Superman said, “Don’t worry. I gotcha.” The lady said, “I know you got me, but who’s got you?”

—Five-year-old Ashley drawing and telling a Superman story (Dyson, 1981)

Almost 40 years ago now, I met Ashley (all names are pseudonyms) at a kindergarten writing center I had set up for my dissertation (Dyson, 1981). He was great fun to sit by (for me and for his peers), as he accompanied his detailed drawings with imaginative storytelling, blending material from the television, the movies, and everyday life. Moreover, Ashley, foreshadowing children in my future, would wield a magic brown crayon and his beloved superheroes would change identity and become Black like him.

Among his drawn superheroes was, of course, Superman, who “always have an S on his shirt.” One day, Ashley wrote his own name across Superman’s shirt, using letters and letter-like forms. He drew a box around his all-important and quite clear S so that it served double duty, marking both Superman and him.

I look back now, all these years later, and see potential social and semiotic processes mediated by the “toy box” of commercial media (Dyson, 2003)—characters, plots, appealing language, dynamic images, and on and on, all available for the taking. Ashley was thus a participant in popular culture (Storey, 2015), that is, in the social and semiotic use of primarily commercial media. With a blank page and a marker in hand, he declared himself an S-endowed superhero, venturing forward in what was, for him, the new world of school.

I wrote none of this at the time, of course. In the then blossoming research on child writing, popular culture was not singled out for study. Moreover, findings on child writing were generalized (e.g., “the first-grade writer,” “the second-grade writer”); in that homogenization, the particularities of children living and learning at the intersection of societal forces like race, class, and gender were often erased.

In this article, I take readers along with me over time and space as we follow children writing into the complexities of popular culture. Key moments in the lives of three children—Jameel, Tina, and Ta’Von—will help illuminate the journey, providing illustrative material to clarify key concepts. In addition, I’ll call on, albeit selectively, theorists and colleagues met along the way. The aim herein is to illustrate interconnections between children’s participation in popular culture and their participation in composing practices. The energy fueling the children’s world making, involving diverse symbolic tools (e.g., drawing, writing, talking), is often to be found in their relationships with other children, that is, in local childhood cultures.
Everyone’s research trajectory grows out of their ever-present passions and past experiences. Mine is that of an ethnographer gripped by how written language plays a role in particular childhoods, focusing on urban children in economically challenged neighborhoods. My curiosities about popular culture came from watching children, including the three featured below.

To begin, however, clarifications of both popular culture and childhood culture are in order. And for those, I’ll turn to an early piece, written by Henry Jenkins, on children’s participation in popular culture, one starring that eighties television character, Pee-wee Herman (Jenkins, 1988).

A Pee-Wee Herman Party: Popular Culture as a Mediator of Childhood Culture

To study children’s participation in popular culture, children have to be viewed as social participants and semiotic players. Many commercial objects are offered—films, television shows, video games—but many fail to gain children’s attention as material to play with. The importance of children’s agentive action with offered media material was dramatized in a small paper, entitled “‘Going bonkers!’ Children, play, and Pee- wee” (Jenkins, 1988).

Jenkins wrote about a party his 5-year-old son held with other fans of Pee-wee Herman (a figure disdained by many adults). The party’s central activity was, technically, to watch Pee-wee Herman’s television show. The children, though, were not mesmerized by the show, but rather by “the good parts”—the scenes they found “crazy.” That craziness or humor was taken up, or recontextualized, in the children’s own joking, storytelling, and drawing. Through those familiar social and semiotic practices, the stuff of Pee-wee Herman was integrated into children’s everyday lives and their relationships with each other. That is, it became an aspect of their childhood culture.

Children, like those young Pee-wee Herman fans, articulate their “selves” as they respond to other selves with whom they construct their lives (Bakhtin, 1981). In so doing, they appropriate shared semiotic material (from popular media, as stressed herein, but also from folklore, or institutions like church); as they do so, pleasures and concerns are shared, common knowledge discovered, relationships formed, practices evolved, and childhood worlds created (Dyson, 2013). Thus, participation in popular culture helps children fulfill basic desires of childhoods—to have companions, to make sense of experiences, and to garner some sense of control over their lives (Corsaro, 1985). That participation is interwoven with the practices, relational dynamics, and values that constitute childhood cultures (Dyson, 2013).

