Exploring Youth, Race, and Popular Culture: A Critical Dialogue with Jabari Mahiri

Lamar L. Johnson

This article features a critical dialogue with Dr. Jabari Mahiri about his past and current scholarship on youth, race, and popular culture.

This issue of Language Arts features a critical dialogue with Dr. Jabari Mahiri on how to incorporate popular culture in the classroom as curricular and pedagogical practices that center and build upon the lived experiences and knowledge production of youth who come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Dr. Mahiri is a professor of education and the William and Mary Jane Brinton Family Chair in Urban Teaching at the University of California, Berkeley. He has published numerous articles in national and international scholarly journals and has written many books that have been transformative to the field of language and literacy studies, English education, and critical multicultural education. Dr. Mahiri is faculty director of the Multicultural Urban Secondary English Program, Faculty P.I. for the Bay Area Writing Project, and a board member of the National Writing Project. He was also a board member of the American Educational Research Association, 2014 through 2017.

This excerpted conversation was recorded on December 13, 2017, and has been edited for publication.

Lamar L. Johnson (LLJ): Dr. Mahiri, it is great to be speaking with you. When I entered my graduate studies program, I was introduced to your work on out-of-school literacies and multicultural education. For example, in your earlier work, you foreground this notion of pop culture pedagogy; however, pop culture is ever-evolving and changing. Therefore, could you begin by explaining what is popular or “in” now, and what do these current texts (e.g., novels, films, media, music, art, etc.) teach us about contemporary childhood?

Jabari Mahiri (JM): It was right at the turn of the century, and in my book, Shooting for Excellence: African American and Youth Culture in New Century Schools (1998), I argued that there was a contemporary popular culture in the United States and that things such as the media, African American youth culture, and hip-hop culture were actually undergirding the ways we think about contemporary popular culture.

In the book, I tried to show how bringing some of those elements into the classroom was in fact a realization of arguments that we’ve been making under this notion of culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive pedagogy. If it’s going to be culturally relevant or responsive to contemporary youth, it has to span the bridge of hip-hop and popular culture. For example, African American youth may see no more of a connection with African American canonical authors like Tony Morrison, Ralph
Ellison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and many others than they do with canonical White authors, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald (The Great Gatsby, 1995) or John Steinbeck (Of Mice and Men, 1994). As educators, we must now put these canonical Black writers in the same category as the traditional Eurocentric texts and create the pedagogical bridges that will make these texts accessible and relevant to contemporary young people.

Thus, hip-hop and rap became powerful tools that helped youth to make meaningful connections to texts, critique the dominant discourse, and acknowledge alternative ways of being in the world.

As a former English teacher, I thought bringing the historical African American texts into the classroom was key, particularly to get young people engaged; however, I realized they were not any more engaged in reading the canonical Black literature than the White literature because the pedagogy did not incorporate and invite young people into the text. Bringing us to the issue of childhood and young people, I think about my experiences teaching a canonical text, The Canterbury Tales (Chaucer, 1996) and how I incorporated hip-hop pedagogy to guide my curricula and pedagogical practices. In the beginning of this unit, students were resisting the text and the curriculum. I had to take a step back to figure out the reasons why the youth were resisting, and I had to consider ways I could begin to incorporate their voices and lived realities into the classroom. Thus, hip-hop and rap became powerful tools that helped youth to make meaningful connections to texts, critique the dominant discourse, and acknowledge alternative ways of being in the world.

To illustrate, if you look at The Canterbury Tales, they are basically raps. The different characters in The Canterbury Tales are telling stories pertaining to common people, dukes and counts, the miller, the squire, and the knight. These stories are being brought to the forefront in a style that is exactly like rap. Immediately, I understood that, as a teacher, I could provide a bridge between the canonical text and how youth were experiencing their own lives, thus helping them to make meaning and comprehend the text.

**LLJ:** What I have found is that many teachers have trepidation about how to develop the curriculum to infuse hip-hop, poetry, art, body movement, media, etc., which leads me to the following question: how does popular culture shape the literacy practices and identities of children and youth of color?

