MAKING MEANING IN HYBRID SPACES: CO-CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE USING HIP-HOP

by

JOANNA LYONS ANGLIN

(Under the Direction of Peter Smagorinsky)

ABSTRACT

In the three article manuscripts that comprise this dissertation, I analyze data sets comprised of transcriptions of audio-recordings of three groups of high school students as they discussed their interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the first article, I foreground the work of Vygotsky (1978) and the notion that "thinking involves a sort of dialogue with others" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 62). In examining how the students co-constructed meaning using hip-hop as a mediational tool, I also discuss the implications of using popular culture to create hybrid spaces in the classroom. In my second manuscript, I examine the impact of the *Hamlet* rap activity to create a space in which students performed certain identities connected with or in contrast with that of hip-hop culture. Drawing on the works Gutiérrez (2008) and Moje (2004/2011), I discuss how hybrid spaces impact the enactment of specific identities, specifically two high school seniors with very different relationships to hip-hop culture. Focusing specifically on the students' performative roles of *hip-hop insider* and *hip-hop outsider*, I analyze the language the students used to enact those specific identities (Gergen, 2015). For my third manuscript, I write for educators interested in incorporating popular culture, namely hip-hop culture, into the traditional classroom. Using a comparison of three groups of students, I provide a discussion of how the

elements of hip-hop culture can be used within the confines of a traditional classroom to re-engage students in literacy practices. I discuss the implications for such practices in light of the current assessment-driven educational climate, and I provide examples from the students' discussions to support the use of popular culture in the classroom.

INDEX WORDS: Social constructionism, hybrid space, discourse analysis, identity, hip-hop pedagogy, teacher research

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by

JOANNA LYONS ANGLIN

BS, Georgia College and State University, 2001

MAT, Georgia College and State University, 2002

EdS, Piedmont College, 2009

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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JOANNA LYONS ANGLIN

Major Professor:	Peter Smagorinsky
Committee:	Donna Alvermann
	Kathryn Roulston

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2017

DEDICATION

For Robin and Jo Ella—two of the strongest women I've ever known.

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I offer a special thank you to my husband Chris, without whom I would not have had the courage to complete this dissertation. Throughout 16 and a half years of marriage, he has supported me in all of my crazy endeavors, this just being the most recent. From late nights spent working at the dining room table to piles of articles scattered all over the house, he never once complained. Instead, he rubbed my shoulders and handled the household chores so I could focus and finish what I started. It is impossible to put into words all that he means to me. I could not ask for a better partner and soulmate. He truly is my better half.

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I would be remiss if I didn't express my thanks to Donna Alvermann, who validated my passion for celebrating students' popular culture interests in the classroom. Her love of literacy reminded me that teachers don't teach content, they teach children. A child who won't read a book is no better off than one who can't.

If I ever decide to leave education to interview people all over the world, Kathy Roulston is to blame. My initial impression of qualitative research was skepticism. How could writing about what we see and hear be research? In Kathy's class, I fell in love with the power of

qualitative research—it is through qualitative research that you can give voice to people and their experiences. People, especially children, don't become numbers lost in the midst of charts and graphs. As education increasingly emphasizes numbers over children, I think back to Kathy's class and the power qualitative research to truly change education, if only we'd listen.

Thank you to the strong women who have inspired and guided me on this journey—Dr. Evelyn Jackson (who went first on the doctoral journey and showed me the way), Dr. Julie Kimble (a friend whose passion made me yearn to complete my journey), Dr. Tameka Osabutey (who completed her doctorate with four kids in the house!), and Dr. Allisa Abraham (who reminded me that we are stronger than we think). These special women made the journey seem possible.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, HYBRID SPACE, AND LITERACY

I consider myself a professional student. For the past three decades, I have been enrolled in some school or program. I have written countless essays, read countless books—from Atwood to Milton, from Morrison to Vygotsky. Put me in a classroom, and I am right at home. My fondest memories, however, are not of the essays, or even of the books; instead, what stands out clearest in my mind are the times when I have had the freedom to collaborate with other, creative individuals to produce something more exciting than an essay. I can still picture the moment when my 10th grade English teacher took a chance on my group and allowed us to do our own interpretation of Dante's *Inferno*, complete with a game-show-esque narrator who provided a modern take on the scenes we acted out. I can still remember leading my classmates through the courtyard in 12th grade as another group member threw pieces of paper in the air as we taught them about Flannery O'Conner's *Wise Blood.* Overwhelmingly, these are the moments that I remember with a smile, not the essays, not the tests—neither multiple choice nor written—not even the heated classroom debates.

It is not surprising, therefore, that I took that same approach to my role as an educator. I enjoyed providing students with opportunities to think outside the box, and to express their learning in unique and creative ways. Over my 11 years in the classroom, I had students create movie trailers, build board games, and act out countless modernizations of novels and plays. However, the assignment that I am most proud of was not my idea at all—at least not originally.

It was the inspiration of one of my students, a gregarious, creative young man who was enrolled in the most traditional of courses, Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature and Composition.

AP courses are the domain of the College Board. To become certified to teach an AP course, educators must attend a week-long seminar, which teaches them the goals and standards of the particular AP course, and provides a model for how to teach the course. Teachers must also submit a syllabus to the College Board for approval. These hoops ensure a consistency of instruction and materials across the nation. At the end of the course, students take an AP exam, written and graded by experts hired by the College Board, in order to receive college credit. AP courses provide high school students with "access to rigorous college-level work" (College Board, 2017, n.p.). These courses are designed to provide students with the "opportunity to dig deeper into subjects that interest them, develop advanced research and communication skills, and learn to tap their creative, problem-solving, and analytical potential" (College Board, 2017, n.p.). AP courses are discussion- and writing-focused courses, especially AP English Literature and Composition.

So, there I was, in my sixth year of teaching, teaching my third group of seniors in an AP English Literature course. I had spent the previous two years building up the program, recruiting non-traditional (aka, minority and low-income) students, and creating an increasingly inclusive classroom. Not surprisingly, I found myself faced with a room full of students who didn't look like the traditional AP students in my building, or across the nation (see Bland & Neve, 2012 for a discussion of College Board's shift to open enrollment in AP courses). As the year progressed, I found myself looking for ways to make *all* of my students feel welcome and included in the overwhelmingly White, European, male curriculum. Even though my school used AP English

Literature as a fill-in for British Literature, the traditional 12th grade course, I began incorporating works by women, including American women, and by multicultural authors. During a unit on identity, the students selected from works by Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Ken Kesey, and others. Still, there was something missing.

It was during one of those unscripted, in-between moments in the classroom—you know the ones, the off-hand conversation when students are talking about what they really enjoy—that I overheard one of my students mention that he was a rapper. I had been pondering how to create a more culturally-inclusive classroom, and this was the defining moment for me. Without any real expectations for what they would produce, I challenged my students to work in groups to create raps about *Hamlet* following the reading of each act. There was no rubric handed out, and I made up the requirements (i.e., must work in groups, must have at least 20 lines, and must rhyme) as they asked questions along the way.

Not surprisingly, the first group to perform included the burgeoning rapper. They stunned us all, possibly even themselves, with the brilliance of their rap. The other groups, made up primarily of White students, took this as a challenge, and I found myself watching good-natured rap battles at the end of each act of *Hamlet.* It was a joy to watch the students work together and *enjoy* learning. They talked about their raps outside of class, and worked on them outside of class, too. The project took on a life of its own. My colleagues heard about it, and I can't begin to describe their surprise that students were rapping in an AP class. This activity, which was a spur-of-the-moment idea that took on a life of its own, became the thing I was most known for as a teacher. And, it's the thing I am most proud of.

However, this type of learning experience seems to be offered less and less as teachers find themselves beholden to state- and district-mandated testing, which often consumes weeks of

the school year. Teachers, and students, find themselves facing a seemingly endless litany of tests in a race to prove *teaching effectiveness* and *growth*, respectively. Certain learning activities, such as these raps, get lost in the rush to make it through the curriculum and measure students' mastery of the standards. However, the importance of true learning opportunities cannot be understated, especially at a time when learning, and students, seems to be the casualty in the war on education.

Social Constructionism

From birth, people begin the process of working with others to construct their knowledge of the world and their own identities. It is through interactions with others—initially parental figures and later school-age peers—that people learn the meaning of the signs and symbols that make up the reality around them. Initially, a person builds language and knowledge through grasping objects and learning their names (i.e., ball, leaf, etc.). Later, this learning becomes more structured in the school setting, where children learn the rules that are associated, not only with words and objects, but also with learning itself.

Knowledge is not a static entity to be delivered from one person (the teacher) to the passive recipient (the student). In fact, Vygotsky's model of language acquisition indicated that "a child's first speech is social; words evoke specific responses and must be reinforced by adults" (Emerson, 1983, p. 254). Unlike the current assessment- and teacher-centered approach to education, which views thinking and learning as the product of receiving knowledge from the teacher, Vygotsky argued that "Thinking is not the *product* of an action but the *action* itself, considered at the moment of its performance, just as walking, for example, is the mode of action of the legs, the 'product' of which, it transpires, is the space walked" (cited in Wertsch, 1985, p. 201, emphasis in original). In fact, Vygotsky's work "implies that even when people are alone,

their thinking involves a sort of dialogue with others, including those long gone" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 62), so, while formalist instruction forces students to look at the author's use of metaphor or hyperbole to find meaning, students are inherently having an inner dialogue connected to a whole host of other topics—their personal lives, popular culture, other texts, etc.

Vygotsky was concerned with the "links between thinking and speech" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 64) and how the two processes interact with one another to produce visible evidence of learning. Instead of viewing thinking and speech as separate entities, or subjugating speaking to thinking as merely a means of communicating that which has already occurred, Vygotsky argued that "the process of speaking itself often serves as a vehicle through which new thoughts emerge" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 64). There is a "continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought" as one makes sense of new concepts or clarifies existing ideas (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 218; as cited in Roth, 2010, p. 49). One has only to speak with a young child to see the thinking-speech partnership in action.

However, sociocultural theory argues that the process for socially-constructing meaning continues throughout a person's life. In fact, Pontecorvo (1993) argues that, from a Vygotskian perspective, "the individual functioning of the mind is part of a larger social functioning that is situated in a cultural environment" (p. 191). Therefore, even if I were having a silent conversation, I would still be referencing the culture around me (e.g., my background, my religious or political affiliations, my gender, etc.) as I think through various topics. The impact of culture occurs not only in conversations, but also as a reader interacts with a text. This conversation, of sorts, is "culturally mediated, locating meaning not only in the reader and the text but in the cultural history that has preceded and conditioned both" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 124).

In fact, this co-construction of meaning leads to the impact of such collaboration on one's identity. Vygotsky argues that "[o]ne makes a self through the words one has learned, fashions one's own voice and inner speech by a selective appropriation of the voices of others" (Emerson, 1983, p. 255). The language people use shapes their identity and their ways of thinking, and, in turn, they use that language to create an identity within the spaces they inhabit, a notion echoed in Burr's (2003) research. For example, as I share my thoughts during a faculty meeting, I am creating my professional identity, as well as acting upon others' views of me. My role within this educational setting is very different from my role in an informal conversation with my friends over coffee, even if the topic of the conversation is the same.

Gergen (2015) argues that everything from words to emotions is made sense of through collaborative action. In fact, he argues that without someone to respond to, or to help make meaning with, people make no sense at all; this notion echoes Bakhtin's concept of *addressivity*—all utterances are addressed to someone and therefore exist within the context of the response (Holquist, 1990/2002). These collaborative interactions help people define the reality around them, as well as their identities within that socially constructed reality.

Education, with its increasing emphasis on the use of state-mandated assessments, often seems focused on what Paulo Freire calls a *nutritionist* view of education, where teachers simply feed the knowledge to students, who wait passively to receive the knowledge (as cited in Gergen, 2015, p. 147). For social constructionists, modern schooling has become an exaggerated form of Freire's nutritionist model, a place where, instead of students and teachers working collaboratively to make sense of the world and curriculum, students sit in rows regurgitating information in order to pass the mandated tests.

To that note, typical classrooms provide students with limited ways of enacting their identities, and constructing meaning. Within the classroom, there are specific protocols that regulate how teachers and students interact, as well as how meaning is discovered and shared. In fact, the structure of typical classroom discussions is counterproductive to the presupposed goal—teaching students to think on their own—because these classroom discussions "end up being more lectures than discussions" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 65). Therefore, settings are created not just by the physical space—the walls of the classroom—but also by those within the space.

Hybrid Space

Space is vitally important as one considers how people co-construct meaning. For Vygotsky, the organization of how space and thinking interact is not linear: it is "(at least) two-way: people's thinking shapes their physical and symbolic worlds, and their engagement with those worlds in turn shape how they (and others) think" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 62). Unfortunately, schools and classrooms are spaces filled with power, which often lies in the hands of the teachers, who "endorse and reinforce" the ways in which texts are understood, as well as the methods by which meaning is made (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 129). This power allows teachers—and schools and test companies—to determine what meanings are the *correct* meanings in regards to curriculum content.

Hybrid space has been used to describe the practice of incorporating out-of-school knowledge within official educational spaces (Moje et al., 2004). One way to create a hybrid space that disrupts the traditional power roles within schools is to incorporate popular culture, such as young adult literature, rap, comic books and graphic novels, video games, and other media that are accessible to youth, into the curriculum (e.g., Alvermann, 2010).

Three manuscripts about social constructionism and hybrid space

In each of the following manuscripts, I analyze data sets that feature transcribed audio recordings of high school students as they worked in small groups to collaboratively create interpretive raps based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* For each of the three groups, there were five audio recordings that were transcribed into Word documents for coding and analysis. Included here are three manuscripts that explore key themes that arose from those data.

Pitfalls and Promise of Collaborative Groups interpreting Hamlet

In my first manuscript, I foreground Vygotsky's (1987) work on the social construction of meaning and the use of *meditational tools* drawn from the social, cultural, and historical knowledge of the participants (Smagorinsky, 2011). Specifically, I examine how a group of high school students used hip-hop culture, particularly rap, to mediate their knowledge of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

A key component in this manuscript is the discussion of how students enacted various identities within their collaborative group. In discussing these roles, I recognize that *identity* is a multifaceted notion involving how people see themselves, how they present themselves to various audiences, and how others recognize them. Therefore, I attend to the students' *performative roles* within the group, as it is impossible to attest to how the students saw themselves using only the data set. Therefore, my attention is focused on their enactment of various identities related to the activity itself—*procedural leader*, *peace-maker*, and *hip-hop insider*—and how the enactment of those specific identities resulted in conflict.

In this manuscript, I also discuss how the *hybrid space* created by the intersection of the traditional classroom and text with the hip-hop culture-oriented task afforded the students certain freedoms in their discussions of *Hamlet*. Drawing upon the work of Hill (2009), I examine the

impacts of incorporating hip-hop culture, which is often criticized for misogynistic and violent lyrics, into the classroom, and analyze how the students co-constructed original, *interpretive texts* that evidenced their nuanced understanding of the play.

"To be or not to be:" Navigating identity in hybrid spaces

In my second manuscript, I draw upon Gee's (2012) work on the social construction of identity, particularly through the use of language. In this study, I analyze how the inclusion of hip-hop culture into the traditional classroom affected what identities the students enacted within that space. The combination of disparate spaces—the traditional AP classroom and hip-hop culture—resulted in a struggle for two of the students.

I build upon Gergen's (2015) work on the struggle that often exists when people co-construct their identities with people within a space. As identities are often dependent upon how others view you, I examine how the students enacted specific identities within the space of the rap activity in order to either build community with the class or the activity, or both.

This study foregrounds two key performative identities—hip-hop insider and hip-hop outsider—in the discussion of the students' navigation of the hybrid space. I use the term *hip-hop insider* to refer to the enactment of an identity aligned with certain elements of hip-hop authenticity—blackness, the streets, "hard" heterosexual masculinity, representing where you are from, and being true to yourself (Low, 2011, p. 31). For the two students featured in this study, this identity was problematic. As such, I use the term *hip-hop outsider* to refer to statements directly rejecting the identity of hip-hop insider. Both of these terms are key to the analysis of the impact of the activity on the students' perceived and performed identities.

Re-engaging Students in the Age of Accountability

In my third manuscript, I provide an examination of how classroom teachers can use hip-hop culture to re-engage high school students in the development of literacy skills. Drawing upon Vygotsky's (1978) work on social constructionism, I explore how students made use of the elements of rap to co-construct meaning. Building upon the work of previous authors, such as Adams (2016), Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen (1998), and Theodotou (2017), I examine the impact of incorporating non-traditional meditational tools, such as rap, on students' literacy skills.

This study also draws upon the work of Alvermann (2010) in discussing how students' popular culture into the classroom can be used to create more critical readers. Specifically, I examine how the students' attention to word choice and hip-hop conventions, such as rhyme and call and response, allowed them to construct original interpretive texts that went beyond the level of summary.

