Engaging the Politics of Hip-Hop, Literacy and Identity in the Classroom: A Multicultural Focus

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Thanks to the work of scholars from many disciplinary backgrounds, the Global Hip Hop Nation (Alim, 2009) has been included in academic discussions aimed at expanding conceptualizations of what counts as "literacy" (Alim, 2011; Hill, 2009; Richardson, 2006; Smitherman, 2006). This paper is the result of applied ethnographic work in a high school ESL classroom with students of multiple ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Through two sociocultural approaches to literacy—Critical Hip Hop Literacy and new literacies—I examine ways that students' images of self and the world are interpreted and performed through interaction with hip-hop culture. Throughout this paper I capture these experiences as they are revealed through first-hand student accounts resulting from interviews. I use discourse analysis to discuss interactions and outcomes occurring within two lessons I led involving hip-hop and language in a high school ESL class. The findings uncover the role that hip-hop plays in mediating formulations of critique and "symbolic capital" as students interpret and produce articulations about the world around them (Norton as cited by Ibrahim, 2009a, p. 181).

Moving Global Hip-Hop Pedagogies From the Streets to the Classroom

Thanks to the work of scholars from many disciplinary backgrounds, the Global Hip Hop Nation (GHHN)[1] (Alim, 2009) has been included in academic discussions aimed at expanding conceptualizations of what counts as "literacy" (Alim, 2011; Hill, 2009; Richardson, 2006; Smitherman, 2006). In her book, *Hip Hop Literacies*, Richardson (2006) pointed out that traditional notions of literacy privilege the written word, often overlooking the value and complexity of orally-rooted (yet very multimodal) forms like rap—the flagship element of hip-hop culture. But big ups to hip-hop anyhow! Like the African-derived cultures that gave birth to it, hip-hop has withstood tumultuous internal ideological conflicts and external reductionist critique. It is perhaps the very core of this duality that constitutes the foundational allure of hip-hop culture. Indeed, as I write, youth across the globe are asserting their own unique forms of transformative inclusion in this forum of "internal inconsistencies and open, discursive spaces" (Alim, 2011). Countless examples of scholarly work evidence these highly hybrid, translocal (socio)linguistic practices

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[1] Alim (2009) describes the Global Hip Hop Nation as "a multilingual, multiethnic 'nation' with an interantional reach, a fluid capacity to cross borders, and a reluctance to adhere to the geopolitical givens of the present" (p. 3).

such as Sarkar and Winer's (2006) study of codeswitching practices in Quebec's hip-hop community and my own work on intercultural processes of Chinese hip-hop identity construction through language (Barrett, in press).

Within the past decade, several scholars have argued in favor of the cultural and linguistic relevance that this global youth phenomenon offers to classroom instruction (Morrell, 2002; Paul, 2000; Trier, 2006). And although the English language arts classroom might seem to be the most obvious candidate for experimentation with hip-hop pedagogy, the sciences (Emdin, 2010) and mental health professions (Gonzalez and Hayes, 2009) have also tapped into some of the less conventional possibilities of hip-hop pedagogy.

Several works focus on hip-hop pedagogy and its cultural relevance for youth of Afro-diasporic and Latino ethnic backgrounds in the U.S. (Alim, 2007; Kirkland, 2008; Sanchez, 2010). As local diversity and global connectedness guide our efforts toward developing and researching responsive pedagogies, we are reminded that new literacies are grounded in the postmodern realities of students' shifting identities and multiple allegiances (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; New London Group, 1996). These hybrid identities are constantly in flux, overlapping across countless cultural, racial, ethnic, national and gender spaces, to name a few (Wallace, 2008). This is precisely why fossilized perceptions of hip-hop as an exclusively Black, youth cultural and pedagogical movement unravel easily in the face of a new postmodern awakening.

None of this is intended to suggest that the scholars named here are ideologically inflexible, nor am I discounting the much needed effort of addressing ways to bring Black cultural practices from the margins into "official" learning domains (Alim, 2009; Dimitriadis, 2001; Hill, 2009; Kirkland, 2008; Morrell, 2002). Instead, my goal is to contribute to the expansion of these discourses in a way that accounts for the diverse youth populations that are now remixing hip-hop identities in the GHHN.

Similar to Hill's (2009) methodological model where he designed, taught and researched a course on "Hip Hop Literature," this paper is the result of my own collaborative applied ethnographic work with an ESL instructor. By applied ethnography, I am referring to ethnographic research that results from the application of theoretical insights to actual praxis. The study took place in a high school ESL classroom with students of multiple racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Through two sociocultural approaches to literacy—Critical Hip Hop Literacy and new literacies—I examine ways that students' images of self and the world are interpreted and performed through interaction with hip-hop culture. This study is grounded on the premise that a multicultural view must take into account the variety of ways that youth perceive and experience hip-hop culture both inside and outside of school. Throughout this paper I capture these experiences as they are revealed through first-hand student accounts (resulting from interviews) as well as two lessons I led involving hip-hop and language in a high school ESL class.

