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Popular Culture and Critical Media Pedagogy in Secondary Literacy Classrooms

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Abstract: This article outlines a framework for the teaching of media and cultural studies in to urban youth as a way of promoting much-needed academic and critical literacies. We argue that a critical media pedagogy can help young people to identify concepts such as hegemony and ideology and understand that the mass media are not neutral entities. Through a problem-posing (Freire, 1970) and culturally affirming pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), students can also learn to deconstruct dominant media narratives and to create their own counter-narratives to the media's depiction of urban youth of color. Drawing from an intervention with urban adolescents where media are used as part of instruction, this study reveals how critical media pedagogies can simultaneously empower youth toward the media they confront while also imparting academic literacy skills. The article concludes with the contention that new media texts are more relevant to and affirming of the everyday sociocultural experiences of students and can be used to teach the literacy skills needed for academic advancement, critical citizenship, and professional employment.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Literacy Education

Introduction

MOST PEOPLE SPEND as much as a third of their lives engaged with mass media. A person of 60 years of age, for example, has seen, read, or heard as many as 50 million advertisements (Sardar and Van Loon, 2000). Popular media, which are comprised of news reporting agencies, magazines, films, music, television, and the Internet are, for most people, the major source of information about their world. Kellner (1995) argues that media culture is now the dominant culture which socializes us and provides material for identity in terms of both social reproduction and change. The uncritical consumption of media texts that frame citizens as consumers or, worse, as criminals or objects of commodification in the service of dominant interests can facilitate alienation and disempowerment. Kellner, in response to the dangerous potential of dominant media narratives, calls for a critical cultural studies that:

...conceptualizes society as a terrain of domination and resistance and engages in a critique of domination and of the ways that media culture engages in reproducing relationships of domination and oppression (4).

No group is more impacted by the dominant narratives of media culture than urban youth of color (Goodman, 2003). Giroux (1996) examines how working class youth are both commodified and criminalized by media culture. At the same time,

however, he and other cultural theorists acknowledge that youth have created their own forms of media expression that simultaneously serve as sites of resistance and sites of cooptation by the culture industries (Lipsitz, 1994). Hip-hop music and culture, for example, are the authentic representations of the fear and rage of postindustrial urban youth (George, 1999). At the same time, though, this form of expression is captured and co-opted by corporate media who then market this culture back to youth in the service of profit. Regardless of whether its consumption comes to good or ill, the sheer volume of time and involvement legitimate the mass media as a viable pedagogical institution with a strong impact on the lives of urban youth (Giroux, 1996).

It is also true that the media play a central role in the construction of race, class, and gender in problematic ways. Cornel West (1993) comments that the two biggest problems impacting the African-American community are too much poverty and too little self love with popular media contributing to both. Though this statement was originally applied to African-Americans, it can definitely be expanded to include members of other marginalized groups. That is, the messages sent to young people of color by the dominant media can foster feelings of alienation and inferiority while also justifying individual and institutional racism. These consequences are so severe that the American Academy of Pediatricians (2001) and the British Broadcasting Standards commission recommend that media studies be taught in



school to mitigate the impact of mass media on the lives of youth (Sardar and Van Loon, 2000).

Equally as problematic and challenging as the pre-eminence of disempowering popular media narratives of urban youth of color is the paltry condition of literacy instruction for students of color attending America's urban schools. Numerous researchers (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gutierrez, 2000; Lee, 2001; Moll, 2000) have chronicled the challenges confronting these populations in America's classrooms with potentially devastating consequences for the myriad of youth who are systematically denied access to academic literacies¹. The very same students who are framed as illiterate or non-learners are the ones who engage in literate and literacy learning activities as they interact with popular media on a daily basis.

We begin this work here; from a sociocultural framework that views all students as learners and users of language and literacy as participants in local cultural communities (Cole, 1996; Moll, 2000). From there we seek to make meaningful connections between out-of-school literacy practices and academic literacy instruction aimed at academic achievement, economic empowerment, and social change. Ultimately, we make the case that critical media pedagogy with urban youth that draws upon the authentic experiences of urban teens of color to accomplish these multiple aims.