Intended for an audience of teachers, this manuscript follows the tradition of teacher research, examining my own pedagogical practices and how popular culture can be used to re-engage high school students in the learning process. Using a comparison of three groups of students, the article discusses the impact of incorporating hip-hop culture into the traditional classroom to provide students with opportunities to explore new ways of thinking and learning. I offer this analysis in contrast to the current educational climate, which emphasizes accountability and assessment. As such, this manuscript provides a timely reflection on current teaching practices and the impact on learning.

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CHAPTER 2

PITFALLS AND PROMISE OF COLLABORATIVE GROUPS INTERPRETING *HAMLET*

Anglin, J. L. To be submitted to *English Education.*

Knowledge is not a static entity to be delivered from one person (the teacher) to the passive recipient (the student); instead, the construction of knowledge is a collaborative effort often taking place *between* two people and in interaction with a host of other factors. Vygotsky's model of language acquisition proposed that "a child's first speech is social; words evoke specific responses and must be reinforced by adults" (Emerson, 1983, p. 254). Unlike the current assessment- and teacher-centered approach to education, which views thinking and learning as the product of receiving knowledge from the teacher, Vygotsky argued that "Thinking is not the *product* of an action but the *action* itself, considered at the moment of its performance" (cited in Wertsch, 1985, p. 201, emphasis in original). In fact, Vygotsky's work "implies that even when people are alone, their thinking involves a sort of dialogue with others, including those long gone" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 62), so, while formalist instruction forces students to look at the author's use of metaphor or hyperbole to find meaning, students are inherently having an inner dialogue connected to a whole host of other topics—their personal lives, popular culture, other texts, etc.

In this research I provide an analysis of the transcribed discussions of five high school seniors who collaboratively created spoken word poetry as a means of understanding and interpreting William Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* In doing so, I investigate how the meaning constructed by the students for the canonical Elizabethan drama was mediated by their interpretation through a contemporary popular culture form. To study the processes through which they used the spoken word genre as a means for constructing and expressing their understanding of the drama's complexities, I inquired into the following questions:

1. What resources did the students draw on to produce their spoken work performances?

2. What do the data suggest that the students learned through their composing process about the play's meaning?
3. To what extent, and in what manner, did interpreting *Hamlet* through spoken word performances contribute to their construction of the play's meaning?
4. To what extent, and in what manner, did interpreting *Hamlet* through spoken word performances contribute to their construction of their individual identities?

Theoretical Framework

I frame this study in terms of the social-cultural-historical theory outlined by Vygotsky (e.g., 1987) and updated by researchers in recent decades to provide corrections and extensions of his ideas (see Smagorinsky, 2011). This framework emphasizes the manner in which learning to think is mediated by cultural signs and tools, particularly speech, in a variety of social settings. I apply this perspective to the discussion of how students used the popular culture medium of spoken word poetry (rap) to collaboratively create interpretative texts based on Shakespeare's tragic work *Hamlet.* This activity made use of hybrid spaces within the classroom to afford students with the opportunity to draw upon their individual cultural and lived experiences, as well as their knowledge of popular culture, to make meaning of the play.

Youth Culture as Mediational Means

Mediational tools are inherently *cultural* tools, as people draw upon their lived experiences and culture as they make sense of the world around them (Holland & Valsiner, 1988; Smagorinsky, 2011; Wertsch, 1991). While much research in this area focuses on the use of cultural tools by marginalized populations (see Gutiérrez, 2008), the wider student population can benefit when teachers afford those experiences to all students. Alvermann and Hagood

(2000) argue that including popular culture texts, particularly music, can help students engage in "complex multiliteracies" as both consumers and critics (p. 438).

Researchers have made the connection between popular culture and the creation and enactment of youth identities. Popular culture tends to resonate with adolescents because of the human desire "to resist an official view of who they must be and what they must do" (Finders, 1996; as cited in Neilsen, 2006, p. 9). By not including popular culture texts in the classroom, "many English teachers were silencing the everyday experiences of youth" (Savage, 2008, p. 62) and leaving youth to consume popular culture texts without a critical eye. Hagood, Alvermann, and Heron-Hruby (2010) argue that *how* these texts are used and *why* become important issues for educators to consider.

In this vein, Hill (2009) argues for using hip-hop culture, especially music, to create a space where students can be empowered to become critics as well as consumers. He examines how the elements of hip-hop culture "can be used within classrooms to improve student motivation, teach critical media literacy, foster critical consciousness, and transmit disciplinary knowledge" (p. 2) and "to reaffirm and challenge particular social identities that informed and reflected their lived experiences" (p. xix), as opposed to the traditional curricula that often denigrated students' outside-of-school identities and experiences. In doing so, Hill pulls from research by Morell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) on how using hip-hop in the classroom provides the teachers with a way to access all "students' lives in ways that promoted academic literacy and critical consciousness" (p. 88). However, Hill acknowledges that incorporating hip-hop into the classroom is not a panacea for today's educational woes. In creating spaces that empower some students, others may be silenced.

The students producing raps were not, like the hip-hop-oriented youth studied by Kirkland (2008) and others, urban Blacks. Rather, they were suburban students from a variety of ethnicities whose immersion in youth culture enabled them to know, understand, and be able to reproduce the conventions of rap music, while having little in common with the urban artists among whom the genre originated and flourished. However, their contentious relationship with and appropriation of these conventions illustrates how rap has become part of the mainstream popular culture while still retaining the singular elements that first popularized the genre among urban youth as a means of self-expression and resistance to the dominant culture.

Hybrid Classroom Spaces

The classroom is a space wrought with issues of power as the policies, procedures, and practices in schools seem designed to perpetuate a specific set of values and expectations. The space itself is part of an institution, a powerful entity that determines what is learned, when it is learned, who learns it, and how they learn it. Hybridity, or hybrid space, is often used to refer to the intersection of the official space of the classroom and the unofficial spaces created by the incorporation of the cultures and backgrounds of students into the classroom (Moje et al., 2004). Researchers have applied hybrid space theory in examining how students' outside of class knowledge, or funds of knowledge, can be incorporated into math (Cribbs & Linder, 2013) and science (Barton & Tan, 2009) classrooms to provide more meaningful learning environments.

I draw upon research in the use of popular culture to create hybrid spaces or settings within settings in classrooms. Popular culture is familiar to students in terms of its formal features, which are amenable to appropriation and often involve themes that are consistent with those that run through canonical works. Various researchers argue that incorporating students' popular culture knowledge can provide disengaged students with the opportunity to re-engage

with the school curriculum (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016) or provide traditionally engaged students with new ways of interacting with and understanding complex texts (Smagorinsky, Cameron, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2007).

Drawing on the multiple interpretations of hybridity in educational research, I will examine how the socially constructed space of a classroom impacts how students position their roles within the classroom. As such, I will look at how the collaborative spoken word poetry activity allows the students to create a hybrid space for learning while also causing them to critique the identities created for them through the space of the classroom. Because the activity takes place both *within* and *without* the official classroom space, it constitutes a hybrid space. As such, I will build upon the research of hybrid space theorists as I examine how students use classrooms spaces to enact their own identities while collaboratively constructing meaning.

Context of the Investigation

The setting for this study was a high school located in a suburban city near a major Southeastern U.S. metropolitan area. The school, which enrolled approximately 1,400 students, had recently undergone a dramatic shift in both demographics and in the socioeconomic status of its students. This study took place in a senior Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition class wherein I was the teacher during the spring of 2010. The recent emphasis by the College Board on encouraging open enrollment for all AP courses coincided with the district's shift in demographics, resulting in a classroom with a diverse population, many of whom were taking an AP course for the first time as seniors. Following an alternating A/B block schedule, my AP class met for 90 minutes every other day from August until May with the same group of students being enrolled both semesters. Data collection occurred during a unit on identity that I taught between April 13 and May 13. While I taught the unit on identity with all

three of my AP classes, I selected my first period class as participants in this study. While the class had only 14 students, the make-up of this class was representative of the AP classes I taught throughout my time at this high school: 50 percent White, 43 percent Black, and 7 percent Latin@.

Participants

I chose to focus on this particular group of students—Amanda, Jasmine, Ana, Manny, and Elijah (all students' names are pseudonyms)—because in addition to being the most diverse collaborative group in my AP class, they were able to consistently produce a spoken word poem that both summarized and interpreted Shakespeare's *Hamlet* even while navigating ongoing interpersonal conflict. In order to provide a greater context for this study, I include brief profiles of the five students who participated as members of this group. Some of the information below could be considered conjecture on my part; however, I include those observations in an effort to provide a richer context for their interactions during this study.

Amanda. Amanda, while outgoing with her friends outside of class, was often quiet during class discussions. Unlike many of her classmates, Amanda was taking an AP class for the first time as a senior, and she had enrolled based on the fact the she knew me from when I coached soccer previously. Amanda was unfamiliar with many of her classmates, many of whom had taken several other AP classes together throughout their high school careers. In spite of her reticence in class, Amanda was witty and had a sarcastic sense of humor that appeared when she was in smaller settings, such as when she visited my classroom before school.

Jasmine. Jasmine took charge of the group from the very beginning, which was a contrast to her usual behavior in my class. Typically seated in the back of the class, Jasmine usually remained quiet while the more outgoing students took charge during class discussions.

However, her battle for control of the group resulted in much of the conflict that occurred during their construction of the spoken word poems.

Ana. In class, Ana was a cheerful, smiling student who was quick to laugh at jokes. However, as the year progressed, she became withdrawn as the weight of her two jobs resulted in her falling asleep in class at least once per week. Like Amanda, Ana was an outsider in this class—she had not taken any AP classes with the rest of the students—but unlike Amanda, Ana was not shy about voicing her opinion. This resulted in her clashing with Jasmine on more than one occasion during their group work.

Manny. Like the rest of his group, Manny was an atypical AP student—he was the only male Latino student in my AP classes and this was his first AP course. However, this did not hinder him in any way. He was quick to volunteer to act out parts during the reading of plays, and he was a key member of class discussions. Manny was an affable student, quick with a joke and kind to everyone. Not surprisingly, these qualities became hallmarks of his participation with his group. However, the domineering natures of both Jasmine and Ana left Manny vying to get his opinions heard through all five acts of the play.

Elijah. Elijah was a young man who conducted himself with the utmost decorum, and he was liked and respected by everyone who met him—teachers and students alike. Quiet and unassuming, Elijah presented himself as an original thinker, often wearing a vest and blazer to school. The oldest of five children from African immigrants and a first-generation American, Elijah was serious about his education and his place as a role model for his younger siblings. A religious student who was an aspiring preacher, Elijah played the peace-keeper in his group. In fact, he was quick to support almost any idea, so long as it did not compromise his principles.

Instruction prior to *Hamlet* Unit

The unit emphasizing identity construction had evolved over the years to meet both the AP curriculum and the students' interests. As such, the unit on identity contained several works from different genres and time periods that concern a character who struggles to find him or herself in some way, including August Wilson's *Fences,* William Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

The instruction leading up to the spoken word poetry activity included the close reading of literary works designed to prepare the students for the AP exam, which requires interpretations based on New Critical assumptions (Olson, Metzger, & Ashton-Jones, 1998). While the works taught in this class typically followed the traditional canon, I had incorporated opportunities throughout the year for students to stretch their creative muscles, requiring them to analyze popular music, create movie trailers, and design symbolic objects to represent important characters and themes. These earlier activities provided students with structured processes for analyzing texts through a variety of mediums, drawing on their creative skills as well as outside of school knowledge. As such, my students were not unfamiliar with using creativity to make sense of difficult texts such as Shakespeare.

The *Hamlet* Unit

The selection of *Hamlet* as the culminating piece for the semester-long unit on identity was intentional. As a play about a young man who struggles to find his place in his world following his father's untimely death, the play provided a vehicle through which the seniors could examine their own struggle to determine who they wanted to be and what their next steps in life were. To provide a frame of reference for the spoken word poetry task, I showed the students a video of one of the raps my students created the previous year. We discussed what elements of the rap made this example a good rap and what the students could have done to

improve upon it. I then instructed the students to split into groups and gave them the following directions for creating their own raps:

1. Write a 10-20 line rap. It should have a rhythm and a rhyme scheme.
2. It should summarize Act I.
3. It should include key characters, events, and ideas, and can include quotes from the play or famous songs.
4. The whole group MUST be involved in the performance in some way.

The students were given roughly 30 minutes to summarize Act I as a group and turn it into a rap. While many of the students were 18 at the time of the study, both the students and their parents were asked for their assent in order for the students to participate. After giving their assent, students in each group were given a recorder to capture their composing process. Each group performed its rap, and this process was repeated for each of the remaining four acts.

Method

Data Collection

Data collection occurred during the four week unit on *Hamlet* that culminated in May of the students' senior year. While students read, performed, and discussed each act of the play, I recorded my observation in field notes, which informed my coding and analysis of their collaborative discussions at the end of each act. As students worked in their self-selected collaborative groups to compose the raps, I captured the students' discussions using audio recorders to separately and concurrently record each group's discussions. The resulting data set encompassed fifteen audio recordings that averaged approximately 30 minutes each. These methods allowed me to document the students' discussions and interactions as they composed, revised, and practiced performing their raps. Following the completion of the Hamlet unit, I

transcribed these audio recordings into text files that were then loaded in the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. During the transcription, I recorded my initial thoughts about themes in memos. These memos served as a preliminary analysis of the data (Glesne, 2006).

Data Analysis

Following the initial review of the audio recordings for this group, the transcripts of the composing sessions were coded using a coding system created during a study in the spring of 2010 (Author & Colleague, 2014), which was informed by prior studies in this line of inquiry (see Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995). This prototype provided superordinate categories such as the students' *composing processes*, *social processes*, attention to the *source text* (*Hamlet*), *intertextual references,* and *student performative text*. Using an existing coding system helped inform and validate the themes that arose in this data. During the transcription and coding processes, the students' unique interpersonal dynamics necessitated the creation of new subcodes, including *interpersonal conflict* and *peace-keeper*, in order to accurately convey the collaborative process in which the students engaged. Codes were applied to each student's speaking turn. During transcription and coding, I used memos to document my thoughts and any themes that arose, which served as an initial analysis of the data and informed the writing process. The codes and frequencies for each are available in Table 1.

Place Table 1 about here

Findings

As the coding system indicates, the students' collaborative composition of interpretive raps incorporated both formal and procedural knowledge emerging from a variety of sources,

produced within the constraints of the assignment and related school factors. The process of composing the raps further generated new knowledge about the play through the students' efforts to represent it in a popular culture medium.

Through the incorporation of their knowledge of hip-hop conventions, the students used the spoken word poetry activity to create a hybrid space—combining their knowledge of popular culture with the requirements of a traditional classroom setting. The students drew upon their varying levels of familiarity with hip-hop conventions to analyze and represent the meanings in Shakespeare's *Hamlet.*

In addition to drawing upon their knowledge of hip-hop culture and conventions, the students enacted certain social roles in their co-creation of meaning. Throughout the five acts, the students took turns enacting the roles of leader, hip-hop insider, and peace-maker to varying degrees. As such, this activity afforded the students with new opportunities to enact, accept, and even reject the roles and identities created for them within the traditional classroom setting.

For this study, I choose to focus on the processes engaged in by these students during each of the play's five acts. For each act I begin with a brief summary of the act, follow with the text of the students' rap compositions, and then provide my analysis.

Act I

Summary. The play is set in Denmark and opens with the appearance of the ghost of the late King Hamlet to two guards. The late King Hamlet's brother Claudius has assumed the throne, and King Hamlet's wife, Gertrude, marries him and remains the Queen. Prince Hamlet mourns his father's death, resents his mother's quick remarriage to his uncle, and distrusts the newly-crowned King Claudius. Ophelia is cautioned by her father Polonius and her brother Laertes to not fall in love with Prince Hamlet, as he might be manipulating her emotionally and

politically. King Hamlet's ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius poisoned him and urges Prince Hamlet to kill Claudius but not Gertrude.

The interpretive rap. To represent and interpret this action, the students produced the following rap:

"Swear"

Now swear by my sword

Mother, married to my uncle

The man who killed the king

O villain, villain, smiling villain

The king's ghost comes to me

with murder, murder, swear revenge

King Hamlet and Hamlet they rule Denmark

Then a tragedy happened that was sure to leave a mark

He was betrayed, something like Caesar and Brutus

Hamlet promised the ghost revenge

Be sure to be true to this

Now I have to plot

I can't get caught

Somethin' rotten in Denmark

More than these thoughts

Now "swear"

Social processes and interpersonal conflict. From the beginning of the collaborative spoken word activity, this group struggled to navigate the social processes involved in working

in a collaborative group. All five students took turns assuming the role of *procedural leader* during the collaborative process, which resulted in a continual jockeying for power. Throughout the group's discussions, they were plagued with *conflict*, which took the form of productive disagreements—wherein the students held conflicting opinions as to how to write the raps—or interpersonal conflict—wherein the students' disagreements were personal in nature and tended to disrupt the climate in the group.

