

7-2016

# Pop, Hip Hop, and Empire, Study of a New Pedagogical Approach in a Developmental Reading and English Class

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Pop, Hip Hop, and *Empire*,

Study of a New Pedagogical Approach in a Developmental Reading and English Class

by

Karen Denise Taylor

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Gardner-Webb University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English

Boiling Springs, N.C.

2016

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

In the Spring of 2015, one rare evening when I had the time to surf channels on television, I saw the pilot for a new show, *Empire*. The preview information was that the storyline revolved around Hip Hop culture and the recording industry with the focus on family. I decided to watch the pilot, and I remember thinking that it would probably be awful. Little did I know where I would end up with this television show and what it would provide me.

While watching the pilot, I had an epiphany, grabbed a notebook and furiously began writing notes. During a scene of the pilot, one of the main characters made a crack about *King Lear*, which cemented the idea I had formulating in my mind for using the television show as a text for instruction in a developmental reading and English class that I was currently teaching.

I determined that the pilot was available free of charge on *YouTube*, so the next day I went in, gave the students an introduction and asked them to observe and make notes on things that stood out to them from the show. Some examples I asked them to look for was irony, contradiction, and gender issues. After the viewing ensued a lively discussion, with almost every student getting involved. I felt that I was really on to something, so I took a vote, asking them if they would be interested in studying the show's episodes, making it clear so they would realize there would be writing and research assignments connected. The vote was unanimous to go with it.

*Empire's* Hip Hop themes were the target of studies during the class, and were beneficial in illustrating various literary terms like symbolism and metaphor, and also the irony mentioned above, to the students. In addition to introducing literary terms, the show also afforded the opportunity to demonstrate various analytical tools and critical thinking skills, such as their ability to see the contradictions between a couple of the character's actions and their words, as

well as noticing themes from the show that connected to life in general, themes like the rags-to-riches American dream and how power and money change people, to name only a couple.

Student engagement was a vital component to the material in the text, and perhaps this was due to the origins of Hip Hop culture. Much like modern rappers who came from the streets to succeed in music, the rags-to-riches American dream is presented in *Empire*, and many Americans, especially members of the lower-income class, relate to the dream.

Television is a purveyor of much modern pop culture, and this television show represents the popular culture of Hip Hop. This thesis focuses on a study of the effects of using a non-traditional text in the form of a television show on students in this particular class.

Popular culture pervades modern society, and as a result, most students know more about pop culture (e.g. artifacts, ideas, occurrences) than any literary text. There is value to studying this genre. In fact, this is not a new idea. The literary theory of cultural poetics has been utilized since the 1970s when theorists developed the concept of an intricate relationship between historical events, culture, and art. This theory can not only be used to study how literary texts are affected by historical context of the era in which the text was written, but also cultural texts, including pop culture artifacts such as television shows, advertisements, and music.

The cultural poetics theory was developed more fully in the 1980's and was based upon viewing a text within its historical context at the time of its creation. More than just an examination of the target text for analysis, the theory included artifacts like laws, public debates on relevant issues of each time period, art, music, and the economy of the time period represented in the text. (Bressler 191-196). Cultural poetics, also known as New Historicism "declares that all history is subjective...[and] is but one of many discourses, or ways of viewing the world. [It] highlights the interrelatedness of all human activities" (Bressler 319). This theory

can include pop culture as one of the textual considerations as well because of the predominance of pop culture in humanity's daily life. If by studying the artifacts and culture of any historical period along with a literary text can reveal important information, pop culture is a definite source for the study of culture and its historical implications.

Many forms of popular culture can be mined as a source for teaching in a variety of subjects, if for no other reason than it is knowledge many students have when they enter into the classroom. Hip Hop culture is a subgenre of pop culture and as such provides a rich vein to mine for classroom use. Scholars like Geoffrey Sirc and Teri Sutton state that "students' prior knowledge of Hip Hop gives them an easier entree into the language, strategies, and techniques of college writing at a major university" (27). Students' knowledge of subjects situated in pop culture exceeds their knowledge of literary texts in many cases because of their exposure to media such as: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Unlike the classics like *Tom Sawyer* or *The Scarlett Letter*, which are print bound and the students' exposure is usually limited to academia. According to "Statistics About Education in America," from the website *studentsfirst.org*: Sixty-six percent of all U.S. fourth graders scored "below proficient" on the 2013 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading test, meaning that they are not reading at grade level. Even more alarming is the fact that among students from low-income backgrounds, 80 percent score below grade level in reading. Reading proficiency among middle school students isn't much better. On the 2013 NAEP reading test, about 22 percent of eighth graders scored below the "basic" level, and only 36 percent of eighth graders were at or above grade level ("Statistics About").

Numerous times, I have questioned students about their reading habits. Out of several classes, I can recall only one that had more than one student who indicated that he/she enjoyed

reading. In response to my questions of why they did not like to read, I received responses stating they found it boring or that they couldn't focus. I have noticed on other occasions that some students do not understand many of the words when they read, and as a result, lose interest. This observation of mine along with samples of statistical data as evidenced above has led to me conclude that they feel the material is inaccessible.

For this thesis, I will focus on the possibility of using Hip Hop studies in a developmental reading and English class as a bridge from these possible feelings of inaccessibility, inadequacy, or even disinterest to a more balanced interest and attitude toward literacy in the form of Hip Hop studies.

### **Brief Background of Hip Hop Culture**

During the 1970s, New York City experienced upheavals in the lower income neighborhoods called "urban renewal." The South Bronx was particularly affected, and not surprisingly, that is the location that is usually credited for being the "home of Hip Hop culture" (Rose 30). The urban renewal projects destroyed many homes of various ethnicities. These displacements were widespread and scholars believe are at least part of the reason for the birth of the voice of Hip Hop.

Hip Hop culture has evolved since its beginnings in the 1970s. It began on the streets of New York City and operated as a voice from economically, racially, and otherwise oppressed social classes (Rose 16). Since the beginning, it has represented what is often referred to in post-Colonial literary theory terms as "the other," representing the cultures and/or classes repressed by the dominant colonizing class. When the colonizing class begins, the customs and everyday habits and rituals practiced by the class undergoing the colonizing are many times prohibited by the class doing the colonizing. This effectively oppresses the indigenous people under

colonization to the point where they are considered to be the “other.” This particular characteristic of oppression of the other represents some of the social aspects and values of Hip Hop culture.

Three basic tenets make up Hip Hop culture: rapping, breakdancing, and graffiti writing (Rose 27). The phrase—Hip Hop culture—refers to the inclusion of these three tenets as well as the other characteristics of the culture such as described above by Tricia Rose. Rap music, according to Rose, “must be understood as one cultural element within a larger social movement known as Hip Hop” (25). Because of the various characteristics of African American culture embodied in rap music, “[r]ap’s primary context for development is Hip Hop culture” (Rose 26). In other words, the emergence of rap music encompassed under the larger umbrella of Hip Hop culture is one of the reasons for its popularity and significant messages.

The message of Hip Hop culture represented in rap music and graffiti writing is a voice of the oppressed. Rose states that although rap music represented economically and racially oppressed communities, it wasn’t the first music to do this, and there is more to rap music and Hip Hop culture and “[b]eing angry and poor were not new or unusual phenomenon for many African Americans in the 1970s” (26).

### **Hip Hop’s Voice**

“Hiphop discourse...offers an interesting view of the human freedom struggle and aspects of the knowledge that people have about the world” (Richardson 9). This struggle for freedom continues for people from various races. However, the economically oppressed social classes, which encompasses many ethnicities, all struggle with certain types of freedoms, like financial freedom, freedom to an education, and freedom to pursue every day pleasantries that the upper income social classes take for granted.

Rose states “[h]ip hop emerges from complex, cultural exchanges and larger social and political conditions of “disillusionment and alienation” (Rose 59-60). Much like the oppressed people who began the rap music movement of the 1970’s, people who live in the communities around Southeastern Community College of North Carolina experienced some of the same feelings of poverty and feelings of helplessness.

Themes of economic struggling and disparity between the social classes are common in many music genres. The themes are not that different from many Hip Hop/rap songs. Anyone who has heard rap music, but who is not an aficionado or a member of Hip Hop culture has heard terminology in the lyrics which she does not understand, but some of the references to the differences in upper and lower social classes are easy to comprehend.

### **Southeastern Community College**

This social and economic divide includes more than urban areas. Economically oppressed classes living in suburban and even rural areas are divided socially from those who are in better financial circumstances. For example, the environment of the county where Southeastern Community College is found constitutes a mixture of people who hailed from a textile-based economy several years ago. From the years 1996 through 2006, major declines in factories and jobs in North Carolina occurred, displacing many textile workers who had no other job skills or training (“Key Industries”).

Many of those who found themselves without a means of making a living were also uneducated. Some had high school diplomas, but many did not. The situation was dire enough that programs were put into place assisting the jobless with returning to school to obtain training for work other than textiles. Some of these people were in my extended family. One aunt in particular graduated her program with honors, despite the fact that she did not finish high school

when she was younger. She eventually became the supervisor over housekeeping at the nursing home where she began as a Certified Nurse's Assistant (CNA). Another aunt attended the community college and got a job at Walmart in the bookkeeping department. In total, I had three aunts displaced by the textile collapse and attended Southeastern as a result. All of my extended family, with the exception of one, would fall into the middle to lower income working class. I am familiar with the feelings of some of these students about their perceptions of social class and education.