A 2001 report by the National Reading Conference on literacy development among adolescents (Alvermann, 2001) calls for literacy educators to help students learn to more critically interrogate the mass media that play such a central role in their identity development and worldview. In this way, teaching the mass media is also an approach that can simultaneously promote academic and critical literacies. In order to function as empowered citizens with positive self concepts, urban adolescents need to be able to deconstruct and reinterpret the messages that are sent to them by media advertisers. At the same time, with the proliferation of independent news sources coupled with the concentration of news reporting agencies, these same youth need the analytical skills—the literacy skills—that enable them to make sense of the mixed and multiple messages about the world that are conveyed through the various news media. Young people need to understand the difference between reality and the media's various representations of reality. Individuals wishing to remain informed need to learn to “read” news media carefully; they must also triangulate traditional readings with counter-readings of media texts. Critical citizens must also be producers of media texts writing or using other images when and where they can, whether through a web page, a community newsletter, a bro-

chure, an independent newspaper, a letter to the editor, a message sent out on a listserv, or the production and distribution of digital films.

This paper outlines a framework for the teaching of media and cultural studies to urban adolescents as a way of promoting much-needed academic and critical literacies. We argue that critical media pedagogies can help young people to identify concepts such as hegemony and ideology and understand that the mass media are not neutral entities. Through a problem-posing (Freire, 1970) and culturally affirming pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), students can also learn to deconstruct dominant media narratives and to create their own counter-narratives to the media's depiction of urban youth of color.

This paper also examines data gathered from a summer seminar where urban teens were apprenticed as critical researchers studying urban youth's access to public spaces and social institutions. These data include video tapes of classroom activities, formal interviews with students, extensive reflective field notes, and samples of students' writings and students' presentations of their work. Analyses of the data reveal how critical media pedagogy can simultaneously empower youth toward the media they confront while also imparting academic literacy skills. We conclude with a challenge to literacy educators to justify traditional practices that use alienating and irrelevant texts in diverse classrooms. We ultimately contend that new media texts are more relevant to and affirming of the everyday sociocultural experiences of students and can be used to teach the literacy skills needed for academic advancement, critical citizenship, and professional employment.

The Hip-Hop Project

As part of their involvement in a summer research seminar for teens, a group of students decided to study the multiple impacts of hip-hop music and culture on inner city youth and the potential implications for literacy instruction in secondary schools. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell have taught in a research seminar, known as “Special Topics in the Sociology of Education,” an annual collaboration between a local university and surrounding urban school districts. The students, entering juniors and seniors, come together to study works that introduce them to critical social theory, research related to urban education and urban sociology, and critical qualitative research methods. The centerpiece of the seminar is an independent critical research project that is completed by the students, who work together in groups of four or five. Led by a mentor, usually a practicing teacher, the student team creates a question, locates relevant literature, designs a study, col-

¹ We use the ‘academic’ modifier to distinguish traditional school literacy demands from popular cultural literacies.

lects and analyzes data, and writes a report to share with university faculty and community activists. Over the six year history of the seminar, student-generated research has been published on web sites and read by local and state politicians. Student work has also been featured on local and national media outlets.

It is important to add that the student-participants in the summer research seminars are not selected based on superior grades or recommendations. To the contrary, the students who participate often have marginal academic records or are labeled as “at risk” by their respective institutions. Of the student participants in the hip-hop group, for instance, none held higher than a 2.3 grade point average and none were enrolled in the Honors or Advanced Placement track at their high school.

The four students interested in the hip-hop project centered their work in social reproduction theory and critical literacy. They read works from MacLeod (1987) and Bourdieu (1977) to understand how the structure and culture of urban schooling leads to the reproduction of social inequality. Certainly, one facet of this structure would include hegemonic curricula, or assignments that reflected the norms and interests of the dominant elites in society. The following is an excerpt from the students’ final report:

The Sociology of Education is a field of study that seeks to explain how forces of social reproduction help to maintain inequality in educational achievement. Sociologists of Education also explore ways to enable teachers, students, parents, and communities to alter or disrupt these forces. For example, the powerful elite, which are less in population, have power over the masses, which are overflowing in population. Social Reproduction is the way that the powerful elite have control over the masses. It refers to the ways in which dominant institutions (like school) promote social inequality. This allows a small dominant group (oppressors) to maintain control over a much larger subordinated group (oppressed) (Hip-hop Project, 1999).