The group was coded as making comments related to *interpersonal conflict* 48 out of the 685 segments, or roughly 7% of the time. The group's unique social structure resulted in the creation of three new codes: *social process/interpersonal conflict* [*SP:IC*], *social process/role/peace-maker* [*SP:R:PM*], and *social process/nonverbal* [*SP:N*]. In spite of this conflict, the students primarily used their allotted time to construct their interpretation and summary of the act's key moments. The group's interpersonal conflict is captured in the brief segment below, which includes the codes applied to each student's speaking turn:

Jasmine: Who's going to be the leader? [*SP:R:PL; SP:RC*]

Ana: I think you will, Jasmine. [*SP:R:PL; SP:A*]

Manny: You will. [*SP:A*]

Jasmine: What does that mean? [pause] Hey! Hey! Let's read the book now— Eck, eck, eck— [verbal noise to quiet them] We're reading the book now. [*SP:R:PL; SP:RA:RA*]

Manny: You're mean. [sounds surprised] [*SP:IC*]

This opening segment provides a snapshot of the group's contentious interpersonal dynamics. Almost immediately, Jasmine asserted herself as the leader of the group, resulting in an ongoing power struggle that lasted throughout all five collaborations. Even as she posed the

question, "Who's going to be the leader?" she was claiming her position as the *procedural leader* [*SP:R:PL*] of the group, which was recognized without question by both Ana and Manny. Jasmine's leadership style resulted in almost immediate conflict, with Manny claiming, "You're mean." While this sort of ongoing interpersonal conflict [*SP:IC*] could have prevented the group from completing the assigned collaborative rap, a new role emerged—*peace-maker* [*SP:R:PM*]. At varying times throughout the act, Manny, Elijah, and to a lesser extent Amanda, assumed the role of peace-maker, using humor and nonverbal chuckles [*SP:N*] to defuse the contentious situations. This pattern of conflict and resolution continued throughout the collaboration for all five acts.

Narrative perspective and plot focus. The collaborative interpretive process both helped and hindered the students as they engaged in a wide-ranging discussion to produce their interpretation of the first act. Although their social processes were problematic in some ways—they were coded as being *off-task* [*OT*] on 53 of the 685 segments, or approximately 8% of the time—the students primarily used the allotted time to work on their analysis and interpretation of the act. In spite of the many choices the students could have made, they focused intensely on the *composing process* [*CP*] instead of the interpretation of the act itself. I illustrate the students' emphasis on the *global planning* [*CP:P:CA:GP*] phase in the excerpt below:

Amanda: If we do four lines each— [*CP:P:CA:GP*]

Jasmine: In the narration part— [*CP:P:CA:GP*]

[Six lines discussing the difference between writing or performing the four lines.]

Amanda: I was like, that's not gonna work. [*SP:RI*]

Jasmine: I mean, we write a couple of lines— [*SP:R:PL; CP:P:CA:GP*]

Manny: I mean, we do it as a group—and then we—present it. Break it up. [*SP:L; SPT:R:C*]

[Twelve lines debating the number of lines to assign each member.]

Manny: I guess, I guess we could do that— like quote— in a row— from— where we got them. — Like, from beginning to the end— do the important quotes, and then— [*SP:R:PM; SP:A; IR:CL:C; CP:P:CA:NS*]

In this segment, the students began by discussing the procedural aspects of their composing process (Ana asks: "Who's gonna write?") before deciding on the *narrative structure* [*CP:P:CA:NS*] of their rap. Instead of organizing their interpretive rap to follow the act's plotline, the students decided to focus on key moments in this act, starting with the revelation that Hamlet's uncle killed his father, which, while a pivotal moment for both Hamlet and the play, occurs at the end of Act 1.

At times, the students struggled with the constraints of the activity, particularly the requirements set forth by the teacher to compose a collaborative rap. The students referenced the *teacher-imposed framework* [*C:TIF*] (i.e., "That would make, I think this is, this is enough, 'cause we're gonna have, like, 10-20 lines. That's the max, right?") as well as the general nature of composing collaboratively (i.e., "Shouldn't we do it as a group?"). However, the structure of the task did not hinder the students' discussion, which revealed the playful atmosphere created by the activity.

Intertextual references. During the composing process for the first rap, the students' *intertextual* connections were limited but key. As this group spent a substantial amount of time negotiating the social structures involved in working in collaborative groups, their narrative relied heavily on elements from the source text. However, the students drew upon prior

knowledge, such as of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and the Bible, to deepen their understanding of the relationships between the characters in *Hamlet.*

Central to the students' interpretation of *Hamlet* was the theme of betrayal. In analyzing Hamlet's experience with betrayal, the students initially combined two famous betrayals—that of Jesus and Julius Caesar—with Jasmine's suggested line, "Betrayed like Jesus and Brutus." In an example of the group's productive conflict, Manny argued that pairing Jesus and Brutus did not make sense because Jesus was betrayed but Brutus was the betrayer. His statements regarding this provisional line indicated a deeper understanding of both the theme of betrayal illustrated in *Hamlet* as well as the other classic works upon which Jasmine's initial line drew. Although the students ultimately selected the pairing that matched the necessary rhyme scheme, their attention to the content of the line indicated that rhyme was not the sole consideration as they co-constructed their interpretive text.

Composition of an interpretive text. Reducing an act from a play of the complexity of *Hamlet* to a short poetic rap requires decisions regarding what is most critical to the drama's action. I coded 18 instances of the students' discussion regarding the play's *narrative structure* [*CP:P:CA:NS*]. Focusing on the Ghost's onus for Hamlet, the group's rap ignored other elements of the act's plot, foregoing mention of Ophelia, Polonius, and other key characters in lieu of focusing on the impact of the King's death on Hamlet and his desire for vengeance. In fact, the group's rap emphasized the importance of the brief conversation between Hamlet and his father's ghost, noting that "the chat they were having was sure to leave a mark." In fact, their opening lines positioned Hamlet in the same level of power as the late king—"King Hamlet and Hamlet, they ruled Denmark" [*CP:P:CA:C; T:I*]. This was an interpretive choice that positioned

Hamlet not as a petulant young man, as many interpretations do, but rather as an adult equal in power and responsibility to the other main characters in the play.

The students thus did not simply summarize Act I, but engaged in a collaborative, interpretive composition that produced a new text in relation to Shakespeare's play. The students took an existing story and retold it through the confines of the hip-hop genre—10 of their statements were coded as *interpretive*, and 21 *summative* in reference to the play. However, their incorporation of hip-hop elements focused on the performative text, which I will discuss in the following section.

Composition of performative text. The students' ultimate task was to take their verse and perform it as a rap. This process involved a number of decisions about role assignment, hip-hop conventions, knowledge of popular culture, and other factors that informed their choreography and performance. For this group, the process of planning their performance consumed much of their discussion involving Act 1, with 40 of their statements referring to the *coordination* [*SPT:R:Co*] of the rehearsal, including much discussion about who was going to say which lines of the rap during the final performance. The following excerpt illustrates how their final performance took shape during the process of rehearsal:

Ana:	"He is betrayed, something like Caesar and Brutus. Hamlet promised the ghost revenge." [*SPT:R:R*]
Jasmine:	"Be sure to be true to it." You guys— [*SPT:R:R; SP:P:PL; SPT:R:Co*]
Ana:	Okay, we gotta find— [*SP:R:PL*]
Elijah:	There's— [*SPT:R:Cr*]
Jasmine:	There's no beat. [*IR:HC:C; SPT:R:Cr*]
Manny:	"Be sure to be true to it." [*SPT:R:R*]

Jasmine: Where's the beat? [*IR:HC:C; SP:RC; SPT:R:CR*]

The students' conception of the performance incorporated various elements of hip-hop performance and culture, including their concern over incorporating a *beat* [*SPT:R:B*] in their performance and assigning various roles to group members for the performance (i.e, "Amanda's just gonna be in the back dancin'?"). Although the students did not make a direct reference to *rhythm*, their discussion during the rehearsal indicated their understanding of the importance of rhythm in making "the lyrics a rap, rather than just words spoken in a random way over a beat" (Edwards, 2009, p. 111), as noted by Jasmine's comment, "There's no beat." With the rap was composed and rehearsed within the time frame provided by the class session, the students performed their rap for the class the following day. This pattern of composing and then performing continued for the remaining four acts of the play.

Act II

Summary. Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo to France to spy on his son Laertes, and Claudius similarly uses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet. Ophelia tells her father, Polonius, that Hamlet visited her, appearing unkempt and acting strangely. Polonius declares that Hamlet's erratic behavior is due to his love for Ophelia, but Gertrude maintains that Hamlet's change in behavior is due to his father's death and her hasty remarriage. While he behaves erratically, he does not provide Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with a definitive answer. Hamlet bewails his own inaction in avenging his father's death. Determined to rectify his inaction, he recruits a troupe of traveling actors to perform a play that will reveal if Claudius indeed murdered his father.

The interpretive rap. The students produced the following rap in relation to their discussion of Act II:

Act 2, Act 2, what do you do?

It's Hamlet's friends spyin' on you.

What do you say? Is it true? Is it true?

Polonius selling his daughter to you.

Hamlet goes up to Ophelia's room, with a jacked up shoe.

What do you do?

Tell the King and Queen call his friends across the wing

Find a solution to solve this thing.

Hamlet don't jive, looking crazy in the King's eyes

A fling with the bling ring on his mom's thinga thing.

Takin' Daddy's job but he's really a slob

Wait 'til the play to reveal that day

Now he's gonna pay for taking Daddy away.

Narrative perspective and plot focus. The students' collaborative composing process reveals the social nature of their learning as they made sense of Act II's developments as well as their growing familiarity and comfort with the framework of the collaborative raps. Their playful composing process afforded the students the opportunity to form their own understanding of *Hamlet*, including a deviation from the critically-established interpretation.

The Act II discussion began as a summary of the plot, with the group members bouncing off of each other's ideas, branching from more traditional summary statements to interpretive comments. The opening conversation captures this collaboration:

Manny: Polonius is, like, meddling— in everything. [*CP:P:CA:C; T:S*]

Ana: Polonius is— [*CP:P:CA:C*]

Manny: I think Polonius is crazy— [*CP:P:CA:C; T:I*]

Ana: Hamlet's gone crazy— [*CP:P:CA:C; T:I*]

Manny: He's on, he says a lot. [*CP:P:CA:C; T:I*]

Ana: He spoke to Ophelia. [*CP:P:CA:C; T:S*]

Elijah: Aye. [drawn out sound] [*SP:A*]

Ana: And tries to trick her in the deal-ia. [*CP:P:WC:CTP; T:I*]

[Three statements approving her suggested line.]

Ana: So she tells her—spy daddy. [*CP:P:WC:CTP; T:I*]

The group's playful discussion is a sharp departure from their conversation about Act I, in which they struggled to move beyond the global planning phase to make their own interpretation of the play. In spite of a brief moment of *interpersonal conflict* [*SP:IC*], the group managed to stay focused on the task at hand—composing an interpretive rap of Act II. In fact, the back and forth nature of their exchange, which derailed them during the first rap, enabled the students to clarify their understanding of the play and to build upon each other's suggestions as they created the interpretive rap. Contrary to the first collaboration, in which several group members were silenced, either by other group members or by choice, the discussion of this act reveals the change in the group's social dynamics, with both Amanda and Manny making contributions to the group's composition. Overall, only 22 segments were coded as being statements of *interpersonal conflict*, less than half of what was evident in their collaboration on Act I.

Composing an interpretive text. The group drew on their knowledge of *hip-hop culture* [*IR:HC*] throughout their composition of the rap for Act II. Jasmine's early suggestion of "Lookin' fly. Hamlet, don't jive" as a *provisional text* draws on popular slang, which is often

used by hip-hop MC's to "make the content more colorful" (Edwards, 2009, p. 47). While this line underwent several revisions, a version of the line was included in the final performance. Although the group's discussion was peppered with direct references to hip-hop culture, their composing process was primarily centered on *play* [*SP:P* and *CP:P:WC:CTP*]. While play and off-task behavior are often the byproducts of semi-structured collaborations between students, this group's play actually aided their interpretation of Act II. The segment below captures a key example of the group's playful, but productive, composing process:

Ana: Something that rhymes with ring. Fling? [*CP:P:WC:Rh*]

Jasmine: Oh my gosh. Ana can rap. [sarcastic] [*SP:IC*]

Amanda: Shut up! [*SP:IC*]

Ana: He put a ring, on his mom's thing thing. [*CP:P:WC:CTP; T:I*]

[group chuckles]

Amanda: If you write that? [chuckles] You're reading it. [*SPT:R:Co; SPT:RA:RR*]

This excerpt also illustrates the students' evolving use of *rhyme* in their composing process. Though the opening lines of their interpretive text relied on a multi-liner, which is "a rhyme scheme that joins together three or more bars of lyrics" (Edwards, 2009, p. 101), the latter half of their rap featured both single-liners and internal rhyme (i.e., "Takin' Daddy's job but he's really a slob"). The combination of rhyme schemes is a technique used by MCs, most notably KRS-One and Busta Rhymes, to keep the listener entertained (Edwards, 2009). Through their discussion of rhyme, the students explored various aspects of Gertrude's involvement with Claudius, which they represented through the symbol of the "bling ring." Although this word choice deviated sharply from school-approved language, the students made use of the freedoms

afforded through the *hybrid space* to explore different interpretations of Shakespeare's classic characters.

Composition of an interpretive text. Overall, I coded the group's Act II as more interpretive (32 codes) than summative (9 codes). While the group drew heavily from the source text for their composition of the rap for Act I, they deviated from the text in key ways during their rap for Act II. The group's interpretive work was evident as they discussed Polonius's often ineffective attempts to spy on Hamlet at Claudius's request:

Ana: He's a slob. — Who's that guy who's always spying? [*CP:P:WC:R; SP:RC*]

Jasmine: What's his name again? [*SP:RC*]

Amanda: Polonius? [*SP:RC*]

Manny: Yeah. [*SP:A*]

Ana: Polonius thinks he's got a job, but he's really a slob. [pause] He's Polonius. He's gonna catch— [*CP:P:WC:CTP; T:I*]

Manny: I think, I think, like, Polonius has his own delusions. I don't think he's really a snitch. [*CP:P:CA:C; SP:RI; T:I*]

What began as an off-the-cuff remark that Polonius "is a slob," of which there is no proof in the play, became an opportunity for the students to discuss Polonius's larger role in Claudius's plot against Hamlet. While the characterization of Polonius as a slob seems to represent a misunderstanding of him as presented by Shakespeare, one could argue that this label sums up his overall ineffectiveness—he fails to successfully complete any of the tasks assigned him. As the students exchanged comments, their interpretation of Polonius shifted from him being "a slob" to having "delusions" to being "a snitch." As such, the students' discussion revealed an

understanding of the characterization of Polonius, and indicated that their playful presentation of him was not inaccurate. As argued by Smagorinsky and Coppock (1995), such reconfiguring of plots does not indicate a misunderstanding of the literal storyline. Rather, it suggests attention to the emotional qualities of the action and how they may be depicted in new transmediational (Suhor, 1983), or multimodal, texts.

Act III

Summary. Claudius and Polonius eavesdrop on a conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet tells Ophelia that he believes she is spying on him, and he grows agitated and hostile to her. That evening the play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, is performed, with a mime acting out the Ghost's version of King Hamlet's death as a prelude. Claudius's strong reaction to the play confirms to Hamlet that the ghost was telling the truth about Claudius's involvement in King Hamlet's untimely death. Concerned that Hamlet is becoming a threat, Claudius decides to send Hamlet to England, using his erratic behavior during the play as an excuse. Hamlet, ironically, chooses not to kill Claudius because he thinks Claudius is praying for forgiveness, but he is not. Following the play, Hamlet quarrels with his mother, expressing his displeasure over her hasty remarriage. Hamlet inadvertently kills Polonius, who is hiding behind a curtain in Gertude's room, thinking he is Claudius. The Ghost appears to remind Hamlet to treat Gertrude with kindness.

The interpretive rap. The students produced the following rap through their process of interpreting the action in Act III:

The King's plans fail to find out Hamlet's reasons

They go see the play with acts of treason

Hamlet's actin' crazy, givin' all kinds of puns.

Ophelia, Ophelia, I want you to become a nun.

Hamlet and Claudius fight, wouldn't wanna be them.

Forget it young Hamlet, you're going straight to England.

Polonius, Polonius, spyin' by the drapes.

While Hamlet talks to Mommy, he pops out and gets a scrape—

Out comes King Hamlet, that mom don't see

Hamlet keeps pointin'. Mom's like, "R U crazy?"

