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Backstage performances: a third grader's embodiments of pop culture and literacy in a public school classroom

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Abstract

This article examines the less visible ways in which popular culture enters the classroom and shapes children's embodied performances as students and literate subjects. Foregrounding snapshots from a case study of a low-achieving, African American female student, I consider how popular culture is inscribed on students' bodies and becomes a means through which they perform their schooled selves, at the same time that school curricula are resources for constructing conceptualisations of popular culture images and texts. The examination of popular culture, literacy curricula and identities is informed by poststructural approaches to discourse, power and the body that allow the consideration of bodies as discursive means and as sites of inscription. This approach

makes possible the examination of the politics of the curriculum, that is, the examination of the ways school curricula at their intersection with popular culture exert power onto students' bodies and produce norms and regularities that students take up, subvert and/or resist. From this perspective, I expose the ways in which the curriculum, popular culture and children's performances as gendered, literate and other types of subjects intertwine in the background of the official school space.

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Introduction

Research on literacy and popular culture has proliferated over the past years and focused, among others, on the potentials of expanding school curricula by drawing on children's out-of-school texts, practices and interests. Connected to ethical and pedagogical demands, the infusion of the curriculum with popular culture texts and practices is promised to capitalise on children's cultural and symbolic resources and thus make school more meaningful for them (Evans, 2005 ; Shegar and Weninger, 2010). The argument for popular culture concerns not only children (e.g. Marsh, 1999 , 2000 ; Millard, 2003 ; Vasquez, 2003) but also adolescents (e.g. Moje, 2002 ; Morrell, 2002; Woodcock, 2010) and adults (e.g., Guy, 2007). As popular culture becomes a resource for literacy teaching and learning, educators and researchers point out that it is also necessary to acknowledge the preconditions for success and implications of this endeavour. These include the reconceptualisation of text so as to refer to modes and modalities beyond print-based, verbal forms of expression; the need for critical and pleasurable engagement with those texts and the deconstruction of binaries between high/popular culture and formal/informal learning that would lead to the realisation that the divide between those is artificial (Alvermann, 2012 ; Alvermann et al., 1999 ; Woodcock, 2010).

Despite their artificiality, binaries between 'high' and popular culture, and formal and informal learning, in particular, have real effects for learners who encounter and are expected to stay within the lines of school curricula that narrowly define what a text is and who and how one can be recognised as literate in school (Dyson, 2008b). Even in that case, though, popular culture and school literacy intersect as learners move across spaces and carry the imprints of one to another, thus constructing hybrid texts and literate (and other) identities (Blackburn, 2003 ; Pahl and Rowsell, 2010). The intersection of popular culture and school literacy is then to be seen in unexpected, unofficial spaces that learners craft for themselves and which might not be readily visible within the classroom (Dyson, 2003b ; Kontovourki and Siegel, 2009).

This article builds on this position and examines the less visible ways in which popular culture enters the classroom and shapes children's embodied performances as students and literate subjects. Foregrounding snapshots from a case study, I consider how popular culture images and texts inscribe students' bodies and become lenses through which they read their schooled selves. In particular, I focus on Butterfly (self-selected pseudonym), a third-grade female student, and her engagement with popular culture and school literacy during different literacy events that took place in the margins of the official curriculum. As such, I approach these literacy events as backstage performances and unpack

them by drawing on poststructural notions of discourse, power and the body that allow the consideration of bodies as discursive means and as sites of inscription. This approach makes possible the examination of the politics of a 'permeable curriculum' (Dyson, [2003b](#)), that is, the examination of the ways that school curricula at their intersection with popular culture exert power onto students' bodies and produce norms and regularities that students take up, subvert and/or resist. By doing so, I expose the ways in which the curriculum, popular culture and children's performances as gendered, literate and other types of subjects intertwine in the background of the official school space.

Literacy, identities and popular culture

The exploration of how children engage in literacy and popular culture may be seen as a 'remix' (Dyson, [2003a](#)): a mixing and recontextualisation on behalf of the children of available symbolic and other resources to both construct unofficial, playful practices and respond to the demands of official literacy spaces. For Dyson ([2001](#), [2003b](#)), children's appropriations might refer to the content (e.g. names, events, plot), communicative practices and genres (e.g. reporting sports games, improvising songs), technological conventions (e.g. graphic displays), actual lines (e.g. the use of particular words) and ideologies (e.g. gender, wealth and power). As children re-voice and appropriate those, they blend, juxtapose and/or expose the disconnection between official and unofficial literacy worlds. The distinction between official and unofficial worlds points to institutions' (e.g. school) efforts to make children literate while also highlighting child-governed practices (including play and the appropriation of textual toys). According to Dyson ([2003a](#), [2008a](#)), the distinction is not easy to make as the latter enter the former in unforeseen ways, constituting literacy curricula permeable and children's texts hybrid.