After “Going Bonkers!” Jenkins wrote a seminal book about the textual “poaching” (DeCerteau, 1984) of adult Star Trek fans (Jenkins, 1992). These fans—and Jenkins was one of them—appropriated fragmented material from media stories for their own creative transformation into fan fiction, explanatory texts, folk songs, paintings, and so on. In Stuart Hall’s (1981) terms, consumers of commercial media were also interpretive producers; in their composing, they explored their social identities. The potential link between media consumption and textual production was illuminated by the first child to perform in my textual spotlight, first grader Jameel, whom I met in the late eighties; Jameel is bringing along with him his money-making singing fish.
humorous, modeled as it was on the cartoons he watched, along with his favorite books by Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein (cartoonists and rhythmic players both). Indeed, it was a performative production that appropriated and integrated material from varied sources—televised cartoons, music on the radio, and hustlers on city streets—that garnered him respectful inclusion in his classroom. All that material was integrated into a creative alchemy that yielded a singing fish and a hugely popular performance; the lead character, the fish, was influenced by an ongoing ocean study unit, which led Jameel to “star[t] loving animals,” especially fish.

I have often shared this example, as it was transformative for me as researcher and for Jameel’s classroom place (complete case in Dyson, 1993). Figure 1 presents his text, which is annotated below.

On the top of his paper, Jameel’s fish has four large bubbles coming out of its mouth; these are both comic-like and air bubbles—a visual pun. In each bubble is a “tune,” that is, the words being sung by the fish. Another voice occupies the bottom half of the page, one that sounds like a televised used car salesman. What is being sold, though, is not a car, but a performance by the fish. The stapled pocket on the bottom of the page was for the tips that would surely follow when Jameel took that singing fish to the streets.

When Jameel took the singing fish to sharing time on the rug, he became the crooning fish. His singing was presented in phrase groups, with changes in rhythm indicated by the air bubbles; the period after each letter in a phrase group indicated that that letter’s name should be sung. Repeated words in the third phrase group indicate duration of a single word over time. (Jameel was inventing how to write rhythm.) In the transcript below, I added the colons to capture how Jameel elongated certain sounds. Listen:

Jameel: M-Y-M-Y: (sings each letter in a smooth, rising tune, elongating the last Y)
M-Y-M-Y: (sings similarly)
M:-M: (continues on the high pitch with elongated M’s)
me me me: (even pitch)
you you you: (even but higher pitch)
my my my: (even but higher pitch)
M-Y-M-Y: (as before)
I: lo::ve (elongated and with a rhythmic drop and then rise in pitch)
you, to, poo poo pee doo (syncopated)
M-Y-M-Y: (as before)

That fish isn’t any ordinary fish. It’s a singing fish. (Reads in an announcer’s voice; note the repetition and variation in sentence structure.)

(first presentation of event and figure reprinted in Dyson, 2016, pp. 49–50)

As detailed in the original study, Jameel’s inventive integration of a range of appropriated material, highlighted by a singing fish, brought him the social respect and appreciative response he so wanted from his peers. In fact, they began trying to write songs, too. Moreover, Ms. Louise gathered resources, including her husband (a musician) and the school music teacher, to explore printed music and the conventional writing of rhythm.

The story of Jameel was positive; its outcome was the entry of a new expressive practice into the locally expanded cultural world of children. In the
literature on popular culture and children’s language arts of that time, pedagogically oriented projects were beginning to garner attention. For example, Jackie Marsh (1999) documented what happened when Batman and Batwoman founded a bat cave in the midst of an enacted primary school literacy curriculum. And Vivian Paley (1984) reinforced the value of fantasy play and storytelling (and negotiating), taming her discomfort with superhero play in her kindergarten.

Still, many adults are uncomfortable with children’s play around commercial media, like superhero stories. Indeed, some children are not so pleased with the play for reasons that have to do with social justice. These concerns, and their transformative possibilities, came to my attention as I continued along my trail in the children’s worlds.