Disillusionment abounded in the area surrounding the community college after the collapse of the textile industry. The combination of loss of the means to earn a livelihood along with lack of education perpetuated by years of available jobs in the cotton mill all encompassed within a rural environment creates a context that exhibits economic disadvantages and hopelessness. Both groups feel the pressure from being at the bottom of the food chain and not seeing a clear way out. The reasons for lack of education may be somewhat different, but feelings of being outcasts of the dominant culture are similar. The correlation between Hip Hop culture and the children of the displaced textile workers is significant and could be part of the reason the students in my class performed so well within the context of Hip Hop themes.

### **The Relevance of Hip Hop—or What is Hip Hop?**

A main issue that several scholars address is the relevance of Hip Hop studies or even an accurate description of what constitutes Hip Hop culture and studies. Dimitriadis, Metro-Roland, Watkins, and Pough have all addressed these concepts in their research. Dimitriadis defines it in the following words: "Hip hop is a multi-layered art form that has only grown in depth, power, and significance over time" (35), whereas Metro-Roland states that it is "a popular form of lyric poetry," and that "rap is a paradigmatic genre that reflects how language functions in the process

of a fusion of horizons” (569). He follows his genre distinction for rap music by pointing out that it “or any other art form...cannot be reduced to a simple accumulation of words and meaning as interpreted through textual analysis” (Metro-Roland 569). Jones argues that rap is not just music but represents the actual “voice of a population that has been ignored by mainstream leaders and institutions. It is a culture” (Jones 17). Hip Hop culture includes its own language, customs, and norms, like any other social group.

### ***Empire and Hip Hop***

*Empire* represents Hip Hop culture and also the American Dream of rising from nothing to fame and riches. Two of the main characters started their lives on the streets selling drugs and doing whatever else they could to feed their family while they pursued their dreams of making music. The Hip Hop culture, particularly rap music, has a basis in gang and drug culture, who some believe is the only means available for them to move into a better social and/or economic class.

The basic story line of the show follows Lucious, the father and owner of his recording company, *Empire*, for which the story is named. His wife, Cookie, spent seventeen years in prison for dealing drugs. She took the fall for Lucious, so he could use the four hundred thousand dollars' worth of drug money to build their dream of a recording company. Cookie and Lucious's three sons were left to the care of their father, who is a cutthroat type of man. The story revolves around the rags-to-riches dream, family, and doing everything they can to keep the company and their family together after Cookie gets out of jail.

The show presents certain themes, like the misogyny and homophobia of the Hip Hop culture, as well as illegal activities and drug use. These were the focus of some class discussions and in their formal and informal writing. Students were able to use terms and ideas of which they

were familiar in the Hip Hop culture in their writing. In essence, they combined language and meaning making skills.

According to Richardson, “[A] group makes the new language fit, to the extent possible, its epistemological, ontological, and cosmological system” (2). The group I had, comprised students from various parts of our rather large and rural county, many of who came from the displaced textile worker environment mentioned above. This sometimes fosters a feeling of not belonging when the students enter the classroom. These students liked the idea that another non-dominant culture can fashion its own uses from the dominant discourse. Rose refers to “ontological and cosmological systems” which I interpret to mean, the system of the group in question’s worldview. Cultural norms include language habits and communication and these tenets are part of James Paul Gee’s study and observations of cultural groups and situated worlds, how they connect to culture, and how we all use language. Therefore, if a group constructs or perceives an invisible barrier between other cultures and societal classes and itself, the language accepted and perpetuated within the group will be one of the things that hold it together and makes the members feel accepted.

Another important thing that Richardson points out about hip hop is that “Hip hop discourse...offers an interesting view of the human freedom struggle and aspects of the knowledge that people have about the world” (Richardson 9). This “knowledge that people have about their world” was my basis for this study. I was hoping that the hip hop culture displayed in *Empire* would interest these students and help them in learning how to read and write more easily, and more importantly I believe, to improve their critical thinking skills. These critical thinking skills are paramount in the job market as well as in academia, and since there is so much

dissentation regarding the validity of certain courses value outside of academia, it seemed relevant. In other words, critical thinking and worldview go hand-in-hand.

Critical thinking skills are developed by analysis and problem solving skills. The more varied situations and environments to which a student is exposed, the more opportunity to expand his/her knowledge and become familiar with new approaches. The new approaches lead to new ideas and more open-minded thought processes. By expanding students' worldview, he/she is able to comprehend new situations.

Since we began studying *Empire* after the semester had already begun and I was acquainted with the students to a small degree, I felt I had a viable chance at gaining the students' interest in the show. The demographics were such that there was a mix of races and genders, so I was relatively sure that I would have varied responses. According to Richardson, "Hip hop is a rich site of cultural production that has pervaded and been pervaded by almost every American institution and has made an extensive global impact" (9). It is obvious that Hip Hop has pervaded television and other media, but it has also entered some churches, schools, and even some governmental institutions as in law suits over copyright, Senate committee hearings on the propriety of the lyrics and subject content, and many others. In this class, I was hoping to use Hip Hop's prevalence in pop culture and the tendency of most people to watch at least some television as a knowledge base for the text in the classroom.

Using a text that the students were interested in made instruction in reading and writing easier due to experiencing less resistance from the students. After informal writing in their notebooks and verbal discussions, they began writing essays and topics they chose from *Empire* enthusiastically instead of resisting all of the way.

The results of this classroom experiment brought up questions about whether or not using a non-traditional Hip Hop themed text such as *Empire*, affected student interest and learning. I wanted to know if the students felt or perceived any differences between this class and previous classes in reading and English. This experience was a catalyst for my investigation into the impact of *Empire* on student interest and engagement or effects upon performance in the classroom.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### Social Aspects and Values of Hip Hop Culture

Scholars such as Gwendolyn Pough, Debra Sanchez, Dimitri-Roland, and Greg Dimitriadis, have either used Hip Hop texts in their own classrooms, or studied its use. Several of these scholars have made connections between classroom material and the exterior world of politics, economics, and social factors. These particular social factors have been a source of study for another scholar, James Paul Gee. These correlations are important in understanding how the study of Hip Hop functions.

Literacy and language pervade and combine any human social acts or performances. Debra Sanchez states: “[L]iteracy, language development and use, and language’s ties to identity are inseparable to social, political, and economic contexts” (479). These social, economic, and political contexts are all performed by means of language, and also according to the culture or social class from whence the performers came. In Sanchez’s statement, she connects the importance and intricacies of social interaction and communication, by pointing out that language and these social interactions are inseparable, whereby leading to an important concept of Gee’s. His belief is that the social group is one of the most important things to consider in learning because the focus is to “apprentice the learner” into that particular group (48). Looking at Sanchez’s statement and considering Gee’s concept that all groups focus upon “apprenticing” the learner or new person into the group provides a view of varying cultural worlds and identities converging in the presence of a shared goal or subject, like the classroom, the boardroom, or a recording studio. Academic essays and scholarly discourse represent only one type of social group, so Gee’s conclusions point toward an idea that a more varied acceptance of social languages should be the final goal of the academy.

James Paul Gee, as sociocultural linguist and researcher provides a method for analyzing language and its situated meanings. Within Gee's methods of discourse analysis, he describes social goods as "anything that a group of people believes to be a source of power, status, value, or worth" (Gee *Discourse Analysis* 2). He also states: "[S]peakers and writers use the resource of grammar to *design* their sentences and texts in ways that communicate their perspectives on reality, carry out various social activities...and allow them to enact different social identities" (Gee *Discourse Analysis* 5). Students bring their own social identities into the classroom, and the classroom provides a new space for constructing a new "situated identity" (Gee *Discourse Analysis*, 140) for a new social group. The students' expectations of grammar and writing in previous English classes are the "social goods" of their experience. However, within this new social group in the classroom of pop culture, Hip Hop language and style can operate as social goods for this new social group by using the students' existing knowledge of pop culture and Hip Hop in a combining approach to academia, allowing these students to "enact different social identities" (Gee *Discourse Analysis* 5).

A varied approach pedagogy, as advocated by Pough, provides opportunities for students to access larger worldviews and perform successfully. Such a varied approach would include Pough's theory of the classroom:

[V]iewing the classroom as a protopublic space encourages students to realize themselves as participants in multiple, different, and overlapping publics, and this realization can help them examine and ultimately experiment with the situated nature of rhetoric which requires specific needs for effective writing. (194)

Pough also advocates for "allowing students to address difference through various language acts allow[ing] them to see both the social aspects and the process aspects of reading and writing" (195). This concept points again to the "protopublic" space of the classroom as a model for the

world outside. Students can learn that there are different types of “language acts” besides essays, like rap music and poetry for example, that include reading and writing skills.

Pough’s varied approach agrees with Sanchez’s observations and appears to utilize Gee’s concepts about social identities and situated worlds. This type of pedagogy which provides a larger world view for the student could allow for feelings of accessibility to the students and the concept that there are more “worlds” in which they can perform comfortably. Gee’s belief that language is a part of cultural constructs, operating mainly to adhere social groups, ties into Sanchez’s conclusion that the language and social, political, economic contexts are inseparable. Both Gee’s and Sanchez’s observations support each other and Pough.