The connection of official and unofficial literacy worlds is also evident in the work of researchers, such as Marsh ([1999](#), [2000](#)) and Wohlwend ([2008](#), [2009](#), [2011](#)), both of whom have examined how popular culture texts enter the official school space in a playful way and are connected to students' identities. Focusing on young children's talk of superheroes, Marsh ([1999](#), [2000](#)) suggested that children's playful engagement in literacy intersected with their gendered, classed and ethnic identities, with boys getting more engaged in school literacy and girls being provided the opportunity to subvert and transcend their positioning as passive onlookers. Likewise, Wohlwend ([2009](#), [2011](#)) pointed out that through their play with popular culture artefacts and media texts (Disney productions and related artefacts, in particular), young boys and girls took up, resisted and rewrote stereotypical notions of gendered identities. Vasquez ([2005](#)) reached a similar conclusion, when she noted that children of ages 4 and 7 years attached Pokemon images and artefacts (which, according to their creators, are non-gendered) to boys' and girls' writing performances, identifying different garments of Pokemon clothing as suitable for either boys or girls; a point that illustrates how popular culture and media texts become tools for devising gender and to which I return as I discuss the case study presented in this article.

The embodiment of (literate) identities

I unpack the connections among school literacy, popular culture and children's identities by drawing on poststructural notions of discourse, power and the body. Exploring the connection among those concepts, Luke (1992) posited that discourses of pedagogy, which regulated classroom literacy events, were built around claims of truth that constituted students as particular types of subjects and shaped what counted as literacy in the classroom. Doing so, Luke (1992) drew on the Foucauldian notion of discursive power, which is regulatory and concurrently productive. This means that sedimented systems of ideas permeate and constitute the social body, as those are instantiated in the mutual relation of individuals with one another and with broader societal grids (Foucault, 1980). For Foucault (1977 , 1980), this constitutes a process of subjectivation, of the ways individuals are continually constituted as subjects, that is, as effects of power. Butler (1999) expands this idea by considering identities not as concrete categories but rather as performative acts: as acts that are normalised, naturalised and solidified in time through ritual and repetition, which make particular identities or types of subjects appear as stable and true. In this way, performatives reflect prior social conditions and also work with their social power to regulate and form bodies (Butler, 1997).

Attention to the body is thus necessary for understanding the mundane workings of discursive power, given that identity performances are accomplished through corporeal signs, including linguistic signs, bodily gestures, postures, movement, proxemics, gaze and silence (Butler, 1999 ; Kalmbach Phillips and Legard Larson, 2009 ; Kamler, 1997 ; Luke, 1992 ; Youdell, 2006), as well as clothing, hairstyling, accessorising, humour and laughter (e.g. Hagood, 2005 ; Johnson and Vasudevan, 2012). For researchers such as Kamler (1997) and Luke (1992), bodies thus become the discursive means through which particular literacy events, practices and pedagogies are instantiated in everyday classrooms. Because discourses that shape those events, practices and pedagogies are embodied (i.e. performed and reproduced through bodies), they become internalised and lead to self-surveillance and self-colonisation (Luke, 1992). Students' bodies thus become sites of inscription: the inscribed surface of events and the locus of what Hagood (2005), drawing on Foucault, refers to as the disassociated self – a self that is centred as a theoretical and analytic construct, yet only to be concurrently decentred as it is taken to be the effect of discourse and of relations of power. Accordingly, the body may be read as a text that is written upon and socially (re)produced according to the particular practices and discourses to which it has been exposed.

Popular culture and school literacy constitute systems of ideas (or, discourses) that produce and are (re)produced through the material body. As Grushka (2011) suggested, popular culture and media images, which reproduce hegemonic gender roles, connect to the ways identities can be read as bodies constructed and performed in particular cultural sites. Similarly, Luke (1992) argued that popular culture texts, as well as family and community texts, created differential experiences for different students, thus being connected to their classed and gendered identities. As popular culture texts are embodied, they become means for students to (de)construct their and others' bodies as texts, keep them under surveillance and use them to define themselves in relation to others (Hagood, 2005 ; Hughes-Decatur, 2011). School literacy works in similar ways, as it has been described as a site and technology for regulating students' bodies by defining what is possible and intelligible for different types of subjects, as those might connect to identity markers such as gender, class, ethnicity, ability and so on (Enriquez, 2011 ; Kamler, 1997 ; Luke, 1992 ; Wohlwend et al., 2011 ; Woodcock, 2010). Nevertheless, embodied action might simultaneously be the means through which social and academic norms are possible to be interrogated, resisted and reinscribed (Enriquez, 2011;

Johnson, **2011** ; Wohlwend and Medina, **2012**). It is this possibility that Butler (**1999**) termed as performative politics, which I employ to deconstruct Butterfly's embodiments of popular culture and school literacy.