Two Sociocultural Approaches to Hip Hop, Language and Literacy

The two approaches to hip-hop language pedagogy covered in this article—Critical Hip Hop Literacy and new literacies—are both undergirded by a sociocultural view of literacy. A sociocultural perspective moves literacy beyond the two-dimensional space of simply reading and writing. Instead, students'

experiences and voices become intertwined in the text with which they seek to make meaning. With a sociocultural approach, the connection between reading/writing and "the contexts of social, cultural, political, economic and historical practices" is central. Wallace (2008) describes this learning experience as one where "pupils and teachers are able to speak as producers or interpreters of texts rather than 'acting out' the school curriculum" (p. 62). The wide-reaching range of social phenomena that global hip-hop literacies address and affect form the basis of hip-hop language pedagogy content under a sociocultural view.

Critical Hip Hop Literacy

If, as educators and researchers, our introduction of material reflects our view of the world (Freire, 1970), so too does a student's worldview affect the way they perceive the word. Critical literacy is defined primarily by the goal of "reading and writing to become conscious of one's own (as well as others') experiences, [especially as these manifest] through power relations" (Anderson and Irvine, 1993). Under a critical literacy approach, text is laden with opportunities to interrogate existing subjectivities internally (within the student) and externally (beyond the student).

Alim (2007) conducted a project called Critical Hip Hop Language Pedagogies, which he designed to raise student awareness of language varieties and co-existing power dynamics that impact those in contact with these varieties. Similarly, Hill (2009) implemented a "Hip Hop Lit" curriculum that formally examined the literary components of rap compositions. The activity I cover in this analysis corresponds to what I am calling Critical Hip Hop Literacy (CHHL). CHHL can be understood as a confluence of Hill (2009) and Alim's (2007) approaches to hip-hop language pedagogy. CHHL draws attention to social issues and power relations as they are expressed through hip-hop literacies. CHHL foregrounds those aspects of hip-hop culture that function to interrogate, reflect and shape reality.

The discursive tendencies of hip-hop as a culture of (social) resistance (Smitherman as cited in Kirkland, 2008) lend themselves considerably to critical language pedagogy. Politically "conscious" hip-hop does much to expose the power inequities that are a central focus for critical literacy, as Pennycook (1999) points out in his overview of approaches to critical TESOL. Instructors looking to employ a critical literacy approach can work with students to draw out these relationships. For instance, Morrell (2002) uses T.S. Eliot's and rapper Grand Master Flash's accounts of devastation in their communities to have students discover interpretive linkages between social commentary in canonical poetry and hip-hop music.

Overtly stated social issues need not confine the set of curricular goals of CHHL in a completely literal sense, however. Bradley's (2009) *Book of Rhymes* provides numerous illustrations of hip-hop texts and their underlying poetic functions (rhyme, rhythm, wordplay, etc.). These structural elements are in fact socially situated as they are deliberately and strategically manipulated by artists in a multi-layered fashion to subvert "standard" language forms (Alim, 2011) and express other nuances unique to hip-hop literary tradition. As such, they hold as much merit as the messages flowing through them. The emphasis on structural elements and techniques depends largely on overall instructional goals.

New Literacies

In his book *Literacy in the New Media Age*, Kress (2003) contends that linguistic theories are insufficient for explaining processes of representation and communication. Instead, Kress adopts a broader view of understanding meaning by employing a semiotic approach. From a Peircian semiotic perspective, any *perceivable sign* (Peirce, 1934) carries meaning according to how it is ascribed by the reader/interpreter of the sign. As *new literacies* make increasing use of non-textual, non-linguistic signs to produce meaning, a semiotic perspective becomes crucial for analyzing these processes of *articulation* and *interpretation* (Kress, 2003).

In a classroom environment, a semiotic perspective completely expands the set of skills required not only of students, but of teachers as well. Behaviorist paradigms of evaluating "correctness" solely according to how messages are encoded with alphabetic characters fall short of taking into account how the textured placement of various digital signs work *in concert* to convey meaning (Baker, Pearson & Rozendal, 2010).

The co-configuration of multimodal communicative elements on a screen is a temporally "frozen" encapsulation of the thoughts, desires and understandings of the author(s). A sociocultural perspective becomes important when we consider the role that various spaces and magnitudes of social context—spaces such as the chatroom, classroom, school, city, etc.—play in shaping these literacies. Likewise, interactants play a key role in re-formulating meaning based on their own subjectivities. This cyclical in- and out-pouring of social context with multiple perceivable modalities corresponds to the new mindset of interrelatedness, or the "new ethos stuff," mediated by the "new technology stuff" of new literacies (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 7).

