"I've got swag": Simone performs critical literacy in a high-school English classroom

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ABSTRACT: *Drawing on multimodal, post-structural, and critical theory, the author examines a high-school English classroom exchange about editing a student publication. Analysing a young woman's embodied identity performances, the author illustrates how Simone, a tenth-grader, employed, adjusted, and coupled modes of communication like speech, laughter, gesture, and silence to perform critical literacy amidst discursive subjectivities the local media and school officials were busy producing for young writers. She argues that Simone's decisions to try on a variety of genres of communication, to shift from speech modes to embodied gestural modes, and to address particular audiences at particular junctures, evidence her identity as a critically literate person in school. Moreover, shifts in genre, mode and audience afforded Simone opportunities to maintain multiple identities in the classroom, at times obfuscating her "critical" identity to maintain her status as an "obedient" student while simultaneously critical vis-à-vis other audiences. Teachers interested in critical pedagogy and ways to read participation might consider how gestures, body movement and shifts in volume are participatory, communicative acts that might provoke questions about authority and limits to classroom knowledge. Teachers can engage such questions to re-think curricula, rules, what they're willing to know about student identities in school.*

KEYWORDS: *Critical literacy, identities, multimodal, post-structural performance, student publication, youth media.*

On a hot May morning in a big-city, public high-school English class, a teacher, her students, and a professional developer discussed events at their North American school that had been picked up by local media. A week prior, a school newspaper in their academy published a lunchtime poll of several teens asking what they would do with 24 hours to live. One responder shared his desire to visit family in the Dominican Republic, die on his soil, and shoot George W. Bush. Days later, local newspapers and the Internet featured articles about the poll. After articles circulated, secret service agents interrogated the young man. But this article is not about his experience or the school newspaper that came under fire. Rather it explores how those events, their representation and dissemination positioned young writers preparing to publish a collection of student essays on taboo discussion topics later that year.

Under their teacher's guidance, and through the support of a professional development organisation (The Young Writer's Project [YWP]), students in Room 323 had taken individual essays through the writing process with the plan that their work would come together in a book for purchase by high-school advisories, (that is, structures adopted by small schools and learning communities where teachers lead school sessions designed to develop closer relationships with students, build

community and mentor toward college). The student publication centred in this article was unique for its focus on student-authored essays to address student-generated questions often neglected in classroom conversation, (for example, What influences how cliques are formed? Why do teens take on adult responsibilities?) (See Appendix A for more detailed list of questions).

In this article, I take a close look at a class period when Ms. Nicole Phagan, a tenth-grade English teacher, used the interrogation above to frame a second round of edits for student essays in the class publication. I work to analyse one young writer's communications during the conversation about these secondary edits through multimodal and post-structural lenses. Multimodally, this means that I look at "the complex layering of signs, forms, modes and functions of socially organised people [who] work together to make meaning through and in bodily communication" (Franks, 2003, p. 158). Post-structurally, this means that I situate these bodily communications in a socio-political context, where people are perpetually performing identities and positioning one another in discursive subjectivities they may or may not be interested in occupying (Bettie, 2003; Bomer & Laman, 2004). Consequently, I point to the ways Simone, a tenth-grade student in an English class, employed, adjusted and coupled modes of communication like speech, laughter, gesture and silence to perform critical literacy amidst discursive subjectivities the local media and school officials were busy producing for young writers. Simone's performances warrant close attention as she engages with a sticky literacy practice young people frequently confront when their writing goes on display – *re*-revising or *re*-editing for a broader adult audience. Analysis here illustrates ways people perform less audible/visible critical *literacies*, especially when critical *voices* are not privileged.

A multimodal lens allows me to consider the variety of communicative genres, modes and audiences Simone engages in this difficult classroom conversation. I argue that her decisions to try on a variety of genres of communication, to shift from speech modes to embodied gestural modes of communication, and to address particular audiences at particular junctures, are evidence of her identity as a critically literate person in this classroom. Moreover, these shifts in genre, mode and audience afforded her opportunities to maintain multiple identities in the classroom, at times obfuscating her "critical" identity to maintain status as an "obedient" student, still critical vis-à-vis other audiences. This lens on critical literacy holds promise for educators and researchers interested in building on youths' conceptions of criticality while offering some ways to consider how student gestures, jokes and whispers might be critical literacy practices.

Below, I briefly introduce the larger study that frames this piece and the critical identity Simone performed during her time with me. I follow with my theoretical framework, background about some of the patterned literacy practices during a year in Room 323, analysis of Simone's in-class critical literacy performances (Blackburn, 2003), and close with some possibilities this research affords teachers who locate, sanction, and teach critical literacy daily.