"I gotta be cruel, only to be kind"

Gotta get this revenge so the throne will be mine.

Narrative perspective and plot focus. In spite of the ease with which the group created their interpretive text for Act II, the group initially struggled to find a focus for their rap of Act III. Without Jasmine to assume the role of procedural leader, which she had fulfilled for the previous two raps, the group had a stilted start to their discussion of the actual play, making 21 statements regarding the absence of Manny and Jasmine, both of whom were absent from school that day due to illnesses, before shifting their focus to a summation of the act.

Condensing several pages of complex dialogue into a 10-20 line rap necessitated a variety of interpretive choices. The group referenced this difficulty in their discussion that "It is a rather long act." While the structure of this interpretive rap followed the general plot of the act, the students made key interpretive choices, including multiple points of view and only briefly mentioning the play within a play—one of the most pivotal scenes in the play. The segment below illustrates the collaborative process the students used to construct their raps:

Ana: It's important that they have failed to find out why Hamlet's acting strange. Okay. So— [*SP:R:PL; T:S*]

Elijah: [clears throat] Alright. [*SP:A*]

Ana: The king fails to find out— [*CP:P:CA:C; SP:R:PL; T:S*]

Elijah: Yes. [*SP:A*]

Ana: The plan, Hamlet's plan. He doesn't believe he's crazy. And he wants to keep a close watch on him. [*CP:P:WC:CTP; T:S*]

Elijah: Oh, that's fresh. [*CP:P:WC:A; IR:HC:Si*]

Ana: But why? [*SP:RC*]

Elijah: That's fresh. [*CP:P:WC:A; IR:HC:Si*]

Ana: But why does he want to keep a close watch on him? [sound of pages flipping] 'Cause— [*SP:RC; T:S*]

Ana's initial comment that "they have failed to find out why Hamlet's acting strange" became the theme around which they centered the *narrative structure* [*CP:W:CA:NS*] for their rap, choosing to include events from Act III that focused solely on Hamlet's behavior and the implications thereof. Even though she suggested the line, Ana continued to struggle with the motivations of the characters, asking the group, "But why does he want to keep a close watch on him?," illustrating how the students used the rap activity to co-construct meaning in a way that went beyond simply summarizing the key events of the play, focusing instead on interpreting the motivations of characters which is considered a level 2 or 3 task according to Webb's Depth of Knowledge (Hess, 2004).

The group continued to shift between third person omniscient narration (e.g., "Polonius hides behind the drapes while Hamlet talks to his mommy") to first person POV (e.g., "I must be cruel only to be kind"). These narrative shifts positioned Hamlet in an *active role*, a deviation from conventional interpretations of Shakespeare's tragic hero as one almost paralyzed by

indecision (see Belsey, 1979). The group's choices focused, instead, on Hamlet's position of power with Ophelia, where he attempts to make decisions about her future—"Ophelia, Ophelia, I want you to become a nun"—and his key moment of impetuous action, wherein he mistakenly kills Ophelia's father, the meddling Polonius. Having become comfortable with the hybrid space afforded to them by the spoken word activity, the group made use of the freedom to explore alternate interpretations of the text, such as empowering Hamlet.

Composing a performative text. During the composing process, Ana and Elijah spent a considerable amount of time negotiating rhymes, which often led to refiguring the intent of the play in order to fit their rhymes. For example, in spite of Polonius's key role in Act III, they ultimately did not use his name as part of a rhyme, determining that "Polonius is just such a weird name, you can't rhyme that with anything." Instead, they chose to rhyme "drapes" with "scrape," referencing how Hamlet inadvertently stabs Polonius after the play. This interpretive choice was influenced by their attention to the importance of rhyme in their rap. Unlike their rap for Act II, their rap for Act III followed a single rhyme scheme, relying on the more traditional choice of couplets, much like the Beastie Boys' "Shadrach" (Edwards, 2009, p. 99).

Additionally, their composition of a performative text featured key elements of hip-hop *performance conventions* [*IR:HC:PC*]. As they coordinated their performance of the rap, discussion centered around incorporating a *beat*. Elijah introduced the notion of a beat by simply creating one with his mouth. After several attempts by Ana to perform their rap, she and Amanda tried their hand at beat boxing, ultimately deciding that Amanda "can ad lib" while Ana beat boxes. Ana's playful imitation of a scratching record was a reference to the technique of turntablism, which is often credited to DJ Grandwizard Theodore (Newman, 2002). The students made use of their knowledge of hip-hop conventions to create a hybrid space wherein their

knowledge of hip-hop and popular culture was just as valued as that of Shakespeare's play. In doing so, the students were able to co-create a new text that illustrated their new understanding of the classic text.

Composition of an interpretive text. The students' discussion of Act III as they co-constructed meaning revealed their newfound comfort with the hybrid space afforded them by the spoken word poetry activity. Through the discussion process, the students moved from Ana's initial summative statements—"The plan, Hamlet's plan. He doesn't believe he's crazy. And he wants to keep a close watch on him"—to an interpretive statement from Claudius's point of view—"Forget it, young Hamlet, you're goin' straight to England." The students' ratio of summative-to-interpretive codes, 18:28, suggests that the task of transmediating the play into the form of a rap involved a strategic negotiation of incorporating what literally happened in Shakespeare's play, how those events influenced the characters' emotions and following actions, and how the students felt about those characters and events into a cohesive, original narrative.

Act IV

Summary. Claudius learns of Polonius's death from Gertrude and uses it as an excuse to banish Hamlet immediately to England. In a hostile confrontation, Hamlet reveals to Claudius the location of Polonius's body, and Claudius orders Hamlet to England, along with a letter instructing those in England to murder Hamlet upon arrival. Meanwhile, Fortinbras marches on Poland, and Hamlet regrets not having Fortinbras's fortitude in conducting a pointless if honorable war. Ophelia goes mad in her grief over her father Polonius's death and ultimately drowns. When Laertes goes to the castle to confront Claudius, Claudius informs him that Hamlet is Polonius's killer, leading them to plot Hamlet's death in a fencing match.

The interpretive rap. To depict and interpret this action, the students produced the following rap:

Ophelia, she got problems. Ophelia, she got problems.

Ophelia, she got problems. Get your mind right.

Ophelia, she got problems. Cuz she's in love with Hamlet.

But he just using her / Like an experiment

New things happen / Come walk through the door

Fortinbras waging war

Hamlet's upset cause he wants to do more

Laertes' poison sword is ready to bore

Act 4, Act 4, wanna know more?

Go get your own book at the Borders bookstore.

Narrative perspective and plot focus. For the construction of their rap for Act IV, the students continued the character-focused points of view of their raps for Acts I, II, and III, all of which focused on Hamlet even as the raps alternated between third and first person point of view of the action; however, the students' selection of Ophelia's perspective for the opening lines created a very different rap from the previous three. Through their discussion, they did shift their focus from Ophelia to Hamlet, drawing upon the play's key *characters* [*CP:P:CA:C*] in their planning of the interpretive rap, as seen in the segment below:

Elijah: Get your mind right. Ophelia, she's got problems. Ophelia, she's got problems. Ophelia, she's got problems. Get your mind right. Yeah. [*CP:P:WC:CTP; SPT:R:PP; SPT:RA:R*]

Jasmine: Ophelia's in love with Hamlet, but— [inaudible] [*CP:P:CA:C; CP:P:WC; T:I*]

Elijah: Yeah! [*CP:P:WC:A*]

Manny: You don't know that for sure. [*CP:P:WC:C; T:I*]

Jasmine: So? [*CP:P:WC:E; SP:R:PL*]

Amanda: So? It's our own interpretation. [*CP:P:WC:A; T:I*]

Elijah: Right? [chuckles] It rhymes. [*CP:P:WC:A; CP:P:WC:Rh; SP:R:PM*]

[Four statements regarding the need to write down the line before they forget.]

Elijah: "Ophelia, she's got problems. Ophelia, she's got problems." [*CP:P:WC:R*]

Jasmine: I mean, she's got her family, and they're causing problems. [*CP:P:WC:CA:C; T:I*]

Manny: She's got problems. I get it. [chuckles] [*CP:P:WC:A; T:I*]

Their narrative structure deviated widely from the order of events in the act. By focusing first on Ophelia's "problems," which are not revealed until the latter part of the act wherein she appears disheveled, singing songs and handing out flowers, was a purely interpretive choice [*T:I*]. In fact, the students' rap truncates much of the action in this act, summing up key events such as Hamlet being sent to England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern being dispatched with him as spies, and the discussion of the location of Polonius's deceased body, into the line, "New things happen / come walk through the door." The result is a rap that focuses more on stylistic and performative elements than creating an accurate summary.

Intertextual references. The group's composing process was a reference to the writing process favored by many rappers—beginning with the hook, or chorus, first. While this method is preferred by such writers as will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas (Edwards, 2009), the students

did not set out to intentionally write the hook first. Instead, they stumbled upon this writing structure following Elijah's suggestion of the line "Ophelia, she got problems." The line itself is likely an allusion to Jay-Z's popular single "99 Problems" from 2004, which was itself a reference to the Ice-T single "99 Problems" from his 1993 album *Home Invasion.* Additionally, the group later referenced a second Jay-Z song with the added refrain "Get your mind right," a nod to the 2000 collaboration between Jay-Z, Memphis Bleek, Snoop Dogg and Rell.

Composition of an interpretive text. Although the students grounded their interpretation [*T:I*] in the events of the play, they presented those actions through their unique interpretive lens. For example, although Elijah explained that the death of Polonius may have prompted Ophelia's suicide, there is no reference to her death in their rap other than the repetition of "Ophelia, she got problems." In fact, the only reference to her actual emotional situation and suicide is possibly the line, "Get your mind right" that appears as part of the ongoing refrain. Although the ending lines of their rap seem to focus on characters other than Ophelia, one could argue that both Hamlet and Laertes, her assumed boyfriend and brother respectively, are connected to Ophelia, and the characters who are not closely connected to her—namely Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and even Claudius—are absent from the group's rap in spite of their key roles in the action of this act.

Act V

Summary. Act V opens with two gravediggers digging a grave for Ophelia. At Ophelia's funeral the priest declares her death a suicide, which angers her brother Laertes and leads to a fight between Hamlet and Laertes over whose grief was greater. Hamlet tells Horatio how he escaped the plot against his life and had Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed instead. Hamlet and Laertes meet in the castle and, in spite of Hamlet asking Laertes's forgiveness for the death of

Polonius, engage in a sword fight. During their fight Gertrude drinks from a poisoned cup intended for Hamlet and, while dying, tells the assembly that she has been poisoned. During the sword fight, Laertes fatally stabs Hamlet with a poisoned sword tip. Hamlet in turn stabs Laertes with Laertes's sword following an exchange of weapons during the fight. Hamlet then stabs Claudius and forces him to drink the remainder of the poisoned wine, the combination of which kills Claudius. As he dies, Hamlet instructs Horatio to name Fortinbras as the next King of Denmark. Fortinbras, who arrives shortly thereafter, assumes the crown, and Horatio, as requested by Hamlet, tells the story portrayed in the drama.

The interpretive rap. The students produced the following rap to represent and interpret this action:

Hamlet, he wanna be a balla, shot calla,

Got his spot taken like a MARTA.

Everybody dies and he's the cause-a-it.

Momma is an alcoholic.

After one sip, she took a dip.

Now she's dead.

Her late husband's brother she wed.

Made Hamlet mad, fumin' red.

Laertes' dad is dead.

Sword fight, sword fight.

All through the night.

Poison tip on the knife.

Killed everybody, righhhht.

YEAAAAHHHH.

Narrative perspective and plot focus. The students' rap began with an emphasis on Hamlet's determination to avenge his father's death, which Jasmine summed up in the playful line "Hamlet wanna be a baller, shot caller." While this line deviated from the traditional conceptualization of Hamlet, this playful use of hip-hop terminology captured Hamlet's desire to take control of his life through avenging his father's death. To continue this portrayal of Hamlet in an active role, they focused on the culminating scene from the act, wherein everyone dies, omitting several key incidents, including Hamlet's impulsive jump into Ophelia's grave and Fortinbras's assumption of the throne of Denmark. The excerpt below illustrates their focus on Hamlet as the central figure in the tragedy at the end of Act 5:

Jasmine: Everybody gotta hit the pause-a. What's next? [*CP:P:WC:CTP; SP:RC; SP:R:PL; T:I*]

Ana: And he's the causer. (*giggles*) [*CP:P:WC:STP; T:I*]

Jasmine: Yeah. Everybody gotta take a pause-a. His momma— [*CP:P:WC:STP; CP:P:CA:C; SP:R:PL; T:I*]

Ana: Or you can do the cause-a. [*CP:P:WC:E*]

The students' rap centered on their interpretation that "Everybody dies and Hamlet's the cause-a-it." Following this initial summation, the students reiterated key events from previous acts, namely Gertrude's remarriage and the death of Polonius, Laertes's father, to support their assertion. While these events occurred in previous acts, the students included them as part of their explanation for Hamlet's actions and the culminating scene, wherein everyone dies except for Horatio. This interpretive choice helped them frame Hamlet in an active role, as opposed to the more conventional interpretations of him as an inactive figure (Besley, 1979).

Intertextual references and interpretive process. The integration of hip-hop conventions in the Act V rap served to accomplish more than simply allowing students to infuse the play with modern terminology. Rather, it required an intense attention to detail, particularly in determining the rhyme. The excerpt below illustrates the group's attention to both the content and hip-hop conventions:

Jasmine: She's an alcoholic. [*CP:P:WC:CTP; T:I; CP:W:PT*]

Ana: The cause-a. [*CP:P:WC:R*]

Jasmine: *It.* His mom's an alcoholic. [*CP:P:WC:CTP; CP:P:WC:R; CP:W:PT*]

Ana: That's why she took the poison and then she took a dip. [*CP:P:WC:CTP; CP:W:PT; T:I*]

The use of the multi-line rhyme scheme forced the students to make considerable interpretive choices in their rap. For example, they used the phrase "took a dip" to refer to Queen Gertrude's weakened state due to the poisoned wine, but it could also refer to her "dip" in loyalty in marrying Claudius. While the group initially seemed inclined to use the same rhyme for all of their lines, they ended up creating rhyming quatrains (i.e., "dead," "wed," "red," and "dead"). Their attention to the rhyme was not solely for musicality; the group tested and rejected lines such as "Everybody gotta hit the pause-a" because it did not fit with their presentation of Hamlet as an active figure. This line was ultimately replaced by "Everybody dies and he's the cause-a-it."

The students' rap was narrative in structure—indicating Hamlet's desire to take control of his life and then recounting the tragic events that followed this decision—and interpretive in purpose. Using the rap as a mediational tool, the group grappled with the nuances of Gertrude's betrayal and Hamlet's feelings towards her and his current situation. The confines of the rap

genre—with its emphasis on rhyme and rhythm—forced the students to analyze every word included in their representational text carefully.

The students' *provisional performance* illustrated the hybrid space in which the students created their interpretive rap. As they began their formal rehearsal, Ana assumed the dual role of *hype man* or *rocking the crowd* with her playful announcement that "It's Jasmine and Ana on the triz-ack" (Edwards, 2009). This line, which asserted their identities as rappers, was uttered twice leading into their provisional performance. This technique is widely recognized as a way for rappers to show they are "bringing the proper attitude to [their] performance and letting go of [their] inhibitions" (Edwards, 2009, p. 295). In this event, it indicates the students' acceptance of and control over the hybrid space created by the interpretive rap activity. While referencing Shakespeare's classic text for source material, the students fully assumed ownership of the rap.

Discussion

Through this series of activities, the students collaborated to create five distinct yet interrelated raps that, while based on Shakespeare's play, were unique, interpretive texts themselves, much like Shakespeare's plays were retellings of older stories. While grounded in the source text of *Hamlet*, the students' raps became original texts as they students made choices regarding which characters to include, which events to omit, what point of view to present the action from, and what structure to follow in terms of plot elements, as well as what conventions of hip-hop to incorporate. Ultimately, the students used the rap genre to mediate their understanding of Shakespeare's play.

The spoken word poetry activity, which occurred within the traditional confines of an AP English Literature classroom, afforded the students with the ability to make use of a *hybrid space* in their co-creation of their understanding of the play. While the teacher-imposed framework of

the rap provided the students with parameters to ensure at least some attention to the required content, the flexible, creative pairing of the rap medium with the canonical work provided students with a unique space in which to discuss and interpret Shakespeare's play. The spoken word poetry activity provided the students with a semi-structured process of *transmediation* (Suhor, 1983), wherein the students used the new medium of rap to make meaning of the source text. While I hesitate to make claims regarding the accuracy of the students' raps in relation to the original play, I can assert that being able to incorporate modern slang and hip-hop conventions, such as a keen attention to rhyme, afforded the students with the ability to create interpretive texts that resonated with them and incorporated their life experiences and funds of knowledge.