James Gee's (2010) extensive work on situated sociocultural approaches to literacy and technology points out that studies in new literacies refute the idea of literacy as a cognitive phenomenon. Rather than relegating literacy to the spaces "inside the head" (p. 166), Gee points out that literacy "is about social and cultural achievement . . . ways of participating in social and cultural groups—not just a mental achievement" (p. 166). As an illustration of this point, it is worth noting that hip-hop literacies operate through the distribution of artistic innovation across global networks. According to Knobel and Lankshear (2007), these flows reflect the distributed, participatory nature of the new literacies mindset.

Further, as *Global Linguistic [Hip-Hop] Flows* (Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook, 2009) propagates, the literature shows significant processes of change in sign-forms and discourses around issues of so-called First World power invocations (Omoniyi, 2009; Roth-Gordon, 2009) and authenticity (Pennycook, 2007). The social significance of these discourses parallels the situated learning contexts in which English language learners (ELLs) negotiate multiple skill sets, affiliations and ways of identifying with those around them. Bennett (2003) notes that in order to create classroom environments that affirm these multicultural sensibilities, pedagogy must work toward developing *multicultural competence.* As one of the four dimensions of multicultural education, multicultural competence is "the process of becoming conscious of your own as well as other cultural perspectives as a foundation for informed cross-cultural interactions" (p. 14). This skill stands to be particularly valuable for today's students, who

continuously navigate (both virtually and physically) the landscape of an increasingly diverse and connected world.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This applied ethnographic project involved weekly visits over a nine-month period during two semesters of an advanced-level high school course called "English for English Language Learners." The school was located in a suburban area of a major city in the northeastern United States. The critical literacy exercise took place with the first semester group, which consisted of 10 seniors (12th grade) and one junior (11th grade) from 9 different countries. Languages spoken by the students included Urdu, Krio (Sierra Leone), Spanish, Hindi, Cambodian, Turkish and Liberian English. The new literacies work happened during the second semester, when the group totaled 12 students (all seniors). These students were from 10 different nations. Languages spoken by this group included Yoruba, Liberian English, French, Vietnamese, Hindi, and Urdu, among others.

The teacher, Mr. Paul, has a teaching philosophy that differs drastically from the high-stakes, assimilationist pedagogies of today's mainstream U.S. language classrooms. These are known particularly by their convergence toward White, monolingual, middle-class norms (Freeman, 1998). Instead, Mr. Paul designed his curriculum and managed classroom interactions in a way that made room for students' home cultures and languages. This research study was made possible, in large part, by Mr. Paul's interests in multiculturalism, social justice, technology and co-teaching activities with researchers.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted a total of 12 interviews—six during each semester. Five of the 12 interviewees were from West Africa. This selection decision was based in part on preliminary guidance from Ibrahim's (2009a) previous work on African youth in high schools who use hip-hop and Black English as a Second Language (BESL) as a self-styling resource. Additional students were selected based on my observations of their social interactions in class, or lack thereof. Interviews were conducted after each lesson was complete. Questions were semi-structured according to the goals of 1) gathering accounts of how students interact with and interpret hip-hop cultural practices outside of class and 2) reflecting on discourse occurring during class.[2]

Similar to other teacher-researchers (Alim, 2009; Hill, 2009; Kirkland, 2008; Morrell, 2002), I am interested in the role of hip-hop as part of a classroom's *main text* (Ibrahim, 2009b). At present, hip-hop and other youth cultures (gaming, music, social networking, etc.) constitute a "*Creative Margin Curriculum*—a configuration of knowledge and a *mattering map* that are linked to students' identities and ways of knowing and learning—representing their *School of Reality*—but not directly addressed

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[2] I also compiled field notes for each of my weekly visits. I produced four reflective memos pertaining to pre- and post-lesson conversations with Mr. Paul, the manner in which I was developing relationships with various students and the state of the research project in general. These reflections helped me to understand what was (not) working and how to make adjustments for future activities and interactions.

in their schooling process" (Ibrahim, 2009b, p. 240, emphases in original). As such, this study took form as an *applied* ethnographic study, seeking to understand where the insights of scholarship and theory might lead us in a real classroom setting.

Analysis of the data was comprehensive, occurring continuously across both semesters. The two hip-hop-related classroom activities I led were videotaped and transcribed. Student work resulting from these projects was also collected. I used discourse analysis on classroom discussions and interview data.

Findings

In this section, I will unpack a bit of the complexity behind the ways that hip-hop pertains to the "mattering map" of multicultural students (Ibrahim, 2009b). Mattering maps are conceptual schemas organized around "linguistic, cultural and sociosemiotic space where people's identities and everyday lives are formed, performed and make sense" (p. 242). To be clear, this study makes no claims that all students are crazy about hip-hop. The findings show that students interact with and perceive hip-hop in fascinatingly diverse ways. These student insights enhance our ability as an academic community to understand the situated interactions that occur around hip-hop culture—and youth cultures, more generally speaking—both inside and outside of the classroom.