Methodology

This article is organised around two snapshots from the case study of Butterfly, an African American, female literacy learner, who was described as a low achiever in official school language; a type of subjectivity that was determined for her through multiple assessment practices and sealed with an individual educational plan that had followed her since kindergarten to remind teachers and other adults that she was among the students with learning and other difficulties. Butterfly's case was drawn from a broader ethnographic case study of students' performances as literacy learners over a school year, during which regular literacy instruction intersected with mandated assessment practices. To explore how students performed and embodied literate identities, I collected data through participant observation of classroom events in a third-grade classroom, which was located in a public school in a metropolitan city in the United States. The school served African Americans, Latinos/as and recent African immigrants and had most of its students being eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch. The particular classroom, which was led by two white female teachers, reflected this student composition, whereas nine out of its 16 students, including Butterfly, received Special Education services, and three others participated in pull-out programmes for English language learners. I entered this classroom as an adult yet student, given that I introduced myself as such but also that I never acted like a teacher. Thus, I would never lead the classroom, address them as a whole, provide answers to students' questions on reading and writing tasks or ask students to call me by my last name as they did for other teachers (by mid-year, some of them had already dismissed Ms, too). Rather, I would go out during recess and chaperone students in field trips to only hang out with them rather than spend time with the teachers – a habitual act that allowed me to see students' performances in unofficial and unguarded places. Further, my accented English and dark brown, straight hair, as well as names of places written on my sweatshirts, occasionally led students to ask in enthusiasm if I spoke Spanish rather than English, which the two classroom teachers spoke; and yet, I did not.

From this insider–outsider position, I observed students interacting with one another and with their teachers without interrupting yet seeking for their interpretations about key episodes and events during informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. Those interviews relied on different interview tasks, including the elicitation of students' stories through conventional questions and photo-elicitation interviewing, which was decided upon because of its potential for disrupting some of the power dynamics among researchers and research participants (Clark-Ibáñez, **2004** ; Samuels, **2004**). Of interest to this article were the auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews (Clark-Ibáñez, **2004**) that I conducted with five focal students, including Butterfly. Interested in the children's out-of-school literacies and performances as different types of subjects, I provided them with disposable cameras to take pictures of what mattered to them outside school. Once the pictures were developed, each child and I sat in the classroom in the absence of other children and teachers, and the child would walk me through the pictures to describe each and then tell the story behind some, which she/he selected upon my prompt to isolate pictures that were special. During a child's narration, I asked for clarifications, yet

with an ear and an eye to issues that were centred in my study; thus, as will be seen later, I would pose more questions when issues of text and identities arose, especially in their relations to school norms and discourse.

My observations and interactions with teachers and children were transcribed into texts (sometimes multimodal, given that I incorporated in typed field-notes snapshots from video-recorded literacy events), which I read multiple times through notions of discourse, power and the body. This necessitated that the classroom context was understood as discursively constructed at the interplay of acting bodies, audiences, intentional communications and backstage performances, traces of external structures on the curriculum and power negotiations (Alexander et al., 2005). Those traces constituted analytic tools for the data from the broader study, as well as the case study depicted in this article. Further analysis relied on the identification of students' performances as literate subjects during different literacy events and of the ways they were inscribing their bodies. In other words, I approached students' bodies as visual texts, while concurrently considering the discourses, including social and academic norms, which shaped those bodies' performances. Further, I analysed interviews as instances of storytelling that included different narrated events (Wortham, 2001). This allowed the consideration of interviews as literacy events that were fused and shaped by students' embodied performances in the presence of an interested other, given that I was positioned as their audience.

Butterfly, the student whose embodied performances are foregrounded in this article, was one of five focal students who participated in the broader ethnographic study. In fact, she was the first among the classroom children who noticed my presence in their room, as I sat next to her group table and close to her chair during my initial days in school. After a few days of awkwardness, she started initiating conversations with me during unofficial school time, such as when she unpacked in the morning, when she finished her work early or in transitions between reading and writing instruction. She would share stories about her family or tell me that she saw me on her way to school, as she, her mum and I followed the same route to school. In analysing Butterfly's performances, I located the symbolic resources upon which she drew to position herself in particular ways and accounted for how she utilised her body to do so in the official/visible and the unofficial/less visible spaces of the mandated literacy curriculum. I paid particular attention to the ways she engaged with texts, including the types of texts she used and referenced (e.g. pop culture or school-sanctioned texts) and the language she utilised to describe and to affectively position herself in relation to those, as well as to school literacy expectations, and to others. Those analytic tools allowed me to consider how she took up, resisted and re-inscribed popular culture and school literacy curricula.

Popular culture and the official school curriculum

Understanding Butterfly's performances as embodied – inscribed yet possible to perform differently – resonates with Dyson's (2003a) description of children's literacy pathways as remixes: as appropriations and adaptations of symbolic material from their everyday lives to “new beats required in official literacy spaces” (p. 104). Before I introduce Butterfly and foreground her embodied performances, I consider it important to briefly identify those beats of the official literacy curriculum and school space that were most closely connected to popular culture, as those make visible the politics of the curriculum which I explore. Thus, I assemble a few moments from my classroom and other

observations when pop culture texts such as dress, music and bodily movement were talked about and performed. Although these are only glances at the discursive grid wherein children embodied manifold subjectivities, I utilise them to illustrate how socio-cultural norms and institutional truth claims regarding children's out-of-school and schooled lives inscribed their bodies.