**Power, Status, and the Possibilities of Critical Rewriting**

The ideologies at play in popular culture have long caused adult concerns about ideologically stereotypical representations of gendered and raced characters and about the perceived glorification of violence. Recently, Marvel Comics has been challenging the stereotypical identities of superheroes, notably through the efforts of Marvel director and editor Sana Amanat; among the newer characters are Ms. Marvel, Spider-Man Miles Morales, and Isaiah Bradley, known as the “Black Captain America.” Still, from their beginnings, superheroes were created by, and for, mainly White males. Moreover, superheroes’ actions, particularly when appropriated by children, may be seen as violent, with no attention given to child players’ and composers’ interpretations and strategic decisions (Newkirk, 2002).

By the nineties, the pedagogical response to these concerns sometimes went beyond the banning of such material (Comber & Simpson, 2001). Inspiration for engaging students in critical reflection came from Freire (1970), who argued that, since texts construct the taken-for-granted world, critically rewriting texts is also rewriting the world. Moreover, critical feminist voices (e.g., Haraway, 1988) and positioned scholars of color (e.g., Rosaldo, 1989) called attention to multiple “truths” tied to our varied social positions and, thus, our varied perspectives in a power-saturated world. To escape the confines of our own points of view, we need critical conversation and collective work toward a better world.

In my own work, children instigated the critical rewriting of words and thereby worlds within a complex child culture in which children were positioned differently at the intersections of gender, race, and class. Their need for companions and control led to discomfort with the usual storylines. They were aided by the presence of a responsive teacher who allowed their critical conversations to permeate the official curriculum and thereby connect with the official intellectual work of the classroom. This dialogic process is dramatically illustrated by the next key child moment, starring 7-year-old Tina.

**Ideological Conflict and Critical Transformation: Tina and the Crying Superheroes**

In Tina’s multiracial and socioeconomically diverse second grade, her teacher, Ms. Kristen, had instigated an Author’s Theater as an alternative way for children to present their writing. She felt engaging in this theatrical practice would allow children to make decisions about how to present their work; she also aimed to provide them opportunities to discuss narrative elements such as characters, motivations, and plots. For a theater production, child composers served as directors, choosing classmates to act out their stories as the author read them. The ideological complexities—and potential for critical rewriting—came from the different ideological positions of the children themselves in response to these productions. And most of those responses centered on superhero stories, which were initially exclusively produced by boys.

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At first, Tina had no interest in writing superhero stories, but she did want to act in them. In contrast, her peer Sammy was an avid composer of superhero stories. He was new in the school and desperate to make friends, so he used superhero stories to get the other boys’ attention: those boys wanted parts in his stories.

Like other superhero authors, Sammy gave few roles to girls. This was true even when he wrote
about the X-men, a team of male and female superheroes, all human mutants with amazing powers. If girls were included, it was as the love interest of a male superhero, and, in that case, White, middle class girls were most frequently chosen for the femme fatale. After all, in superhero stories, White females who speak Standard English, are trim and curvy, and dress to the nines are the norm.

Tina did not like any of this. Along with her friend Holly, she spoke up, not just for herself, but for girls as a collective. “You [boys] never let girls play,” they complained in response to superhero dramatizations. And, said Tina, “In every story, the boys always have to win. And that’s really not fair to the girls.” Moreover, a group of Black children, including Tina and Holly, objected strenuously when a child composer said a certain female character had to be played by a White girl, like in the TV show. (In contrast, boys of color did change the racial identity of male superheroes, whose key qualities consisted of powers, not looks. For a full discussion of the class- and race-based objections to the boys’ decisions, see Dyson [1997]).

In frustration, Tina herself eventually wrote her own X-men story, one in which girl superheroes dominated. Further pushing the superhero norm, one of the X-men characters died and the other X-men wept at this loss. Listen in as Tina reads her text as the designated child actors were to enact it:

Tina (reading her text): “One of the X-men died.”
(No one dies.)
Tina repeats the sentence louder:
Tina: “ONE OF THE X-MEN DIED.” Die! Die!
(Eventually, under Tina’s stares, one does die.)
Tina: “And the rest were very sad. They cried.”
(Only Holly cries.)
Tina: Everybody cry now, even the boys.