I see this study serving several purposes. First, it introduces a pedagogy for engaging with *Hamlet* and other difficult works of literature that, at least in the setting of one AP course, appeared to enable students to advance their understanding of the drama. Examining the activity in other settings, such as rural or more urban areas, would enable a greater understanding of the possibilities afforded by the use of such an instructional practice. As the study occurred in a single location and is comprised of a small sample size with no comparison group, I hesitate to make sweeping generalizations regarding the importance of this pedagogy. I attempt, instead, to provide an analysis and discussion of the impact the activity had upon this one group in this particular situation.

The study contributes to the existing research in the field of social constructionism in examining how students co-create meaning through the use of meditational tools, such as those afforded them through the inclusion of hip-hop conventions. Through the examination of the students' collaborative discussions, their thought processes are made visible, which provides

insight into how students draw upon their individual and collective knowledge of popular culture and canonical conventions to make sense of dense literary texts. While such activities could be viewed as ineffective, the discussions captured here illustrate how even playful, often off-task, discussion can inform students' understanding of the school curriculum.

Teachers seeking to incorporate popular culture texts and conventions into their classrooms should recognize that doing so provides students with both possibilities and problems. As seen in the text of the students' discussions, the blending of the students' outside-of-school knowledge with the traditional classroom setting resulted in the additional struggle of having the navigate where the students fit within those two identities. For some students, such as Jasmine, the spoken word poetry activity afforded her a leadership role that was absent from the traditional AP classroom, which was geared toward White, middle class students. However, the same activity was problematic for students such as Elijah, who struggled to negotiate his role within the group, at times playing peace-maker and at others the leader.

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Table 1: Codes and Frequencies

CODE	ACT 1	ACT 2	ACT 3	ACT 4	ACT 5
COMPOSING PROCESS					
Prewriting:Content analysis: Character	7	21	10	30	8
Prewriting:Content analysis: Global planning	30	0	12	21	49
Prewriting:Content analysis: Narrative structure	18	5	5	0	2
Prewriting:Word choice	5	8	14	23	4
Prewriting:Word choice: Affirmation	24	27	21	43	10
Prewriting:Word choice:Composing through play	5	13	1	13	20
Prewriting:Word choice: Critique	8	13	4	22	6
Prewriting:Word choice: Evaluation	7	2	7	30	4
Prewriting:Word choice: Repetition	7	19	8	28	25
Prewriting:Word choice: Rhyme	0	2	4	36	4
Revision:Composing through play	5	13	1	13	20
Revision:Word choice	10	4	2	5	5
Writing:Final text	0	0	0	0	0
Writing:Provisional text	10	17	19	10	13
Writing:Repetition	1	4	8	1	3
INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCES					
Canonical literature: Conventions	35	3	2	11	13
Hip-hop culture: Call and response	0	0	0	0	0
Hip-hop culture: Conventions	16	1	0	11	5
Hip-hop culture: Performance convention	15	11	17	4	9
Hip-hop culture: Sampling	2	6	0	0	0
Hip-hop culture: Signifying	27	4	9	5	4
Pop culture	0	0	0	0	1
OFF TASK	53	11	28	210	135
SOCIAL PROCESSES					
Affirmation	87	31	33	38	21
Interpersonal conflict	48	22	10	101	94
Logistics	14	4	10	46	37
Play	26	10	8	49	74
Play: Play that becomes composition	3	0	0	0	1
Rejection of idea	18	9	3	5	19
Request clarification	68	21	26	81	47
Role assignment: Scribe: Request clarification	21	11	15	9	13
Role: Peace-maker	66	27	17	46	32
Role: Procedural leader	133	88	53	156	145
Role: Scribe	15	24	14	20	12
Self-assessment	13	7	9	30	8
Self-mockery	3	1	2	7	2
SOURCE TEXT					
Interpretation	10	32	28	24	13
Summary	21	9	18	15	14
STUDENT PERFORMATIVE TEXT					
Rehearsal: Affirmation	9	3	16	32	24
Rehearsal: Beat	2	7	10	1	1
Rehearsal: Coordination	40	33	20	62	25
Rehearsal: Critique	8	5	3	11	3
Rehearsal: Evaluation	0	0	0	0	0
Rehearsal: Provisional performance	25	37	12	14	7
Rehearsal: Repetition	27	18	15	22	27
Rehearsal: Revision	0	0	0	0	0
Rehearsal: Self-assessment	0	0	0	0	0
Role assignment: Beat	13	5	12	2	1
Role assignment: Character	9	2	2	0	4
Role assignment: Dancer	8	5	1	1	5
Role assignment: Evaluation	0	0	0	0	0
Role assignment: Rapper	31	45	19	29	31
Role assignment: Role approval	25	8	6	7	5
Role assignment: Role rejection	7	4	0	4	3
Role assignment: Singers	0	0	0	0	0
Teacher-imposed framework	40	14	4	39	13

Appendix: Codes, Definitions, and Examples

Composing Process

Character (CP:P:CA:C)—reference to organizing the analysis of the play based on characters central to that act. Ex: "Polonius is, like, meddling— in everything." (Manny, Act 2)

Global Planning (CP:P:CA:GP)—reference to the overall organizational structure of the rap. Ex: "Yeah, but shouldn't we do it as a group, so we could make sense— and we wouldn't be off, in like, left field— from everybody?" (Amanda, Act 1)

Narrative Structure (CP:P:CA:NS)—reference to organizing the analysis of the play based on the plot of the act. Ex: "You can't leave a cliff-hanger. You gotta bring it together." (Ana, Act 2)

Word Choice (CP:P:WC)—reference to word choice in the linguistic portion of the representational text. Ex: "Now this word— with the poisonous sword. That's what we should say." (Jasmine, Act 4)

Affirmation (CP:P:WC:A)—statement supporting another student or his or her contribution to the group's collaborative effort. Ex: "Yeah— that's good. I like that." (Ana, Act 1)

Composing Through Play (CP:P:WC:CTP)—reference to informal, joking interactions between the students that lead to the composition of the linguistic portion of the representational text. Ex: "Now he's gonna take your daddy—" (Ana, Act 2)

Critique (CP:P:WC:C)—statement criticizing a specific word or line suggested for inclusion in the representational text. Ex: "That's awful. It doesn't make any sense." (Jasmine, Act 2)

Evaluation (CP:PWC:E)—statement judging the effectiveness of a word or line suggested for the linguistic portion of the representational text. Ex: "Which bore? Which bore? War is bore? Complete bore." (Jasmine, Act 4)

Provisional Text (CP:W:PT)—text that has not yet been finalized by the group, often subject to revisions. Ex:

Jasmine: Everybody gotta hit the pause-a. What's next?

Ana: And he's the causer. [giggles]

Jasmine: Yeah. Everybody gotta take a pause-a. His momma—

Ana: Or you can do the cause-a. (Act 5)

Intertextual References

Canonical Literature (IR:CL)—reference to classic works of literature or stylistic devices typical of classic literary texts. Ex: "I guess, it's, like, already in iambic pentameter." (Manny, Act 5)

Hip-hop Culture (IR:HC)—reference to conventions typical of hip-hop music or performances (e.g., sampling, signifying, etc). Ex: "Oh, they're flowin. They're spittin." (Elijah, Act 1)

Off-Task Talk

Off-Task (OT)—personal talk unrelated to the text under consideration. Ex: "I think it's, like, her cat. A couple of days ago she told me that her cat got leukemia—" (Elijah, Act 3)

Social Processes

Affirmation (SP:A)—statement that affirms the worth of another group member's contributions to the group. Ex: "I agree with Ana." (Manny, Act 1)

Interpersonal Conflict (SP:IC)—statement that denotes conflict with another group member, often antagonistic or condescending in tone. Ex: "Dude, you know what? You know what? We're talking about the rap. YOU're out here— I don't know what you're doing." (Amanda, Act 5)

Logistics (SP:L)—statement about the physical surroundings or the physical interactions

between group members during the composition of the text. Ex: “I don’t know. Close the door back. She doesn’t want—” (Amanda, Act 4)

Peace-Maker (SP:R:PM) —statement that is intended to defuse a possible conflict either through agreeing with the majority opinion or by not escalating a disagreement. Ex. “I guess, I guess we could do that.” (Manny, Act 1)

Play (SP:P)—statement that is joking in nature and is often intended to incite a reaction from group members. Ex: “We should have, since this is totally a rap, someone should come in looking like they’re arrested.” (Ana, Act 1)

Role (SP:R)—statement about the student’s role within the group’s cooperative work. Ex: “What does that mean? [pause] Hey! Hey! Let’s read the book now— Eck, eck, eck— [verbal noise to quieten them] We’re reading the book now.” (Jasmine, Act 1)

Self Assessment (SP:SA)—statement in which a student refers to his or her own abilities in producing the representational text. Ex: “I don’t know what to say for the first one.” (Elijah, Act 4)

Request Clarification (SP:RC)—statement in which a student asks someone to clarify or elaborate on a prior statement. Ex: “Do they even like— fight?” (Elijah, Act 3)

Source Textual References

Summary (T:S)—summary or description of a character or action from the source text with no effort at inference. Ex: “He’s talking to the ghost— he’s talking about murder.” (Manny, Act 1)

Interpretation (T:I)—inferential statement about a character or action from the source text. Ex: “So she tells her— spy daddy.” (Ana, Act 2)

Student Performative Text

Beat (SPT:R:B)—reference to the inclusion of rhythmical accompaniment to the rap. Ex: "Okay, who's makin' the beat?" (Elijah, Act 1)

Coordination (SPT:R:Co)—reference to planning the timing, location, and visual aspects of the performance of the rap. Ex: "Alright, so— how 'bout you take from 'King Hamlet and Hamlet they ruled Denmark' to 'tragedy that happened' and everyone, you could just say 'Be sure to leave a mark.'" (Jasmine, Act 1)

Critique (SPT:R:Cr)—statement that critiques either the group's or an individual group member's behavior in regards to the performance of the rap. Ex: "See, it was dumb! You gotta go fast." (Jasmine, Act 2)

Role Assignment (SPT:RA)—reference to an individual's role within the performance of the rap. Ex: "Let Elijah rap." (Amanda, Act 3)

Role Playing (SPT:RP)—statement that suggests that a student has assumed the persona of one of the characters from the play as part of the composing process. Ex: "Poison used to kill my dad, man. That ain't right." (Jasmine, Act 5)

Contextual References—Affordances and Constraints

Teacher-Imposed Framework (C:TIF)—reference to a structure provided by the teacher to direct the students' production. Ex: "It's even got must underlined." (Amanda, Act 1)

Material Framework (C:MF)—reference to a corporeal structure that in some way constrains and enables the students' means and method of production. Ex: "We have to have 20 lines, so if we divide by five—" (Ana, Act 1)

Temporal Framework (C:TF)—reference to the time limitations that bound students' production. Ex: "Oh, my goodness. It's almost 9:30." (Manny, Act 4)

CHAPTER 3

"TO BE OR NOT TO BE:" NAVIGATING IDENTITY IN HYBRID SPACES

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Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is itself a treatise on identity, centered around Hamlet's famous dilemma: "To be or not to be, that is the question" (Act III, scene *i*, line 1749). This question permeates every aspect of Hamlet's life—should he believe his father's ghost and pursue vengeance against his uncle, should he reject Ophelia and thereby protect her, and should he spare his mother as the ghost commands? Almost every scene provides Hamlet with new questions. Much as Hamlet struggles to make sense of his role in avenging his father's untimely death, students often wrestle to make sense of their own identities within the various social spaces they inhabit.

Since the 1990s, educators have been exploring the potential of hip-hop music and culture to positively impact students' educational experiences (Powell, 1991). Researchers have examined the use of hip-hop in language arts (Hill, 2009), mathematics (Gilbert et al., 2008), and even science classes (Emdin, 2013). However, much of the research surrounding hip-hop-based education (HHBE) has focused on urban youth and urban spaces (Irby & Hall, 2013). Additionally, much of the research surrounding HHBE focuses on non-traditional educational spaces, such as the evening classes in the Twilight Program (Hill, 2009).

The inclusion of hip-hop into the educational space involves more than just providing students with opportunities to critically examine rap music or create raps of their own. One of the most controversial elements of HHBE is the hip-hop culture itself, which is often criticized as promoting violence, alcohol and drugs, and misogyny (for examples see the catalogues of Waka Flocka, Chief Keef, or N.W.A.). At the center of hip-hop culture, and one could argue all popular culture, is the notion of identity. However, the hip-hop identity is often intertwined with notions of authenticity that "can create a very rigid template for what it might mean to be a young, urban, person of color" (Low, Tan, & Celemencki, 2013, p. 119). The depiction of authenticity explicit

in hip-hop culture provides an identity rooted in the "street" (Keyes, 2002; Spady, Lee, & Alim, 1999), the "hardness" of gang life (Low, Tan, & Celemencki, 2013), and heterosexual masculinity (Hill, 2009), all of which can prove problematic for students who are still exploring their own identities and may not fit with this narrow conception.

In this study, I examine the incorporation of hip-hop within a traditional, K-12 educational space—the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition classroom—to create a hybrid space that provides students with opportunities to enact various non-traditional identities within the classroom. Hybrid space theory has been used to examine how classrooms, as part of the larger institution of education, often privileges specific ways of knowing and being. In educational spaces, the hybrid space incorporates students' funds of knowledge in order to create more meaningful mathematics classrooms (Cribbs & Linder, 2013) and science classrooms (Barton & Tan, 2009), as well as to examine how students' identities are enacted in various social spaces (Moje, 2004/2011).

With a curriculum traditionally focused on British literature, the AP English classroom is far removed from the marginalized educational spaces featured in much of the research on Hip-Hop Based Education (HHBE). While Pardue (2004) argues that hip-hop has the potential for "restructuring institutional spaces" that have historically been resistant to the inclusion of popular culture (p. 423), I make no such sweeping claims here. Instead, this case study extends the current research by examining how the inclusion of hip-hop into the traditional classroom space can impact a wider student population in a multitude of ways.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

This study was approached through the lens of social constructionism, which posits the idea that "[m]eaning is something we negotiate and contest over socially" (Gee, 2012, p. 24).As

people participate in various social relationships, they co-construct both the meaning around them and their identities specific to that social relationship. To do so, people employ social languages to accomplish two things: "(1) we must make clear *who* we are, and (2) we must make clear *what* we are doing" (Weider & Pratt, 1990, as cited in Gee, 2012, p. 86). Bakhtin's concept of *addressivity*, which assumes that all utterances are addressed to someone and therefore exist within the context of the response, takes into account the notion that people adapt their *who* and *what* depending upon their audience (Holquist, 1990/2002).

Identities are often enacted through the use of a discourse, which refers "to verbal interactions and sequences of utterances between speakers and listeners" (MacKay, 2003). However, Gee (2012) makes the distinction between *discourse* and *Discourse*, wherein Discourse is comprised of ways of speaking and listening, writing, acting, interacting, valuing, thinking, etc, which allow people to "enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities" (p. 152). Gee argues that people have a primary Discourse, which is our initial sense of self and forms the basis of our "everyday language" (p. 153), as well as secondary Discourses, which are accumulated later in life as people interact with various institutions, groups, and communities. These often contentious interactions play out daily in classrooms where non-dominant students must negotiate the identity politics inherent in traditional school settings that subjugate their primary Discourse to the privileged school-based Discourse.

Social constructionism examines how the meaning making process involves both intentional actions and others' decisions about how you present yourself—"how you identify yourself will largely depend not on your choice, but on the way you are represented in others' talk—their descriptions, explanations, criticisms, or congratulations" (Gergen, 2015, p. 54). He

describes this process as a "site of struggle, a contest between self-control versus being controlled by others" (p. 55). This struggle plays out in various settings, from the office to the ball field, from the coffee shop to the classroom. Inevitably, one's identity, and how one enacts said identity, is influenced, and co-constructed, by the people in that space. Drawing upon Foucault, Gergen suggests that people's dialogue with one another is the building block of their co-construction of identity—"[c]onversations are pivotal in creating our sense of the real and the good" (p. 51) and the world in general.

Drawing upon the theory of social constructionism, as explained by Gee (2012) and Gergen (2015), I provide a case study examining two students' speech as evidence of their thought processes and co-construction of identities as they created collaborative spoken word poems based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* While it is impossible to capture every thought a student might have during the interpretation of a work, the discussions captured here provide evidence of the possibilities for identity construction and contestation afforded students through the creation of hybrid spaces in the classroom.

Description of the Study

The setting for this study was a high school located in a suburban city near a major Southeastern U.S. metropolitan area. The school, which enrolled approximately 1,400 students, had recently undergone a dramatic shift in both demographics and in the socioeconomic status of its students due to an influx of families from neighboring urban counties. In 2000, the district's student population consisted of 67% White, 24% Black, 6% Hispanic, and approximately 45% free and reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). By 2012, the district's schools served a population that was 47.4% White, 48% Black, 10% Hispanic, and approximately 70% free and reduced lunch (Ballotpedia, n.d.). The changes in the demographics

of the school district, which occurred over such a short time span, drastically affected the work of the teachers as they adapted to the needs of the new student population.