INQUIRING INTO POP CULTURE TEXTS, IDENTITIES, AND PERFORMATIVE POLITICS IN SCHOOL

From 2006-2008, I inquired into the ways an English teacher and her tenth-grade students negotiated meanings for pop-culture texts and their own senses of identity during class. During the academic year, I conducted participant observations of classroom interactions focusing on gathering field-notes and audio-recordings of Ms. Nicole Phagan and five, student, focal participants in class, and conducting five interactive interviews with each participant, which included discussions of participant composed photo-ethnographies about pop culture in their lives. Drawing on socio-cultural and post-structural theories of pop culture and identity performance, I identified pop culture texts of importance to participants, (for example, hair, clothing, jewellery, their student publication), identities they performed for me across the year I spent with them (for example, racial, ethnic, classed, critical), and zoomed in on moments when these texts and identities were centred in acts of performative politics (Butler, 1999), that is, times when people performed one way of being that was ignored, recognised or positioned otherwise. Ultimately, I argued that pop culture texts are always and already present in classroom interactions and unpacking moments of performative politics is critical to understanding and teaching about the contextual, contingent and political roles pop culture texts play in peoples' lives.

This article centres on Room 323's "student publication" – a pop culture text of import to all my participants – and a critical identity Simone performed regularly, across data sources. Here I zoom in on a moment of "performative politics" surrounding a pop-culture text, that is, a time when Simone performed her critical identity to or through the student publication and the identity went ignored or positioned otherwise. While this moment illustrates one of my study's major findings, it contributes to work on critical literacy as it diversifies the ways people practice critical literacy in school. Noting how Simone "performs" critical literacy renders some embodied dimensions of critical literacy visible, dimensions that might be missed or misread as disruptive, inconsequential or failure to pay attention in class. Specifically, I consider the critical readings Simone offers when she shifts **genre**, for example, serious conversation to mocking an authority figure (Grace & Tobin, 1998), **mode**, for example, verbal to gestural, that is, speech to a smirk, and **audience**, for example, whole class to more sympathetic tablemates, for her classroom communications. Communicative acts like Simone's are usually absent in literature on critical literacy, but might help researchers and teachers better understand ways students' embodied identity performances include critical literacy practices to acknowledge and foster.

ONE OF MANY SIDES OF SIMONE

Across the years of this project, Simone articulated her identity as a critically literate person to me in and out of class. My definition echoes that of Jones (2006), who states:

> Critical literacy is like a pair of eyeglasses that allows one to see beyond the familiar and comfortable; it is an *understanding* that language practices and texts are always informed by ideological beliefs and perspectives whether conscious or otherwise. It is a habit of *practice* to

> think beyond and beneath the text, investigating issues of power and whose interests are being served by texts, whose interests are not being served, and why (p. 67).

In speech, writing, photographs, gestures and her dress, Simone worked to elucidate the ways power and the personal interests of people impacted her life and the lives of socio-economically disadvantaged peoples. Instead of labelling this identity critical literacy, Simone called it "swag".

> *Simone:*   ….It's like kind of swag. Like how we carry ourselves…
> *Liz:*   What's an example, if you were to describe that? Is it like you got swag or you swag or are swag?…
> *Simone:*   It's like our persona. That's how a swagger is – how you carry yourself, how your attitude is. We probably share the same slang terms, talk the same way….Besides our talk, our attitude. It's hard to explain our attitude.
> *Liz:*   What's an example of it?….I think it's slang terms and mentality. We're not loud, but we speak loud enough to be heard and kind of like that I guess.
> *Liz:*   In what sort of spaces or heard by who?
> *Simone:*   Like I dunno. In the classroom or somethin' we'll talk loud if we have a question. We're like Miss, Miss, Miss?!

What is interesting about "swag" and the focus of this article is Simone's distinction between being loud and loud enough to be heard, but her insistence that swag constituted *more* than talk. Swag was a way of carrying oneself, an attitude, a persona, an embodied performance that had to be loud, but not so loud that it might be dismissed. It was a way of speaking, moving, thinking, that is, projecting oneself in school. Here I argue that Simone performed this critical identity in observations and interviews for this project, in and beyond the classroom. These performances are important to consider for their embodied, multimodal, literate dimensions. Specifically, they illuminate embodied dimensions of multimodal literacy and pinpoint possibilities that arise and consequences that result when we consider these dimensions of classroom communication.

When I asked Simone to photograph popular culture texts important to her, among photographs of friends and fashion, she chose to represent her neighbourhood. Snapshots framed bars and a half constructed condominium complex (Appendix B). Simone analysed the social and economic shifts taking place in her backyard, detailing the upsurge of wealthy and middle-class people moving to her neighbourhood. Buildings previously affordable under rent control laws had been bulldozed and replaced by condos like the one she photographed. She wondered about the long-term effects of neighbourhood overdevelopment, pointing out that eventually, "nobody's going to be able to afford this but rich people".

When I asked Simone about pop culture in school, she talked about music, and her essay for the revolutionary music unit in English class. Artists she identified and content she drew on underscored her swag. Specifically, she highlighted artists who questioned social norms and the ways particular populations unfairly wield power over others. For the essay, Simone chose a song by Christina Aguilera[1] featuring Lil Kim[2]. Both artists sang and rapped about different, double sexual standards for men

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[1] An American pop, R&B singer and songwriter, born in 1980.
[2] Grammy award-winning American multi-platinum rapper and singer.

and women, arguing that women are positioned as whores for the same sex acts that position men as successful and alluring. Simone also identified strongly with the work of Jay Z[3] and Biggie[4] – two artists she recognised as writing "real music" about "an issue" or "what's going on in the community". Simone defined communities as economically poor people, often judged and misunderstood, and pointed to the ways each artist complicated criminality. For example, Biggie rapped about how some poor people sell drugs because they don't finish school, can't get "a legitimate job", and in some cases need to feed a child. The following theoretical framework situates Simone's swag in her embodied classroom identity performances – performances that depict critical literacy practice in living, breathing motion.