As a response to curricula intended to promote dominant interests through “justifying oppression and excluding people’s cultures,” the group looked to Freire and Macedo’s (1987) critical literacy or an empowering reading of the word and the world. Specifically, the group focused in on the following statement from Freire and Macedo:

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. Reading the word is not merely preceded by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that

is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. Words should be laden with the meaning of the people’s existential experience, and not of the teacher’s experience. A critical reading of reality constitutes an act of what Gramsci calls counterhegemony (36).

The students surmised that the inclusion of hip-hop culture in secondary curricula could play a vital role in a Gramscian-inspired counterhegemonic curriculum. Again, we quote liberally from the student report:

Understanding the world you live in will help you become conscious of your oppression. When you are conscious of your oppression, your ideology will change and when your ideology changes, your actions will change. Then it becomes possible to change the world you live in. Having a problem such as oppression and being conscious of that problem will help you become critical of your actions and this can change your interpretation of the powerful elite and your struggles. When you change your interpretation of your struggles, transformation can begin. Hip-hop culture can help urban youth become conscious of their oppression because it relates to their own experiences and teaches them to be themselves, fight for what they believe in, and pursue their dreams (Hip-hop Project, 1999).

As part of data collection, the students took photographs that depicted the impact of hip-hop culture and music on youth in their communities. They designed a survey that was distributed to students in the area, and they conducted formal and informal interviews with students, classroom teachers, and neighborhood residents. The research showed that students and teachers agreed that hip-hop music and culture have a major impact on the lives of urban youth, although there was general disagreement over the nature of this impact. For instance, several students pointed toward artists such as Lauryn Hill as examples of how hip-hop music could lead to increased self-esteem and social critique among youth. Others, however, pointed toward hip-hop’s violent images and negative references to women as bitches and hoers.

The student research here is corroborated by the work of Giroux (1996) and Lipsitz (1994) who also speak to the multiple positive and problematic outcomes associated with participation in hip-hop culture. Lipsitz, for example, identifies hip-hop culture as a struggle between the forces of youth resistance and commodification of the culture industries. Although hip-hop culture is an expression of the rage and frustration of postindustrial urban youth (Rose,

1994) it is ultimately dominant business interests that determine how the product is marketed and distributed to the youth from whom it is inspired. Giroux also sees hip-hop as a powerful example of youth critique and resistance, a potent counternarrative of life for youth remaining in postindustrial cities long after the jobs and hopes of industry have departed. His critique, however, is similar to the students in that he sees much of the product that is marketed promoting the criminalization of males and the fetishization of working class females as objects of sexual desire.

Many early theorists of hip-hop (Baker, 1993; George, 1999; Rose, 1994; and Tabb-Powell, 1991) make the distinction between the roots of hip-hop culture and the product that is marketed to youth worldwide. In our own work (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, 2002) we express the importance of textual selection in any classroom units that incorporate hip-hop music and culture. This is no different from the criteria of textual selection in which literacy educators engage with canonical texts. None of this, however, detracts from the students' findings or the potential role of hip-hop in a counterhegemonic curriculum. The point of the research is not to blindly celebrate all that calls itself hip-hop. To the contrary, the students' desired to critically interrogate hip-hop as a viable subject of academic study. In this sense, their work is truly an example of the critical cultural studies called for by Giroux and Kellner.