Global Hip-Hop and Student Life—Exploring the Need for Critical Literacy

Liberian hip-hop not up to standard?

One student from Liberia, Amu, was familiar with and engaged regularly with hip-hop from his native country and from the US. In our interview, he spoke nostalgically of Liberian hip-hop, distinguishing it from American hip-hop by its topical appropriation of local political themes deemed more pertinent to the people's concerns. Likewise, Omoniyi (2006, 2009) and Pennycook and Mitchell (2009) have documented trends of addressing political themes in African hip-hops as both a galvanizing local activism strategy and a direct critique of mainstream American hip-hop. Amu expressed his identification with the music by embedding himself directly into references to the music through the use of first-person possessive pronouns. He consistently referred to Liberian hip-hop as "my country music" (interview, October 28, 2010). Interestingly, when our conversation moved toward questions of whether he had a preference for American or Liberian hip-hop, Amu's stance shifted in favor of American hip-hop. He pointed out that American hip-hop is "up to standard," which implies that Liberian hip-hop is not. One of his main reasons was a perceived deficit in Liberian English due to its incomprehensibility for Americans. He then linked this viewpoint to his earlier experiences as a newly arrived immigrant. He explained that his deficit positioning of his Liberian variety of English was due to the fact that Americans did not understand him when he spoke.

This conversation on hip-hop language raises issues relevant to a sociocultural approach to CHHL. In his work on sociocultural approaches to literacy, Gee (2010) posits that in addition to learning reading and writing skills, individuals participating in literacy practices of "different social groups . . . [learn] how to act,

interact, talk, know, believe and *value* in certain ways" (p. 167, emphasis mine). Therefore, it would be a mistake to assume that this conversation was just about hip-hop. What I aim to make evident throughout this paper is that hip-hop and other popular cultural forms *mediate,* or serve as a conduit for, reading and performing conceptualizations of self and the world. If Liberian hip-hop is not up to standard, then neither is the part of Amu that identifies as a member of that social domain. These types of revelations cannot simply be brushed aside in our dialogues over what and who should be included as part of the "main text" (Ibrahim, 2009, p. 238). Instead, they should be viewed as an opportunity for students and teachers to gaze at their currently situated roles as "sowers of words [and knowledge]" (Freire, 1970, p. 347). From this viewpoint, educational communities can examine diverse language varieties and engage in critical dialogue over ideologies and the social factors that shape both their own ideas and those of a larger society. In this same critical vein, I continue in the next section with a reflection on the first collaborative examination of a hip-hop narrative I facilitated in the ELL class.

"People Like Me"—A Critical Hip Hop Literacy Exercise

For the CHHL exercise, the ESL instructor, Mr. Paul, chose to present hip-hop as a genre of poetry (i.e., within a larger unit on poetry). Mr. Paul and I co-taught the lesson. We covered a hip-hop text called "People Like Me" by K'Naan (Warsame, 2009). As a rapper originally from Somalia, K'Naan uses the song to share events he experienced during his journey to the U.S. as a refugee. We introduced the hip-hop text in a way that highlighted its narrative function—emphasizing hip-hop as a storytelling medium for expressing one's point of view (Bradley, 2009). Particular areas of interest in the song were the details about K'Naan's close relationship with his cousin, their involvement with "gun crimes" and his mother's difficult decision of having to leave his cousin behind in Somalia. The students began by watching a video-recorded performance of the song. Afterward, in a review of the written lyrics, Mr. Paul and the students analyzed technical elements such as tone, organizational units (stanzas) and figurative language (i.e., similes). Mr. Paul had expressed interest in exploring poetry and prose with an underlying theme of social justice. Therefore, the structural analyses of the narrative were woven in around one of the major objectives of the lesson—a critical examination of refugee policy in the United States.

Through examination of the Congressional Budget Office Report on Immigration Policy in the United States (2006), this part of the lesson rested on three tenets of critical (language) pedagogy:
- being situated in the experiences of the students,
- calling for critical dialogue, and
- relating to the power dynamics at play in larger social and political issues (Anderson and Irvine, 1993; Morrell, 2002; Pennycook, 1999).

The goal was to employ the scaffolding technique of contextualization (Walqui, 2006) by juxtaposing the point of view represented in policy with the individual account presented in K'Naan's lyrics.