Pough experienced boundaries of social identities becoming blurred in her classroom “when the discussion of rap and articles about rap contributed to the clashing of cultures” (204). Students from different economic and social classes came together in the classroom constituting the “clash” in a positive way. Within this classroom clash, Pough demonstrates the social relations that Gee refers to as intertextuality (Gee *Discourse Analysis* 48). Gee states that “a single written or oral text can be in one social language or it can switch between two or more or even mix them up pretty thoroughly...Sometimes, however, a text...will accomplish a sort of switching by incorporating...words from another text...in the same or a different variety of language.” (Gee *Discourse Analysis* 46). This he defines as intertextuality. Intertextuality combines social languages and social identities. Pough’s views regarding the use of hip hop in the classroom are a means of opening a dialogue for more tolerance and acceptance of various cultures. Sanchez holds that Hip Hop can illuminate “social realities lived by many African Americans” which folds into the cross-cultural understanding Pough presents in addition to recognizing the various social relations Gee believes are represented or implicated in any and all

texts as in intertextuality (Sanchez 480). Pough's use of rap music in her classroom helped her students open their minds and changed the way they viewed other cultures. By using the context of rap music and Hip Hop culture, she was able to blur the original lines between the students' individual social identities and their perceptions of academic situated identities. Her success with Hip Hop in the classroom gave her the feeling that this type of pedagogical approach could "possibly change their [students'] ideas and society as well" (195). The classroom here, is not a sterile environment set apart from the rest of the world, but an intricate microcosm of the whole macrocosm of the worlds of social interactions, language, cultures, and situated identities which has been used by these scholars to study and conclude that Hip Hop in the classroom can be effective in various forms.

### **Authenticity and Ideologies in Hip Hop**

Some scholars question the differences in culture, the right to study Hip Hop, and how its authenticity may sometimes be in question, particularly when there exists a chasm of culture between the typical white, middle-aged teacher/instructor and the students she teaches. Metro-Roland examines the situated role of the white middle-class teacher using a hip hop text in the classroom and its ramifications. He questions whether this can even be done due to the space that seems to exist between the students with a detailed knowledge of Hip Hop music and culture and the dominant, white, patriarchal, privileged place of this teacher. His interrogation stands upon the idea that perhaps this type of course subject could actually assist the white teacher in understanding her students and the "urban youth who propelled this popular and controversial music into the public eye" (Metro-Roland 565). He discusses applying his own "hermeneutic theories" and attempts to understand how to interpret Hip Hop, so this "hypothetical middle-aged teacher" could gain an "appreciation for rap music" and understand his students better (Metro-

Roland 561). As a white, middle-aged teacher myself, I recognize that my status may appear to separate me from disenfranchised students; however, being disenfranchised is relative. Though I may not come from a Latino or African American culture, close members of my family have experienced the fall of the textile industry and fallen into impoverished conditions with a lack of education. I also realize that my cultural differences as a researcher will influence how I design and interpret data from this study.

Metro-Roland's hypothetical typical teacher might at first believe all of the negatives connected to rap music, like the belief that it promotes and even instigates violence; it represents the "angry black man," the promotion of drug use, and of course, misogyny, to name only a few. By not overlooking the negatives that are usually attached to the music, Metro-Roland makes the study authentic because he openly discusses these negatives as characteristic of much rap music.

These negative aspects have been discussed and interrogated at length by scholar Michael Eric Dyson who, though not a teacher in a classroom, has spoken before senate committees as an advocate for rap music and Hip Hop culture. In regard to the violence and drug culture so many attribute to the genre, Dyson argues that only looking at these negative aspects represents a "shallow understanding of rap" (Dyson 403). Metro-Roland supports Dyson's argument by making a comparison to the lyrics and effects that emerging rock and roll music had on its generation, placing it into perspective. This is a good place to refer again to the literary theory of cultural poetics. The study of the effects of musical lyrics from any time period along with instances like Dr. Dyson's appearances in front of Senate hearings to advocate for Hip Hop culture would provide a wealth of information and fodder for critical thinking in regard to the Hip Hop text and the world surrounding it.

Metro-Roland includes a look into the pervasion of capitalism into the Hip Hop culture and how its constant evolution has facilitated the capitalistic trend with fashion and other items distinctly particular to it (568). He also investigates the predominant audience of Hip Hop and questions whether teenagers who do not hail from a Hip Hop culture (e.g. urban, economically and racially oppressed) can understand the messages that Hip Hop music brings. So, he not only questions the ability of the white teacher to understand and appreciate the music and culture of Hip Hop, but also the typical white pop culture-type teenager as well. This interrogation of the authenticity of Hip Hop audience and teacher is supported by successful Hip Hop artists, who tend to discount any non-Hip Hop artist as able to comprehend its intricacies (Porfilio & Viola 201). This negative view of anyone not originally from Hip Hop culture being unable to understand it does not help present the possibility for using any artifacts or rap music as a text, yet the controversial and closed-group nature of this idea is merely one more of the tenets which can be examined and analyzed. Metro-Roland does recognize the varied characteristics and pitfalls of studying Hip Hop and in the interest of full disclosure he believes that “the reconstructing of Hip Hop leads to ever complex and expanded views of the subject matter” (568).

### **Language/SAE/Power**

Hip Hop scholars address the role of Standard American English (SAE) as it can be used as a tool of power, impacting marginalized classes whose culture doesn't use SAE as their primary discourse register. This concept is political in nature, yet politics pervade all institutions; one institution in particular is the education system. By valuing only SAE as acceptable discourse or presenting it as a social good in the classroom, students who are unfamiliar with it can feel left out or “less than.” Power wielded in the form of stringent and inflexible rules of

grammar, standardized testing, formula-style grading and assessments can attribute to a feeling of oppression from the students unfamiliar with SAE. These procedures are designed to assess literacy and because of the significance of language in regard to social identity, Gee believes that “any view of literacy is inherently political, in the sense of involving relations of power among people” (31). Feelings of not belonging or unfamiliarity of the language discourse being used can attribute to inaccessibility and perceived powerlessness. Gee further develops this by expounding on words and their function in society and situations by explaining that in order for words to do what they are meant to do, there has to be agreement on the meaning. He calls the agreements we humans have in regard to words and their functions in “different situations” as “conventions.” He also holds that “non-standard dialects” can sometimes make more logical sense or at least sound more “elegant from a linguistic point of view,” yet he sustains the concept that all dialects are valuable and “[n]either is better or worse” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 14, 21).

Gee feels that politics, society, and words cannot be separated. He actually states that they are “married,” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 15) and that the higher social classes maintain their beliefs regarding standard dialects in order to perpetuate their “control of power and status and to feel validated in doing so” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 28). These politics involving power and control, in some ways, are operated through language because in order to maintain the status quo, politics and power determine acceptable dialects or standards of language over others. Further, people with power “have a vested interest to use language and literacy in their own favor...[to]validate their power (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 28). These examples illustrate Gee’s statement that despite the fact that standards of language and power are connected and political in nature, “racism and power are just as much cognitive issues as they are political ones” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 39).

Scholars Dimitriadis and Sanchez's ideas regarding standard language and academia support Gee's ideas regarding power, politics and language and the concentrated effort to further oppress the marginalized classes. Dimitriadis observes that an attempt to keep Hip Hop out of the world of academia contributed to a "larger effort to unfairly marginalize particular forms of expression" (36). One particular form of expression that was unfairly marginalized was oral utterances.

Sanchez recognized the devaluing of the oral as opposed to the written, and she agrees with the idea that the academic world attempts to maintain a level of proficiency form of maintaining the political power status quo, similar in nature to Gee. She believes academic writing is the tool that functions as the "gatekeeper to entry into the academic community," and writing is still the only accepted way to enter that particular gate (Sanchez 482). This "narrow view of Standard English still dominates in the academy," and, like Gee, she feels that all types of language styles should be valued. "[W]e must continue to work against the system to change the narrow view of what counts as standard" (Sanchez 486).

One of these "narrow views" about what is considered standard as a measurement of literacy is vocabulary. Sanchez points out that Hip Hop artists have a large and varied vocabulary, which includes word forms that are "innovative" (483). Metro-Roland takes this same idea further and explains that there are certain beliefs held by some teachers (and others) which causes a misconception about the literacy of rap artists and those who use Ebonics and their lack of education. Usually the idea that these same persons are also "inarticulate," causes difficulties for teachers' inability to view rap music as art or "to identify completely with the artist" (Metro-Roland 567). As mentioned above, however, rap artists are usually quite intelligent and innovative with the language, and creative.

Sanchez advocates a use of combined texts in the classroom, instead of just the usual ones. She also presents an approach that includes more than one type of text as a means of incorporating several language forms along with SAE. She believes that the students can still learn SAE, but other language forms and texts, like rap/Hip Hop music and other dialects from different cultures can be valuable, assisting students in learning new language forms. However, it is important that educators develop an understanding of “students’ linguistic competencies and interests and encourage hybrid academic forms that counter a monolithic view of SAE” (Sanchez 486). In other words, a hybrid text is a means of overcoming the obstacle that some students find in approaching SAE. By making texts more familiar and accessible to students who may not be as familiar with SAE, education can come closer to providing equal ground for all.

### **Connection to Literacy**

How does Hip Hop studies affect literacy in the classroom? Gee believes that there are intricate relationships among words, politics, power, and people, as already discussed. He also believes that the only reason words work is because there is an agreement among people as to what words mean. This reveals an inherent agreement among these scholars as they observed and experimented with Hip Hop studies in their respective classrooms. The power and politics of social goods were based upon SAE. Sanchez and Pough advocate for varied texts that include more than one type of discourse for learning and assessment. Dimitriadis feels the power and political tool used for oppression in academic environments is based upon valuing writing over oral texts which directly affects cultures with rich oral traditions. Using Gee’s belief that the only reason words work is agreement among people, it is significant to note that agreement among these scholars, the academy, and students in the classroom could do much toward a solution for oppression. Gee states that “meanings we give to words [are] based on knowledge we acquire

and choices we make, as well as values and beliefs, and yes, even interests—we have” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 15). If scholars, the academy, and students can agree upon meanings based on knowledge from more than one source, literacy could expand to new meanings; this is what these scholars have explored in their respective classrooms. Questions regarding literacy gaps are “an ongoing debate in the academy and elsewhere, including the political world” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 41). Gee refers to it as a crisis and makes the distinction that the “fears about literacy often mask deeper social and moral problems” (41). The deeper moral problems masked by fears of literacy could be fears of changing the social hierarchical lines and change in the politics and power of the established academic world. Deeper social problems could fall under this same assumption.