At the end of the story, the “singing girls” sang a love song up in heaven. (Dyson, 1997, p. 80)

Tina’s story was long and complex, but she and her classmates illustrated how, out of childhood desires for companionship and control, critical engagement with fundamental issues of fairness can arise. After all, fairness is a persistent concern of children together. When the desire for fairness is articulated in the intersection of race, gender, and class, powerful word- and world-transforming actions may emerge. In Tina’s story, the usual members of the X-men team changed, as did their actions.

Although some readers might view Tina as a binary thinker (boys against girls), that is not the imagined world mediated by her superhero text. The story complicated such simplistic gender divisions: fighting X-men were not just men, and those who wept at human loss were not just women. Tina’s composition thus “dialogized” the usual superhero storyline, making it an option among options (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 426). In fact, after this event, Sammy wrote about “X-people,” not “X-men.”

The issues emanating from the children in this class continued to diversify, including voiced objections (initially from middle-class girls) about violence. Superhero authors, however, did not view their stories as “violent”; like the children Newkirk (2002) interviewed, they were just interested in action-packed stories about saving the world. For her part, Ms. Kristen compared superheroes to historical figures who were socially powerful but physically unimpressive (e.g., Gandhi), and she also discussed the genre of superhero stories itself, where physical action is key. In that kind of story, denying a group of people access to such action is not fair, as Tina argued.

Like Jameel, Tina was bringing into school a range of semiotic and relational experiences from other times and spaces. These layers of experience, of meaning, contributed to Tina’s composition of a superhero story. These ideas—of a range of semiotic and relational experiences and of layers of meaning—come into focus below, as I introduce another 7-year-old, Ta’Von, whom I have met relatively recently on my trail in the children’s worlds.

Child Access and Agency in Convergence Culture

As the twenty-first century unfolds, the ways in which young children can potentially participate in popular culture continue to expand. For example,
Marsh (2014) examines the corporate playthings accompanying two popular Disney films, Davy Crockett (Walsh & Foster, 1955) and Frozen (DelVecho, Buck, & Lee, 2013). In so doing, she documents both longstanding corporate play offerings (e.g., toy figures and costumes) and newer materials orchestrated on cyber playgrounds (e.g., Facebook pages for fan responses, websites with film-related games and videos, YouTube productions in which children sing film songs). This expansion reflects our “convergence culture” (Jenkins, 2006); that is, corporate media exploit a range of avenues for child participation, and children themselves, as eager fans, seek out relevant material from whatever sources are available to them.

The child awaiting us now, Ta’Von, sought out a diversity of avenues for involvement with his passions. Like many children globally, though, he had constrained access to digital devices at home (Gutnick, Robb, Takeuchi, & Kotler, J., 2010). Socioeconomic matters influence access, as it did for him; for other children, geography may matter, too (i.e., rural vs. urban). Further, in Ta’Von’s classroom, the push toward accountability through narrow skill testing meant that most school possibilities for using digital platforms were heavily structured and, thus, allowed limited space for children’s agency and their popular interests.

We cannot, then, refer to a singular twenty-first century childhood without leaving out the particularities of children’s lives throughout the world. Moreover, a term like “digital divide,” when referring to socioeconomic differences in home access to computer technology, deflects attention away from the agentive child. There is no inherent need to link participation in digitized popular culture to individual ownership in a capitalistic world (Shah, cited in Livingston, Byrne, & Bulger, 2015). If children have access to digital platforms of interest, they will use them.

Ta’Von sought out a wealth of opportunities to participate in his passions, particularly outside of school. His interests were not those mass marketed to children; rather, they were steeped in interactions with his grandmother and his siblings and in his love of a good “beat.” When he appropriated from these opportunities and recontextualized them in school—whether as written lyrics or informational essays . . . or a mean air guitar—his texts reverberated through layers of reframed experiences; that is, his texts were laminated (Prior & Shipka, 2003, drawing on Goffman and Bakhtin). But I am getting way ahead of myself. Below I let Ta’Von take center stage.

