORETICAL LOGIC FOR POP CULTURE IN THE CURRICULUM**

Emergent technologies are changing what it means to be literate as well as how we think and function as a society (Alvermann, 2001; Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2004; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995). This fundamental shift in conceptions of literacy is nothing new however. Early literacy theorists and literacy historians (Kaestle, 1988) have made explicit connections between literacy and changing technology, noting the changes in definitions of literacy and literacy practices that accompanied the development of the alphabet and the invention of the printing press. As the literacy demands of citizenship and the workforce change, schools are forced to rethink the nature of literacy instruction. Just as it would have been inconceivable for students to acquire the needed literacy skills from the study of hieroglyphs in the 18th and 19th centuries, it is just as inconceivable that 21st-century literacy educators would ignore the advances in literacy technology that have occurred over the last 100 years.

In order to keep pace with the ever changing literacy practices in homes, communities, and the workplace, scholars (Barton and Hamilton, 1998) encourage ethnographies that look into the everyday literacy practices of local populations. These theorists surmise that everyone uses language and literacy as a part of daily activity (Cole, 1996; Moll, 2000). From reading and conducting such ethnographies ourselves, we have learned that urban youth navigate popular media texts as a part of their everyday activity (Goodman, 2003; Mahiri, 2004). Our reading of theory and of the worlds of urban youth lead us to ask several important questions: Can we bridge the gap between the theorizing and pontificating of cultural theorists and the actual school setting? Can we move fluidly from the playbook to the textbook, or from rap to Rousseau? Can we produce the empirical data to support the claim that this approach has promise for more effectively serving the youth we are currently failing?

We are living in an age where the concepts of text are being constantly redefined in virtually every space except schools (Kress, 2003). We open

our doors, every day, to young people who are engaging in new-century literacy practices that they find much more compelling than most things we currently offer them in our curricula. Over time, the battle for intellectual commitment is one that we lose with far too many students.

However, we must not overlook the fact that middle class students conform to the expectations of school and school culture because the exchange is worth it for them—not necessarily because they are impressed with the curricular offerings. These youth see a value in believing in the immediate and long-term exchange value of conforming to the schools' expectations. They see that historically this has often translated into genuine opportunity and a recycling of the socioeconomic privileges of being middle class. To the contrary, poor children often do not believe in the reward structure proffered by schools and likewise do not see investment in the school culture to be a worthwhile exchange—a disinteresting curriculum only exasperates this feeling. It seems a sad commentary that so many students see school as a place where they must negotiate over how much of themselves they are willing to give up, rather than as an additive place where they can grow. Sadly, what we know is that far too many students across the board are generally unimpressed with the schooling that we offer them. Should we just accept that school will never be a place that students enjoy? We believe that this doesn't need to be the case. But to create schooling environments that are more responsive to a student body that is increasingly more informed and inundated with media texts, we must seriously rethink our marriage to a failing curriculum. The origins of this rethinking may be best summed up with the comments of one of our students:

SHAUN: If you learn one way to cook on a stove, you can always go to another stove and learn to cook. That's just like if you learn popular culture, you can come back and learn how to use canonical culture. Because learning, basically all you have to do is use your mind and be interested in what you are learning. Because if you are bored in class you are just going to doze off in class and sleep ('cause some teachers will let you sleep, I ain't even gonna lie). If it's interesting though, you'll stay up and you'll participate and you'll try to get some points of information in. But no matter what, you'll always try to learn. But I think if you are allowed to learn from that pop culture and then that teacher tried to bring you into the canonical, or the regular text, I think if you are paying attention in this one (pop culture) and they can relate it to the other, then the person will learn both ways. I can say for myself that I did that in this class (Student interview, 2000).

Shaun seems to be able to say it better than we can. The question becomes whether or not we can provide students the skills they need to become intellectual chefs. Once they have mastered the principles of the art,

the application of those skills is dictated only by context. We tend to believe, like Shaun, that this principle is appropriately applied to the theories of teaching and learning. That is to say, once we help all students develop a faith in their natural intellect, the limits to what they can learn come only in terms of hours in the day.

It follows from our framework that critical educators should draw upon the language and literacy practices associated with participation in popular culture to develop literacy skills needed for academic advancement, professional membership, and active citizenship. Ideal classrooms would create activity systems that facilitated learning through active critical engagement with popular media. This teaching of popular culture, however, must be a liberatory practice that enables urban youth not only as readers of the word and the world, but as agents of social change (Freire, 1997; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 1989; Shor, 1992).