The literacy crisis does include deeper social and moral problems such as racism and oppression facilitated by the politics of accepted language standards. Sanchez’s presentation of a hybrid text approach incorporates more than the general accepted standards in the classroom. She feels that the hybrid text approach can “work against the supremacy of a standard” and assist learning by “encouraging students’ agency” (483). Her suggestion is to use the knowledge of language and literacies from varied cultures that these students have as a valuable mine to “profit” from “rather than deficit” and that it can “allo[w] for a more inclusive perspective of what counts as academic literacy” which will ultimately include more students in the conversation (485).

Sanchez outlines some of the more valuable characteristics of the knowledge of Hip Hop many of the students have. She points out that this knowledge these students have is privileged in itself, much like the dominant standard language in academia. The Hip Hop privilege comes from within the African American communities (480). One such bit of knowledge she describes

is the term, “‘Flippin’ the script,’” or “semantic inversion,” which is the technique of “imposing a completely different meaning on the dominant definition of a word” (482). This is achieved by “deliberately transform[ing] the spellings of words to imitate the phonological and syntactic features of AAVE...to create alternative meanings for existing standard spellings” (Sanchez 483). This type of technique is interesting, unique, and has a valuable purpose. However, due to academia’s standards, knowledge such as this is not viewed as valuable in standardized testing situations or even in writing essays or testing for vocabulary, or other means of assessment and evaluation for grading. Sanchez states that the combination of “social, political, and material realities” along with a tainted and negative view of “a language that has deep historical ties to the identities of many African American students,” are contributing factors which are “tied to learning academic literacy” (479). She quotes Dyson in her study: “Dyson intimated that in a classroom where ‘everyday voices are welcome’ teachers can expand the possibilities for what counts as academic literacy (quoted in Sanchez 484).

Michael Eric Dyson believes in the literacy of rap and believes it “expresses the ongoing preoccupation with literacy and orality that has characterized African American communities since the inception of legally coerced illiteracy during slavery” (“Culture” 408). Oral tradition is inherent in several cultures, including storytelling, and call and response in church services. Dyson believes the evolution of significance in oral texts of the slave culture is grounded in their not being allowed the privilege of an education, so any stories or history had to be preserved by storytelling and memory, exhibiting oral literacy.

### **Use of Hip Hop in Education**

The scholar with the most research and information on using Hip Hop and rap in the classroom is Gwendolyn Pough. She argues that rap music can be used as a device to bridge gaps

between cultural boundaries and as “a successful crossover genre, has an enormous potential for effective teaching, bridging gaps and maneuvering contact zones” (194).

After using rap music in her classroom, Gwendolyn Pough believes that its use can be beneficial on many levels, but her main contention is the power of rap to affect the listener so strongly the very first time hearing it that it can immediately “make people love it or hate it, even sometimes without knowing the first thing about it” (Pough 200). This type of effect can positively influence student interest and engagement. Even if a student is one of the ones who immediately hates rap, he/she can usually articulate why easier than when they discuss subjects they feel are less interesting. Pough also believes that rap can forge a melding of popular culture and the world of academics in order to change society (213). By merging popular culture and academics, a broader spectrum of subjects to explore contribute to student interest and engagement because the students are able to bring some knowledge of pop culture to the discussion. Pough makes it clear that she realizes the negative effects rap has on the public, but she also explains that rap not only addresses societal problems outside of itself, but goes within and investigates and “takes issue with itself” (Pough 195). She means here, that some rap music actually addresses problems that are perpetuated within Hip Hop culture, speaking out against things like capitalism and misogyny.

She also reports success with the development of her students’ critical thinking skills while using Hip Hop in the classroom because it initiated deeper and better thinking. This type of deeper and better thinking is usually found within student and/or program learning outcomes in first year composition classes or developmental reading and English classes. The ability to think deeply and draw conclusions is important in comprehension of texts and writing in many forms. Pough also holds that this critical thinking “can potentially lead to change...about our lives and

ourselves,” and “we will be able to progress in meaningful ways” (202). This conclusion points back to the broader worldview mentioned above that is oftentimes facilitated by the crossing of cultural boundaries and integration of social identities. Pough built upon those very critical thinking skills to assist her students in learning of things outside of their own cultures and knowledge. She was able to “provide students with a space to open their minds,” resulting in the ability to see perspectives of others than their own and “disrupt each other’s realities through reading, writing, and critiquing” (200).

In her use of rap music and Hip Hop culture, Pough observed “passionate responses from the students” in addition to the critical thinking skills it developed (213). By connecting the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills in the classroom, Pough noticed students comprehending the validity of these skills outside of the classroom, and translated them into “their participation in the public space” (207) outside of the classroom in their daily lives.

Sanchez also used Hip Hop in her classroom and “discovered [its] validity” with students, including those “placed in developmental or remedial classes,” and observed that these students “are in a position to educate us if we are willing to listen” (478-479). In her article she refers to a learning unit entitled, “The Classroom, the Community, and the World,” Kirkland used and found that the literacy standards set forth by “IRA and NCTE” were met (479). She also references statistics provided by Alim as reporting that “97 per cent to 98 per cent of Black American students are influenced by Hip Hop Culture;” concluding herself from the data that “teachers can capitalize on this influence by bringing hip-hop into the classroom as a valid form of study” (483). Sanchez further provides a sort of technical description of a rap song and the various tenets it normally contains and because it is a “part of the social practice of hip-hop culture,” has “features of African American rhetorical, expressive forms and features of AAL

that make it distinct from an academic essay” (483). She further distinguishes these features of rap songs as having a radical and violent view of the world because of its origins of street culture in direct opposition to the relatively stable nature of some academic social practices” (482).

•Despite the differences, value resides in both academic and Hip Hop/rap texts which goes back to Sanchez argument for more hybrid-type texts and accepted language standards. By using “hip-hop and hybrid texts” students may be able to more easily “insert themselves into the academy and ‘represent’ and express their African American cultural and linguistic identity” (479).

Dimitriadis seems to back Sanchez up on this concept because in his paper, he “argue[s] for approaches that took seriously how young people themselves responded to Hip Hop texts” (32).

By using Hip Hop texts and/or rap music in the classroom, critical thinking skills, reading and writing connections to real world situations, open-mindedness, engagement with texts and student identities were honored and experienced, and at least one scholar reported that learning outcomes were met. The validity and authenticity of Hip Hop culture and its ideologies are important to maintain and examine while including its texts in learning situations, and the politics, power, language, and literacy are all affected by social and cultural hierarchies in the learning environment. Sanchez, Dimitriadis, Metro-Roland, and Pough all advocate for the use of Hip Hop text in varied ways. Even though Gee does not directly state it, his views on dialect and language seem clear enough to say he would agree also. The biggest issue of conflict appears to lie with the accepted language forms and differences in the AAVE as opposed to the SAE. This raises the question: Can a Hip Hop text based course balance itself between the two standards and forge a pathway for coexistence, and at the same time accomplish student learning outcomes in reading and writing and literacy? Using this question as a starting point, I studied the student

learning outcomes and prepared questions based upon the students' perceptions and comparisons to previous English and reading classes they had experienced.

## Chapter 3-The Research Approach

### Research Framework and Method

Most students entering the English classroom define good writing as the use of good grammar and punctuation. This usually stems from previous classroom writing experiences assessed by using Standard American English (SAE) standards where the students' writing, whether essays or other artifacts, contained grades and feedback that mainly focused upon grammar and punctuation errors. Many times, SAE represents a concept of "rightness" or "proper" speech that functions as a gatekeeper to academic discourse.

James Paul Gee is a sociolinguist who has authored many books on the subject of discourse analysis and he explains these beliefs about the correctness of SAE thusly: "What people call 'Standard English' is a rather 'special' dialect. 'Standard English' is the variety of English that is held by many to be 'correct' both in the sense that it shows no strong regional variation and it is used widely in mainstream and by public figures" (*Discourse Analysis* 8). This idea about SAE represents, to some degree, the dominant white culture or top of the social hierarchy and is many times associated with class distinctions. These class distinctions are noted as the upper class members being the ones who are literate and wealthy with the SAE dialect, and the poor working class is often considered to be illiterate with a non-SAE dialect. The class distinctions were created long ago, but still hold true in many cases.

Students from a non-dominant culture environment entering the academic classroom, many times do not identify with or even understand much of that world, and part of it can be attributed to an unfamiliarity with the dialect and vocabulary. Some instructors, whether intentional or not, use language that further alienates the marginalized students because of their

unfamiliarity. Many times this adherence to SAE and only SAE is used to separate and classify students, further ostracizing them and making education inaccessible.

One example of this type of practice involving inaccessibility includes the use of feedback on students' writing that only takes into account SAE standards as proper or correct grammatical techniques and very little attention to the message within the student writing. Another example is written feedback that focuses only on the non-SAE grammar with no understanding of the student's home environment or culture (e.g. other dialects). This approach many times leads to silence from the students receiving the negative feedback and no progress in the process of learning how to write by drafting and revisions. They feel reluctant to write because they feel they are bad writers. In an interview entitled, "Freewriting, Voice, and The Virtue of Making a Mess," Peter Elbow addresses writing and literacy and how it sometimes operates, "So I am arguing that literacy functions as a plot against the body and the voice and against people without privilege" (21). Elbow's statement agrees in that what most consider literacy in writing, i.e. good grammar and punctuation, functions to effectively silence the "voices" of the "non-privileged," or disenfranchised students.