Walqui (2006) argues that contextualization is effective at "making [difficult] language accessible and engaging" (p. 173). In a post-lesson interview, however, Mr. Paul shared that even with the contextualization around the narrative, he

thought the policy language was too difficult for the students. There were several moments of silence in which we believe the students struggled to understand the text, and maybe even lost its connection to the larger lesson goals. In his discussion on difficulties students encounter when learning to read, Gee (2004) highlights vocabulary, syntax and discourse as key areas that differentiate various genres or "specialist varieties of academic language" (p. 18). It became apparent that modifying the language for ELLs would have been helpful for achieving comprehension. Additionally, another improvement would have been to bring attention to the grammatical and discursive resources particular to the hip-hop narrative versus the policy document.

As perceptions of and interactions with hip-hop work within the system of identity formation, so too does identity influence the continuous flow through which selfhood is enacted in literacy practices. Immigration to a new country is an experience that all of the students in this class have experienced in ways that impacted them each differently. According to Wallace (2008), content such as this provides "opportunities for students to build better chances to build links between school text and their personal histories" (p. 62). We discovered during this process, that reflecting on these links can bring forth complex and sometimes uncomfortable reactions.

I now turn to a point in the lesson after which the class had reviewed a written copy of the lyrics and was discussing poignant themes. Fama, who had personally endured the painful experience of fleeing her native Sierra Leone from war, returned continuously to the issue of conflict between people. Below is a dialogue that took place about the topic of *beef*, or conflict, following a review of the written hip-hop lyrics during the lesson:

1	Mr. Paul:	Sometimes when people tell their story, the words are not literal. If
2		I say do you have beef with me, I'm not talking about food. What
3		do I mean?
4	Fama:	What I think he mean in the music, I think it mean you're against
5		something . . That's why they had war and his cousin was left in
6		the war.
7	Mr. Paul:	You're against it. You have a problem. You wanna argue. So what
8		can we learn from listening to others' point of view?
9	Fama:	You can feel the feelings he feels. Even some of us went through this.
		(video transcript, October 28, 2010)

Several important points emerge from this exchange. First, is the skillful way that Mr. Paul signaled attention to the term "beef," which is typically utilized in hip-hop community repertoires (Rymes, 2011) to denote conflict. This is an instance of a lexeme from a hip-hop repertoire occurring outside of its typical domains of production—in this case, an educational setting. To scaffold comprehension of this term for students (all of whom cannot be presupposed to understand it), he differentiates its use in this context from its literal meaning of cow's meat. By mediating this interpretation, Mr. Paul opened up contextual access simultaneously to the text in question as well as the repertoire from

which the term originated. Rymes (2011) supports this manner of instructional negotiation and describes it as a balanced gesture between the poles of *deference* to and *denial* of youth repertoires.

Further, this exchange took place during a delicate moment in the lesson, when Fama's Liberian friend actively pursued a safe *second (private) space* (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999) away from the larger class discussion. She was sitting quietly and choosing to discuss her thoughts with Fama only. Mr. Paul assured the students that they do not have to discuss any deeply personal or painful aspects of this matter with the entire class. This example points to a potential challenge that arises when text relates to intense personal experiences of the students. For Fama's friend, the refugee experience was very familiar and in essence may have silenced or alienated her from whole group conversation. This example shows how deeply student perspectives and identity become intertwined with material that relates closely to their lives. Sensitive matters such as those concerning refugee and asylum seekers point to the delicate line the educator navigates in scaffolding learning through bridging prior knowledge with new knowledge (Walqui, 2006) and silencing student voices due to hesitation about "letting the outside in" (Wallace, 2008, p. 62).

Global Hip-Hop and Student Life—Identity Performance through New Literacies

"We don't want to be Desi . . . we don't wanna go back."

In an interview, Pakistani student, Gulshan, discusses his reasons for listening to hip-hop:

> We feel like, when we listen to music, we have a lot of confidence, you know. That's right. We listen to hip-hop because we act like a Ameri-can, you know. That's why. We have a dressing like, you know. Dress up. When we go somewhere, then we gonna dress up like an American. Then, we don't want to be like (.) we don't want to be like Desi you know. 'Cause now we in America. We don't wanna go back. That's why. (interview, October 28, 2010)

Gulshan's account here provides a glimpse into examples of routinized practices that he and his friends engage for the purposes of constructing the narrative of an American self. This process is ongoing, and in this instance has come to involve hip-hop sign-forms within the array of symbolic resources that must be evaluated according to their ability to conform to goals of the group. Forman's (2002) work on hip-hop in Somali youth communities shows that for these immigrant youth, attempts to "fit into" a North American cultural landscape are not pursued necessarily by wholesale adoption of ideals and images at national levels. Similarly, here, allegiances to a sense of American identity are achieved through affiliation with hip-hop as a subnational/subcultural set of practices. In other words, despite the fact that hip-hop is not exactly known in the United States to be "as American as apple pie," Gulshan and his friends operate within a peer microculture in which the amalgamation of hip-hop with American national identity has become solidified. The peer microculture Gulshan has described is organized around:

> flows of meaning which are managed by people in small groups that meet on an everyday basis . . .The particular combination of personalities, the localities where they meet and certain momentous events they experience together are three kernel elements in every microculture. (Wulff, as cited by Forman, 2002)

In this microcultural framework, "American dress," while also a less than uniformly applicable and recognizable sign-form, has come to be qualified, at the very least, as a manner of dress that allows Gulshan to temporarily distance himself from the features of South Asian culture indexed by the term "Desi." Gulshan's daily experiences keep him constantly engaged with identity politics—that is, the work of resolving his sense(s) of self among the dissimilar realms of home, school and community. In this instance, being Desi serves as a liability in the pursuit of a more American sense of identity. It seems logical that ELLs would feel conflicted while negotiating their role within a monolingual language education environment with "power relations . . . that legitimize the dominance of Standard English and Standard English speakers" (Freeman, 1998, p. 11).

This is only a fraction of Gulshan's narrative, however. At times Gulshan expresses pride in his home culture and shows a strong preference in class to interact in Urdu with a group of South Asian students (Indian, Bangladeshi, etc.). The key point I wish to make here is that, as an individual, he offers no exclusive allegiance to a single culture and no bounded set of cultural practices to affirm those allegiances. Indeed, hip-hop is one of the *multiple* mediating resources he employs to enact what Wallace (2008) refers to as "new ethnicities [that] result in the simultaneous emergence of local and global identities" (p. 63). In a later interview (in Urdu) with one of my colleagues who is a woman of Pakistani origin, Gulshan stated that he wanted to return to Pakistan because he felt lonely and misunderstood in America. If conceptualized through the lens of a continuum, Gulshan's shift in *footing*—or as Goffman (1981) describes it, "alignment... or stance" (p. 128)—is unmistakable and seems to have been prompted, at least in part, by a desire to represent a certain "self" to me as an English-speaking American researcher versus the "self" he was willing to reveal to my colleague.

Along similar lines, in the next section I discuss how (new) literacies and hip-hop culture mediated the performance of multifaceted student identities.

The World Music Project—A New Literacies Exercise

The new literacies approach took place in Mr. Paul's ESL classroom as part of a larger exercise called "The World Music Project." Students were issued the task of using individual laptops to conduct online research about the history, social significance and instrumental composition of music from their native cultures. This project foregrounds social aspects of literacy engagement by inviting the students to link introspective thoughts around the ways that they have experienced music cultures in their own lives with broader sociohistorical elements (e.g., instruments, traditions, etc).

The framing of language in the project instructions reflects Mr. Paul's culturally inclusive approach to teaching: "For this project, you will be researching the music of a specific culture in *our* world." In many ways, Mr. Paul defers his authority

as an instructor to his students. He uses the project to guide students to select meaningful content and produce discoveries about the content. Bennett (2003) notes that with this model of *experiential learning,* the teacher positions him/herself as a "fellow investigator rather than an expert" (p. 267).

In his book, *Literacy in the New Media Age,* Kress (2003) argues that "meaning is the result of semiotic work" (p. 37). Here, he refers to the outward manifestation of signs as *articulation,* and the sign made inward as *interpretation.* In the sections that follow, I review two cases occurring during the World Music Project that involve processing of signs around hip-hop.

Race matters—interpretation through digital media.

Bennett (2003) notes that research in multicultural education has shown effective results in following up student-led discoveries with discussions and activities that promote reflection on their discoveries. Mr. Paul and I brainstormed ways to get students to use their data to reflect on the interconnectedness of music cultures over dimensions of space and/or time. We agreed that the dynamic and hybrid nature of global hip-hop flows provided an ideal platform to engage students with this idea. In this hip-hop exercise, I showed the class images from hip-hop communities in China, India, Norway, the United States, Japan and other countries. As a group, the students were asked to identify semiotic features (not in those terms) that are used for expression in music cultures. I made a list on the board of the students' findings: language, clothing, body movements (dance), message and instruments. This was followed by a video on hip-hop in Latin America where we looked at some of the content (translated into English) and examined what the author's message was, why he might have wanted to send this message, for whom the message intended and so on. As mentioned earlier, this sociocultural analysis of the text is an integral part of literacy processing as it encourages students to consider not only the denotational significance of the text, but also the interactional implications on a wider scale.

The following discussion took place as I was showing digital images to the class of how hip-hop has taken on different forms around the world. This piece of the discussion involved Mr. Paul, Fatou (a student from Guinea), and myself. In keeping with her expressive personality, Fatou chose to offer a response to the images:

1	Catrice:	These guys are from China.
2	Fatou:	(starts laughing)
3	Catrice:	She's laughing. She has a lot of laughs. What's funny about this?
4	Fatou:	Nothing. (laughs again)
5	Ife:	She's in a good mood.
6	Catrice:	She's just in a good mood?
7 8 9	Mr. Paul:	You can tell her. I mean it's—it's different when you see— because—if you get right to it—what is hip-hop—what race is most connected with hip-hop?