**JM:** Before I answer that question, I want to say that the field of education has put a lot of emphasis on rap and hip-hop, but remember that under the general context of hip-hop culture is also spoken word. Simply stated, I think we haven’t made enough use of the vibrancy of spoken word, both as a performative text and as a rigorous process of intellectual intensity that creates a spoken word text, in this particular case, a writing process. I’ve seen numerous situations where educators have utilized spoken word in the classroom as a way to get youth excited to learn about language through language.

I coauthored an article with four of my graduate students, “Both Sides of the Mic” (Mahiri, Ali, Scott, Asmeron, & Ayers, 2008), in which we explored the various literacy practices related to hip-hop engaged in by youth. For instance, if you’re making meaning as a hip-hop DJ, there are literacy practices that are associated with that. If you are a rap artist, an MC, a break dancer, and/or a graffitist, there are literacy practices that are associated with these various elements of hip-hop. So in the article, we spelled out a number of ways we can think about literacy from the standpoint of youth of color that teachers need to be aware of. We essentially challenge notions from culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies to emphasize that cultural expressions of youth are not uniform or homogenous. In other words, African American youth are not a monolithic group; there are different kinds of youth who identify as African American, yet they have widely varying positionings, practices, choices, and perspectives. Many, for example, may be hip-hop heads, but others may not be. There are African American youth who are avid readers of Manga or Anime, or are avid participants in Korean Drama websites. Their diverse ways of participating in and re-producing cultural practices reflect micro-cultural
expressions of their identities. This is not to say that the larger society won’t still respond to them as a homogenous group, but this is where the larger society is missing the essence of human diversity.

LLJ: Excellent points. Can you elaborate on how you are defining micro-cultural?

JM: Micro-cultural is a hyphen between micro and culture that really incorporates four things: social positioning, literacy practices, the choices people make, and finally, the perspectives they hold or that they develop. If we look at any individual along the lines of those four categories, we get down to a unique way of identifying people that bust up culture with a big “C,” discourse with a big “D,” and language with a big “L” (Gee, 1990) because we can talk about how people are actually engaging in the making of meaning in their daily lives.

LLJ: Yes, so interesting.

JM: Therefore, taking something like hip-hop culture as a beginning window and looking at the inherent literacy practices (because some of these practices are bridges to other literacy practices that we want youth to develop and engage in at higher levels of learning) becomes complicated. Essentially, the point is that if we’re talking about culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy and building from the “funds of knowledge” of young people, finding bridges requires obtaining a much more ethnographic orientation to what the range and diversity of those funds of knowledge are. Also, individual young people are coming into the classroom at different stages in their own development; a kid at fourth grade is not the same kid and cultural being in the eighth grade.

LLJ: It is great to hear you talk about literacy from a racial, cultural, and sociohistorical context. You’ve unpacked hip-hop pedagogy, popular culture, and how we (as educators) have to foreground the literacy practices of youth of color in classrooms. In your work with K–8 teachers, how do their views of childhood influence their selection of curriculum materials and instruction?

JM: I think before teachers can begin to address students they have to unpack their positionalities (e.g., their language, culture, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, etc.). The subject position of the teacher is often left unexamined by the teacher; however, self-examination is a primary starting point for how one begins to engage with others who are different. If you begin with the assumption that your way of viewing the world is the authentic way of viewing the world, then there will always be a deficit orientation to others, because it’ll always be a question of how can I get them to view the world, engage in text, and love the literature that I love.

I would argue that the view of teachers needs to be informed more by what Lisa Delpit (2006) initially called teachers as ethnographers. Delpit was building on Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) work, described in Ways with Words, which highlighted an ethnography in the African American community and poor White community. The second half of her book focused on teachers attempting to implement instruction proceeding from an ethnographic perspective. Thus, I believe teachers need to be ethnographers. That is, we need to enter our classroom with an open, blank page until we come to understand who our students are; we have to begin with pedagogical techniques that allow us to get insights into who we’re working with.

To illuminate, in my current work, I make the case for a new racial literacy, and one term that I’m foregrounding is illegible skin. By this I mean, we try to read people’s racial positioning based on the way we try to read skin, which is often oriented to White supremacy’s specification of a black–white binary. With this being said, it is noteworthy that whiteness is defined by its opposition to blackness. Then, the other three, maybe four, “racial groups” are color-coded in between. These broad brushstroke ways of putting people into five essential racialized, colorized categories are highly problematic.