Gee's ideas on language performances illustrate the validity of all languages and dialects, not just the SAE. Many years of privileging SAE as valuable has caused a hierarchy of learning which also contributes to some students feeling like outcasts because of the foreignness they feel in regard to the SAE usually used in academic classrooms of which they may not use at home. Some students, however, have had the advantage of growing up in a family which privileges SAE:

Because of its prestige, many people in the United States speak Standard English and pass on that variety to their children, even if earlier in their family histories their ancestors spoke

other dialects...many Southerners have given up their Southern dialect in favor of Standard English and speakers of Appalachian Vernacular English or African-American Vernacular English often adopt Standard English for job interviews and interactions within public institutions (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 8). Some of the students I have taught at Southeastern Community College have had this experience of SAE in their homes, much like I did as a child, but many more are not familiar with more formal dialects like SAE, and particularly not academic verbiage. This causes difficulties for them in the classroom, and later in the outside world because of the expectations, as Gee points out, in public institutions for SAE discourse. These students who are unfamiliar with SAE feel they need to conform in order to receive the social goods of good grades and later on, jobs. This conforming is difficult for them in some cases and as a result, they experience feelings of inaccessibility and class distinction.

A straight-laced SAE, academic approach to communication in the classroom with no acceptance of any other kind of dialogue as valuable perpetuates that class distinction regarding literacy and wealth. The classroom can be a place of combined and cross-cultural experiences for all, leading to a better understanding of diversity in the world. By studying the transcripts of students who participated in the *Empire* class, I hope to determine if using a dialect other than solely SAE had any impact on students' literacy and identity.

### **Research Method: Discourse Analysis**

I have chosen to use James Paul Gee's methods of discourse analysis as a research method for coding and analyzing language in this research study's manuscripts. His book, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method (third edition)* provides Gee's theory of analyzing discourse that fits my worldview about language, power, and social class; therefore, it fits my study. According to Gee, we all inhabit many distinct social "worlds" in each of which

we perform differently according to the situational social and cultural expectations. He points out that race, class, and gender are rather too “general and static” for an accurate analysis of the “contextually specific ways in which people act out and recognize identities” (Gee, “Identity as an Analytical Lens” 99). Over time, Western society has moved across and assimilated many types of perspectives, and instead of inhabiting one, Gee contends that “in a society such as the United States, all of these perspectives coexist” (Gee, “Identity” 101). His worldview encompasses all types of social discourse and favors no one in particular. His methods provide a valuable means of deeply observing language within cultural context and also a means of examining language in moments when individuals cross cultural boundaries.

In his book, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, Gee uses an example of a young woman telling her parents and her boyfriend of a story she had studied in her college classroom. In discussing the characters within the story with her parents, her language was much different from the less formal language she used while speaking with her boyfriend. This individual was one of Gee’s students and agreed to record her conversations for him. After his student reviews her tape, she is surprised at the two markedly different ways she related the story dependent upon her audience: parents and boyfriend.

This example is what Gee refers to as “social language,” which he labels differently from Discourse with a capital D. Gee uses this to illustrate the different ways people speak in diverse social situations (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 46). He goes on to outline his concept that each social language has its own grammar (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 50). Gee also differentiates between everyday interaction type of conversations with a small letter c and larger issue/debate type conversations he refers to as the big C conversations like abortion, smoking, etc.

Human discourse contains more than language alone; it is where the language and the “acting, interacting, valuing, believing, feeling...with bodies, clothes, non-linguistic symbols, objects, tools, technologies, times, and places” combine to make meaning (Gee, *Discourse Analysis*, 35). Gee calls this the “who-doing-whats in language” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis*, 35). The “who-doing-what” in “each social language has its own grammar,” or patterns created by rhythms and treatment of colloquial speech (41). These patterns that Gee is describing are “‘co-relations’ (correlations) among many grammatical devices...[which] co-relate to (coordinate with) other non-language ‘stuff’ to constitute (for historical, i.e. *conventional* reasons) *whos-doing-whats-within-Discourses*” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 41). Gee’s concepts regarding the convergence of all these things in the big D provide a foundation for understanding the various ways social languages and identities interact. These interactions are part of the way humans make meaning.

In order to more fully understand our world, we humans interpret it through devices Gee calls, “figured worlds” or “unconscious theories and stories...we...use to understand and deal with the world” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 63). These figured worlds heavily affect how people perceive situations and others, and as a result, can affect our big D discourse or how we perform. This leads to Gee’s situated meanings, which are “the specific meanings words and phrases take on in actual context of use,” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 211) which can be derived from figured worlds. When we perform within the context of a situation we perceive as normal, this is our figured world. From this performance, meanings become situated. Therefore, by using Gee’s tools of inquiry, I hope to determine what types and how many varied figured worlds, situated meanings, and performances are occurring within the context of a developmental class studying Hip Hop and *Empire*.

### Using Gee's Method in Analysis

My study is based upon interviews with two students from the Spring 2015 semester at Southeastern Community College. After obtaining an approval from the Gardner-Webb University Institutional Review Board, I chose a female, Jane, and a male, John for interviews. Each interviewee signed a pre-interview consent form and a debriefing form afterward. I interviewed them in the same classroom where they attended the *Empire* class. The interviews were based upon seven questions and the sessions took about an hour per student. Due to scheduling conflicts, I had to interview them separately.

I recorded the interviews and later transcribed them, breaking them down into stanzas consisting of lines of dialogue. I broke the lines of dialogue by the pauses in each student's speech patterns.

By breaking down the transcripts into stanzas, I was able to see how the two interviewees used language to perform within their own situated worlds and cultures. I did this by using some of Gee's questions like: "How does this piece of language connect or disconnect things; how does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another" (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 12)? or "How does this piece of language privilege or disprivilege specific sign systems (e.g. Spanish vs English...) or different ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge and belief" (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 13)? These are only two of the seven questions from Gee's approach, but they provide an overview of the type of analysis I have done with this study.

In the stanzas from the interviews, I point out certain of Gee's concepts and their clues to social identities. For example, in his book, Gee concludes that students from working class families tend to use more narratives and cognitive I-statements, demonstrating their tendency to

“everyday” language or dialogue. This is something I looked for in order to determine identities of the interviewees.

The stanza approach also assisted me in recognizing different key words and phrases which pointed to the interviewee’s beliefs and perceptions of the English classroom and how the content of the *Empire* class affected them, their writing, their thinking, and their perceptions of themselves in the classroom and with the other members of the class.

After applying the discourse analysis questions, examining the stanzas, and observing the interviewees as they responded, I was able to draw conclusions regarding what their words represented in regard to their beliefs about learning English and writing through a Hip Hop lens to some degree.

I was also able to note the differences between their dialects in the interviews and SAE. The interviewees did “perform” to their perceptions of what a student should act and sound like, but their personal cultures and identities were visible as well, successfully integrating the two cultures somewhat.

## Chapter 4-Student Interviews

### Interview with Jane

Jane and John were two students from the Spring 2015 *Empire* class. I interviewed Jane May 12, 2016. She is an African American female in her twenties who holds a full-time position as a Certified Nurse's Assistant. She is interested in studying exercise science or physical therapy, and is from the area around Southeastern Community College. Jane attended one of the local high schools and her background is that of a working class family. At the beginning of the class, she was quite reserved and said little, but took copious notes. After a couple of classes discussing some of the themes from the show, she began to speak out more. She had, and still does, the idea that she is not a very good writer and she does not read for enjoyment.

The following stanza is in response to interview question number three: *How would you describe the writing you did in our Empire class?*

#### Stanza 1

1. um [long silence]
2. I think it was based off of[...]
3. not moreso like the right or wrong of it
4. but what we were seeing and our opinions
5. of what was going on like [...]
6. um [...]
7. at what was going on in the show
8. and what was happening
9. we felt like we could write about whatever.
10. And what interested us

11. and it wasn't like it had to be a certain way or [...]

12. grammar and things like that

Jane only uses I-statements in line one of the stanza, yet she uses “we” three times, “our” and “us” once. Although these are not single I-statements, they do include the first person along with others in her class. This suggests feelings of affiliation with classmates, perhaps even a feeling of belonging or group acceptance. It could also suggest that Jane may feel uncomfortable speaking in the first person, like it is singling her out or bringing undue attention to her.

In line two of stanza one, Jane uses the cognitive statement “I think it was based off of,” and in line nine, “we felt like we could write about whatever.” In both of these lines, she thinks and feels; even though she uses the “we” pronoun, she includes herself. In the second part of line nine she uses what Gee calls the “ability and constraint statement” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 141) because the “we could” shows an ability to do something. Gee’s I-statements are used to determine what identities are being constructed with language. His conclusion that narratives are used more by working class teens in his study compares to the interview with Jane because her responses are narrative and they make use of the I-statements which she “encodes [her]...values, interests, and themes” within the context of discussing the *Empire* class.

Examining the personal pronouns alongside line eleven, “and it wasn't like it had to be a certain way or” suggests a history of expectation in the classroom. By using I, we, us, and our to express a sense of belonging placed beside of the statement in line eleven, Jane indicates a connection to the other students and the material. Her narrative includes hints that her identity she builds through this language is one of acceptance and affiliation with the rest of the class.