A text that was explicitly read and overtly regulated was students' dress, given that the official school policy required students across grades to wear a uniform. During the winter months in particular, children were also allowed to come to school in 'hoodies' (i.e. hooded sweatshirts) but not with their hoods up. Wearing hooded sweatshirts was a common embodiment of students' out-of-school performances as urban youth, whereas the very act of having a hood up or pushed back was a signifier of different meanings (e.g. see Vasudevan's (2009) description of young men's embodied participation in literacy events). Children would pull their hoods over their heads and down to their foreheads to manifest their resistance or withdrawal from the official classroom space – an act performed, for instance, by Butterfly when asked by a teacher to change her seat as the class prepared to take a practice test (field notes, 10 December 2007). This would cause the teachers to ask the children to pull their hoods down, thus making the politics of the curriculum visible in their reference of a school-wide rule and the deployment of dress and clothing garments for disciplining students' schooled bodies. That one day a teacher addressed an African American boy, “Yo, D, put your hood down, man” (field notes, 10 March 2008), may thus be interpreted not as a comment on stylistic preferences but as an attempt to remind that particular student of the rules governing the official school space. The tone of the utterance also allows that such statement is unpacked as a plea to the student to avoid embodied performances, including the use of hoods, which have been demonised in public discourses (e.g. Blanchet, 2013) and have been a cause for the victimisation of particular raced, classed and gendered subjects (young African American men, in particular).

Music and dancing also offered examples of how pop culture (and students' out-of-school embodied performances, preferences and desires) were implicated in schoolwork. One of the pop culture texts that was often cited and bodily performed by students during the year of observations was DJ Webstar's *The 5000*, which brings together four different hip hop songs/dances (The Tone Wop, The Bad One, Chicken Noodle Soup and the Harlem Shake) and is oftentimes perceived as a symbol of the hip hop culture that developed in the broader metropolitan city where children's school and communities were located. Given the children's affiliation and participation in communities that shared and constructed this text, *The 5000* constituted a pop culture text familiar to them, which they brought into school through singing and dancing, yet mostly during recess and field trips, even though I would sometimes catch a whisper of a verse during independent work in the classroom.

During a break and while teachers were seated away, I watched from a short distance a group of children from Butterfly's classroom gathering together, forming a circle and singing the song at the top of their voices (field notes, 30 April 2008). At some point, two African American boys stepped in the middle and danced to the interested audience, kicking their feet, doing cartwheels and spinning on their backs – a style of dancing associated with hip hop (Dyson, 2003a) and a frequent bodily enactment of street dancing in the particular city. Immediately after that and as the song culminated to “Do it for the ladies” – a verse repeated four times in much slower pace than the rest of the song – a girl identified as a Latina got in the middle and moved her hips slowly, closing her eyes, putting her hands over her head and smiling indulgently (as may be seen in the official video clip of the song).

Another girl started yelling that they were not allowed to do this. As nobody paid attention to her, she came to me to anxiously tell me that they could sing the song, but the teachers told them not to “do the ‘do it for the ladies’”. By the time I asked why, she had left, the singing and dancing was over, and many of the children were now running and spinning around.

In this episode, both the boys and the dancing girl performed as raced and gendered types of subjects affiliated with particular communities where such performances were intelligible and thus expected. The girl's attempt to interrupt that performance was a re-articulation of the school discourse that denied those gendered/raced performances. Interestingly, by citing the teachers' rule, she made visible that the norm did not apply to the text itself but to specific performances of that text, given that children were allowed to sing it but not to dance the “do it for the ladies” part – a point that indicates that schooled children were concurrently positioned as asexual subjects. The distinction of the song from its performance may also be an indication of how hip hop has been commodified and sanitised in mainstream culture, especially when taking into consideration how DJ Webstar's Chicken Noodle Soup (2006) was performed by Kidz Bop, a brand featuring children of different ethnic backgrounds performing pop hits.

The complexity of this take-up and concurrent rejection of children's home performances is further indicated by the fact that hip hop was conditionally allowed during official school time. At the school level, children could participate in a hip hop group that was operated as one of the school's clubs to which children across grades participated on the basis of their special interests. At the classroom level and in terms of the official literacy curriculum in particular, children were allowed and even encouraged to perform texts through their bodies in ways that resembled their out-of-school performances during a unit of study that centred on poetry reading and writing. In this context, children would perform poetry through singing voices, movement, gesture and other resources. However, those very performances were legitimised and enveloped in school literacy discourse when teachers cited them as “noticing the rhythm of a poem”, which constituted one of the teaching points of the unit (cf. Kontovourki, [forthcoming](#)).