10	Unidentified Student:	Black.

11	Mr. Paul:	Black. African American. So what Catrice is showing us here
12		is that hip-hop is all around the world and it's not just Black.
13		(inaudible) But, sometimes we're so used to seeing Black people
14		dressed in hip-hop style, when you see Asian, Chinese, it's
15		funny. It looks different, right? Even when the first White people
16		started rapping. Now we have someone like Eminem, who,
17		you know, he's very famous for rapping. But in the beginning
18		White people rapping was very funny to people. It looked silly.
19		It looked strange. So, I think it's alright if you find some of this
20		funny. It's not, it's not weird. (video transcript, March 17, 2011)

This was an instance where I felt that my role of researcher was a bit at odds with my teaching in this class. As much as this was an instructional exercise, it was also aimed at gathering information. To speculate on Fatou's thoughts might have amounted to the researcher's faux pas of "leading." Mr. Paul, on the other hand, immediately picked up on Fatou's hesitation to bring forth matters of race and although his own hesitation is apparent in his initial series of pauses and re-phrasings (lines 7-8), his metapragmatic reflection aloud eventually indicates that he is ready to "get right to it."

Herrera and Morales' (2009) study on White ESL teachers in the southwestern United States shows that some teachers claim a "colorblind" stance in order to avoid acknowledging the social significance of race in classroom settings. Mr. Paul used this conversation to bring race front and center in his explanation of Fatou's reading of the image. In doing so, he acknowledged that ways of interacting and identifying with regard to race are anything but non-existent in ESL classrooms. In a private interview, Fatou expressed her thoughts further on the image:

1	Catrice:	So, this group (showing her the picture we viewed in class), I don't
2		remember the name of this group, but like, just looking at the picture,
3		what is it that looks unusual? Is it just that they're Chinese?

4	Fatou:	Yeah. And plus, it's dreadlocs 'cause most White or Asian don't
5		get dreadlocs, but the (laughs) he have dreadlocs . . . Keepin it real
6		means being real with everything that you do . . . instead of lying to
7		your people.

8	Catrice:	People doing Chinese hip-hop, do you think they're keepin it real?

9	Fatou:	No, not really 'cause that's not them. You wouldn't see people like
10		that as people who would put dreadlocs and all of this other stuff.
		(video transcript, March 24, 2011)

Chambers (as cited by Forman, 2002) points out that the North American immigrant experience is characterized by a two-dimensional dialogical encounter involving 1) conversations between self and the cultural other and 2) conversations between the past and present self. In the ongoing processes of self-making,

Fatou's conversations with others have resulted in her being codified as "Black American." Accordingly, Fatou makes strategic adjustments in her pronunciation and mannerisms to perform this role when she desires; she is also aware of how to counterperform this role (and become more "African"). Additionally, Fatou noted an increase in her consumption of Black American musical forms like hip-hop and R&B. Internally, she pointed out that all of this has created personal dissonance as she has trouble reconciling her seemingly opposed "African self" and "American self" (interview, March 24, 2011). Studies by Smalls (2010) and Ibrahim (2009a) provide key insights on the fact that African students are keenly aware of the inferior reading and positioning of cultural elements that index affiliation with Africa in US school contexts. Within this framework, it is very difficult for Africanness to occupy spaces designated for Americanness.

This same struggle over seemingly incongruent forms of cultural identities also manifests in Fatou's argument about the role of Chineseness in the hip-hop image we discussed in class. Based on Goffman's discussion of demeanor, Agha (2007) introduces the concept of a *demeanor indexical* as a perceivable sign of appearance or behavior that conveys information about an actor. In order for Fatou to read a hip-hop artist as "real" and "honest with their people" they must possess the essential demeanor indexical of Blackness. As these data have shown, classroom spaces are included in the set of domains where students like Fatou and Gulshan devote considerable energy to "summon[ing] up . . . a social identity that enables [them] to invest in and struggle over, and hence create a symbolic capital" that serves various functions in their processes of becoming American (Norton, as cited by Ibrahim, 2009a, p. 181).

Showing and telling my world—articulation through digital media.

The World Music Project actively recognized the inherent value in students' existing ways of knowing not only from a sociocultural perspective, but it also offered the students a choice of multiple modalities for articulating this knowledge. Mr. Paul offered three choices for the students to present their findings: a written essay, an iMovie® video or a PowerPoint presentation. Engagement with multimodal forms of literacy or *multiliteracies* such as video, pictures and audio decentralizes text as a dominant mode of articulation (New London Group, 1996). In light of the salient role of technology in the 21st century, literacy ought to reflect the "particular ways of reading and writing in cultural contexts"—including those occurring out of school (Street, as cited by Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 4). I turn now to the case of Ahmed, a senior from Afghanistan, who deployed hip-hop in his video production to configure layered digital signs in a way that simultaneously demonstrates multiliterate skill and articulates various facets of his own positionality.