Ta’Von: Musical Sites and Laminated Texts

I first met Ta’Von when he was a preschooler attending a district early childhood program dominated by low-income children of color, like him. In kindergarten, though, he was assigned to a school serving a majority White, middle-class neighborhood. As detailed elsewhere (Dyson, 2018), from the first day of school, Ta’Von grappled within racial, cultural, and socioeconomic encounters with peers: his braids were a curiosity, his access to certain peer-valued goods (e.g., “cool” water bottles) was economically constrained, his out-of-neighborhood abode removed his family from the local networking—not only regarding play dates, but also parent-shared knowledge of the kindergarten assessments awaiting their children.

By second grade, though, Ta’Von had established a new facet of his identity among his peers as well as a new sense of himself. He was, he said, a “musician”—a budding blues guitarist and, eventually, a singer of Motown hits. This identity did not come from nowhere. He and his then best friend Sophia had sung their way through preschool; both loved movie songs. Ta’Von’s singing voice was muted when he changed schools, but now it was back with a decidedly different beat.

That new beat had been nurtured in talks with his music-loving grandmother, who was partial to the blues and a child of the Motown Era, and in lessons with Mr. Dan, the guitarist at Ta’Von’s church who agreed to teach him how to play. Indeed, Ta’Von’s extended family included blues fans and even a former professional singer. His participation in popular culture had a classic, old-school feel.

I did not learn of Ta’Von’s passion for music during what he called “real writing,” the writing tied to the lessons in his language arts text. I learned from the humble task of journal writing, done daily...
In part to occupy children while their teacher, Ms. Cee, worked with one reading group or another. The journals were checked to make sure children had written, but they were neither read to the class nor responded to by Ms. Cee.

For the first few months of school, Ta’Von’s journal entries were short references to superheroes, averaging 21 words per entry. Then, like Muddy Waters belting out a blues standard, Ta’Von belted out his identity as a musician. The piece I excerpt herein was begun on Nov. 16 and considered done (in that he no longer picked up from where he had stopped the previous day) on Feb. 1. In this piece and others, he wrote about blues singers and guitarists he grew to know from varied media and interactive sources: his grandmother’s DVDs (some featuring blues artists and others containing fictionalized accounts [movies] of Motown musicians); stories his grandmother told him about artists whom she enjoyed; a YouTube video on his grandmother’s smartphone (his only access outside school to the Internet); the music-related storytelling of all his grandparents and their friends; and Mr. Dan’s guitar lessons. Ta’Von was, by his own account, “getting pretty good” on the guitar.

In the text excerpted below, Ta’Von appropriated and recontextualized from these diverse musical experiences, all steeped in relationships with important others. As Bakhtin (1981) would say, Ta’Von’s words echoed with those of others. (In the transcript, the symbol “/” means a new line in his text; “[]” means a space-saving summary by me.)

I like to Play / my Guitar because / it is fun because I / get to Write music in / my music book. It is fun / because I can / Let my Grandma and / my Brother and / my Sister hear me play / my Guitar. . . . And one day / I made my own guitar beat . . . out of . . . / [a song of] muddy water’s . . . / and do you know/ stevie ray, Robert cray, Bonnie ray,/ Dr. John, jimmey ray, B.B. King, Buddy Guy, / and Guitar Slim, and do you / know that all the Guitar / people that I just wrote / about, I will study about, and / Robert cray play a song for / stevie ray [as a tribute] / because he / would indent be able to come because / he died in an airplane / crash, and if he was / alive, I would really / like if I could meet / stevie ray. . . . / The second Guitar / player is going to be / Buddy Guy. Buddy has / the pashin like Stevie / ray. . . . My / [Grand]Papa has / seen Jimmy, Stevie, / Bonnie ray, Buddy Guy, / B.B. King and he has / shook B.B. King’s hand, and / my papa looks like / David Honeyboy edwers . . . . / I know that Big mama / thorton wrote a lot of / song’s like hound Doggy and / wang Dang Doodle. . . . I know about sister mama / Thorton because . . . my Brother / and me have seen it / on my Grandmas / Phone. . . . Now I’m writing about / me. I play Guitar / and I learned a lot of Things from / my Guitar teacher. . . .