To this point, this article has laid down important theoretical groundwork for the potential of using student investment in youth popular culture as a powerful space for intervention and empowerment. In our previous work, we have argued for the use of popular texts as a bridge to more traditional canonical texts (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, 2002, 2004). Certainly, we would still support the use of popular texts to this end. However, our previous work has allowed for the continued placement of popular texts at the margins of the academy. In that approach, teachers often see the popular texts as a pathway into “more serious” academic works. This, in our estimation, is a mistake because it is a continuation of the marginalizing of student interests in schools. This does not mean that the traditional works of the canon should be abandoned. But, it does mean that popular texts should be read and studied as rigorous and relevant pieces with genuine academic merit. The adoption of this approach by teachers and the academy will directly incorporate student knowledge and culture into the classroom and will certainly reinvigorate a standard curriculum that has long been suffering for an injection of relevant core texts. To support this claim, the remainder of this article examines the academic rigor and relevance present in several different popular texts.

### **“YOU MUST BE TRIPPIN’”: ARGUMENTS AGAINST POP CULTURE IN THE CURRICULUM**

One of the most common arguments against the incorporation of popular texts into school curricula is that they lack academic rigor. This argument depends largely on notions of high and low culture. The logic boils down

to a belief that the types of popular texts students choose to engage in are frequently devoid of academic merit and mostly serve the purpose of mindless entertainment. To be sure, this is true of a fair portion of mainstream media texts. However, it seems rational to argue that this is also true of a fair portion of traditional literary texts as well. Of the millions of literary manuscripts that have been published, only a very select few have been selected as worthy of long standing continuous study in the canon. Along these same lines, it would stand to reason that only a select few of the popular texts deserve the intensity and rigor of academic study. We argue, with a high degree of certainty, that these academically meaningful popular texts do exist. We also believe that their conspicuous absence from the curriculum is an egregious oversight on the part of educators and can be linked to the increasing disenfranchisement of students from all walks of life.

For many, it is unclear why we should not cling to an educational past invested deeply in a traditional curriculum. Educators have spent countless hours formulating new and creative ways to present the same information through the same medium. Effectively, we have beaten our heads against the wall in efforts to disguise an increasingly irrelevant curriculum. These attempts have focused our attention on making adjustments to classroom instructional methods, producing concepts such as tracking, cooperative learning groups, learning houses, and block scheduling. With most of our educational indicators telling us that students are continuing to move in a negative direction, we have recently chosen to invest heavily in the concept of testing as a way to insist that schools teach better. These authors predict with confidence that this effort will produce even more of the same, namely high, rates of urban student disinterest and failure.

To be frank, things have changed. We live in an age that is historically unmatched because of the onset of technology and mass media:

The growing pervasiveness of the media in the lives of 21st-century youth has meant that youth identities are increasingly mediated through this set of cultural activities. Recent reports suggest that the average child watches more than three hours of television a day (Nielsen Media Research, 2000); this engagement with electronic media more than doubles to six and one half hours per day when various forms of electronic media are included (television, movies, video games, computers) (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999). When one considers the amount of time spent shopping and socializing in malls and reading various popular magazines, interacting with youth culture may seem as a full time job for American youth. (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, in press-a)

Schools are possibly the slowest of our primary social institutions to recognize and respond to this reality. From the badlands to the promised lands, America's youth have become overwhelmingly invested in the culture of the mass media. From preschool to high school, children can recite ditties from virtually every major manufacturer, whether they purchase their products or not. They can rattle off lyrics from dozens of songs and can access the Internet more quickly than many of the adults in their lives. They can, in point of fact, already perform many of the skills that schools argue they are failing to master—recitation, memorization, textual analysis, accessing secondary sources for information, and more. As educators, for us to accept this, we must also accept the fact that learning and teaching often merge at a place where traditional roles of power are blurred. This territory is often a place where the student must teach and the teacher must learn (Freire, 1970). For this to happen, it is crucial that we recognize that students enter the educational institution already exposed to vast amounts of knowledge, and this exposure increases exponentially as we are cast into the new millennium. This knowledge of new media texts that students bring to bear must be embraced by schools as academically legitimate and as a central foundation upon which to build the intellectual and social development of the children that cross the thresholds of America's classrooms (Apple, 1990).