Introducing Butterfly

Within this societal and institutional grid, Butterfly, an African American girl, constructed and embodied literate performances at the conjunction of popular culture and school literacy. Butterfly was among the few children in the classroom who had to commute to the school, because she resided in a different area where, such as in the school community, most residents were African Americans and/or Latinos/as. The particular school was convenient for her as her father worked long hours, her mother worked at another school in the area and her grandmother lived in the neighbourhood. Having an older brother, an older sister and a younger brother, Butterfly spent most of the afternoons and weekends with family and also took dance/ballet lessons and participated in a Girl Scout group. In the classroom, she was friends with girls with high social status but was also the only girl who stated that she played with boys. Like few girls, she was also funny and joked with her (female) teacher, an act that was valued in the classroom but mostly associated with performances of masculinity and popularity therein. In doing so, she resisted dominant discourses on girls in schools as mostly caring and subservient (Lewis, [2001](#)).

Official literacy discourses, which relied on normalisation, classification and examination as key technologies of the self (Foucault, 1977), inscribed Butterfly's performances as a deficient literate subject as that was determined through assessment and her comparison with established standards of achievement. This regulated both the school-sanctioned texts and the people with whom she could engage: she was only allowed to read levelled books with simple (if any) storyline, which she often characterised as babyish or boring, while she was grouped with peers who were also constituted as deficient literate subjects. In Butterfly's construction of herself as a literate subject, she resisted her constitution as deficient through her attempts to control reading and writing events and through her citation of popular texts and artefacts that allowed her to perform literacy differently in contexts other than the official classroom space. Those texts, practices and artefacts included hip hop as a music genre that connected closely to the raced/classed and local communities of which she was a member; an iPod to listen to the music she liked; cartoon series and movies such as Scooby Doo, the Cheetah Girls and High School Musical, and toys along with related movies such as Bratz Babyz and Bratz Kidz. I delve into her performances around some of these texts as I present the two episodes/snapshots of her backstage performances of popular culture and school literacy.

Backstage embodiments of popular culture

In what follows, I discuss two episodes from Butterfly's performances of popular culture and school literacy, as those intersected, intertwined and thus inscribed her body. Each of those episodes is drawn from extended interviews with me, which I considered as literacy events given that each was a space for students such as Butterfly to produce and engage with texts, embody particular types of subjects and potentially re-inscribe their own bodies as literacy learners. To unpack the meanings made during those instances, I locate Butterfly's embodiments within her performances as a literate subject at different points of the academic year. I thus aim to expose the regulatory power of both popular culture and school literacy but also consider the possibilities of re-inscriptions in those backstage performances.

Un-mixing discourses and performances

If Dyson's (2003a) metaphor of literacy learning as a remix is useful for understanding how children draw from multiple resources to recontextualise and re-appropriate everyday and schooled literacies, it is also useful to reverse it in order to introduce the first episode as Butterfly's performance of un-mixing: an attempt to unpack differences and construct binaries between cultural sites, where popular culture and school literacy met. This episode, which is extracted from a photo-elicitation interview, is an exemplar of the ways Butterfly's corporeal signification constructed different types of gendered and raced/classed subjects as those emerged from media and school. After Butterfly presented pictures of herself, her family members, a friend and her stuffed animals and upon my request to choose a few favourite pictures, she singled out a self-portrait, where she smiled and posed with two fingers up and her palm turned toward her face – a gesture originating from gang signs and oftentimes associated with particular genres of music, such as hip hop, rap and R&B (Figure 1). Aware of the significance of the sign in the communities it has been produced as well as of Butterfly's love for hip hop music outside the school (she had already pulled her iPod from her zipped pocket to show it to me during our

conversation, only to shove it back in as one of the teachers entered the classroom), I asked her to describe what she was doing in the picture.

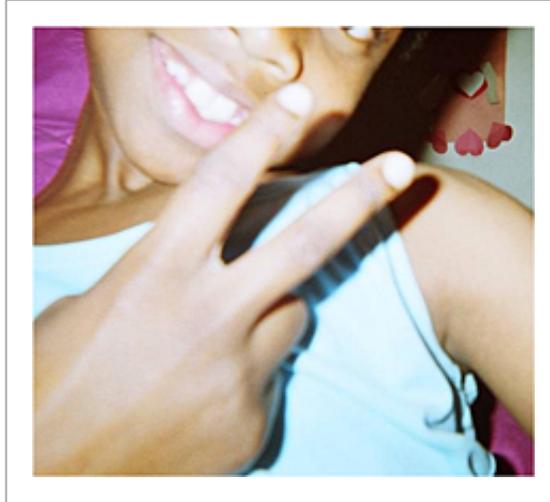


Figure 1.

[Open in figure viewer](#)

Butterfly posing for the camera

Butterfly first said that she liked to pose like that because it was fun and because she liked to have different poses, and later commented that she wanted to be a 'poser' when she grew up. She explained that a poser poses for photographers (which I interpreted to mean that she wanted to be a model) and continued to say that she would take any kind of pose, except this one. When asked why, Butterfly responded:

Butterfly:

"'cause women posers don't do that."

Stavroula:

"Women don't do that?"