Whether or not, dear readers, you are impressed by the above no doubt depends in part on how much you know about the blues. But Ta’Von consistently wrote such informational pieces, often including the titles and lyrics to blues songs (e.g., *You Gotta Move Child* [Frazier & Lomax, 1938], *Ain’t Gone ‘n’ Gonna Give Up on Love* [Vaughan, 1985]); he also referred occasionally to radio pop songs. The blues titles and lyrics were usually written in a “nonstandardized English” (particularly African American Language, which he used minimally in the classroom). Ta’Von called tablemates’ attention to his efforts and sang quietly throughout the day, often accompanied by an air guitar.

Ta’Von appropriated and used blues performers—elements of their life stories, their songs, and his mediated experiences with them—to construct his own identity as a musician. When Stevie Ray Vaughan died, wrote Ta’Von, “we lost a good blues Guitarist . . . .” Ta’Von was part of that “we.” His laminated texts were layered in experiences and family relationships; so situated, he reached out to his peers in new ways.

Ta’Von eventually sought out potential peers for a “club,” a term he used synonymously with “band.” Making a club was a cultural play practice in his room, such as for those wanting to make comics or to express their liking of gummy bears.
Although there was no band formed, Ta’Von did earn recognition for his passion for music and was even asked by one child to teach her to play guitar (impossible to do without school access to a guitar and social time/space).

Despite Ta’Von’s peer-recognized musical knowledge, that knowledge garnered no official classroom recognition. He tried to appropriate from his musical resources for use during “real” writing, but that proved difficult. His teacher was hardworking and loving, but unlike Ms. Louise and Ms. Kristen, teachers at Ms. Cee’s school were under enormous pressure to follow the prescribed curriculum. Moreover, they were required to submit results of the tests accompanying the language arts text to the principal (and, ultimately, to the district for principal evaluation).

One day, when the textbook assignment was to write a fictional story, Ta’Von decided to make up a story about brothers Stevie Ray and Jimmy Vaughan. In the story, the well-known guitarists were driving back from a concert and, as they traveled, they thought about a song they wanted to sing at the next night’s concert. That night, wrote Ta’Von, “both could not sleep [because] of this song they were thing[thinking] about playing in there concert tommorow and so then they woke up and practiced the song . . .” Ta’Von’s story captured that feeling of anxiety and anticipation that many of us may feel before an engagement. But Ms. Cee was understandably concerned that the textbook directions be followed—to make up a story with characters, a clear setting, and a beginning, a middle, and an end. When she came by to check Ta’Von’s work, he told her that his story was about “real people but not [a] real [story].” His teacher asked who the people were:

“Very awesome guitarists,” he said, adding that Stevie Ray learned guitar when he was 7, just like him. Ms. Cee reiterated that this was to be a made-up story, not facts.

“I’m just telling you that they learned,” he responded. Ms. Cee moved on, and he finished his text—a text never shared, never performed, never linked to the official curriculum (or to the very next assignment, to write “realistic fiction”).

It’s hard now not to see what could have happened, given a “permeable curriculum” (Dyson, 1993), like the one embracing the other featured children’s efforts, one that allowed for creative and critical work by both teachers and children. We might imagine a sharing discussion where child texts would be given a stage, a place to be enjoyed, compared, and linked to the genre-landscape of the classroom. And oh the discussions that could have been had, given the grammatical variability of Ta’Von’s musical lyrics, about diverse Englishes (and diverse languages) and how they figure into artistic productions as well as into everyday life. Further, in addition to the existent structured activities assigned for Chrome book use, Ta’Von could have had the opportunities he told me he wanted—opportunities to follow his interests onto the Internet and search out information on musicians.

Finally, toward the end of the year, Ta’Von knew that the teachers were organizing a school website for music and art. He wanted to record for that website, but there was no official road he could follow to that platform, where he might have found a stage for his eager participation in a strand of popular music. To my mind, it was a case of the school-house blues. All his knowledge and passion had no place in a contemporary, heavily test-related and standards-based curriculum.