Education often seeks to separate youth culture from notions of legitimate cultural knowledge. We ask students to leave the knowledge of their culture at the gates of the school, so that they may embrace the knowledge that matters the most, the "official knowledge" (Apple, 1993). Apple explains further that traditional educators have long believed that the separation between the child and the adult takes place when the child learns to value the "more legitimate and higher culture" of the adult world.

We would argue that this hierarchy of culture is the central sticking point for the movement of popular cultural texts into the daily classroom activities inside the institution of school. If we cannot perceive youth and the culture they bring with them to school as a powerful representative of "an inescapable intersection of the personal, social, political, and pedagogical" (Giroux, 1996), then it will become virtually impossible for us to teach them. As schools continually engage in the process of laying out "the politics of official knowledge," no group is more alienated from the institution, the curriculum, and thereby the classroom than young people, particularly young, poor, and working-class students of color. These feelings of exclusion and ostracization, often emerging out of a curriculum and

pedagogy that fails to reflect the lives and interests of these “otherized” student populations, can be eliminated.

### “THIS ‘ISH’ IS OFF THE HEEZY”: MOVING BEYOND CONVENTIONAL CURRICULUM

We believe that popular texts provide the academic rigor and relevance to students’ lives to facilitate a more engaging curriculum. In particular, we believe that the regular use of these texts may be one of the only ways to recapture the audience of our most disenfranchised student populations. The list of these texts must be rethought and updated regularly because students are constantly interrogating new ones (see Morrell [2004] for a list of popular culture sources). With that in mind, we are providing some analysis of a film trilogy and three rap texts as evidence of the academic rigor of these new century texts.

The California Department of Education reading list website states that parents and teachers should take “a variety of important factors into consideration” when choosing texts for children to read ([www.cde.ca.gov/statetests/star/readinglist.html](http://www.cde.ca.gov/statetests/star/readinglist.html)). All four of the factors listed there (interest, reading ability, motivation, and maturity) have obvious relevance to the argument for the incorporation of popular texts in the curriculum. So, too, does the final statement printed on the bottom of every page of the website and written in all capitals: ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO READ.

What are kids *interested* in? What is their *reading ability*? What *motivates* kids? What are they *mature* enough to handle? What will *encourage* kids to read? Thus far, we have argued extensively that young people are already regularly involved in new-century literacy practices that feature popular texts. This seems to answer most of the questions listed above. The only unanswered question is whether students are mature enough to handle the texts that they are engaging. Whether they are or not seems less relevant than the fact that they *are* engaging these texts and that schools can either actively participate in this process or continue to hope that these multiple-media texts will just go away. We advocate for the former because it is clearly the more proactive stance.

The authors are certainly concerned with the amount of adult material present in popular media texts. We also recognize that, whether we like it or not, students are exposed to these issues in very real ways virtually every day. The responsible reaction to this changing world reality is to provide spaces for students to discuss and critique this reality in the presence of a qualified and caring adult—a teacher. The summary dismissal of the

fact that students are dealing with these issues is not only irresponsible, it is negligent. By no means do we insinuate that these texts be inserted into the curriculum without the rigor necessary for a critical examination of the issues they raise. Instead, we contend that the use of new-century popular texts provides educators the opportunity to reach expected professional standards while also helping young people to navigate increasingly complex social realities.

### **ON MY BLOCK: UNDERSTANDING THE ACADEMIC RIGOR OF HIP-HOP TEXTS**

Key to working effectively with students to intellectually examine popular texts is seeing the academic merits of such an endeavor. Our earlier work has presented hip-hop as a viable literary genre worthy of serious academic contemplation (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, 2002, 2004). There are profound implications for urban secondary English teachers using hip-hop music to impart academic and critical literacy skills to urban youth. For instance, Lee (1992), in a southside Chicago study, uses signifying, an African American discourse genre, as a bridge to teaching literary interpretation. In the same manner, popular texts such as hip-hop and film can be used to scaffold literary terms and concepts and ultimately literary interpretations. The use of these texts can easily be tied to the four California English–Language Arts content standards: (1) reading; (2) literary response and analysis; (3) writing; and (4) listening and speaking strategies (California State Board of Education, 1997). Using a text such as Scarface’s “On My Block” (Scarface, 2002a), all four of these content standards can be met. In this piece, Scarface paints a vivid picture of the realities and coping strategies common to many of America’s youth living in postindustrialized urban centers. His use of tone, diction, image, and metaphor are all powerful literary techniques that teachers are asked to impart to their students. His mastery of language conveys larger themes and motifs present in urban life, including concepts of identity (lines 1–6, 13–16) and struggle (2–4, 17–20) (Scarface, 2002b).