This stanza contains several pronouns that point to Gee's conclusion that working-class teens construct their identities with language that creates their identities from an "everyday" type of interaction. (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 141). Gee explains that:

[W]e tentatively reached the following conclusion: the working class teens in our interviews use language to fashion their identities in a way that is closely attached to a world of 'everyday' social interactions and orients more toward their personal biographical trajectories...defined by the (deeply aligned) norms of their families, schools, and powerful institutions in our society...upper middle-class teens...use the abstract language of rational argumentation. (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 141)

Gee goes on to explain that another difference between the working class and upper middle-class can be found in their language performances as they "build different socially situated identities" when they speak in the first person (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 141). These "cognitive statements" he categorizes by means of disassembly using the predicate of the statement to indicate what the speaker is saying about herself. A couple of examples of a cognitive statement from one of Gee's working class students is as follows: "I guess they broke the rules; I think I'm so much like a grow-up; I don't think they'd let me" (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 141). Cognitive statements occur when phrases such as, "I guess", or "I think," are used.

The above stanza exhibits evidence seemingly supporting Gee's conclusions regarding working-class dialogue tendencies toward narrative and how the upper middle-class group tended toward more "distanced and impersonal" ways (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 148). In Jane's narrative, she uses words that point to feeling: "we felt like we could write," "And what interested us," statements Gee refers to as cognitive (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 141). These phrases indicate her connection to the material as well as the feeling that she was not alone in her opinions due to her use of inclusive pronouns.

Gee states that "[n]arratives are important sense-making devices. People encode into narratives the problems that concern them and their attempts to make sense or resolve these

problems” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 150). Examining line eleven of stanza one, we see: “and it wasn’t like it had to be a certain way or [...]” which seems to indicate Jane’s encoding of the previous problems in the right or wrong ways of writing. This points to Gee’s statement regarding his conclusions about narratives and I-statements of the working class teens and their “personal biographical trajectories...defined by the (deeply aligned) norms of their families, schools” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 141). The reference Jane makes to being “a certain way” seems to point to her previous experiences with norms of school and institutional expectations.

The next stanza is Jane’s response to the question regarding whether or not the subject matter affected her writing and whether or not she felt the writing and thinking about *Empire* were connected in any way. There are many more I-statements in this stanza.

## **Stanza 2**

1. I think I felt more connected to it
2. because its
3. kinda like my culture
4. and it was something I was interested in, so I could write about[...]
5. I can write about things I'm interested in moreso than if I'm just reading a text and it
6. doesn't interest me at all.

Lines one, four, and five all have multiple I-statements, and lines three and six each contain the word “me.” These personal pronouns demonstrate the narrative Gee discussed as Jane explains her connections between the writing and thinking. There is no distancing here that Gee describes as a characteristic of upper middle-class students.

In lines 4,5, and 6, Jane uses the words “interested” and “interest” while discussing her connections between writing and thinking. These words support the use of the personal pronouns

illustrating the narrative and personal dialogue as Gee concluded was not evident in the upper middle-class. For example, Jane says in line four, “and it was something I was interested in, so I could write about it,” and in line five, “I can write about things I’m interested in.” In both phrases she uses the personal pronoun, I, with “was interested” and “interested” both showing action within the narrative. Her narrative describes her connections to the material by means of personal interest which facilitated an easier process of writing.

These examples are important because Gee has established that the narratives people use are “often encode[d]” with “the problems that concern them” as well as “their attempts to make sense or resolve” them (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 150). In Jane’s narrative, she encodes struggles with writing to disinterest in the material. Her attempt to resolve the issue is by explaining that more freely with the content of the *Empire* class because she felt more connected to the content, as she said in line one of stanza two.

The idea of encoding problems leads to “how situated meanings and Discourse models work in narratives to build socially situated identities” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 150). Within the dialogue, when Jane encodes her problems with writing about things of which she has no interest, her solution is predicated upon her social identity when she states that she felt connected to the content of the class because Jane felt that the material was a study in her culture.

One of my questions for this research study is: Did the study of a Hip Hop based television show provide an opportunity for these students to connect their “socially situated identity” with the classroom, another “situated identity?” Jane’s response, “not moreso like the right or wrong of it” in line three of stanza one, taken within the total stanza, suggests that the writing she did in class was different than her expectations based upon her historical experience within previous English classrooms. Jane’s statement suggests her construction of her situated

world of English class is predicated upon the belief that there is a “right” and “wrong” way of writing. Line number nine supports this: “we felt like we could write about whatever,” and line eleven: “it wasn’t like it had to be a certain way or.” These “cognitive beliefs” Jane expresses illustrate her ideas about writing and how it is usually taught. She further supports this by her statement in line twelve regarding grammar, where she states, “grammar and things like that” just after the line about the writing didn’t have to be a “certain way.” Her choice of words makes a direct correlation between right and wrong and grammar. Also, Jane’s statements demonstrate that she didn’t experience the expectations of the same type as what she was used to, thus implying that she liked the new expectations and she felt more comfortable in her writing.

### **Building Politics**

Gee defines politics as “the distribution of social goods” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 112), which can be analyzed in discourse by using his question: What social goods are “relevant (and irrelevant) in this situation” and “how are they made that way” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 112). The social goods can be things like “power, status, ...aspects of gender, race, and class,” to name a few. In the situation of Jane’s interview, the social goods are revealed by her comments regarding writing, grammar, and the right or wrong of it all. Jane refers to the acceptance of her writing process in the *Empire* class and connects her interest in the material to being able to write better because of the freedom she felt and her interest. This ability to write easier pointed to her feelings of acceptance which are the social goods in this situation. To Jane, the ability to write more freely was relevant in this situation and this was made relevant by her interest. The relevancy of all of it together is the new feeling of acceptance of her writing process.

Returning to Jane’s dialogue in Stanza one, line three, the “right or wrong of it,” referring to the rightness or wrongness of writing a paper points to the social goods of acceptance and

good grades on writing in the classroom. By adding lines four, nine, and particularly eleven to the implications of one and three, which is the sentence: “and it wasn’t like it had to be a certain way,” shows Jane’s encoding of “problems that concerned” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 150) her.

Stanza two shows the value Jane places on the material’s connection to her culture and how it garnered her interest in ways that she did not experience in previous classes in writing and English. As Jane states in line two, “kinda like my culture,” there is a reference to the social goods or politics of acceptance because Jane connected her socially situated world or the perception of who she is to the material in *Empire*.

Jane’s use of the pronouns “we,” “our,” and “us,” all point to the social goods of status in that they indicate acceptance or a group-like culture in the *Empire* classroom. Jane identifies herself as part of the group and speaks as if she is expressing the feelings for the entire class.

The predominant cultural identities or situated worlds demonstrated in these two stanzas are: the working class student, the perceived world/culture of the English classroom, and Hip Hop culture in *Empire*. When Jane talks about writing in the class, she refers to right and wrong, the opinions and ideas of her and her classmates, and the freedom she experienced in being able to “write about whatever.” These ideas imply a break from the expectations of her English classes historically. Her identity from her cultural origins has been brought into the classroom and she has connected to the material. She demonstrates a world blending experience that included her classmates in her opinion. Therefore, her socially situated world outside of the classroom was blended into the classroom experience and the social goods of acceptance in the writing/English classroom occurred.

### Interview with John

John is an Hispanic male who is also in his early twenties. His family is from El Salvador, but he is an American citizen, who speaks both Spanish and English fluently with no accent. Throughout the class he exhibited a dependable work ethic and desired to perform well in his writing. He paid attention during the episodes, and during class discussions afterward he contributed thoughtfully.

John was trying to start his own cleaning business for himself and his mother, so he could work around his school schedule. His environment, like Jane's, is working class. He is also a musician and writes music. Out of the entire class, he was the one student who enjoyed the Hip Hop studies conference at a university where the students presented papers.

My analysis of John's interview revealed that most of his dialogue included verbiage indicating personal connections between what he learned in class and his work as a musician. Like Jane and following Gee's observance regarding working class students, his interview responses rely heavily upon narrative and cognitive I-statements (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 143).

In Stanza one, John is responding to the question asking him to describe the writing he did in class.

#### Stanza 1

1. Well
2. I noticed a really big change in my writing
3. because I used to be afraid to
4. um
5. express what I would be thinking
6. just because of grammar or punctuation, or it just didn't sound right

7. um
8. through studying and taking a look at *Empire*,
9. it just made me not.
10. it just made me think [...]
11. that it doesn't have to be perfect as long as you get the point across

There are three I-statements and two uses of “me.” The I-statements are cognitive as are the “me” statements. Lines nine and ten are actually two parts of the same statement: “it just made me not,” “it just made me think.” Both phrases are narrative and cognitive because of his use of first person combined with the “think.” The word think goes to the very core of personal narrative when used with the I pronoun. It is hard to get more personal than individual thought.

John also uses the words “grammar or punctuation” as a means of showing his reasons for having trouble with writing in previous classes.

In line two, John uses I with the verb “noticed” representing a thought process or cognitive statement. Line three’s I-statement is indicating feeling or emotion when he refers to being afraid in his previous writing experiences. The fear of not writing correctly points to Gee’s social goods concept. John connected grammar and punctuation to writing well and as a result, had fear about fulfilling his perceived expectations of the English classroom. The social goods of acceptance in the English class which could be translated to getting a good grade has affected his performance to the point where he felt fear when asked to write. In line eleven, he seems to indicate that the social goods that are normally at stake in the English classroom, “grammar [and] or punctuation” were not what was at stake in the *Empire* class when he says, “it doesn’t have to be perfect, as long as you get the point across.” The social goods of his expectations of an English class have been affected by the methods he employed in the *Empire* class. By using the

word “perfect” he indicates his prior belief which points again to line three where John expressed his once-felt fear of writing because of not being skilled at grammar and punctuation.