This study took place in a senior Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition class that I taught. Following an alternating A/B block schedule, my AP class met for 90 minutes every other day from August until May with the same group of students being enrolled both semesters. Data collection occurred between April 13 and May 13 as part of a semester-long unit on identity. While I taught the unit on identity with all three of my AP classes, I selected my first period class as participants in this study. Although the class had only 14 students, the make-up of this class was representative of the AP classes I taught throughout my time at this high school: 50 percent White, 43 percent Black, and 7 percent Latin@.

Participants

I chose to focus on this particular group of students—Jenna, Trey, Alexis, and Sierra (all students' names are pseudonyms)—because of their struggle with the spoken word poetry task. In order to provide a greater context for this study, I include brief profiles of the four students who participated as members of this group. I include their demographic information as well because it informs the discussion of the students' interactions that follows. Because of my close connection with the students, information included in the descriptions below includes my observations from throughout the school year, not just those during the data collection process. While this study focuses primarily on the appropriation of the hybrid space by two of the four group members, I include descriptions of all four students to provide a richer context for their interactions during this study.

Jenna. Jenna, a middle class White female, was quiet in class and rarely was the first person to answer a question. While she was reluctant to get up in front of the class to act, she was

a strong student who wrote insightful, well-crafted essays. An only child, Jenna preferred to work alone and tended to avoid group work unless required.

Trey. Having not taken classes with the rest of the students up until this school year, Trey found himself outside of the main clique in the class. A middle class Black male, Trey was representative of the shifting demographics of an AP English Literature class. He alternated between being the class clown or withdrawing and not participating. While this was Trey's only AP class, he knew many of the students from being in the school's marching band for the previous three years.

Alexis. Alexis, a middle class Black female, was often quiet in class, preferring to watch rather than participate in acting out plays and contributing to class discussions only when pressed. While this was not her first AP class, she did not know many of the students in this particular class period, which could be why she kept mostly to herself and did not engage in the jovial banter between her classmates.

Sierra. A Black female from a single parent home, Sierra was taking her first AP class that year. Quick with a smile, Sierra was a student who got along well with most everyone. However, she and Trey tended to have a convivial relationship, often goading each other during unstructured moments in class. A student athlete, she was outgoing in informal settings but tended to observe rather than participate in class discussions.

As a teacher researcher, I brought with me various cultural lenses that inevitably impacted how I conducted my classroom and the analysis of this study; therefore, I feel it is important to address my role as a participant here. At the time of the study, I was finishing my eighth year of teaching English, but this was only my fifth year teaching AP English Literature and Composition. While I often included popular culture into my classroom, I cannot claim to be

to be a hip-hop insider. For the purpose of this study and in this space, I was daily enacting the identities of a middle-class, White female who happened to be a full-time teacher and part-time graduate student, all of which informed my roles as teacher and researcher.

The *Hamlet* Unit

Shakespeare's classic tragic play *Hamlet*, which focuses on the sudden death of King Hamlet and the impact thereof on his heir and namesake, young Prince Hamlet, was the culminating text in a semester-long unit on identity. Centered around young Hamlet's inability to process his father's sudden death and his mother's hasty remarriage to his uncle, the play provided a vehicle through which the seniors could examine their own struggle to determine their identities and plans for the future. In spite of the fact that the play focuses on the royal family of Denmark, the themes of loss and betrayal, both of which Hamlet must deal with in the play, often resonated with high school students as well.

Throughout the year, the students had participated in a variety of interpretive activities, including analyzing songs that connected with themes from the play, examining artistic representations of the play's characters, and writing original poems inspired by novels and plays. The spoken word poetry activity provided a familiar and accessible genre through which students could make meaning collaboratively in relation to *Hamlet.* To provide a frame of reference for the spoken word poetry task, I showed the students a video of one of the raps my students created the previous year. We analyzed the exemplar, identifying the elements of the rap that made this performance a good rap and what the students could have done to improve upon it. I then instructed the students to split into groups and gave them the following directions for creating their own raps:

1. Write a 10-20 line rap. It should have a rhythm and a rhyme scheme.

2. It should summarize Act I.
3. It should include key characters, events, and ideas, and can include quotes from the play or famous songs.
4. The whole group MUST be involved in the performance in some way.

The students were given approximately 30 minutes to summarize Act I as a group and turn it into a rap. Because many of the students were 18 at the time of the study, I had both the students and their parents sign permission forms giving their assent to participating in the study. Students in each group were given a handheld recorder to capture their composing process. Each group performed its rap and turned in the completed interpretive text for their rap, and this process was repeated for each of the remaining four acts.

Method

This study follows the tradition of teacher research, which is intentional and systematic inquiry done by teachers into how to effect change within the classroom to improve results for students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In this practice, teachers serve dual roles—both teacher and researcher—as they seek to reflect upon and understand the impact of teacher practice on students' learning and development. A vital difference between teacher reflection and teacher research is the systematic processes applied to teacher research, including conducting "formal and informal observation, conducting interviews, collecting artifacts, or keeping a journal" (Henderson, Meier, & Stremmel, 2012, p. 2). In this study, I draw upon what Cynthia Ballenger (2009) described as *puzzling moments*—"the moments when they [the students] had failed to do what we expected" (p. 5). While the spoken word poetry activity was intended to create an inclusive classroom that acknowledged and incorporated the cultural lives of minority students, there were *puzzling moments* that made me question the benefits of the activity.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred during the four week unit on *Hamlet* which was the culminating literary piece of a semester-long unit on identity leading up to the administration of the AP English Literature and Composition exam. While students read, performed, and discussed each act of the play, I recorded my observations of the students' group dynamics and task completion in written field notes. However, the dual task of teaching and observing resulted in incomplete notes, which led me to lean more heavily on memos written during the transcription and coding processes. As students worked in their self-selected collaborative groups to compose the raps, I captured the students' discussions using audio recorders, which allowed me to document the students' interactions and discussions as they composed, revised, and practiced performing their raps. Following the completion of the *Hamlet* unit, I transcribed these audio recordings into text files that were then loaded in the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. During the transcription, I recorded my initial thoughts about themes in memos. These memos served as a preliminary analysis of the data and were used to inform my findings (Glesne, 2006).

Data Analysis

For this study, I applied a coding system co-developed during a study in the spring of 2010 (Author & Colleague, 2014), which was informed by previous studies conducted by Smagorinsky and various colleagues (e.g., Smagorinsky, Cameron, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2007; Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995). This prototype provided both superordinate categories, such as the students' *composing processes*, *social processes*, attention to the *source text* (*Hamlet*), *intertextual references*, and *student performative text*, as well as subordinate categories, such as *prewriting*, *procedural leader*, and *rehearsal* to name a few. I applied the codes using line-by-line coding, applying multiple codes, as appropriate, to each student's speaking turn. The codes

and frequencies for each act are available in Table 1. Throughout transcription and coding, I used written memos to document my thoughts and any themes that arose. These memos served as an initial analysis of the data and provided for richer descriptions during the writing process.

While the initial coding process involved applying a previous coding system, there were elements of the students' collaborative interactions that were not captured during the first round of coding. These "puzzling moments" (Ballenger, 2009) resulted in the creation of two new subordinate codes, *role/hip hop insider* and *role/hip hop outsider.* As such, the two new codes were applied to the students' comments during a second round of coding. These two codes, and what they reveal about the nature of including popular culture texts and techniques within the traditional classroom, are the focus for this paper.

Findings

The students' collaborative process highlighted their tenuous relationship with the perceived identity expectations created through the spoken word poetry activity. At times resistant to and at times accepting of the hybrid space, two of the students in this group struggled with the identity politics in which the activity was wrapped. That is not to say that their discussions were solely focused on the struggle with the hip-hop culture frame of the task. In spite of conflicting personalities, the assumption of the role of hip-hop outsider, and an overall lack of motivation brought on by their impending graduation, the students were able to draw upon their knowledge of hip-hop culture and conventions to co-construct meaning, making use of the freedoms of the activity to create playful interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet.*

The collaborative nature of the spoken word poetry task resulted in the students enacting certain social roles in their co-creation of meaning. As such, this activity afforded the students with new opportunities to enact, accept, and even reject the roles and identities created for them

within both the traditional classroom setting and the hybrid space created by this activity. Using examples from their recorded discussions, I analyze their use of the hybrid space afforded them through this activity to enact and contest the roles created for them during the interpretive task. The next section examines each theme in turn, providing examples from the students' discussions throughout all five acts.

Hip-Hop Outsider

Hill (2009) cautions that in incorporating hip-hop culture into the classroom in an attempt to include non-dominant populations we must also be aware of creating "new forms of marginalization" (p. 64). While the spoken word poetry task was designed to create a more inclusive environment within the traditional classroom, the hip-hop culture associated with the task created a site of conflict for the very students it was designed to give a voice to. Hill argues that his Hip-Hop Lit class created a space in which students "could perform and validate particular conceptions of racial authenticity" (p. 55); however, for some students, these conceptions of racial authenticity might feel too narrow, or even contradictory to one's self. This was true of Trey, a Black male student enrolled in my Advanced Placement English Literature class. Even as he made use of the freedoms afforded by the hip-hop oriented task, Trey refused to identify with hip-hop culture, making clear his role as a *hip-hop outsider* [*SP:R:HHO*], as seen in the excerpt below:

Jenna: "While this is going on, Laertes schools Ophelia." [*CP:P:CA:Ch; IR:HHC:Sl; T:I*]

Sierra: "While this is going on—" Wait, what are we going to—what rhymes with Ophelia? [*CP:P:WC:Rh; CP:W:R; SP:R:S:RC*]

Jenna: (*laughs nervously*) [*SP:SM*]

Trey: Don't look at me, I don't listen to rap. [*SP:SM; SP:R:HHO*]

Jenna: I don't listen to rap either! [*SP:SM; SP:R:HHO*]

Trey: I can't rhyme! [*IR:HHC:Rh; SP:SM; SP:R:HHO*]

Sierra: But you're doing pretty good. (*to Jenna*) [*CP:P:WC:A; SP:R:HHI*]

Trey: What's that supposed to mean? Huh. What's that supposed to mean? I can't rhyme? [*SP:IC; SP:R:HHI*]

Trey's struggle to accept the hip-hop oriented framework of the task was surprising to me. As a middle class Black male, Trey struggled with what he indicated was his group's expectation that he fill the role of *hip-hop insider*, which he immediately rejected with his exclamation during their first discussion—"I don't listen to rap!" While the group did not overtly express this expectation of Trey, his comment indicated that he felt that there was an unspoken assumption that he would have a certain level of knowledge about hip-hop music. In this case, Trey's comment was intended to make a claim within the setting of the task; he was choosing one role over another, that of *educational insider* over *hip-hop insider*. He repeated this rejection later in their discussion of Act 1, thereby emphasizing his rejection of the role of hip-hop insider.

In this same excerpt, Jenna, who as a middle-class White female presented a much different demographic than Trey, also rejected the role of *hip-hop insider*. Her rejection, while not as surprising as Trey's, illustrates another issue inherent in the inclusion of popular culture within the classroom—the unintentional marginalization of new populations. Unlike Trey, Jenna's initial assumption of the role of *hip-hop outsider* (i.e., "I don't listen to rap either!") was temporary. Throughout the activity, she attempted to work within the confines of the task, taking a leading role in the construction of the raps for all but one of the acts.

Silence and Silencing

Hill (2009) argues that when educators include hip-hop pedagogies into the classroom, they must "listen not only to what is said in class, but also for silences and acts of silencing within the classroom" (p. 96). Next, I will address the issue of silence, a term I use to refer to the students' self-imposed withdrawal from the collaborative process, as it was one of the most notable features of the group's discussion, especially for Jenna and Trey, who struggled with the role of *hip-hop insider* [SP:R:HHI] for very different reasons.

Following his initial rejection of the role of hip-hop insider during the early stages of the group's discussion of Act 1, Trey was silent for 84% of the remaining utterances, speaking only 47 times out of the remaining 290 utterances. Of those comments, the majority of his statements centered around his desire to end the task, as seen in the segment below:

Trey: Y'all 'bout to put some more lines down? [*CP:P:CA:GP; SP:RC*]

Sierra: We haven't got to the end! [*CP:P:CA:GP; SP:R:PL*]

Trey: Yes, ya'll have! Y'all got to the end! That's the end right there! [*CP:P:CA:GP; SP:IC*]

While Trey's struggle with the nature of the task during the discussion of Act 1 resulted in his ongoing push to be done with the task, as seen in the segment above, his self-imposed silence for the discussions of Acts 2-4 could be seen as his way of performing the role of *hip-hop outsider*. During the discussions for Acts 2, 3 and 4, Trey spoke a total of 77 times out of a total 795 utterances, or 9.6%. The inclusion of hip-hop into the classroom inherently brings with it the politics of identity and culture, which can often have the effect of silencing both dominant and non-dominant students, as seen with Trey. While Trey's resistance could also be attributed to the composition of the group—he was the only male—his repeated assertions that he did not know

anything about rap leads me to believe the task itself was at least partly to blame for his resistance and withdrawal. He struggled to accept the role of hip-hop insider, and the resulting conflict, whether internal or external, at times silenced him during the collaborative process.

Hip-Hop Insider

The students' inclusion of overt references to hip hop culture [*IR:HHC*] were limited, which is not surprising given the assumption of the role of hip-hop outsider by two of the group's four members. However, all five interpretive texts included elements of hip-hop culture, particularly *rhyme* (63 instances) and *beat* (17 instances). Most notably, Trey, who rejected the role of hip-hop insider during their discussion of Act 1, provided the group's only overt references to hip-hop culture. During their later discussions of Acts 4 and 5, he revealed a much deeper knowledge of hip-hop culture than he originally indicated, as seen in the excerpt below.

Jenna: Okay, okay. There's the scene in the graveyard— and— Ophelia's dead— Um— Hamlet finds the skull of Yorick. [*CP:P:CA:CA; CP:P:CA:GP; T:S*]

Trey: Hey. Let's do the whisper song— so they can't tell what words we're sayin'. We just do this (*makes whispering sounds*). [*IR:HHC:Sa; SP:P; SP:R:EHC*]

Sierra: No. [*SP:R:PL; SP:ROI*]

Trey: (*laughing*) [*SP:P*]

Sierra: Okay. [*SP:R:PL*]

Trey: And then at the end we say Hamlet. [*SP:P*]

In this segment, Trey suggested that the group *sample* [*IR:HHC:Sa*] the 2005 song "Wait (The Whisper Song)" by the Ying Yang Twins by whispering during their performance "so they can't

tell what words we're sayin'." His reference to the Ying Yang Twins revealed an insider's knowledge of hip-hop culture that he had previously rejected. In spite of his group's immediate rejection of his idea, Trey continued to suggest this performance technique [*IR:HHC:PC*] throughout their discussion of Act 5.

Further indicating his performance of the role of *hip-hop insider*, Trey referenced another hip-hop artist in his suggestion for the group's final performance. Revealing his knowledge of hip-hip, Trey suggested that they borrow a *performance convention* from Lil' Wayne and "walk back and forth" with a cup. A well-known rapper during the early 2000's, Lil' Wayne was often seen with a white Styrofoam cup. The cup, which was rumored to contain a mixture of prescription-strength cough syrup and various sodas, was a much-discussed topic, even becoming fodder for his 2008 single "Me and my drank." While Trey's suggestion initially seemed unrelated to the group's creation of a performative text, it revealed his understanding of the pivotal role of a cup in Act 5—the one containing the poisoned wine that King Claudius intended for the death of Hamlet. His group summarily rejected his suggestion, but Trey's reference to Lil' Wayne's iconic cup revealed his understanding of both hip-hop culture and the play itself as he enacted the role of *hip-hop insider*.

While Jenna also initially rejected the role of *hip-hop insider*, she made use of the freedom afforded by the hybrid space to offer playful lines, such as "Ophelia thinks that Hamlet's hot and Laertes says all he wants to do is nail ya" (Act 1). While Jenna never fully performed the role of hip-hop insider to the extent that Trey did, her leadership role in the creation of several of the group's raps indicated her willingness to, at least temporarily, identify with hip-hop culture as she worked within the confines of the activity. The excerpt below, which

occurred during their discussion of Act 4, illustrates Jenna's role within the group's collaborative process.