MULTIMODALITY, PERFORMANCE, AND CRITICAL LITERACY

> …multimodality, student identity practices and embodied features of classroom events… offer important cues for understanding the kinds of textual interpretations students are making, the kinds of texts they are producing, and links between student identities and engagement with literacy (Leander & Rowe, 2006, p. 431).

Multimodal theory highlights the range of modes people employ to communicate meaning, for example, speech, writing, gesture, image, and so on. Much multimodal research focuses on analysing multimodal texts and design without the social interactions and context surrounding their production (Burn, 2003; Jewitt, 2005). For example, Kress (2003) analyses student work-products or communicative artifacts in social spaces, like a no smoking sign or a list of rules, but analyses of live interactions are nearly absent. Classroom communicative interactions are moments that must be attended to as we consider what it means to be literate. While these moments certainly take place and get transferred to printed texts on paper or the screen, they more often occur but go unrecorded. Kress (2003) considers socially produced, unrecorded texts, but contends that their traces will be slight and difficult to recover. I argue that the significance of these social texts is greater than Kress suggests.

Communicative practices, embodied, spoken, written and projected, convey not only rules and content knowledge, but traces of the many selves people are, were and would like to be (Bettie, 2003). And how these signs of the self signify in the classroom result in who gets to be high, low, reader, non-reader, quiet, out-spoken, girl, boy, difficult, and the list could go on (Wortham, 2006). These ways of being, recognised and unrecognisable, have lasting ramifications for student lives in and beyond school. As Youdell (2006) states, "…changes do not take place through legislation and policy development (although such reforms for equity remain welcome); rather, they occur through practising differently in the everyday, from moment to moment, across school spaces" (p. 40). Multimodal theory does not rule out the significance of embodied communicative practices for identities and subjectivities, nor does it spend much time illustrating it (Jewitt, 2005). So researchers using multimodal theory often couple it with theories that illuminate socio-political dynamics and underscore the significance of multimodal expression.

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[3] American hip hop artist and one of the most financially successful hip hop businessmen in America.
[4] American rapper, raised in Brooklyn, NY, who grew up in the 80s dealing drugs, eventually releasing two, highly successful rap albums, but dying at the age of 24 in 1997. He is famous for a long-standing feud between East and West Coast rap scenes and his rivalry with TuPac Shakur.

Post-structural performance theory highlights how power works through and around these communicative events, attending to ways communicative processes carried out by individuals are themselves identity performances that discursively produce subjectivities (that is, predictable or seemingly natural positions people assign to them), and provide opportunities for those subjectivities to potentially be subverted, re-inscribed or mean differently (Butler, 1999). In the case of school spaces, identities and subjectivities are closely linked to who can learn or should learn in a space, who the expert(s) is (or are) and what knowledge is valued (Wortham, 2006). Post-structural performance theory allows me to read the voice and body not just as vehicles for meanings of assigned or designed texts, but also for meanings of who people are, were and want to be in a classroom (Blackburn, 2003). So while Simone showed me her "swag," that is, her critical readings of gendered sexual standards or urban gentrification, this way of reading was not always considered literate in school. And in the case of the event analysed in this article, her critical literacy performances contrasted with expected, invited ways of reading events precipitating their student publication edits.

Critical literacy is one of many ways to read, write, think, speak and be in a local place. And what gets recognised as critical literacy depends on teacher and researcher discursive repertoires for seeing and hearing it in practice (Comber, 2006). As you will see, Simone speaks and acts in ways that might be perceived as contrary, disruptive, taboo or subversive but, when considered in light of the social and political context of the conversation, can also be construed as evidence of critical literacy and her own identity as a critical reader of the word and the world (Freire, 1970).

In the following section, I briefly sketch one of the patterned classroom literacy practices amidst several that I observed during a year in Room 323. I offer this context not to criticise a teacher's practices, for teachers are not free to act in whatever way they see fit. Rather, educators are circumscribed by school rules, education policies and media politics, as demonstrated here (Jewitt, 2005). Situating Simone's identity performances amidst a year of classroom literacy practices illuminates Room 323 norms and limits for student speech and critical analysis. Rendering the ways norms and limits for critical literacy are practised *and* countered makes it possible to expand them, so future discursive repertoires for critical literacy include ways students shift audience, mode and genre of communication during classroom activities, when critical literacy is not the direct teaching objective.