Ahmed begins his video with the animated title "Music around the world" floating across the screen from left to right. The embellishment of text with animated effects is indicative of the transformation of words from *textual entities* to *visual entities* made possible in today's new spaces where the screen serves as the "dominant site of representation" (Kress, 2003, p. 65). Ahmed's use of animated text raises the key point that working within a more visual, multimodal design framework necessitates considerations of the spatial dimensions in which

representation occurs. In other words, Ahmed's video project required him not only to think of how he would sequence his multimodal elements (i.e. text, sound, images), he also had to consider how they would occupy the spatial allotment of the screen. On the topic of sequencing, Ahmed used a consistent patterning throughout the video, introducing each world music genre with a brief label and then withdrawing the use of text in order for other modes to do the talking.

The first segment is entitled "American music." Instantly, the once popular hip-hop song, *This Is Why I'm Hot* (Mims, 2007), begins playing. Ahmed adds a visual layer to the audio track with a sequence of three images—an American police SUV, a White American solider breaking a car window with his rifle and an American military helicopter hovering over a body of water. Many aspects of one's experience shape the manner in which individuals inculcate signs with meaning. As such, a sign is always in a loaded, non-neutral state, "engaged [with one's own] perspectives, positions and values" (Kress, 2003, p. 44). Ahmed is from the Kandahar province in Afghanistan where the U.S. military has had a very visible presence for the last decade. The "American music" segment was an ideological departure when contrasted with the focus on dance and musical instruments included in Ahmed's subsequent segments. Ahmed's use of the hip-hop song as an accompanying signifier is a meaningful choice in the context in which it is used. He has forged unconventional connections between hip-hop and military culture in his representation of America. On the surface, the catchiness and braggadocio of the hip-hop song contrasts sharply with the critical tone of the images. The strong indexical effects of intrusion, force and dominance completely overtake the signification of the layered modes as a whole. While Gulshan (in excerpt 2 above) took up hip-hop practices to tighten his American affiliations, Ahmed has engaged in modes of production that serve as political commentary, and arguably critique, about the United States. These opposing utilizations illustrate how hip-hop cultural signs are malleable and subject to drastic reformulatation based on individual subjectivities.

Ahmed's subsequent segments reflected the ethnic backgrounds and interests of his friends in the class, suggesting that the hip-hop track may have been recommended by one of them as well. The segments were textually represented exactly as follows: "african jamaican music," "indian music" and "spanish music" [sic]. Previous examples in this study have shown how student identities and subjectivities are constantly at work in the processes of engaging with literacy. Ahmed's decision to frame his articulation around an exploration and critique of social interactions meaningful to him promotes a cosmopolitan sense of interconnectedness between himself and others who bring a different set of skills and perspectives to his project.

Discussion

The primary goal of this paper was to illustrate the diversity of possibilities and realities that exist around multicultural youth engagement with hip-hop and dynamic conceptualizations of literacy, both inside and outside of class. Rather operating from an increasingly paralyzing state of panic over youth practices (e.g., U.S. News, 2011), reconsideration is needed regarding ways to engage the sensibilities that these practices appeal to. I argue that orienting toward a

sociocultural view of literacy, by implementing approaches like Critical Hip Hop Literacy, urges academic communities to consider the situated role of students as meaning-makers. Along these same lines, we become more conscious of how curriculum (dis)engages the various facilities through which youth are capable of producing meaning through literacy. A common element of the critical and new literacies approaches covered in this study is their emphasis on opening up educational spaces for students to connect aspects of their identity to the wider world around them. This idea is precisely what motivates the learning and participation occurring in youth's technologically-mediated spaces. These spaces are limitless, ever-changing and (r)evolutionary, much like the youth identities engaged with them. As such, they serve as crucial resources that must be considered if the state of "achievement" and learning is to advance from its present state.

In reading these accounts on hip-hop, literacies and identity, one might assume that I am suggesting only the use of texts deemed "relevant" to student experiences. This, too, would be problematic as it could contribute to the same dearth of diversity that current curricula do. Instead, I am claiming that a postmodern view of sociocultural-based pedagogies (hip-hop definitely being in that mix) requires that they constantly be under scrutiny for their ability to celebrate and reflect a range of viewpoints. One of the main functional strengths of these pedagogies is that they provide avenues for students to express a broader spectrum of their already multifaceted identities (Wallace, 2008) through literacy. This vision is a synergic one, in which pedagogies evolve parallel to the educational community interacting with them, allowing then for a fuller, more balanced sense of achievement and cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

Acknowledgements

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