Popular texts can also be analyzed for themes, motifs, and plot and character development. It is very possible to perform a feminist or postcolonial critique of popular texts or examine them as individual genres or sub genres such as “gangster rap” in hip-hop texts. We see this in Eminem’s “The Way I Am” (Eminem, 1998a). In this text, once used in poet laureate June Jordan’s urban poetry class at University of California, Berkeley, issues of internal struggle and identity (lines 7–9, 10–13, and 14–17) and a postmodern, socio-cultural critique of the media (1–6) are put forth (see Eminem, 1998b).

Using popular artists can also allow for an extended analysis of the development of their works and themes over time. For example, Eminem's more recent work builds upon his earlier themes (2002a). As in his earlier work, Eminem questions mainstream groups that place the blame for youth violence on the shoulders of musicians and rap artists (lines 1–9) (Eminem, 2002b). He goes on to perform a sociopolitical critique of these criticisms, questioning whether it is the message or the messenger that people take issue with (lines 10–12) (Eminem, 2002b). His critique extends to a commentary about the audience rappers intend to reach—primarily poor and working-class children—and the role of the urban poet in their lives (lines 13–25) (Eminem, 2002b).

If the ultimate goal is for students to be able to analyze complex literary texts, popular texts can be a bridge linking the seemingly vast span between the streets and the world of academics. Texts such as these are not meaningless adolescent rants tearing at the moral fiber of society. They are powerful representations of the intense emotion and rage and that are dominating the sentiments of modern youth culture. Educators can no longer afford to ignore these voices because they are reaching young people with unprecedented intensity and consistency.

The connection between popular media texts and the classroom extends beyond reading and analysis into writing, listening, and speaking strategies. Camitta (1993) discusses a study in which she uses vernacular writing of adolescent culture to teach academic literacy skills. Students, she found, were more motivated to write for social purposes or in a more “comfortable” and culturally relevant language. Popular media texts can initiate discussions about language and vernacular, and they can be used to model creative writing or poetry in adolescent vernacular. Included in this could be California state standards 2.4 and 2.5 under “Speaking Applications,” which respectively call for students to “combine texts, images and sound” and “recite poems . . . with attention to performance details to achieve clarity, force, and aesthetic effect and to demonstrate an understanding of the meaning” (California State Board of Education, 1997). Both of these standards could certainly be met through the production of a music video or documentary that models itself after Scarface’s video for “On My Block” (Scarface, 2002a). For additional public speaking and presentation possibilities, students can be assigned to portray famous rappers who have been invited to a forum on teen violence. Other students, acting as the press, can ask questions to the rappers who must delineate their responses based on the philosophies set forth in their rap lyrics. This could lead students to present and analyze their own poems or raps.

Following the arguments of critical literacy theorists (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Gee, 2004; Hull, 1993; Kress, 2004; Pattison, 1982), teaching hip-hop as a music and culture of resistance can facilitate the development of critical consciousness in urban youth. Analyzing the critical yet controversial music of the Eminem, Scarface, Jadakiss, and Tupac may lead to consciousness-raising discussions, essays, and research projects attempting to locate an explanation for the current state of affairs for urban youngsters. The knowledge reflected in these lyrics can engender discussions of esteem, power, place, and purpose or encourage students to further their own knowledge of urban sociology and politics.

#### **“Y TU FREDO?”: POPULAR FILMS AS ACADEMIC TEXTS**

Popular media texts such as films, given their thematic nature, can also be used as springboards to launch critical classroom discussions and assignments. Provocative popular films can be brought into the classrooms, and discussion topics may be produced from a viewing/reading of the text. These discussions may lead to more thoughtful analysis and, eventually, assignments that capture virtually any of the rubrics laid out in the California state standards for “Writing,” “Written and Oral English Language Conventions,” and “Listening and Speaking” (California State Board of Education, 1997). Smartly chosen pieces will inspire students to watch film texts multiple times, producing levels of personal and intellectual investments in the curriculum that are currently absent. Using a film trilogy such as *The Godfather*, a variety of complex literary themes can be drawn out and discussed in meaningful ways. The medium itself will inspire students to engage the text and its themes. Students eagerly embrace the opportunity to watch and discuss film because it presents narrative in a medium that they already maneuver in with ease. Choosing curriculum pieces that genuinely reflect these types of student strengths will significantly increase students’ willingness to believe that classroom discussions and ideologies are rooted in their best interests.