SITUATING CRITICAL? LITERACY IN ROOM 323

It was May in a south-facing English classroom on the fifth floor of a seven-story building. Large sunny windows spanned hip to ceiling. A humid breeze sweated the air. At the centre of the room were two rows of three large rectangular worktables, each with four chairs intended for students and visitors. A large blackboard hung at the room's front and a round table for four resided at the back, housing a teacher's laptop and folders. 1950s-style, green, steel lockers adorned with student work, photographs and classroom charts lined the back wall.

Students spent the first part of class listening to an audiotape of Shakespeare's *Othello*, while following along in their own copies of Act III, scene iv. Some made the assigned text-to-text, self and world connections on post-its while others listened,

gazed at books, scanned the local paper and chewed on breakfasts. This was the start of a typical day in Room 323. Ms. Phagan made it a general practice to read in preparation for writing. This meant that initial shared and independent reading activities were almost always followed by brief written reflection on a daily response log, in a reading journal or, in this case, on post-its for a discussion. Frequently, students were encouraged to practise "Habits of Proficient Readers" (Artifact, September 12, 2006), that is, make written and oral connections between personal experiences, social issues and other texts as they did on this day.

As part of the larger inquiry that frames this article, I identified five dominant literacy practices that accreted over the school year in Room 323. Ms. Phagan dubbed one of those literacy practices, "getting political." This meant she designed curriculum experiences and pedagogically encouraged students to "get political" and "dig deeper", through considering multiple perspectives on situations. Consequently, her interpretation of political analysis was aimed at achieving balance or neutrality. Lesson-level evidence of these efforts can be seen in a discussion Nicole planned for students to examine perspectives on "technology [cell phones and iPods] in the [school] building". Once students offered their own perspectives on the banned use of cell phones and Ipods, Nicole asked them to consider the "Deans' perspective on cell phones". Deans and teachers were the school-level adults responsible for confiscating cell phones and Ipods on sight in accordance with school district regulations banning student use of cellular and PSP/MP3-style devices (McCormick, 2003).

In the case of the event I unpack in this article, Simone's critical identity performances were balanced out with perspectives of the teacher or other school-level adults responsible for disciplining student behaviour or controlling public perception of student behaviours (Foucault, 1979). While the "getting political" with "multiple perspectives" literacy practice likely produced a classroom where Simone and her peers performed critical literacies centre stage, multiple perspectives were typically privileged over critical ones and school literacy seemed positioned and recognised by the teacher as a neutral practice.

EDITING *STUDENT* WRITING FOR PUBLICATION: SIMONE ASKS WHO? WHEN? WHY? AND FOR WHOM?

The Young Writer's Project student publication echoed Ms. Phagan's efforts to keep political balance and incorporate a range of perspectives to explore the year's essential question: "What is the truth?" For example, each chapter was specifically designed for different students to contribute different perspectives to address a question missing in classroom conversations. Each student worked to capture this different perspective by interviewing someone with or doing print-text research on a distinct standpoint. For example, the chapter on Depression asked: "How do you help someone with depression?" Students interviewed a cousin, a friend who'd experienced depression, a sister who'd struggled with depression, another friend who'd experienced depression, and a student teacher who was chastised for being happy in a school culture where depression was "in". The book was even slated to include an audio CD of student groups talking about their different experiences with issues raised in the book, so readers would "hear" a range of youth perspectives alongside their words.

At this point in the project, students had turned in final edits for their essays and were sitting back waiting for book proofs. On the day discussed here, everyone was anticipating a return to the current study of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Earlier in the year, entire class periods had been devoted to the research and drafting stages of the book project but, at this late stage, half the hundred-minute block periods were spent on more traditional English classroom work, that is, reading and writing to discuss a canonical work like *Othello*, while the second fifty minutes were devoted to tying up the book project's loose ends. On this day, everyone was anticipating listening to and giving feedback on the rough cuts for the book's audio component. However, the school newspaper student interrogation had prompted concerns from school administration. Now students and Ms. Phagan were expected to re-edit the book with the understanding that no student writing provoke similar scrutiny.

After *Othello's* scene iv, class transitioned to work with Mary, the YWP sound editor who came in for student feedback on audio recordings she'd spliced together. The audio recordings would be featured on the CD to accompany the student handbook. Mary played her audio rough-cut and they all talked about the segments on peer pressure and abuse. Then she turned the floor over to Ms. Phagan. Up to this point in the class period, Ms. Phagan had been chiming in as Mary directed the class, but had also been standing at the back, chatting with Jill Donovan, the professional developer from YWP. As Nicole asked the class to give Mary applause she moved to the front of the class.