The student research paper concludes with several recommendations that the students generated for secondary literacy teachers. We will excerpt them here as they are presented in the report:

As a result of our research, the group has come up with the following recommendations for teachers, administrators, and researchers:

1. Teachers should listen to the students' opinions on how they want to learn and what they feel should be taught.
2. As much as possible, curriculum should reflect the experiences of the students.
3. Teachers should understand that school structure and curriculum choices help to promote inequality in achievement. It's not just the fault of "bad" kids who don't want to learn.
4. Teachers should talk with students about social inequality in school to help them become conscious of their oppression.
5. Teachers should make an effort to understand hip-hop culture because it reflects the experiences of their students and has such a tremendous impact on their students' lives.
6. There should be a forum at Pacific High School for us to share our research with teachers and

to discuss more student-focused alternatives for the school curriculum.

7. Some ways that teachers might include hip-hop in their curriculum include:
 - a. Examining the messages that artists are trying to send through their songs to promote discussions among students.
 - b. Looking at the experiences of the artists and having the students relate to their own experiences.
 - c. English teachers can examine the use of language in hip-hop and how it relates students' use of language.
 - d. Hip-hop music can be taught in comparison to other forms of African-American music like Jazz.
 - e. Special courses should be offered that reflect student interests. Students in these courses should be allowed to conduct and publish their own research on topics like hip-hop and explore such issues as: why artists use certain language, why themes such as poverty and struggle appear often in the lyrics.
 - f. Teachers can compare the themes in current rap songs with similar themes in older literary works to help students make the connection between their world and the world of literature (Hip-hop Project, 1999).

This student-generated report is an example of the type of critical cultural studies that empowers urban youth of color over the popular media in which they are immersed. Students left the research with a sophisticated sense of the multiple roles that hip-hop music and culture played in their lives along with a framework and a language for explaining these different outcomes associated with participation in hip-hop culture. To a person, the students admitted that they would be more critical consumers of hip-hop culture. Further, the students were able to take an empowering position vis-à-vis the curricular offerings at their school. In addition to submitting this report, the student participants also presented their findings and recommendations to the English department at their school and to a local conference for English teachers. Later in that same school year, one of the teachers actually allowed these students to incorporate hip-hop texts into their curriculum.

Finally, in addition to being an example of critical cultural studies, this is an illustration of effective adolescent literacy instruction. These students, entering juniors at the time of the research, read complex academic texts, designed interview protocols and surveys, transcribed interviews, and wrote a lengthy report as part of the research process. All of these reading, writing, and research skills were directly

related to the academic literacy requirements of secondary schooling.

The Critical Media Project

One year later, at this same summer research seminar, another group of students found them selves immersed in a project related to the media's interactions with and portrayals of urban youth of color. It was the summer of 2000 and the seminar, located in the host city of the Democratic National Convention, focused upon an examination of youth access as it related to the city of Los Angeles and the DNC. The group that we will concentrate on for this analysis chose to examine youth access to the media and the media's portrayal of urban youth of color.

The group began its work on the premise that millions of people rely on mainstream media reporting for their information about themselves and the world; most of which is consumed uncritically. A second premise was that youth, and in particular youth of color, were frequently portrayed in negative terms by these dominant media narratives. The group consulted literature from cultural theorists such as Kellner (1995) who speak to the role that media play in constructing reality and call for a critical pedagogy of media culture to counter the negative impacts of these dominant narratives on members of marginalized populations. From their analysis of the literature, the group develops a definition of critical media literacy that is not so terribly dissimilar from one that appears earlier in this article:

Critical Media literacy: To obtain facts from the media text necessary: to examine, ask questions, analyze and critically dissect all the forms of culture, language, issues of power, positionality within a text that may create particular meanings, identities, and to shape and transform the material and social conditions of our culture and society. To question reality vs. perception. To examine who the experts are on the story. To consider what you believe is the most accurate, reliable, and factual source of information from the different types of resources or media. To explore how culture, society, and polity are structured and work (Critical Media Project, 2000).