Butterfly:

"Yeah, because (pauses). The photogr-the photographer wants them to be fabulous and beautiful because they like having them pictures good, nice, fantastic, and good."

Stavroula:

"So, you cannot take a picture with that pose?"

Butterfly:

"Yeah, because if you take a picture like that in front of a photographer he

gonna say that ain't great, because they don't look great, that's a boy's pose. Because one day my sister asked me if I want to be a tomboy and I said no. But this – that pose can be for girls also.

Stavroula:

“So, your sister was saying that because you're doing that you're a tomboy?”

Butterfly nods, and I ask her what *she thinks*.

Butterfly:

“I think some girls like – do that, because some girls like hip hop and some girls who do hip hop, they do this pose every time.”

Stavroula:

“Does it mean anything?”

Butterfly:

“It means peace, like in rap, like when you rap.”

(photo-elicitation interview, 13 May 2008)

In the aforementioned excerpt, Butterfly recontextualised and juxtaposed two contradictory constructs of femininity, both of which emerge in popular culture texts and practices and serve to solidify a discourse of an ideal woman as beautiful, gentle and vulnerable. In particular, saying that women posers (i.e. models) do not pose like she did, because they need to be beautiful, fabulous, nice and fantastic, she re-voiced the discourse and particularly the socially constructed expectation for women to be feminine and beautiful – a discourse that usually appears in the media and reiterates an ideal of a woman that stems from normative meanings of femininity and ignores multiplicity therein. That this discourse creates hierarchies and exclusions is indicated by Butterfly's comment that posing like she did would not count as a great, feminine picture, because that was a boy's pose. Her sister's comment to her that she was a tomboy solidified this idea, at the same time that it served to discipline Butterfly's embodied acts and gendered performances. However, Butterfly challenged that by providing a counter-example of women who posed like she did and were feminine but at the same time tough, with opinions that they expressed through their music. Being a knower of discourses that circulate popular culture, she clarified, though, that only women in hip hop and rap did this all the time. Considering that hip hop and rap are oftentimes perceived as subcultures or subordinate to dominant cultures (Dimitriadis, 2001), Butterfly did not traverse stereotypical gender performances, even though she indirectly suggested another way of performing gender. However, what she accomplished through this

clarification was to complicate gendered performances by pointing to how those very performances were also raced and classed.

Continuing on the same topic of posing, Butterfly shared a picture of her baby brother who posed with his arms crossed over his chest. She added that this was a boy's *or* a girl's pose, and that one day, she, her brother and a female cousin took a picture posing like that. To help me understand better, she sat on her knees, crossed her arms over her chest and leaned backwards and to the right. She immediately added, without any prompt, "but school pictures, you just take them regular". 'Regular' pictures, Butterfly explained, were pictures in which students just stood and smiled at the camera or had their chins rested in their palms. Even though her emphasis remained on gender, this unstrained comment indicated the embodiment of different, obviously contradictory and distinguishable, discourses on children and children's corporeal postures that, once more, emerged in different sociocultural contexts and constituted truth claims that led to the production and hierarchisation of raced and classed subjects. For these African American children, the normative image of a student posing in school was prioritised over their spontaneous, everyday performances in front of a camera. To my question, if posing as she liked (with her fingers up or her arms crossed over her chest) was something she could do at school, Butterfly responded: "we can do these at recess, like on Friday when we go outside, that's the only time we can do that". She shook her head in a most serious face when I asked if such poses were allowed in the hallways or the lunchroom, once more un-mixing her everyday world and the official school space.

Butterfly's commentary on posing in and out of school illustrates that she had a clear understanding that schooling excluded practices and performances that were commonsensical in the family and community she lived and which she took up outside the school. Interestingly, the notion of regular came up in another interview with Butterfly, when she said that she liked hip hop, but in school, she did not like music because they only did *regular* music with violins and stuff (individual interview, 3 April 2008). That school music and pictures were depicted as regular indicates that inscribed onto her schooled body was a binary between school and popular culture, constituting the former as the norm against which the latter and her embodied acts were judged and evaluated. The construction of such binaries was also evident in her interaction with popular culture and school-sanctioned texts, which is presented in the succeeding section.

Backstage performances of reading

As mentioned earlier, Butterfly read below the expected grade level, as this was identified through a series of formative assessments, including running records. Running records, as used in the particular classroom and school district, were employed by teachers to identify students' reading levels and communicate this information in alphabet letters, according to which classroom libraries were organised. Thus, students' acknowledgement of their reading level regulated the types and content of books they could read, as they were only allowed to choose books that corresponded to their reading levels (e.g. a student identified at level F was not allowed to read books of level K) (see further , Kontovourki, **2012**). Butterfly was resistant to levelling and to reading books of lower levels, because she considered those boring and nonsense. Her resistance was also revealed in her use of books that were beyond her perceived reading level. However, those performances were not public but rather happened in backstage spaces where the demands of official literacy curriculum were secondary or

irrelevant. An interview with me constituted such a space, given that Butterfly subverted her identity as a low achiever by utilising popular culture texts. When asked about her favourite book, Butterfly responded:

Butterfly:

"It's a chapter – I like chapter books more often".