VOLUNTEERING TO CRITICALLY EXTEND THE STORY: "IT WASN'T ONLY THAT…"

Now it was 9:43 am, and Nicole was sitting front and centre, feet dangling inches above the ground, casual, still centred, but not *standing*, which was her typical teacher pose. Her body location and posture suggested an effort to communicate intimacy, proximity, perhaps even youth, someone who could be and feel on her students' level. The students sat at large tables in groups of four, two on each side of the table. Nicole began, "Um, I have to be, I have to be really, uh, straightforward on something that breaks my heart to talk about with you guys. I don't know if you all know, I'm sure you do know what happened last week with the newspaper article? Did you guys hear about that? Can anybody sum it up for the class what happened? Lucretia?" Lucretia shared that an article in the school newspaper was published, quoting a student saying he wanted to kill George Bush. Lucretia explained that he was interrogated about it in his home. But when she finished this rendition, Nicole invited additional information from the class. Simone volunteered some missing information,

> *Simone:* It wasn't only that, it was with the…It was with the school newspaper how people was writin' things in the school newspaper and this one teacher, I guess he had something against the school, he gave it to the press and it wasn't only about that boy. That boy was the main topic while other teachers, it was about what other teachers said too.
> *Nicole:* Excellent, can you bring up some of the things that were brought up?
> *Simone:* Umm, like teachers like umm in the school newspaper there was somethin' about teachers and what they think about alcohol and stuff like that.
> *Nicole:* Mhm (nodding her head).
> *Simone:* It kind of like blew up their opinions.

> *Nicole:*   Mhm. Good. And I'm just gonna ask for the, for this conversation we don't use anybody's names even, umm, just to protect people.

Simone's rendition of the story was different from Lucretia's, as she first used her voice to denaturalise the occurrence of the story, pinpointing an angry teacher as the story's source, highlighting his interests and how the text was literally socially produced – all components of critical literacy (Jones, 2006). To follow, she disrupted the unilateral focus of the story, pushing her audience to consider that teachers were also under attack in the local media, hinting at the taboo content of their speech, and ending with the papers' exaggeration of individuals' opinions. While Nicole invited Simone to elaborate above, validated her points with an, "Mhm" and a head nod, she followed Simone's story extension requesting that people they discuss remain nameless and returned to a focus on the interrogated student.

While the events Simone shared may seem just a part of the story reported in the newspaper, her move to include them in the classroom and the way in which she did so evidence her critical objectives and audience awareness. Information she shared turned everyone's attention to behaviour of both students *and* teachers under fire in the local media. At Nicole's invitation, Simone shared that the *teachers* talked about "what they think about alcohol and stuff like that". This slow unfurling of the story, with teacher invitation, hovering at the topical, illustrates the situatedness of Simone's performance, her oral savvy in the classroom and audience awareness. The teachers discussed shared their support for underage drinking, so long as it didn't interfere with schoolwork, a detail Simone left out here. We might read this as her consideration for teachers' privacy or knowledge of Nicole's sensitivities. Either way, her talk moved scrutiny to adults and adult behaviours that should warrant the same consideration.

Speaking to share undisclosed facts, in the verbal mode, for a whole class audience, Simone's performance here positioned teachers and students together, equal victims of a media outlet that "blew up their opinions". While Simone was critical of the media's production of this story, she too performed a student critical of the rendition offered thus far in class. She was prepared to carefully interject with necessary facts that might have disrupted authority figures' reputations. Nevertheless, when revealed slowly and cautiously enough, little audible or visible disruption occurred.

Mocking the teacher: "Diablo! Mira a Eso…"

Disruption averted, Nicole's focus on the youthful victim of the local newspapers seemed undeterred by Simone's rendition of events. Nicole ratcheted up the seriousness of the conversation, highlighting the breadth of media attention the school story was receiving. To do so, she listed the wide variety of papers carrying stories on the school news. But in the midst of her pronunciation of the *Spanish* language paper carrying the story, Simone, along with two other classmates, Corey and Kenneth (who often joked around at the teacher's expense), all mocked Nicole's Spanish accent. The tone of the conversation shifted from the serious conversation about federal investigations to a joking, casual, familiar classroom demeanour that invited laughter from several classmates.

> *Nicole:*   …I don't know what you know about the topic, but it's blowing up. It's a pretty big deal. It's, uhh, we were in [One of two Main City Papers], we were in [The City's Main Spanish Language Paper], and I did a Google search.

> *Kenneth:* Diablo [translated devil]. *(Kenneth's voice is slow, enunciated and performed with the accent of a non-native Spanish speaker.)*
>
> *Corey:* *(Pronounces* [The City's Main Spanish Language Paper] *with a Spanish accent. Laughter continues to ripple across the class, but is most pronounced and audible from Santo, a Latino male classmat*e).
>
> *Simone:* Diablo, mira a eso, por [inaudible] *(Light giggling. Simone's voice is enunciated, slow and sounds like a performed, non-native Spanish speaker much like Kenneth's. Laughter continues.)*

Here Simone masqueraded as "one of the boys," piggy-backing on their familiarity with the teacher, but all in Spanish, a language that most in the class understood, but the teacher did not. Simone was typically more reserved in class but, in this instance, performed the joker, keenly positioning herself with two students the teacher frequently played around with, thereby evading reprimand with what seemed a jab at the teacher 's Spanish language facility. Using the same verbal mode before the whole class audience, Simone shifted genres to a mocking imitation of the teacher. Simone's performed accent, like Kenneth's, exaggerated Nicole's white, North American pronunciation pattern, and the class erupted in laughter.