Line eleven contains John’s final answer to the question and his change from the feeling of fear to being more comfortable with writing, at least in regard to writing about *Empire*. He uses the pronoun “you” in the final line of his narrative, making it a personal conversation-style answer. The pronoun “you” in this line is an interesting indicator that something else may be going on in this narrative. He is not referring to the interviewer here, but perhaps to his idea of any student or writer he imagines may be in a similar class or situation. It could also be that John’s imagined “you” here is himself in his past experiences of writing where the emphasis was on grammar and punctuation instead of “getting the point” across. Could he have used the pronoun “you” instead of “I” here to redirect the focus from himself to an imagined person to allay any chance at causing offense to the teacher, me? It is possible he could have felt confused as to my role as both a researcher and his teacher.

In any of the cases, the narrative combined with the cognitive statements support Gee’s conclusion regarding how working class students tend to use more narrative and “everyday” language performance.

The next stanza is John’s response to the question: In what way did the topic affect your reading and annotating skills?

## **Stanza 2**

1. because um
2. because it was a new way of looking at things
3. when we um
4. just because this is the first time

5. I've ever had a class where music was part of the class
6. and so it brought a new element
7. into where I was reading and writing and punctuating better
8. because it was something I wasn't used to
9. so I captivated it faster.

In this stanza, like Jane, John uses a “we” in line three, but that is the only instance he does so. There are four different I-statements in the stanza indicating cognitive sentences, but other than the initial “we” there are no other pronouns. He tends to stay with the independent “I” pronoun. This could mean that John’s social identity in the classroom is more individual in nature than part of a group mentality or it could be something more personal that doesn’t indicate anything necessarily connected to a classroom identity. There isn’t enough information to determine the reasons behind his more individual narrative style.

Johns uses the words, “punctuating” and “captivated,” differently than the norm in lines seven and nine. He uses parallelism in the predicate of line eight when he uses the word, “punctuating.” This word works alongside the be verb “was” performing as a verb phrase, and then in line ten he changes the root word, “captivate” to “captivated.” This could have occurred because John was attempting to model his speech after what he believes to be acceptable academic discourse, thereby pointing to a blending of two socially situated worlds, the academic classroom and John’s own student status and personal culture.

John uses the word “captivated” after an I-statement in line nine, indicating another unique word usage. At first glance, it may seem as though John does not understand the definition of the word; however, simply because it is not normally used in this manner does not make it incorrect, awkward maybe, but not incorrect. He has changed in his tense from

“punctuating” to “captivated,” using a stronger action verb which may indicate the speed at which he learned the material in the *Empire* class. He could have meant that he learned the material faster than a traditional class or that he was captivated by the material, but by using “captivated it faster” he claims ownership to the material by conquering it. This could indicate a mind picture of victory or overcoming an obstacle, such as overcoming fear of writing well.

Exactly what social language is relevant in this phrase? Two social languages swirling around each other seem to be present in line ten, John’s “everyday” language and his perception of classroom/academic language. He discusses his experience of having music included in an English class and how it garnered his interest, as well as the freedom he felt in his writing. This dialogue sounds informal and is in a narrative, yet when he begins discussing his previous beliefs surrounding previous experiences in the classroom, he uses the words, “punctuating” and “captivated” differently than the norm. John’s identity includes music, and as a result of studying a text that includes music, he feels a connection affecting his personal identity positively in the classroom.

The following stanza demonstrates John’s personal connections he made between the socially situated world of the classroom and his situated world of music. (Gee, *Discourse Analysis* 68)

### **Stanza 3**

1. Overall
2. like
3. everything I learned in the class
4. helped me as a person and career wise

5. because it just showed me what to do and what to stay away from
6. um.
7. as a musician
8. um
9. what can happen in the industry and what paths to take and not to take
10. so all in all
11. it was also a learning experience to find out
12. being able to write and learn how to write and express myself
13. but it helped me more than just inside the classroom
14. it developed my skills to write and create music

Although there is only one I-statement in Stanza three, the entire stanza is a dialogue containing John's personal narrative. He uses "me" three times, "myself" once and "my" once.

At first glance, it would seem that John is not going to refer to learning anything to do with course learning outcomes in lines five through nine. It appears as though he took what he saw happen in some of the episodes from *Empire* to be realistic to the music and/or recording business, yet in lines twelve through fourteen he makes the direct connection between the writing he did in class to writing his music. For example, he begins in line twelve by saying, "being able to write and learn how to write and express myself," where he begins drawing his connection with the classroom writing experience and moves to outside the classroom in lines thirteen and fourteen: "but it helped me more than just inside the classroom/ it developed my skills to write and create music." This is an important connection he makes between his classroom identity and his musician's identity with the correlating factor becoming writing, whether classroom related or creative in another genre.

Throughout John's narratives, it is clear that he is quite vested in his music career. His connections to the content of the class and *Empire* are a direct result of his interest in music, providing a combination of identities. He is a student and a musician who sometimes exhibits unspoken desires to fit into the academic culture as well, which is exhibited in lines seven through eight of Stanza two: "and so it brought a new element/into where I was reading and writing and punctuating better, and line eleven of Stanza one: "that it doesn't have to be perfect as long as you get the point across." My conclusion that John has unspoken desires to fit into the academic culture rests upon these statements because they form a view from his previous experience of the social goods of feeling he didn't write well because of punctuation and grammar difficulty to a better experience with the *Empire* class where he felt the social goods of achieving the goal of better writing. He also shows a desire for improvement in his writing and realizes that he has done so when he expresses himself better in writing his songs.

### **Jane and John's Narratives**

John and Jane exhibit narrative and I-statements in their responses pointing to Gee's conclusion regarding the working class student's means of expression and their use of "everyday" interaction. Both students express negative viewpoints of the expectations regarding writing and English classes in their respective histories, but unlike Jane, John does not use the pronoun "we" or "our" in his response. This indicates a more independent-minded perception of John's classroom experience, as when he discusses his learning experiences and connections in Stanza one, line two, "I noticed a really big change in my writing," and line eight of Stanza two, "into where I was reading and writing and punctuating better." Where Jane's narrative included a group-identity and feelings of acceptance and affiliation with the rest of the class, as in line nine of Stanza one: "we felt like we could write about whatever," and line ten, "and what interested

us.” John’s narrative was more personal and self-identifying with no mention of the others in the class.

John mainly identifies with the musician identity he brings into the classroom and only once exhibits a group-type pronoun, showing his choice to focus on himself and his experiences rather than the class as a group. The rest of his narratives stay personal and focused primarily upon the connections he made between the television show and the music/recording business.

Both students demonstrate their preconceived ideas of what to expect in the English classroom, followed by positive statements of interest and engagement with the Hip Hop focus. Each one describes having more interest and desire to attend class because of the personal connections they made: John and his music and Jane and her culture.

The personal narratives each student uses follow Gee’s conclusion that students from working class families tend to utilize personal narrative and everyday language in their conversations; however, in a couple of places, John exhibits attempts to fit into his perception of the situated world of academia, as when he demonstrates the change in social goods he received in the form of better writing in the *Empire* class in line twelve of Stanza three: “being able to write and learn how to write and express myself,” as the social goods of better writing in his view and line fourteen, “it developed my skills to write and create music,” where he connects what he learned about better writing in the classroom to how it helped him to better express himself creatively in his music. The narratives of both working class students support Gee’s theory that students from the working class “fashion themselves in language as immersed in a social, affective, dialogic world of interaction” (Gee, *Discourse Analysis*, 141). John directly connects his experiences in the classroom to his identity as a musician, making a sort of interaction between the two situated worlds, and he does so by means of narrative incorporating

cognitive I statements. He has linked his classroom performance and experience to his music world or his “everyday” identity of combining work (in music) and college.

## Chapter 5-Conclusion

Both of the students interviewed were in their early twenties and worked while attending school. Jane lived on her own, no longer supported by her parents. Both students came from working class families. The narratives they used in the interviews showed their tendency toward the proof of Gee's observations regarding the working class and "everyday" speech. At the time of the interviews, an entire academic year after the *Empire* class, both students had just finished the Spring 2016 semester at Southeastern Community College. Jane was continuing her pursuit of her degree during the summer, while John had left his job and was fully immersing himself into his music. He had already performed at a concert recently and had another one booked. He said that he would be continuing his education online.

My major findings supported Gee's conclusion that students from working class environments tend to use narrative and cognitive I-statements, constituting an "everyday" approach to language. By examining their responses, I was able to find clues to their connections, feelings, and sense of identity in their speech.

In the interview with Jane, it became clear that she associated herself as being part of the class. Several of her statements included "we" and "our" indicating that she felt a part of the group. She seemed to feel accepted and part of a bigger unit as she spoke about viewing and discussing *Empire*.

Jane states that the writing the class did was acceptable, which points again to more comfort and accessibility. In other words, the social goods of acceptance and accessibility in the academic classroom were affected positively. Whether or not student engagement and interest affected these students was another question I had hoped to answer with this study. My conclusion from Jane's response here is that her comfort level in the classroom was positively

affected. Also, when Jane responds to questions regarding her writing in the class, she uses “we,” for example, “we felt like we could write.” This connection to the class as a group demonstrated an identity with the rest of the class, leading to another situated world, but this one a combination of engagement and interest in material studied within the world of academia. One of the things I wanted to understand with this study was the effects of using a non-conventional text like *Empire* on these students. My conclusion from Jane’s comments is, at least in her experience, the content made the classroom more comfortable and accessible as evidenced by her expressed identification with the group.