Along the same lines, it is essential for teachers to utilize pedagogical practices that allow youth to bring forth aspects of their backgrounds...
and experiences as cultured beings in their classroom. As an anthropologist, one would not start by making any assumptions about a culture until they’ve had an opportunity to understand that culture from the informant’s perspective. The anthropologists’ role, in this case the teacher’s role, then, is to engage young peoples’ cultures and the range of micro-cultures in the classroom as a pretext for teaching and learning that will transpire throughout the rest of the year.

**LLJ:** You’ve raised many compelling points. I know you also advocate in your work that teachers are coaches and students are players. How can K–8 teachers consider or implement what happens in the field of sports into their yearly curriculum and pedagogical decisions?

**JM:** Sports, specifically, is one of those entities in our culture that allows us to find bridges. That is, it becomes a space where similar meanings can be negotiated because the rules of sports are explicit, and one of the most fundamental rules is that the highest level of merit is what should be rewarded. Thus, as part of this metaphor, I ask the question: How do you become the best at what you want to do in order to achieve the ends that you want to have? I believe this is certainly clear in sports, but how do we turn that lens toward other things that can impact the classroom? For young people, what else do you want to do beyond sports?

Thinking about African American youth and youths’ culture in my earlier work, another metaphor I seized on was teachers as coach and students as players in the game of learning. The first thing that does is to decenter the traditional role of the teacher as the master and holder of knowledge. A coach must render expertise through the performance of the players, and teachers should be able to render their expertise through the achievement of their students. A teacher cannot take a standardized assessment test for the student just as the coach cannot go out on the court and shoot that free throw for the player. Furthermore, it is essential to decenter the role of the teacher from instructional leader to leader of a collaborative movement that will maximize skills, opportunities, and perspectives on the part of young people.

**LLJ:** Yes, the classroom is a space where teachers and students share in the process of learning, and they can learn from and with each other. Your comparison of the classroom in relation to the rules of sport illuminates how youth are producers and holders of knowledge. In order for educators to center the knowledge and lived experiences of youth of color, teachers have to challenge their personal ideologies and beliefs while understanding how issues of race, class, gender, and language impact the classroom. Thinking about your most recent book, *Deconstructing Race* (2017), you argue that Whiteness and White supremacy are deeply rooted in schools. Can you explain how K–8 educators can reconsider their curriculum and pedagogical practices to critique Whiteness and White supremacy?

**JM:** In every subject area, teachers have work to do. First, in social studies and history, they need to go back and see how their curriculum and instruction facilitates young peoples’ understanding of how White supremacy came to be in the first place, particularly for us in the United States. For example, the work being done by the Facing History and Ourselves organization (www.facinghistory.org/) provides good examples of more truthful explorations of history that can help K–12 teachers find curricular resources and ideas for their instruction.

Often, the argument is that there were moments in history where concrete decisions were made to create the idea of Whiteness. It’s also important to see that the concept of Whiteness went through a number of movements of expansion. Everybody who was White at the beginning of the invention of Whiteness, around the 1620s in this country, primarily consisted of English colonists. Then, Whiteness began to expand for political and historical reasons to include other groups. For example, the Irish, Polish, German, and most recently—as of 1945, at the end of World War II—the Jewish people were included. Thus, Whiteness has never been a certain group, but it’s a constructed group that has been continually evolving and expanding for various kinds of political and social reasons. In short, if Whiteness is an idea that has been created and can be transformed to include others, then it can be deconstructed for what it is, which demonstrates that it’s not necessarily representative of the way people actually look and live within the world.
Though I’m not the first to argue this, in *Deconstructing Race*, I actually posit that Whiteness created Blackness. And, as I stated earlier, other colorized categories were created in between. Yet, there are communities of practice and affinities that people have—such as their history, lineages, and ancestries—that are way more complex than the simplified categories that White supremacy has ascribed to the different groups of people in society. The only way those ascribed categories work is that the people who are ascribed to those groups subscribe to them. This is not to say that I’m only dealing with the notion of the colorization of the categories, because as an African American person, I recognize the African American experience in this country, as well as the experiences of other groups, such as the Chinese American experience, which is not the same as the Japanese American or the Korean American experience. Nonetheless, they all get lumped under this category of Asian, as if that is somehow definitive of the range of histories, complexities, and experiences that brought these different ethnic groups to the United States. In addition, I would argue that the Latino community is just as complex, if not more so. This concept of Latinx or Hispanic—a designation that represents a large range of nations—has to be deconstructed and disaggregated. We’re not all here under the same set of circumstances.