The student research group also focused on the Insider-Outside perspective of corporate media showing how the people on the inside—usually those most closely aligned with power—often control the dissemination of information that influences the lives of the outsiders and how these outsiders live and make sense of their own situation. This point was further elaborated in their argument of the relationship between the dominant interests in society and

the *Media Optic*, which they defined as the way the media views: events, incident, facts, who are the experts, what voices and stories are heard, the complexity of a situation, or themes etc. and what effects how media views the phenomenon. Finally, this group theorized the concept of the *Media Filter*—how the media interprets, filters, and frames a phenomenon with some examination of how the media's positionality, corporate structures, marketing strategies, finance backers, etc. may influence what stories are told and what voices are heard, and who benefits from the story.

In order to gather data for their research, the students interviewed and followed members of the mainstream media during their coverage of the Democratic National Convention. They also distributed a survey on attitudes toward the media to various participants in the convention's activities including activists, politicians, and delegates. Next, they conducted a sophisticated content analysis of the coverage of the major daily newspapers during the week of the convention, specifically as this coverage related to framing youth involvement in protests at the convention (see Table 1 for sample analysis).

The critical media research group found that most people did get their information about local events from the corporate media. In their interactions with members of the media, they found that editors and publishers did encourage a certain reading of youth as volatile, disruptive, and delinquent. Reporters, for instance, admitted that even if a youth protest was peaceful and substantive, if there was one incident of violence or mayhem, then that would lead. A protest without violence or mayhem was actually not considered as news. It is significant to note that, in their analysis of the daily news coverage of the Democratic National Convention, few links were ever made between youth activists and the causes that they represented. The student research paper concluded with the following observations and recommendations:

1. Many of students may have a tendency to read and interact with mainstream media without questioning the perspective, the experience, the truth, the author's positionality, and the expertise of others, let alone how it might affect students in process of and identity formation, how they interact with others, or how decisions are made regarding youth, youth issues, and youth activists.
2. It is highly possible that in the process of accessing various types of media (i.e. newspapers, television shows, internet, radio, etc. in addition to what they learn from peers, family members, communities, and other forms of text), many students may consciously or unconsciously question and/or learn what it means, for ex-

ample, to be stereotyped and silenced in the United States from those whose language evokes a particular history, position of power, and oppression over others.

3. Given media coverage and the structure of many stories will likely remain unchanged, students must be instilled with a more critical awareness of the language, social construction of identity and how race/ethnicity relations is discussed in media.
4. In particular, we need to encourage students to critically think, raise questions as to what factors may affect who students think they are, what they can become, how they think of others, how students interact with others, to examine issues of power, and to analyze relationships particularly Black and Latino youth relations.
5. Students need to be trained in critical media literacy and seen as experts on youth to be empowered to change our future for the better (Critical Media Project, 2000).

The media study group provides another example of first rate critical research on the power of media narratives. The detailed content analysis of the major daily news coverage is the material of graduate theses and professional publications. The students were profoundly affected by the dissonance between their own experiences of events surrounding the convention and the eerily uniform miscoverage by major news outlets. LaShonda, one of the student-researchers in the media group, had this to say in her final journal:

LaShonda: I feel that my group learned a lot from all the things that we have done. We now see that there are a lot of people that are out there that will ask you for your voice, but when you are ready to tell them they might not want to here what you have to say. I feel that we seen a lot of the media only showing the bad things that went on at the convention. When we talked to some of them they said that they only put things on TV that people want to see. If the protest was peaceful then people did not want to see it. From being down there I see that youth have to stand up and be loud. The reason I say that is if you are not loud you will not be heard. Some times the system is not working for you but working against you (Excerpt from LaShonda's journal, August 15, 2000).

Several of LaShonda's colleagues decided to contribute to local media outlets or create their own. One member of this group wrote a multi-page feature in her high school paper and a few others joined their high school journalism staffs with the intent of providing socially-informed reporting. A few submit-

ted their work to online publications, while still others presented their work to national conferences for educational researchers and activists for social justice. This textual production underscores our argument that critical media pedagogy cannot only be concerned with the critical consumption of existing media texts. Educators interested in engaging in critical media pedagogy must also see as their aim to create texts that speak out against the workings of the dominant media while, at every turn, providing perspectives of contemporary events from marginalized voices.