However, when Jane responds to the question regarding how she felt about the writing and thinking about *Empire*, she uses more cognitive I-statements. She mentions how Hip Hop is “kinda her culture” and discusses how it was interesting to her. Interestingly enough, even though Jane uses more I-statements in this stanza, she does refer to her culture, referring to a group. Jane gravitated toward an acceptance, group-mentality whereas John was more self-oriented in his responses. This could have been due to Jane’s belief that everyone was studying “her culture,” thereby making her feel more at home with everyone who came to know more about it. What Jane meant about *Empire* being about “her culture” is not clear. The fact that John was more self-oriented could be that he identified more from a musician’s point of view, which set him apart from the class. It could also just be a result of his being shy. Another interesting observation is the fact that Jane’s Discourse shows a connection to school while John’s was more independent and since the interviews it is notable that Jane continues her education while John has dropped out to pursue his music career.

John made connections between the *Empire* class and his personal experience and culture centered on his musical interests and the recording industry. He stated that his writing improved

which assisted him in writing his music. John's interest in the content of the class occurred mainly because of the themes and storyline of the television show. John saw similarities between the rags-to-riches and family oriented themes of *Empire*, and his own dreams within the music and recording industries. At one point during the interview, he even mentioned the family infighting over the music and fame in one of the episodes and made a comparison to family in real life, giving me the impression that he had experienced some of the same types of things. The topic of John's final essay was on drug use in the show. His paper discussed the connections sometimes made between being successful in the music business and illegal drug use. This is another, and one of the more prevalent, themes of the show.

John demonstrates Gee's I-statements throughout, only once using a group pronoun indicating less association and feeling of identity with the rest of the class than Jane. His musician's identity dominates his rhetoric and it is obvious that is where his major focus lies. From John's responses, I got the impression that he felt his writing became more expressive and creative, as well as more coherent. He seemed to feel less pressure, and as a result, he opened up and started feeling better about his writing process. He does sound as though he is trying to "fit into" the situated world of academia when he uses terms like "punctuating" in referring to his perception of what good writing might exhibit.

Both John and Jane talked about their interest and engagement with the material in different ways. Jane's was due to her feeling that the show represented her culture, which I took to mean her favorite genre of music or her identity as an African American growing up in a time when Hip Hop or rap is the generation's most popular genre of music, and John's was based upon the theme and storyline of the Hip Hop music and recording industry, which connected to his feelings of identity and culture. Jane's identity with Hip Hop culture seemed to merge with

the rest of the class, exhibiting a perception of acceptance and group mentality as she engaged with the class discussions. She merged her personal cultural identity with the content of the show and with her classmates in the situated world of the academic classroom.

John brought his musician's identity into the class and connected with the material in the show because of it, yet instead of identifying himself with the group like Jane, he separated himself throughout his narrative, identifying more with making music and noticing what the recording industry is like. When he discussed his responses regarding writing, he appeared to attempt to fit into a situated world of academic discourse. This was the only real change in identity John demonstrated.

### **Indications of Interpretations**

Both students refer to grammar and punctuation when discussing writing. This points to the idea that their concepts of writing are grounded in these two aspects. With this in mind, the evidence that student interest in class content or material is paramount is another important concept in the teaching of writing. Both students indicated that the content was interesting and that they found it much easier to write when it is something they found interesting. Both of these students said they enjoyed the *Empire* text better than traditional type texts like literature anthologies and handbooks on grammar and punctuation they had experienced. Jane referred to one of her English classes in which she had to read several articles and short stories and stated that they "did not interest [her] at all." Each one of them connected to the material in his or her own way coming from their personal identities integrated into a new situated world of the academic classroom combined with a Hip Hop text.

It was my intention to determine if the study of a Hip Hop based television show had an effect on various factors in the academic classroom of developmental reading and English, and I

wanted to particularly focus upon student identities and whether or not there were any effects on that during that specific semester. From what each of the students provided in their interviews, I believe it is safe to say that they learned a different approach to writing, thinking critically, and what can be studied in an English classroom because of their experiences in the *Empire* class.

Eschewing the classics as valueless is not the purpose here. What can be taken away is an idea for hybrid texts of combining pop culture along with the canon. There really are no new themes. Joseph Campbell established that long ago. What could be done is approaching the study of new texts alongside old texts, taking into consideration cultural poetics theory. Drawing parallels, comparisons, and disparities as a means of engaging interest in textual analysis, critical thinking, writing, and familiarization with the canon and other important works of art could facilitate more student interest. For example, placing *King Lear* beside *Empire* or *Dracula* beside *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or *Hercules* beside *The Dark Knight* could illustrate Campbell's archetypes and show the new approaches to classical themes. The list could continue indefinitely, and the precedent for these types of texts has already been set by organizations like the *Pop Culture Association/American Culture Association* (PCA/ACA).

There is an old adage that says: History repeats itself. This has borne out many times, and literary texts are really no exception. There are a few basic plot lines or themes, with some disagreement to the number, but the main point is that these main themes repeat over time. Literary texts and pop culture texts contain the same basics; the approach and treatment are different, but these two are different in newer literary texts as well. Literature and learning should not be a means of categorizing and classifying into the social hierarchies. By using pop culture as a comparison and transitory step to analysis, engagement, and interest, the English classroom can cross cultural boundaries.

A hybrid text approach could also encourage and demonstrate composition and creation across mediums. In current technological culture, digital communication is ever increasing. By using different types of texts, students could learn, experiment, and compose various types of approaches to composition. This teaches audience and purpose, two important aspects of composition. In the *Empire* class, the students watched the episodes, wrote in their notebooks, discussed in class, wrote essays, and finally prepared a final essay presentation for a panel at a Hip Hop Studies conference. The composition of their essays was a process which occurred over several weeks including numerous drafts and revisions. When Jane and John referred to their writing in the interviews, they refer to the various drafts and edits, as well as their notebook writing. When Jane says, “we felt like we could write about whatever,” she is encompassing the entire process from the point of topic choice from the show to how to approach the free-writing drafting process. Because they were able to identify with the material, each in his and her own way, they were more interested and engaged with the outcome. This provided me with another result for my study questions regarding student identities and writing.

Student identities are important. How they perceive themselves entering the classroom and later succeeding or not is also important. If they feel their identities are valued and that they have knowledge applicable in the classroom environment, they are more interested and engaged. That is simply human nature. Pop culture is a phenomenon of which most people are aware. It is safe to say that most students have some level of base knowledge of pop culture. This base knowledge can function in assisting them in their melding of cultures in the situated world of the academic classroom.

These implications could be the beginning of a pedagogical approach that would provide more disenfranchised students with a sense of belonging and opportunity for success in the

classroom. By demonstrating the significance of textual analysis and critical thinking skills which can be applied and developed across hybrid texts, perhaps more students can feel comfort and progress in their academic careers. It could mean providing a more comfortable environment by which the students bring in their knowledge of pop culture and are able to assimilate it into the academic classroom, perhaps even overcoming feelings of inaccessibility.

### **Limitations**

This study was conducted with two participants, both of whom were members of working class families, so I cannot generalize as to whether a broader study would provide similar data. In addition, Southeastern Community College is located in North Carolina. The demographics represented here are probably quite different from those in other community colleges across the country. However, I suspect that economics suggest that most students who enter community colleges are of diverse working class families.

None of the students I taught in the *Empire* class were unfamiliar with Hip Hop culture, but there is always the possibility of a student whose home environment does not include pop culture artifacts or television in the home. If a student had little to no knowledge of pop culture, it is quite possible she might have a good grasp of the classics. This situation could work well in groups for the class using peer work to bring the students with pop culture knowledge together with the homeschooled student and draw parallels and contrasts between the texts. This type of group work would facilitate more learning outcomes by cross-referencing more texts, as well as incorporating group work. This type of situation seems a good environment for hybrid texts and student engagement and interest. Additionally, it could lead to enthusiasm and feelings of acceptance and more comfort in the newly created situated world.

I interviewed two students formally, but the class performance and enthusiasm I witnessed during the course of the Spring 2015 semester proved to me that the students found the material engaging, and as I witnessed their class discussions, it was clear that they were comfortable in the class. I chose these two students to interview because they were successful in the class. John did so well that he was able to skip the next developmental class and move directly into college credit English courses. However, these two students were not the only successful ones in the classroom. All of the students found the material engaging and interesting, and as an added benefit, the attendance for that particular class was excellent with rare absences.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Further research would warrant a larger interviewee pool because I think it would provide more data regarding identity, especially if members of more varied social classes were represented. Also, a different venue would be interesting I am sure. A four-year university environment may provide a broader cultural diversity as a study base, especially if the demographics included students with very little exposure to pop or Hip Hop culture.

Another possible avenue for further research would be a class structured on hybrid texts combined by themes. For example, a study of the television show, *The Black List*, and *The Great Gatsby*, or even *King Lear* and *Empire*. The list could go on and on, limited only by imagination. The concept is just one of being able to find a connection between a text and the student, keeping their identities and situated worlds in mind.

Further research into this type of text and pedagogy is important, especially in today's expanding global and diverse culture. By studying the effects and results of hybrid texts incorporating both canonical and pop culture, we may be able to achieve a broader base of

student literacy and better student learning outcomes. It is also significant to investigate ways of using student identities and knowledge with which they enter the classroom to positively affect their learning processes, and provide a more welcoming and accessible learning environment.

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