Popular films offer teachers and students the opportunity to engage in a variety of discussions and projects that are relevant to state and national standards. They contain virtually every literary structure used in novels, including characters, plot, setting, and theme. For example, the *Godfather* trilogy offers chances to practice any of the California English–Language Arts state standards, including the literary form of the epic (Literary Response and Analysis, 3.7) or complex literary themes like feminist critiques and postmodern critiques (Literary Response and Analysis, 3.8 and 3.9).

Students can use these themes to examine the significance of the role and treatment of women and its evolution throughout the films (Literary Response and Analysis, 3.8). They can investigate traditional literary themes such as character evolution from boyhood to manhood or epic heroism by interrogating Michael Corleone, or the archetype of banishment through analysis of Fredo Corleone (Literary Response and Analysis, 3.6). Assignments can easily incorporate expectations for students to provide specific textual examples (Writing Strategies, 1.3 and Writing Applications, 2.2-c) by having students use transcribed film dialogue. A final project for the unit might include a debate or court trial that examines the importance of the theme of “Pagan vs. Christian value systems” as it plays itself out in the *Godfather* trilogy. This activity could easily be designed to meet virtually every one of the state’s listening and speaking standards, including comprehension, oral communication, oral evaluation, reflection, and oral responses to literary concepts.

Conservative sentiments will certainly point out that popular texts often represent taboo subjects such as sex, drugs, violence, and profanity. Interestingly though, these concerns are raised with much less fervor when these same themes emerge in more traditional texts. Core curriculum Shakespearean texts are replete with elements of graphic violence, debauchery, sex, and suicide. Core novels such as Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* have multiple uses of profane language. There is no shortage of established core texts that raise taboo subjects. It seems that objections to popular texts are directed more specifically at the messengers themselves, particularly the urban young men of color. This fact is certainly not missed on the urban students of color who identify with these excluded texts and authors, furthering student feelings of exclusion.

### CONCLUSION: A CHALLENGE TO STEP UP

Schooling can be enjoyable and relevant while also being educative. As researchers and urban high school teachers, we have shown that these educational practices work for urban youth. Indeed, educators should bear the onus to defend the near exclusive use of classic and traditional texts over popular texts that are equally (and perhaps more) able to facilitate academic skills and sensitivity to diverse cultural perspectives. This is not meant to encourage the removal of classic and traditional texts, but to insist on increased attention to the usefulness of popular media texts in classrooms.

This brings us to question the logic of preparing tomorrow's teachers for yesterday's classrooms. Given the rapidly changing literacy demands of professional, public, and private life, there should be an increasing focus on new-century literacies. Teacher education and professional development programs must create ample spaces for considering the significance of these new literacies and popular culture to effective classroom practice.

We are calling for urban educators to be vigilant activists and advocates for their students. There is a need for educators who continue to practice with vision, wit, creativity, courage, and imagination, in an era of standardized tests and teacher-proof curricula. More than ever, the times require educational leaders who have the conviction to resist structural restraints that pressure them into homogenized state and national curricula. Critical, postmodern educators should look first to their students to understand how they make sense of the world before deciding what is best for these young people. These new-century educators must see themselves as agents of educational change, able to combine academic content knowledge with a commitment to social justice.

Additionally, teacher educators, educational researchers, and school leaders must mentor and support urban teachers in their endeavors to radically change educational outcomes. These educational leaders should advocate for practices that affirm students and communities, even as these practices fall into and out of favor with current political regimes and funding agencies. Schools of education are well positioned to provide networks and forums for discussion and open exchanges of ideas. Schools of education can also provide new and experienced teachers with the conceptual and analytical tools to assess and communicate these "best" practices. Educational researchers can document and comment upon these practices to stem the mounting attack against urban teachers and students. School and district administrators can create nurturing and supportive professional climates for teachers doing this critically important work. Indeed, this collaborative effort is our only hope for reclaiming classrooms spaces, making them at once sites of necessary struggle and powerful learning.

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