Stavroula:

"Do you have a lot of chapter books ... in your book baggie?"

Butterfly:

"Yes, I have – No, I don't have, I have chapter books at home. I have the Cheetah Girls Two, I have ... I have this other chapter book, I have many chapter books."

Stavroula:

"But only at home?"

Butterfly:

"Yeah".

Stavroula:

"But there are some chapter books here (referring to the classroom library)."

Butterfly:

"Yeah, but I'm not on that level. I'm on a level FG, so I got to read that level so I can move at a different level. And by the time we end the year, we should all be on level O."

Stavroula:

"Hm. And what does this mean? What kind of books – what kind of books are you reading now that you are level FG?"

Butterfly:

"I'm reading the kind of books like – well, I like to read Scooby Doo, but that's JK, but I know how to read it, because JKs are easy for me to read, because they make more sense than the other books I read."

Stavroula:

"Ah ... But you don't have those in your book baggie?"

Butterfly shakes her head no.

(individual interview, 3 April 2008)

In this excerpt, Butterfly identified herself as a lover of books and chapter books, in particular, through the employment of a popular culture text. She said that she had those at home but was not allowed to carry them in her book baggie or read them at school. She also added that chapter books were out of her reach not because she did not understand them but because she was not yet on that level (chapter books first appeared at level JK, but she was still in FG, two levels below that), thus exposing the regulatory power of school literacy curricula and the binary between those and out-of-school interests and preferences. It is also important that Butterfly described 'Cheetah Girls Two', a text recording adventures from a popular media show, as a chapter book – a school-sanctioned term that was utilised in her classroom and across schools which employed the same literacy curriculum to classify texts and the students who read them. In this remark, school language is used to make sense of popular culture texts that were deemed important in her out-of-school life. It is a performance of transgression, as she dissolves the boundaries between school literacy and popular culture, to have pop culture recited as schooled. Given that the interview itself may be interpreted as a narrating event (Wortham, 2001) replete with manifold performances, Butterfly's employment of the school discourse can also be unpacked as an attempt to constitute herself as a knowledgeable literacy learner in front of an audience (me), who was repeatedly constructed as a student yet an adult and who at this particular moment asked questions about books.

Butterfly's statement that she could only read chapter books at home and not in school also implied her awareness that reading beyond her level would have been a performance that would not be recognised as intelligible and desirable in the official literacy curriculum. As a backstage performance only, her reading of books beyond her assigned level was possible in the classroom at moments that usually went unnoticed or were hard to be captured by the teachers. However, I was able to observe Butterfly sneaking out chapter books such as the ones from 'The Magic School Bus' series or copies of 'The High School Musical' book from inside her desk. The High School Musical was the popular culture text most often cited by students in the classroom. The students talked about the show itself, the movie and the books, while they brought CDs with the soundtrack of the movie to listen to during breaks in the classroom. When one day Butterfly pulled the book out of her desk during independent reading time, I was standing next to her observing another group – a position I would often occupy since the beginning of my observations in the classroom. She immediately threw it back in her desk, looked at me and smiled, and I smiled back, shrugging my shoulders to show that it was fine with me. She took the book out of the desk again, opened it at a page that she had bookmarked, held it under the desk and leaned over to start reading while glancing at the teachers who were conferring with students at the back of the room. After a few seconds, she closed the book and took a levelled book from her book baggie (field notes, 26 March 2008).

Within a few seconds, Butterfly illustrated through her embodied acts (her abrupt move, smile, gaze toward me and the teachers, and posture) her resistance to being defined by her reading level and engaged in reading that probably made sense to her. She thus subverted her positioning as a low achiever and suggested a different way of doing reading that moved beyond the text as a set of visual stimuli that the reader needed to decode so as to make meaning. Rather, reading for her involved meaning-making that drew from and relied on meaning-making outside the classroom – hence the

importance of utilising popular culture, media texts both during the interview and in the margins of official literacy practices.