**LLJ:** As we come to the end of the interview, can you explain how our current racialized and political climate informs your upcoming projects or research studies?

**JM:** I’m focusing on the myriad ways that people exist in the world and how this complexity is often simplified by reductions to color-coded categories that have been specified by and fitted into the hierarchy of White supremacy. One example is in the contemporary popular cultural musical *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2016). To be clear, I believe what is interesting and brilliant about this work is that the creators took a narrative that is essential to the making of this country and funneled it through the vantage point of a major character who participated in that narrative, Alexander Hamilton. He was an immigrant to the country and also a biracial person in the sense that he was the son of a Scottish father and a mother who identified as a Black St. Croixan. Nonetheless, Alexander Hamilton is here in the United States at the forming of the country, and he’s participating in the oppression and marginalization of people of color. However, at the same time, the production dissipates the notion that the characters need to be played by racialized characters who are similar to those from that time in history.

By moving the story past its racial moorings of the English colonist, the characters such as Jefferson, Washington, and Hamilton can be played by characters who are the best performers of this musical genre—in this particular case, hip-hop, rap, and popular music. Similarly, the essence of this play exemplifies that we ourselves are participating in stories that actually have all kinds of racial applications and implications. In short, I want to make pedagogical arguments about how teachers can also take this kind of work up in teaching and learning in schools. My aim is to illustrate how peoples’ experiences should be understood authentically and represented powerfully in terms of how we are actually engaging with each other in this country.

**LLJ:** Dr. Mahiri, thank you for taking time to discuss your scholarship centering on youth, race, and popular culture. As you’ve stated and shown through your long-standing research, literacy should mirror the dynamic and robust ways that children and youth of color live, exist, and operate within the world. I’m excited about your new line of research, too, because concepts like micro-culture can inspire K–8 teachers to reimagine the landscape of their ELA classrooms. It has been a pleasure working with and learning from you today. Thank you for this wonderful interview.

**JM:** Thank you, Lamar. Take care and keep in touch.

**References**


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**2018 NCTE Outstanding Educator in the English Language Arts Award**

**Luis C. Moll** from the University of Arizona has been named the recipient of the 2018 NCTE Outstanding Educator in the English Language Arts Award. This award recognizes a distinguished national or international educator who has made major contributions to the field of language arts in elementary education.

The award will be presented at the Elementary Get-Together during the 2018 NCTE Annual Convention in Houston, Texas. Learn more about Luis and how you can nominate an outstanding educator for the 2019 award at http://www2.ncte.org/awards/outstanding-educator-elementary/.

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**Promising Researcher Award Winners**

The recipient of the 2018 NCTE Promising Researcher Award in Recognition of Bernard O’Donnell is Cati de los Ríos, University of California, Davis. She describes her work as follows:

Dr. de los Ríos is an assistant professor at University of California, Davis’s School of Education. She received her PhD in English Education from Teachers College, Columbia University, in 2017 and is a former school teacher in California and Massachusetts. Cati’s research spans a number of phenomena, including Chicana and Latina adolescents’ critical and close readings of corridos, multimodal and translingual literacies, youth community engagement, and the civic literacy practices extant in secondary ethnic studies classrooms. Cati is a Ford Foundation Fellow and part of the 2014–2016 cohort of NCTE’s Cultivating New Voices Among Scholars of Color program. Her dissertation on the Common Core State Standards–aligned literacy activities in a secondary Ethnic Studies course in California recently won two 2018 AERA Outstanding Dissertation Awards. Her latest scholarship can be found in *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, and *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*; she has a forthcoming piece in *English Education*.

The Promising Researcher Award is sponsored by the NCTE Standing Committee on Research. Submitted manuscripts are evaluated based on their statements of research problems, reviews of relevant literature, methodology and data analysis, grounding of evidence, significance of results, and clarity and style.

For more information on the NCTE Promising Researcher Award, go to http://www2.ncte.org/awards/promising-researcher-award.