Grace and Tobin (1998) explored moments of what they dub, "curricular slippage", defined as "unplanned moments where students experienced pleasures on 'their own terms' in school" (p. 43). Such moments, according to them, are opportunities for students to play with authority, push at limits to knowledge, speech and action present in their classrooms, that may encourage, "teachers to think about their authority in new ways" (p. 43). Stein (2003), while not necessarily writing such moves as student resistance, highlighted how students recontextualised a school, doll-making project into their homes based on their perceived needs for particular materials not available in school. Both are examples of students directing curriculum, playing with and around teacher-planned objectives, and subverting or re-making teacher authority. Stein points out that recontextualising the project allowed the young people to draw on symbolic and cultural resources not available to them in school. In the case of Simone, Corey and Kenneth, such curricular slippage was fleeting, but disrupted the heavy tone Nicole was looking to generate as a precursor to the edits she was about to require. Perhaps this genre shift to verbal mocking through exaggerated speech and laughter recontextualised the classroom conversation to a Spanish one, illuminating the limits of Nicole's linguistic authority, that is, the teacher preparing to re-write their English papers, couldn't speak or pronounce Spanish.

PERFORMING DESIRE POSITIONED AS JOKE: KILLING AND KIDDING ABOUT BUSH

Nicole remained cool with Simone, Kenneth and Corey's mocking interlude that lightened the conversational air. She continued relaying serious information, returning to the number of media outlets covering the story, focusing on the young man she perceived at the centre of the scandal, a focus that provoked a surprising performance from Simone:

> *Nicole:* Wait. Hold on hold on. I did a Google search of the student's name uh, I put his name in quotes and you know if you put something in quotes it only finds it when it's right next to each other? And it was on 40 web pages now!

> *Simone:*   Cool! Can, I wanna kill Bush.
> *Nicole:*   Shhhhh.
> *Jill:*   No, sweetie, don't joke.
> *Simone:*   I'm kidding.
> *Katarina:* *(Eyeing me, Jill and Nicole as she speaks to Simone)* There's a lot of teachers here.
> *Jill:*   Exactly, we're all very serious.
> *Nicole:*   We *don't* joke about that. Okay? We *don't* joke about that.
> *Simone:*   I'm kidding *(picks up my recorder and speaks into it)*. I'm kidding.

Nicole: *(Students are chatting, giggling, rustling)* I'm gonna wait. You're being very rude. Shhhh. *(Pause for 3 seconds)*	Liz: Don't worry about it. *(I say to Simone only.)*

Rather than being shocked by the statistic, Simone performed an individual desirous of similar Internet attention – perhaps the opposite response Nicole was looking to provoke. While Nicole used statistical signs to signify the invasion of this young man's privacy, Simone interpreted the statistic as evidence of a swift rise to fame. After admonition from multiple audience members, young and old (that is, Nicole, Jill and her peer, Katarina), Simone picked up my audio recorder to clarify, "I'm kidding", two times. In this instance, she underscored Jill's efforts to position her comment as a joke, affirming her "kidding" for the class, Jill, Nicole, me *and* the tape recorder. Echoing earlier verbal attention to the teachers implicated in the school newspaper scandal, Simone's gesture into the recorder denaturalised the assumed safety of the classroom and this very conversation, underscoring her awareness of the many audiences surveilling classroom speech. The physical gesture of raising the tape recorder to her lips drew direct, non-verbal attention to the potentially infinite and nearly invisible audience for my audio recording – an audience most present had likely forgotten.

Many might read Simone's "kidding" as naïve, adolescent play, but Janks (2002) elucidates the transgressive valence of the politically incorrect joke and the potential for social critique to come in less rational packages. How might this comment mean differently alongside Simone's identity as someone who's "loud enough to be heard" – someone who's critically aware of adults surveilling this project? Up to this point in the conversation, Simone had actively spoken and joked to uncloak the social production of this additional set of revisions. The physical gesture to the audio recorder not only gets her heard, but simultaneously illuminates the range of powerful, invisible adult ears listening.

Specifically, Simone's performed, that is, gestural critical awareness signalled to her teacher and all adults that even the *classroom* was not a "safe" place to discuss, given her participation in this research project. The people surveilling these youth and the source of the panic over their teen speech and writing included some of the very adults working in this classroom. School adults were busy constructing youth as victims in danger as a justification for adult protection from themselves (Lesko, 1996; Walkerdine, 2001). With this revelation, Simone shifted her performance to a more selective audience – her tablemates, the imagined readership of this project and me.

PERFORMING CRITICAL LITERACY ABOVE AND BELOW TEACHER RADARS

After three attempts at whole-class level participation through speech, group mocking and performed desire, positioned as joking, Simone subverted the teacher's rules and the class discussion. Lowering the volume of her voice (to a whisper) and employing gesture (a smirk) she conjured the appearance of silent attention and consequently moved her performance of critical literacy to a more sympathetic audience, her tablemate Rukiya (Leander & Rowe, 2006). Their hushed exchange took place at their shared workspace as Nicole spoke to the class.

> *Santo:*   Whatever happened to free speech?