Alexis: Okay. "Now Polonius is dead, and Hamlet hid the evidence." —What's the next one—"Now Polonius is dead and Hamlet hid the evidence—Now Claudius wants to make England—Hamlet's new residence." [*CP:P:WC; SP:R:PL; T:I*]

Jenna: Okay. [*CP:P:WC:A*]

Sierra: Cool. [*CP:P:WC:A*]

Jenna: Should we say "permanent residence?" (*nervous chuckle*) [*CP:P:WC:E; SP:RC; SP:R:PL; T:I*]

Alexis: Yeah. It doesn't matter. *(chuckles)* [*CP:P:WC:A*]

Jenna: The king of England was going to— [*T:S*]

Alexis: Kill him? [*T:S*]

Jenna: Yeah— Yep, sorry. You can't come back to Denmark 'cause you're dead. (*chuckles*) [*SP:P; T:I*]

In this exchange, Jenna highlighted the full intent of Claudius's decision to send Hamlet to England. Building upon Sierra's initial line—"Now Claudius wants to make England Hamlet's new residence"—Jenna's addition of "permanent," while offered jokingly, provided a more accurate analysis of the events in the play. Accompanied by a letter requesting his death, Hamlet's journey to England was, in fact, intended to be permanent. Through their playful banter, the students were able to craft an original interpretive text that captured both the events and the nuances of *Hamlet.*

Still, Jenna's association with the role of hip-hop insider was tenuous at best, with her alternately rejecting and claiming the role throughout all five discussions. While she took charge of the writing for the rap for Act 1, she did not assume a leadership role again until Act 5, wherein she made use of the hybrid space for a second time with the exchange seen below:

Jenna: Um—I came up with this, but it's kinda stupid. [*SP:SM; SP:R:PL*]

Sierra: What is it? [*SP:R:PL; SP:RC*]

Jenna: Um— (nervous chuckle) "Hamlet—as Hamlet dies, he appoints Fortinbras king. He tells Horatio—to tell the story of when Hamlet gets his wing" (chuckles) [*CP:P:CA:Ch; CP:P:WC; T:I*]

Sierra: Hamlet— [*SP:R:S; CP:W:Re*]

Alexis: Wait, what was the last part? [*SP:RC*]

Jenna: Okay. When Hamlet gets his wings. [*CP:P:WC:Re*]

Sierra: Wings? [*CP:P:WC:E*]

Jenna: Yeah. [*SP:A*]

Alexis: Oh! (*chuckles*) Like in heaven. [*CP:P:WC:A; T:I*]

Having clearly identified herself as a hip-hop outsider during their discussion of Act 1, she hedged her suggested line with *self-mockery* [*SP:SM*], "Um—I came up with this, but it's kinda stupid." However, the group was supportive of her attempt to assume a role that was contradictory to her primary one within the classroom.

To be clear, Jenna never fully assumed the role of a hip-hop insider, but neither did she fully accept the role of hip-hop outsider. Instead, she made use of the hybrid space to try out both identities. Jenna's struggle with the roles provided through this task brings to the forefront the issue of authenticity, or "realness" (Low, 2011), that accompanies hip-hop music and culture.

Neither Jenna nor Trey conveyed a sense of hip-hop authenticity, particularly the notions of growing up on the "streets" or blackness (Low, 2011, p. 31). As such, both Jenna and Trey chose to perform the identities, at various times, that best fit the context of the task and their purpose—to gain authority within the group in order to get their voices heard.

Conclusion and Implications

In the context of teacher research, this study provides an examination of the impact, both positive and negative, of incorporating students' cultures, particularly hip-hop, in the classroom space. Specifically, the spoken word poetry activity allowed students to create a hybrid space wherein they could negotiate their identities while drawing upon their outside-of-class cultures to make meaning of Shakespeare's text. As such, the hybrid space created by this activity provided students with opportunities to extend their interpretation and knowledge of canonical works while creating a classroom space that disrupted the privileged notion of what counts as knowledge.

However, the students' discussions provided me with several *puzzling moments* that indicated the hybrid space was not an uncontested space (Ballenger, 2009). Trey's rejection of the hip-hop nature of the task was one such puzzling moment, as the task was designed to empower minority students by drawing upon their outside-of-school knowledge. One could argue that Trey's assumption of the role of hip-hop outsider was due to the social relationships he held with the three females in his group (Gee, 2012). As such, he was quite possibly performing the identity that was socially acceptable in the classroom space and not making a commentary about his overall identity. Without further observations of Trey in different settings, however, I resist the urge to make any conclusions as to which possibility is correct.

However, the inclusion of hip-hop culture into the traditional classroom did afford the students opportunities to interact with a classic text in new ways. Even Jenna and Trey made use of the hybrid space created by the task to examine alternate interpretations of Shakespeare's tragic play. In spite of the "tensions between the languages of formal schooling and popular culture" (Low, 2011, p. 86), all four group members made use of the hybrid space to incorporate non-traditional language within their suggested lines. Ultimately, the students illustrated "the complexity and fluidity of identity" (Hill, 2009, p. 64) by negotiating and enacting identities that allowed them to successfully complete the task.

This case study provides a limited examination of the impact of including hip-hop culture into official educational settings, such as the Advanced Placement classroom. While the data provide glimpses into the nature of students' interactions within a hybrid space that incorporates hip-hop culture, they do not speak to the inclusion of other popular culture elements in other educational settings. Future studies should explore multiple sites in order to provide comparative settings and to further inform research on hip-hip based education (HHBE). Another potential limitation is the small sample size. This study examines the experiences of two students, and the implications found here cannot be said to speak for those of all high school students.

One possible implication from this study is that teachers' instructional practices can promote students' use of their outside-of-school knowledge and cultures within the classroom to provide students with a deeper understanding of the content. By providing students with opportunities to make use of their cultures, teachers can disrupt the practice of privileging certain types of knowledge over others. Additionally, such opportunities could be used to provide students with a space in which to negotiate their various identities as they work through the process of determining who they are.

The findings from this study suggest that the inclusion of hip-hop culture into this particular classroom afforded students with opportunities to expand and deepen their understanding of a classic Shakespearean text. The activity assisted in creating a hybrid space that enabled students to explore new conceptions of both the play and their own identities within the confines of a traditional classroom. The result was a space that acknowledged and celebrated both the traditional curriculum and the students' outside of class cultures.

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Table 1. Codes and Frequencies

CODE	ACT 1	ACT 2	ACT 3	ACT 4	ACT 5
COMPOSING PROCESS					
Prewriting:Content analysis: Character	40	18	19	13	32
Prewriting:Content analysis: Global planning	32	13	8	3	19
Prewriting:Content analysis: Narrative structure	6	15	1	1	3
Prewriting:Word choice	13	16	11	19	13
Prewriting:Word choice: Affirmation	26	13	18	11	8
Prewriting:Word choice:Composing through play	3	4	1	0	0
Prewriting:Word choice: Critique	5	0	3	2	2
Prewriting:Word choice: Evaluation	2	1	4	6	14
Prewriting:Word choice: Repetition	12	9	5	1	9
Prewriting:Word choice: Rhyme	9	9	11	13	21
Writing:Provisional text	3	0	1	0	0
Writing:Repetition	13	7	7	15	21
INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCES					
Canonical literature: Conventions	9	5	4	6	5
Hip-hop culture: Call and response	0	0	0	0	0
Hip-hop culture: Conventions	5	1	0	2	0
Hip-hop culture: Performance convention	1	0	16	0	2
Hip-hop culture: Sampling	0	0	0	0	6
Hip-hop culture: Slang	3	0	1	0	0
Pop culture	1	0	0	0	0
OFF TASK	15	3	16	10	53
SOCIAL PROCESSES					
Affirmation	20	20	12	6	16
Interpersonal conflict	44	3	17	9	21
Logistics	17	5	31	8	6
Play	11	2	13	7	31
Rejection of idea	16	1	8	3	9
Request clarification	37	20	41	31	45
Role assignment: Scribe: Request clarification	7	2	3	4	5
Role: Enacting hip hop culture	6	0	10	2	7
Role: Peace-maker	13	13	19	10	13
Role: Procedural leader	93	83	73	67	101
Role: Rejecting hip hop culture	4	0	0	1	0
Role: Scribe	12	7	2	8	14
Self-assessment	12	17	23	16	20
Self-mockery	9	6	4	1	3
SOURCE TEXT					
Interpretation	36	13	12	17	11
Summary	8	9	9	12	5
STUDENT PERFORMATIVE TEXT					
Rehearsal: Affirmation	3	4	16	2	0
Rehearsal: Beat	0	0	17	0	0
Rehearsal: Choreography	0	0	0	0	0
Rehearsal: Coordination	27	15	26	12	9
Rehearsal: Critique	4	2	8	1	0
Rehearsal: Evaluation	0	0	0	0	0
Rehearsal: Provisional performance	1	0	12	9	6
Rehearsal: Repetition	2	0	4	0	0
Rehearsal: Revision	0	0	0	0	0
Rehearsal: Self-assessment	0	0	0	0	0
Role assignment: Beat	0	0	25	7	3
Role assignment: Character	0	1	0	0	0
Role assignment: Dancer	0	0	0	0	0
Role assignment: Evaluation	0	0	0	0	0
Role assignment: Rapper	6	4	14	7	8
Role assignment: Role approval	0	4	4	2	0
Role assignment: Role rejection	0	0	0	0	0
Teacher-imposed framework	37	9	5	3	10

CHAPTER 4

RE-ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

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As a classroom teacher, I have learned as much from my students as they learned from me. Together, we explored the nature of gender roles in Elizabethan England and the different connotations of the word *girl* based on a speaker's inflection. However, one classroom assignment stands out from the rest as having the greatest impact on my classroom and my pedagogy—the *Hamlet* raps. The project originated from a student's casual comment about his outside-of-school rap career. As I watched him talk animatedly with his classmates about his interest in music, I knew I had to find a way to bring this level of excitement and engagement into the classroom. The raps—which the students composed in small groups following the acting out of each act of *Hamlet*—became an engaging way for students to mediate their knowledge of Shakespeare's classic tragedy through the tool of hip-hop conventions.

As education becomes increasingly focused on testing and accountability, students continue to disengage with alarming regularity (see Smagorinsky). From No Child Left Behind to Race to the Top, the emphasis on accountability measures has negatively impacted instructional practices (Faulkner & Cook 2). The result is a reductionist model of education, where teachers and students focus on what is on the test and not an authentic exploration of knowledge. Is it any wonder that students struggle to remain interested in their education?

Theoretical Underpinnings

For this article, I draw upon the theory of social constructionism, which defines learning as a social endeavor in which "*children grow into the intellectual life of those around them*" (*Mind in Society* 88; emphasis in original). Learning does not just involve students interacting with one another, however; as they read texts, they are sifting their understanding through their social, cultural, and historical knowledge. As such, the *Hamlet* rap activity involved students constructing knowledge with their peers, as well as in conjunction with each student's social and

cultural knowledge—including popular culture and hip-hop culture. Researchers have examined the impact of various ways of constructing meaning, including dance (Adams 31), art (Theodotou 149), and multi-media texts (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen 220). While Alim defines hip-hop culture as having four elements—"MC'ing (rappin), DJ'ing (spinnin), breakdancing (streetdancing), and graffiti art (writing)" (n.p.)—I choose to focus on how rap functioned as a tool through which the students expressed their understanding of Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet.*

Hip-hop culture is part of the larger category of popular culture. As such, I make use of Alvermann and Hong's argument that popular culture should be viewed as part of children's "everyday literacies*"* and therefore should not be denigrated as "something to be shunned, set aside, or kept at a distance" (147). Instead, by tapping into the possibilities of popular culture—here applied to hip-hop culture—educators can help students "become 'the ideal reader, viewer, listener," find pleasure in reading texts, and develop "self-reflexive" readers who explore media and its impact on their lives (147). In this vein, hip-hop based pedagogy has been used to foster students' interest in science (Emdin 25), to elicit justice-oriented teaching practices in pre-service teachers (Petchauer 29), to develop college students' writing skills (Peterson 55), and to create a storytelling community with at-risk youth (Hill 69).

While there are many elements of students' everyday culture that could be brought into the classroom—dress, movies, young adult literature, etc.—I choose to focus on students' knowledge of rap and how that interest and knowledge can be used to strengthen high school students' literacy skills.

I must be honest here. I do not profess to be a hip-hop insider. While I spent the 90s enjoying the expansion of rap music into the pop and rock worlds, I cannot claim a deep

knowledge of current hip-hop music outside of the more mainstream artists such as Jay-Z, Macklemore, Lil' Wayne, Kanye, and the like. However, I have an appreciation of socially-conscious hip-hop, such as music made by 2Pac and Macklemore. While hip-hop is often maligned for misogynistic and violent lyrics, there are benefits to strategically incorporating students' popular culture knowledge into traditional classrooms, such as providing students with opportunities to apply a critical lens to controversial lyrics or through including edited versions of songs in the discussion of figurative language and devices.

For this article, I draw on audio-recorded discussions collected during an IRB-approved study that took place within my AP English Literature and Composition classroom, the make-up of which was 10 percent White, 65 percent Black, 15 percent Latinx, and 5 percent biracial ("District Directory Information" n.p.). During these discussions, the students collaborated on the creation of interpretive raps based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Their recorded discussions reveal the often maligned nature of small group activities within classrooms—the students spent a good deal of time in off task talk, discussing everything from prom to college applications. However, their discussions indicate the possibilities of allowing students to bring their own culture and interests into the classroom, as well as the implications of using rap as a meditational tool. These implications, which I explore in greater detail in the sections that follow, include the possibilities for building literacy skills through the exploration of rap as a meditational tool and the power of engaging students in the learning process.

About the Play

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a classic tragedy focused on how young Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, deals with the sudden death of his father and his mother's hasty remarriage to his uncle Claudius. While Hamlet vacillates between grief and rage, he remains virtually paralyzed

by his own inaction. Trapped in Denmark, which he likens to a prison, he must decide whether or not to believe his father's ghost and exact revenge or to do as his mother bids him and forgo his grief. In true Shakespearean fashion, the play culminates with Hamlet haphazardly springing into action, resulting in the death of everyone except a minor character, Horatio.

I include this information for reference as I provide excerpts from the students' discussions and analyze the possible implications of appropriating hip-hop as an interpretive tool within a traditional classroom space. Next, I examine how three groups of students made use of hip-hop culture to both extend their understanding of *Hamlet* and to re-engage in the learning process as they co-constructed meaning.

Hip-hop as Interpretive Tool

Hip-hop culture, in particular rap music, makes use of elements that translate into the literacy classroom. For example, rap often features an emphasis on rhyme and figurative language such as similes and imagery (Edwards 43). The ability to identify and analyze the importance of these elements is an important skill tested on assessments from the SAT ("SAT Inside the Test: Reading n.p.) to the Georgia Milestones End of Course test ("Georgia Milestones End of Course Assessment Guides" n.p.). However, hip-hop brings with it additional elements, such as flow, slang, signifying, and call and response, all of which call for interpretive decisions not found in traditional writing tasks or assessments.

As the students constructed their raps, they had to think about their analysis of Shakespeare's play in new ways. They made comparisons between the characters and events in the play and the wider genre of hip-hop culture, which often features misogynistic language and an emphasis on "keepin' it real" (Low 31). The lyrical elements of rap, as well as the controversial themes of patriarchal power and misogyny, made for a unique pairing with the

treatment of women in Shakespeare's play. Much like Hill's use of hip-hop in a non-traditional literacy class, the *Hamlet* rap activity enabled students "to deploy symbols, styles, and practices that were marginalized in other classes" (54).

His Mom's a Harlot

While each group's perception of Queen Gertrude presented her in a less than favorable light, one group used the hip-hop genre to position her as a complicit participant in her late husband's death. Comprised of five students—four females and one male, all White—one group thrived in the playful space created by the rap activity. Through a combination of popular *slang*, or what Alim (n.p.) calls Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL), and the hip-hop technique of *call and response*, this group critiqued Gertrude's involvement with Claudius and provided a view into Hamlet's feelings regarding her hasty remarriage following his father's death. An excerpt from the group's collaborative discussion of Act 1 is below.

Maggie: I wanted to start with the king in the garden and talk about him getting bit by a snake and then it wasn't really a snake, psych/sike! It was his brother, and then—

Laurie: My name is Hamlet, what? My mom's a harlot, what? (*giggling*)

Maggie: My mom's a whore.

Cameron: Harlot rhymes.

Laurie: I know. That's pretty much the point.

Maggie: I'm pretty sure his mom made up all the 'your mom' jokes—like 'your mom—because of this. I can't see what you're writing.

Laurie's suggested line—"My name is Hamlet, what? My mom's a harlot, what?"—made use of a single-line *rhyme*, wherein "the syllables within that one bar rhyme with each other"

(Edwards 100). The importance of the rhyme, as indicated by Cameron's preference for "harlot" over Maggie's suggestion of "whore," emphasized the students' understanding of the lyricism of hip-hop in their interpretive process. While Shakespeare's text does not clearly address Gertrude's role in King Hamlet's death or her reasons for the marriage to Claudius, the use of hip-hop afforded the students the freedom to explore her *characterization* as a possible accomplice. In this instance, the female students appropriated an often-criticized component of hip-hop culture—the misogynistic language and the objectification of women in both the lyrics and visuals of rap music (Low 13)—to define Hamlet's view of his mother, as seen through their interpretive lens.