Discussion: pop culture, literate bodies and the politics of the curriculum

Butterfly's – and her peers' – embodied performances of pop culture and school literacy are discussed in this article in an attempt to uncover the politics of the curriculum: the ways school literacy at its intersection with pop culture exert power onto students' bodies and produce norms and regularities that students take up, subvert and/or resist. As such, it resonates with approaches to popular culture as always part of power relations (e.g. Fiske, 1989) and reiterates the assumption that literacy education is inextricably linked to identity work (Bloome et al., 2005 ; Pahl and Rowsell, 2012). Starting from the latter, the deconstruction of these examples as embodiments of literacy unveils the ways in which students' literate bodies are discursive means and sites of inscription of discourses that circulate the social worlds that they inhabit. The meaning of embodiment is thus rendered useful as an identity theory that helps uncover how subjectivities are produced and materialised through corporeal and other signs. Butterfly's discussion of popular images of femininity as those intersected with particular types of raced and classed subjects connects to the point that popular culture images are lenses through which bodies are read, kept under surveillance and used to define selves and others (Hagood, 2005 ; Hughes-Decatur, 2011). Particular gestures are then allowed or not for different female bodies and are utilised to produce hierarchies of embodied acts and feminine subjectivities. Butterfly's comment that “some girls who do hip hop, they do this pose every time” has manifold significance. First, it establishes her affiliation with a community, and urban youth in particular, for which hip hop music is considered the representative voice because it was created by and for urban youth (Morrell, 2002). Second, it constitutes hip hop and pop culture, more generally, as sites of resistance, where experimentation with (here, gendered) identities is both permitted and desired (Dimitriadis, 2001 ; Morrell, 2004). And, third, it signifies Butterfly's subversive rather than submissive gendered performances, considering that she could identify other girls' unexpected performances against a norm; a performance that Butler (1999) would count as an attempt at passing, an embodiment of the possibility to perform differently and thus a realisation of performative politics.

Further, Butterfly's awareness of hierarchies among gendered subjects and her discussion of different women ‘posers’ reveals that popular culture is not a unitary space from which students draw; rather, it is a space permeated with difference and tension that might complicate students' performances as particular types of subjects – thus Butterfly's comment that her sister considered her a tomboy for posing like women whose music she liked. Thus, the conceptualisation of popular culture as an ideological struggle between dominant and subordinate social groups and discourses (Fiske, 1989) takes up a new meaning given that notions such as gender are complicated as they are simultaneously thought of as also raced and classed. That struggle is further complicated when Butterfly juxtaposes the posing of any female body found in popular images to pictures taken in school. Her reference to the latter as regular and her statement that she would not take any pictures such as the ones she liked

in school expose the productive and regulatory power of schooling by making visible how norms and regularities are produced. With manifold discourses regarding public images of girls, women and students inscribed onto her body, Butterfly is constituted as an effect of those discourses and reproduces them while concurrently attempting to craft a niche for her performances as she claims that she would pose 'non-regularly' during recess or in the yard. While she un-mixed out-of-school and schooled performances of girlhood and studenthood, she was also able to interrogate and move fluidly across those.

Because of its focus on how regularities were repeatedly produced and potentially challenged, the first episode presented in this article is then to be read as the background for understanding how regularities regarding students' literate identities connect to popular culture and operate in classrooms. Important at this point is the realisation that popular culture texts were resources for Butterfly to negotiate a reader identity that subverted her positioning as a low-achieving student. Such negotiation was only possible as a backstage performance – in the unofficial places created not by children in their playful engagement with texts and peers (Dyson, 2003b ; Wohlwend, 2011) but rather by students who seriously strive to make themselves intelligible in public school classrooms. In her effort to do so, Butterfly cited popular culture texts to describe (and subvert) a school-sanctioned identity that had followed her since kindergarten and served as a gatekeeper for the types of texts with which she would engage. Butterfly's attempt to perform differently was replete with her desire to constitute herself intelligible as a competent reader and participant in the school literacy discourse. In this way, the very ideas of agency and resistance are complicated, as Butterfly resisted a type of subject that was produced for her but not the very discourse that produced it. Further, when Butterfly referred to the Cheetah Girls book as a chapter book, she inscribed school literacy discourse onto popular culture texts. Her move is thus illustrative of how popular culture may be co-opted in school literacy, which was also evident in her teachers' recognition of children's embodied performances of poetry as “noticing the rhythm of a poem”. As such, it shows how the boundaries and binaries between in and out of school, formal and informal learning, are bent and transgressed.

The two episodes thus serve to complicate the connections of popular culture and literacy curricula by considering the ways each is used to appropriate the other. This is significant given that the introduction of popular culture to school literacy curricula is often grounded in arguments for the broadening of the school canon and for opening up classrooms to non-traditional texts (Shegar and Weninger, 2010). This approach connects to a direction in the study of popular culture as a collection of songs, movies, television shows and even dress, which might celebrate pop culture without locating it in particular power grids (Fiske, 1989 ; Morrell, 2004). Butterfly's case and embodied performances call educators and researchers to approach popular culture, literacy curricula and children's own performances as sociocultural and historical texts, which are affected by and in the circulation of power in social contexts.

Finally, Butterfly's case exposes and problematises the possibilities for students to (re)define their literate, gendered and raced/classed identities in relation to both literacy curricula and pop culture. Deconstructing how discursive power inscribed Butterfly's embodiments and acknowledging the possibility for re-inscriptions (in the form of throwing signs, thinking it possible for some girls to throw these signs, rejecting levelled books and rewriting her subjectivity as a literacy learner) complicates the way children's agency is performed in schools and other public spaces. Those very performances, as

well as Butterfly's discussions with an interested audience constitute critical literacy practices, which might offer opportunities to children and teachers to unpack how they negotiate school curricula and pop culture texts (Johnson, [2011](#)). Such an approach to popular culture and literacy pedagogy would bring the politics of the curriculum to the front and open it up to redefinition.

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