Nicole: Right now our entire newspaper is identified by one line by a student who said something about President Bush. That's a big deal, even though it is free speech. Anyways, it's also a threat. I know, Santo. This is a very difficult situation for me, too. And now we have to really make sure that everything *you* wrote, as much as possible can't be taken out of context. You couldn't take a line out. But also, I'm fighting for you. I want you to know that. I want you to know that when we talked about the cover, when we talked about the layout of the book, we talked about what words are staying or going, the only people I really care about are you guys….	*Rukiya: (whispered to Simone)* What did he do? *Simone: (whispered to Rukiya)* It was something if you have 24 hours to live, what would you do? *(2-second pause)* Shoot. I wanna be in the newspaper. I'm gonna have all the attention. *Simone: (a smirk and a slow breathy giggle through the nose).*

Rukiya and Simone subverted Nicole's demand for quiet class attention. While their bodies appeared silent, they turned their attention to the matters that mattered to them. In this exchange, Simone again communicated her desire for fame, now to her friend Rukiya, who neither censored, nor positioned her comments as jokes. Simone's smirk and light laughter at Nicole's statement that, "the only people I really care about are you guys," occurred quietly enough to keep the implicit critique within her peer's purview, but loudly enough that I could hear and see that she was visibly and audibly not persuaded by Nicole's sincerity. At this point, Simone's performed critical literacy was still *visible* as she whispered and smirked at her table, rather than speaking before the whole class. Had Nicole swept the room to gauge response, Simone's smirking/whispering posture would have been evident amidst the sea of sober and perturbed student faces.

Adjusting her volume to a whisper and her mode to speechless gestures evidenced continued audience awareness, and the multimodal dexterity necessary to perform critical literacies in school across time, classrooms and teachers (Leander & Rowe, 2006). While she appeared to pay the quiet attention Nicole had requested, her face belied this posture, projecting the implicit critique connoted by a smile in serious

times. We might imagine that it is not always favourable to *voice* opposition to authority and that other modes of communication like silence (Li Li, 2005) or passive resistance might be better suited once others fail. As such, Simone's silent, smiling appearance is a savvy, timely one in the face of heightened adult scrutiny.

REFUSING TO BE A MEDIA VICTIM: SIMONE STAYS FOCUSED ON THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF TEXTS

When the conversation transitioned from Nicole's exposition to student responses, Rukiya, Simone's friend and tablemate, returned to the teacher whose leak to the press had resulted in the teen's interrogation. While her inquiry fell flat, Simone engaged Rukiya in a table level conversation about her concerns. Rather than discuss a classmate's outrage about writing in a time of war, Simone's talk focused on the social production of the media text positioning them, that is, the teacher who sourced local media stories and his personal political interests.

Rukiya: (Loudly, with her eyes and head sweeping the classroom for response) Do you all know who the teacher is?	
Santo: Why'd they do that? They were just saying how creative writing is, it was just an assignment	*(Rukiya and Simone talk quietly with each other and me at their table as Santo talks centre stage)*
Katarina: There's always other meanings.	*Simone:* It's a guy. That's all I know. He doesn't like Mr. Salazano [the building principal] and he's in this school and he's been in the school for a long time.
Santo: and they had to like blow it out of proportion. Something's up. It's all about freedom of speech and all because of the Patriot Act nobody can say anything.	
Jill: You're right.	*Liz:* Oh really?
Santo: It's all because people are living in fear about all this war and Al Qaeda and all this terrorism.	*Rukiya:* He's starting things with Mr. Salazano?
Nicole: Right.	*Simone:* He's been here for like 30 years. And like they can't fire him because there's like laws for that. He's been here and he doesn't like Salazano. He doesn't like, all the teachers know this, because they know, because he doesn't like Salazano and he makes it obvious.
Santo: And also it has to do with creative language. It's actually becoming ridiculous.	
Nicole: Absolutely.	
Jill: And I would encourage you guys, you know I mean you're now, uhh, very personally feeling the repercussions of this. Even if it's not a lot, it's still affecting the way that you know we need to look at the work that you've done, so I, I'd definitely encourage you guys to think about how you want to respond, umm, you know to the repercussions. Do you wanna write an editorial? …	*Rukiya:* I didn't even know this happened.
	Liz: I heard about it, some pieces. Where did you find out *(to Simone)?*
	Simone: A teacher.
	(They stop talking on the side and return to the whole group.)

While no one would answer Rukiya's question to the class, Simone entertained her question at the worktable, reviewing how political interests drove the teacher who had sourced the media. While there is no shift in genre, mode or audience, Simone's focus away from the student and his interrogation and toward the teacher architect of this

media scandal stands in stark contrast to the classroom conversation occurring at the moment. In her earlier story extension, Simone proffered the teacher's interested leak for the class to consider, but this line of inquiry was never taken up. Instead Nicole maintained the student's interrogation as the driving force for the secondary round of edits. But at her table, with Rukiya, my audio- recorder and me, Simone maintained *her* interest in the *local newspaper source's* interests. An eye for the interests, rather than the edits, underscores her continued critical literate identity. Performing for Rukiya, she situates their student publication edits amidst the local actors contributing to the media's production of a youthful terrorist, a production which positions all student writers as victims – a position essential for their teacher's advocacy and editing protection (Lesko, 1996).