Moving on Down the Trail of Popular Culture and Child Writing

Popular culture is an integral part of children’s meaning making as individuals and social actors. The children populating this article were agents and composers, appropriating appealing words, sounds, and genre features, and recontextualizing them as they anticipated others’ response. A singing fish on a city street, superheroes weeping at another’s funeral, old blues figures finding new life in a 7-year-old aficionado’s texts—all productions by child consumers.

Children’s appropriated materials may be infused with dominant ideologies of race, class, and gender (e.g., the typical White male superhero in Kristen’s class). Still, when children crawl into stories, sounds, and images, they may transform
them so that they fit more comfortably within them. In public forums, when children share their productions, a responsive teacher may help children’s creative constructions gain new meanings as they reverberate both among their peers and against a broader human landscape. If there is no daily practice of sharing one’s productions, then there may be no audience, no response, no way to bring one’s passions and inventiveness to official attention. Imagine Jameel’s singing fish denied his song, Tina’s weeping superheroes denied their moment; consider the audience longed for by the singing, guitar-playing, and composing Ta’Von. When teachers are denied the professional agency to respond to their children’s popular participation, they and their children lose rich opportunities for collective and critical exploration.

As for online tools and play spaces, most important for child composing are opportunities for children themselves to pursue their own interests and production desires. I imagine how excited Jameel would have been if he could actually have recorded his singing, enlivening an onscreen fish; how seriously Tina and her peers would have responded if they could have videotaped variations on the enactments of the X-People stories; how joyful Ta’Von would have been if he could have played his blues on a school podcast.

As noted earlier, participation in popular culture and its stretch into new media need not be tied to digital ownership and consumer capitalism. If we do not problematize these ties in who and how we choose to study, we risk contributing to new ways of rendering deficient low-income children, like Jameel, Tina, and Ta’Von. There are many questions to ask about how children and teachers find space for children’s cultural meaning-making resources and the challenges children and teachers face in constructing stages for children’s creative productions; among those challenges is engaging in critical discussions about children’s pleasures without dismissing those pleasures. These questions, these discussions, could be situated in demographically varied sites in schools, public libraries, and community centers. Moreover, there are intriguing questions about the cultural use and meaning of media figures that have spread (and how they have spread) into many childhoods globally. For example, what is the appeal, you might wonder, of a monolingual, Indonesian-speaking Dora the Explorer (Dewayani, 2016)?

What matters in children’s use of any resource for creative production is the intentional child in interaction with others. Popular culture is not something schools can erase from children’s lives, even if they devalue its use, preferring that children poach “literary” sources. Neither Ms. Louise nor Ms. Kristen planned a unit on a form of popular culture. However, they paid attention to the cultural knowledge and know-how their children brought to their composing, and they responded with interest to their productions and found ways to link them to the official curriculum. Both had classroom forums in which children could share their productions, and those productions could lead to lively discussions. The very fact that commercial media texts can “refract” an audience (i.e., lead to a diversity of social responses in a complex society [Volosinov, 1986]) makes those texts extremely valuable for critical discussions, as Ms. Kristen’s children illustrated. (To my great delight, my university has chosen Ms. Marvel #1: No Normal [Wilson, 2014], a graphic novel featuring a female Muslim Marvel superhero, for its one campus/one book project, demonstrating again that popular culture can be the site of critical action.)

I wrote this piece in recognition of my own evolving knowledge of the power of popular culture, and, in so doing, I hoped I might encourage other educators to attend in respectful, thoughtful ways to children’s popular participation, and those productions could lead to lively discussions. The very fact that commercial media texts can “refract” an audience (i.e., lead to a diversity of social responses in a complex society [Volosinov, 1986]) makes those texts extremely valuable for critical discussions, as Ms. Kristen’s children illustrated. (To my great delight, my university has chosen Ms. Marvel #1: No Normal [Wilson, 2014], a graphic novel featuring a female Muslim Marvel superhero, for its one campus/one book project, demonstrating again that popular culture can be the site of critical action.)

I hope to meet some of you as I continue my trail into children’s worlds. To poach from Roy Rogers, a popular figure from my childhood in the fifties, may you have your own happy trails.

References


**Popular Culture Texts Cited**


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