Additionally, the students made use of the hip-hop stylistic technique of *call and response* to position Hamlet in an active role. Their choice of the taunting refrain of "What?" indicated their view of him as a petulant, but still powerful young man. Instead of presenting Hamlet as melancholy and confused, their opening line—"My name is Hamlet, what? My mom's a harlot, what?"—characterized Hamlet as in control, a view that continued through all five of their raps. While this interpretation may seem contradictory to the favored view of Hamlet as an indecisive young man, it is not without support from the text. From confronting his father's ghost to resisting the urgings of his mother and Claudius to put aside his mourning, Hamlet takes action against his situation from the beginning of the play.

Hamlet Doesn't Feel 'Ya

As the students discussed the meaning of the play, they made use of the freedoms provided by the activity to explore the characters' motivations. While all three groups paid close attention to the rhyme scheme, their discussions often delved into the deeper aspects of the play, such as the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. In some ways, their relationship is merely

anecdotal to the internal struggle Hamlet wages with himself. On the other hand, Ophelia stands as a foil to Hamlet as they both deal with the loss of a father and the inability to control their own lives. In the excerpt below, one group wrestled with the true nature of Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship.

Jenna: "Ophelia thinks—Ophelia thinks that Hamlet's hot and Laertes says all he wants to do is nail ya." (*laughter*) I am not writing that down!

Sierra: So, how does Laertes feel about Hamlet? He doesn't like him at all, right?

Jenna: I don't think he hates him, but he's just like—

Sierra: protective of his—

Jenna: Little sister. Grow up and look at the real world and be realistic. I love you, but—I don't know.

Sierra: He can't—maybe he can't let her go. He doesn't want her to grow up—I don't know. We gotta tie in why he's scolding her.

Jenna: I think I like yours—like—"Ophelia's going with Hamlet. Laertes says Hamlet doesn't feel ya." Like, you know, like you were saying—

The group worked their way from Jenna's playful, though not incorrect line—"Ophelia thinks that Hamlet's hot and Laertes says all he wants to do is nail ya"—to a collaborative discussion of the nature of the relationship between all three characters. Instead of providing a simple summary of the interaction between Laertes and Ophelia, the students' discussion delved into Laertes's possible motivations. While Laertes seems to represent the patriarchal society of the time as he dictates his sister's actions, the students' discussion reveals other possible motives, namely his concern for her feelings should Hamlet end up using her. Through the framework of the rap activity, the students co-construct their interpretation of the play, building upon one

another and working through the possible motivations for Laertes and Hamlet. In this particular excerpt, the final line they created is not nearly as important as the collaborative discussion leading up to it.

She Got Problems

As the titular character, Hamlet is often viewed as the pivotal character in the play. However, one group selected Ophelia as the focal point for their rap of Act 4. Crafting a refrain that placed Ophelia at the center of the action, the group's interpretive choice both empowered Ophelia and positioned her as a victim in the play. Although she serves primarily as a foil for Hamlet, the group chose to emphasize her importance in her own right.

Elijah: Get your mind right. Ophelia, she got problems. Ophelia, she got problems. Ophelia, she got problems. Get your mind right. Yeah.

Jasmine: Ophelia's in love with Hamlet, but—

Elijah: Yeah!

Manny: You don't know that for sure.

Jasmine: So?

Amanda: So? It's our own interpretation.

Elijah: Right? (*chuckles*) It rhymes.

Manny: I've got a question.

[Three statements about writing down the suggested lines.]

Elijah: Ophelia, she got problems. Ophelia, she got problems.

Jasmine: I mean, she's got her family, and they're causing problems.

Manny: She's got problems. I get it. (*chuckles*)

While the group's initial focus for the refrain seems to be the rhyme scheme, they used Manny's critique—"You don't know that for sure"—as a push to delve deeper into their interpretation and to provide evidence from the play. Even though Jasmine, Amanda, and Elijah all approved the line because "it rhymes," they acknowledged Manny's request for an explanation. Jasmine provided support for the refrain by referencing key events from the play, which she summarized as "I mean, she's got her family, and they're causing problems." This line alluded to Polonius's use of Ophelia to spy on Hamlet, as well as Laertes's distrust of Hamlet's feelings and insistence that Ophelia guard her reputation and heart from Hamlet. The students' discussion deepened both Manny's understanding of the play and Jasmine's, as she was required to explain her word choice for the line.

Later in their discussion, the students circled back to the discussion of Ophelia's problems, perhaps because of the unresolved discussion surrounding Ophelia's feelings towards Hamlet. In the excerpt below, the students paused their construction of the rap to summarize key events from the play.

Elijah: Oh! Alright. Hamlet calls—something and Guildenstern—sponges—Oh! He calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sponges. Fortinbras—is waging war. (*pages flipping*) Hamlet wants to do something—because he hasn't been doing anything the whole play. Laertes plots with the king—um—Ophelia sings—she sings a song about Hamlet—the death of her father caused it—and she might—she might—

Amanda: I don't know— (*chuckles*)

Elijah: (*chuckles*)

Amanda: She was acting strange.

Manny: She dies.

Elijah: She did die.

Manny: Are we—are we gonna revolve this around Ophelia?

Jasmine: Yeah—

Amanda: About half?

Elijah: Yeah! She might have slept with the king! Yeah.

Of interesting note, while Elijah provided a summary that included several plot elements not connected to Ophelia, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spying on Hamlet, they group chose to remain focused on Ophelia. In spite of other choices for inclusion in their rap, they focused once again on Ophelia, choosing to highlight her "strange" behavior. This interpretive choice, which is supported by events in the play, kept Ophelia as the central figure in their rap for Act 4. Through the freedoms afforded them through the rap activity, the students were able to co-construct their understanding of the play and provide an original presentation of Act 4.

The Power of Play

The *Hamlet* rap activity provided the students with opportunities to co-construct meaning in new ways. While the students struggled to interpret the language and meaning in Shakespeare's text, the less formal language of hip-hop, which features slang and grammatical playfulness, allowed them to interact with the play in a more accessible way. Without the constraints of a formal essay or multiple choice test, the students were able to focus instead on important literary elements, such as theme, characterization, rhyme, and word choice.

The raps afforded the students with unique ways of thinking about a classic text. Drawing upon various degrees of knowledge about hip-hop culture, the students applied elements of hip-hop culture to the characters themselves. For example, the misogynistic presentation of women

often seen in rap may have influenced the students' presentations of Gertrude, who became a central player in the betrayal of King Hamlet, and possibly an accomplice in his murder. This alternative view of Gertrude is not without support and causes them to rethink the various scenes in which she appears. With the need to incorporate rap elements such as rhyme and flow, the students found that what words they chose mattered a great deal.

In today's education climate, wherein teachers and students are weighed, measured, and found lacking (or not) based on a single assessment, the urge to forgo such playful activities is strong. It is easy to get caught up in the testing cycle—test, analyze, repeat—and to forget the importance of student engagement in education. The result is seen in classrooms across the nation, as students disconnect from the learning process, and fall out of love with learning.

However, learning cannot occur when students are disengaged. As my students and I discovered, incorporating popular culture—in this case hip-hop culture—into the classroom provides opportunities to deepen student understanding and to provide for a collaborative learning environment. As seen in the brief excerpts here, the students were *active* in their learning. They had to work—and struggle—to co-construct meaning with their peers. In this instance, hip-hop culture became a meditational tool that allowed them to access their out-of-class knowledge and interests in building their own meanings of Shakespeare's play. While some might criticize the activity as too time-consuming or not educational enough, the students' discussions, which were text-based and featured the development of important literacy skills, prove quite the opposite.

Although the emphasis on accountability does not seem to abating anytime soon, that does not mean students have to suffer. In spite of a laser focus on test scores and data, teachers can still find ways to create student-centered, engaging lessons. By connecting content

knowledge with popular culture, teachers can provide students with active learning environments that go beyond test prep and memorization, while still building the literacy skills required by state assessments.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL PEDAGOGY IN THE ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The impetus for the *Hamlet* rap activity featured in all three manuscripts was part inspiration and part rebellion. At the time, I was teaching Advanced Placement classes in a school that housed many gatekeepers—counselors, teachers, and even the students themselves. In spite of no formal school- or district-policy requiring a specific grade point average or a teacher recommendation, there were many adults who prevented admission to advanced courses as though they were an elite club that only a few could join. In this midst of this environment, I chose to buck the system and throw open the doors to my classroom. Naively, I thought my lone example would cure the ills of my school and the AP program in our district. While my example did prompt others to change their unofficial policies about enrollment, it took me assuming a district leadership position to push the open door policy district-wide. However, new challenges arose.

In an attempt to close the achievement and opportunity gaps, legislators have turned education into an assessment-driven race where there can only be one winner—testing companies. The proposed goal of No Child Left Behind (United States Department of Education, 2002)—reducing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students, meeting the needs of low-achieving students, and increasing educational funding in return for increased accountability—was noble. Unfortunately, the reality did not meet the initial hopes for this law. In efforts to ensure that all students had access to highly qualified teachers, a reductionist

definition was often applied—a teacher was highly qualified if she had a degree in a specific content area (Eppley, 2009). Additionally, the increased focus on accountability measures negatively impacted instructional practices (Faulkner & Cook, 2006). Sadly, Race to the Top (United States Department of Education, 2009), which replaced No Child Left Behind, simply continued the focus on teacher accountability for student learning, all the while turning student achievement into a competition between states for funding (Howell, 2015). The increased funding came with strings attached—"a nontrivial monitoring process, complete with annual performance reports, accountability protocols, and site visits" (Howell, 2015, p. 61).

I reference these key pieces of legislature because they are at the forefront of my mind as I consider the implications of this study and whether or not something like the *Hamlet* rap activity would be welcome in today's classrooms. I worry that, in an effort to make things better for students, we have removed all traces of creativity and collaboration from the classrooms. Instead, we test, test, and test some more.

However, all is not lost. The students themselves seem to be calling out for something different. They resist disconnected instruction and demand the opportunity to explore their own interests. As I look to this generation of learners, I have hope that they will teach us a thing or two about what education should really look like.

Puzzling Moments

One of my first attempts at academic writing was a review of Cynthia Ballenger's (2009) book *Puzzling Moments, Teachable Moments: Practicing Teacher Research in Urban Classrooms.* At the time, I was new to the concept of teacher research as a formal practice, though I had been reflecting on and revising my teaching pedagogy all along. However, what stood out to me was her question—"How can we develop enough distance from this familiar

material to challenge our understanding of teaching and learning?" (p. 80). This simple question has guided my work as both an educator and a researcher for the past eight years.

As I sat down to transcribe and code the students' audio recordings, Ballenger's question circled in my head. I was familiar with the students' discussions, having experienced them as they happened, albeit through a different lens. I found myself getting lost in their off-task discussions, wishing I had kept a tighter rein on their work. I wondered how I would present the research without constantly apologizing for student misconceptions or conflict. Ballenger, with her emphasis on focusing on the *puzzling moments*—"moments when our plans for instruction were not being realized, when discussion went in unplanned directions, even when children appeared wrong or to not understand what we wanted" (p. 5)—provided me with clear guidance for what stories needed to be told from the students' discussions.

The resulting application is Chapter 3, which focuses on a group of puzzling moments wherein two students negotiated their identities and roles as much as they negotiated the meaning of the play. While the students' enactment and rejection of the roles of hip-hop insider and hip-hop outsider were not the original intent of the study, the moments provided insight into the power of education and the possibilities of bringing students' culture into the classroom.

Popular Culture and Hip-Hop Pedagogy

This brings me to the second influence on my teaching and research—the impact of incorporating popular culture into the classroom. While I had always included elements of popular culture—movies, music, art, and fashion—into my instruction, I never thought of turning that passion into a research agenda. Then I read Hagood, Alvermann, and Heron-Hruby's (2010) *Bring it to class: Unpacking pop culture in literacy learning.* This text informed my research

agenda. No longer was I the rebel without a clue; I felt empowered to not only continue, but champion, the work my students and I did in my classroom.

While many authors have written about including popular culture (e.g., Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Neilson, 2006; Savage, 2008) and even hip-hop culture (e.g., Hill, 2008; Hill & Petchauer, 2013; Low, 2011; Morell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002), I hesitated to make this topic a focus for my dissertation. However, in examining the current educational climate, I felt that maybe it was time we revisited this practice and started talking about how to re-engage students in an active learning role.

As I think back on the *Hamlet* raps, I am not so sure that this sort of practice would be welcome in today's climate. The collaborative discussions were messy. The students spent a lot of their time off-task, discussing everything from sexuality ("I can guarantee there are at least three virgins on this couch") to video games ("So, you're a cat in a video game?"). However, their discussions did not lend themselves to being graded on a multiple choice test. Still, I see value in the process, messy as it was, and the outcomes.

The inclusion of hip-hop culture into the classroom, while problematic for some, provided all of the students with opportunities to draw upon their outside-of-school knowledge and experiences. From references to 90's TV shows ("I feel like we're on the Fresh Prince of Bel Air") to popular dance moves ("I'm gonna be a shopping cart now"), the students' discussion made clear the intertextual nature of literacy. Whether the students initially understood *Hamlet* or not, the discussions deepened everyone's understanding of the play in new ways, even mine.

Enacting Identities in Social Spaces

Space, in spite of beliefs to the contraty, is not neutral. It is embued with the power and the corresponding marginalizations of specific ways of being and doing. Specifically,

classrooms, with their emphasis on specific curriculums and ways of demonstrating knowledge, are filled with issues of power. Drawing on the works of Moje (2004/2011), I found hybrid space theory a key framework for how to examine the impact of instructional practices on the learning, and the lives, of students.

I was particularly interested in how hybrid space theory helps illustrate how identity is enacted within and impacted by various spaces. As a classroom teacher in a diverse community, I see daily reminders of how educational spaces privilege some and not others, and the impact of this privileging on students' identities.

As I listened to the three groups' audio files and transcribed them, I was reminded of Moje's (2004/2011) work on how youth "navigate" spaces in their construction of identity (p. 37). This navigation was evident in the initial group's discussion, wherein Laurie felt the need to do "a skin check to make sure she's still white." Her statement, dripping with sarcasm, resonated with me as both a teacher and a researcher. Not surprisingly, I read through the other groups' discussions with heightened awareness. While Trey represented a different demographic from Laurie, he, too, felt the need to comment on the identity politics inherent in the rap activity—"I don't be listenin' to rap!"

These students' words provide key illustrations of the way the classroom space contributes to the enactment of identities of both dominant (Laurie, as a middle class White female) and non-dominant (Trey, as a middle class Black male) students. Both students expressed an understanding of the identities expected of them in the traditional classroom. For Trey, neither the traditional role (educational insider) nor the role created by the activity (hip-hop insider) was comfortable. He spent all five discussions vacillating between the two identities, performing whichever one seemed to garner him membership within his collaborative group. His

experience, however, was not unique. All of the students, to varying degrees, struggled to navigate the new identities afforded them through the rap activity.

As I look to today's classrooms, wherein students are wrestling with everything from gender to what it means to be a student, the power of hybrid spaces seems more important than it did ten years ago. How educators, and education in general, construct classroom spaces makes a difference. Students need spaces where differences are not only accepted, but championed. They need opportunities to try on various identities in welcoming spaces. Education cannot continue to view classrooms and schools as neutral spaces. Doing so will only continue to privilege some ways of knowing and being over others, resulting in students, such as Trey, being silenced in the very spaces where they most need to be heard.

Looking Ahead to the Future

As I consider the fresh, young faces that greet me each year during New Teacher Orientation, I am hopeful for the future of education. I see in them the bright light of youthful optimism—which has not become dulled by the inundation of testing and data meetings—and find myself asking a new question, How can I support them in their resistance to the reductionist model of education?

As a district leader, I find myself burdened by this new task. I sit in endless meetings about data, but there is very little discussion about true learning—the kind that causes students to ignore the bell ending class as they argue with their classmates about a character's actions or the current issue in the media. I find myself appplying Ballenger's (2009) question to my current reality—How can we develop enough distance from these familiar [pratices] to challenge our understanding of teaching and learning? Can we step back from how we've always done things

and look at our practices and processes with fresh eyes? Can we de-emphasize testing, knowing that not all learning can be measured on a timed, singular test?

I must admit that I don't have an easy anser for this. I am, however, hopeful that other teacher researchers will continue to examine the impact of constructivist practices, such as the *Hamlet* rap activity, on student engagement and learning. Through ongoing research and discussion, maybe we can shift the tide of education away from testing and back toward authentic learning.

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