FORESHADOWING FORECLOSURE: "A LOT OF PEOPLE JUST DIDN'T SPEAK 100% TRUTH"

Toward the close of the conversation, Simone raised her hand and was invited to speak before the whole class, offering her critique of the situation. After a student revealed, "…now it's like saying we can't really write anything anymore without being careful," Simone positioned *her* own and other students' writing experiences as less naïve.

> Simone: *(Laughing quietly to herself)* It's this, this, this… What I was gonna say is that, oh yeah, I think that in the piece, a lot of people didn't speak fully like what they think about the same topic, because of what like, because of what might be looked upon them, because of like in the future what might be reflected upon them.
>
> Nicole: That's a good point. So you kind of already did some self-editing just to protect yourself.
>
> Simone: Yeah. Yeah. I think that a lot of people did. I think that a lot of people just didn't speak 100% truth because they know like you'll be reading it and they know probably other teachers will be reading it.

Tentatively, nervously Simone performed a critical literate identity, making her own self-censoring transparent for the teacher, and speaking for peers. Making her point, "people didn't speak fully," before the whole class and on others' behalves suggested that further edits rested on false assumptions of youthful naivete, student/teacher openness and free expression. In so stating, she positioned teachers as the audience to which they wrote and the audience to which they "didn't speak 100% truth". She too positioned her classmates as self-editing, audience-aware writers, not in need of these edits, always and already wary of the teacher's purview. This flipped the power dynamic on its head, suggesting that edits had already taken place, without teacher help, but certainly due to teacher gaze. Such an idea positioned the teacher's editing process as naïve, unfounded, and students as the persons in control of the edits, that is, people who knew the limits of the project and what teachers were willing to "know" about their students. Such a move echoes Fleetwood's (2005) suggestion that "authentic" youth perspectives are productions disciplined by adult producers, editors and pedagogues who guide, surveil, set and enforce much of the criteria for "authentic" youth productions.

Simone's decision to volunteer and perform this critical voice at the end of a conversation about the edits centre-stage illustrates the versatility of her critical

literate identity, across modes, audiences and genres. While ignored, censored and silenced in earlier segments of the classroom conversation, Simone's critical literate identity performances moved to her table only to return to the whole class, performing critical literacy, positioning her writing alongside her peers, and subverting the naïve writing subjectivity her teacher, some peers and the local media had imagined for her.

IDENTIFYING AND ENGAGING CRITICAL LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM

Simone inhabited a critical identity that, while not labelled "critical", was "loud enough to be heard." Much like Moje (2000), who began with "gangsta" youths' literacy practices, that is, their patterned ways of reading, writing, speaking, tattooing and gesturing to claim power and space, I argue for a similar starting point with "critical" literacy. This means that teachers and researchers might begin with eyes and ears open to ways young people naturally denaturalise power relations in their lives, lives which include the unrecorded social texts of communicative interactions (Kress, 2003) in school and the English classroom. Answering my queries into pop culture in her daily life, Simone photographed neighbourhood gentrification, talked about "swag" and began to invite me to identify the critical identity she performed when asked to re-revise writing in school.

Critically literate identities are most easily identifiable when performed in traditional, verbo-centric modes, but social text readings will often come in less obvious silent, gestural, whispered packages given the powerful roles school adults inhabit in young peoples' lives. And as Simone's shifts to less audible and visible modes demonstrate, these critical performances often belie teacher recognition, when students are concerned with occupying "compliant" classroom positions. Multimodal lenses on literacy and post-structural perspectives on identity performances and subject positions helped me detect the critical literate performances in communicative interactions that might be misread as disruption, inconsequential or failure to pay attention in class. Simone demonstrated that even gestures, silence and subversive table talk illustrate a person's facility with modal, genre and audience selection and adjustment.

Though teachers are not positioned to sit, listen, watch and record as I did in this research project, educators invested in expanding their discursive repertoires for criticality (Comber, 2006) *are* positioned to pause, wonder, ask questions and query the social texts we produce together. But classroom events and identity performances are shrouded in a flurry of real time, moment-to-moment positions. Educators working with young people over the course of a year might move from examining the more obvious readings that occur before the whole class and pre-planned assignments to the many side conversations, eye-rolls, and jokes often connected with the planned curriculum. These less audible, seemingly distracting subtexts warrant pause and questions about authority, especially in times like the May event analysed here, when teacher power over student writing is brought into high relief.

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Appendix A

Some student publication questions

Why do people discriminate?
How do cliques take shape?
How do you resolve conflicts with peers?
Why do people join gangs?
What keeps students from learning?
What makes school rules fair?
Do you have to go to college to be successful?
Are alcohol and drugs as dangerous as portrayed?
How do you know when to have sex?
How do you make a romantic relationship work?
How can you help someone with depression?
Why do teens commit suicide?
Why do people abuse others?
Are traditions essential?
How do teens end up with adult responsibility?
How does having a baby impact your life?

Appendix B

Simone's photograph of a condominium high-rise being erected in her neighbourhood
– one example of a popular culture text important in her life