Conclusion

Like West (1993), hooks (1994) has argued that one of the most pressing problems facing poor communities is low self-esteem. She attributes this to an on-going barrage of negative images of the poor in popular culture. Hooks continues by saying that this low self-esteem makes it "impossible for [the] younger generation to move forward even as it makes their lives physically unbearable" (171). She concludes that to change this, educators must intervene at existing sites of representation. This intervention can come in many forms, including pressuring the producers of media to provide more accurate and positive representations of poor and non-white groups. Equally as powerful would be a pedagogy and curriculum that gave students the critical media literacy skills to critique these media representations so as to develop counter-narratives.

Our students tell us, in their dress, in their actions and in their words that they want to be taught. But, if we listen carefully, they will also tell us what we can use to teach them. Educators rightly believe that on-going training and continuous education are effective measures to decide on what is best for our children to learn. However, we have gone increasingly wide of the mark in our efforts to devise strategies for getting them to learn those things. Rather than using the strengths that they bring with them to our classrooms, we have made it our personal mission to separate that which they already know from that which we feel they must know. This, in our opinion, has been our fatal flaw.

As far back as 1951 researchers were calling for schools to develop critical media literacies through the curriculum:

...urging that schools include courses in their curricula which teach the critical evaluation of TV, and of other mass media. These observers argue that we are leaving the age of the spoken and written word and entering the age of pictures. It is high time, they say, that our classrooms caught up with the outside world (Shayon, 1951: 86, as cited in Reeves 1999).

At a time when estimates are that 99% of US households have at least one television and some 70% percent have two or more (Reeves 1999) the time has come for teachers and schools to recognize and use popular media as a powerful tool for connecting students to the curriculum. As Postman (1985) puts it, “the problem does not reside in *what* we watch. The problem is *that* we watch. The solution must be found in *how* we watch” (160, as cited in Reeves 1999).

Schools must step up to the challenge of the 21st Century and help students develop the language to counter the sophisticated politics of public portrayal that target them every day. In so doing, two positive outcomes can be achieved for young people. First, as we have demonstrated in multiple ways in this paper, students’ academic literacy skills can be developed and accelerated. Second, students can learn to develop counter-narratives that allow for a sense of empowerment to disrupt those negative images and create their own realities.

Students engage daily in all of the aspects of school that we are convinced they have no interest in. Our mistake has been in our unwillingness to re-

cognize this and to capitalize on it in our classrooms. As Kozol (1991) notes in *Savage Inequalities*:

It occurred to me that we had not been listening much to children in these recent years of “summit conferences” on education, of severe reports and ominous prescriptions. The voices of children, frankly, had been missing from the whole discussion.

This seems especially unfortunate because the children often are more interesting and perceptive than the grown-ups are about the day-to-day realities of life in school. For this reason, I decided, early in my journey, to attempt to listen very carefully to children and, whenever possible, to let their voices and their judgments and their longings find a place within this book—and maybe, too, within the nation’s dialogue about their destinies. I hope that, in this effort, I have done them justice (Kozol, 1991).

Kozol is quite correct. When, as educators, our curriculum, our assessments, and our schools become as inclusive as he hopes his book will be, our search for motivated learners may very well be concluded.

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Table 1: Newspaper analysis (Sample)

Newspaper on Aug. 15	Word Count	Coverage of youth activist/protest issues	Pictures
USA Today	Weapons – 13 Police – 6 Fire – 1 Protester – 5 Students – 0 Youth - 1	None	At nighttime, four protesters surround a fire, two with handkerchiefs covering their mouths. One protester is putting a piece of paper in the fire out of the 8000 youth at concert/demonstration area
LA Times	Weapons – 2 Police – 20 Arrest – 2 Riot – 5 Protester – 4 Youth – 2 Gas Masks – 1 Students – 2	None	Five cops of color walking in the middle of the street with riot gear preparing for any riots that may break out.
Chicago Tribune	Protester – 22 Violence – 7 Weapons – 5 Police – 27 Fire – 1 Anarchists - 2	2 issues mentioned – “Human need not corporate greed” and “Occidental Petroleum Inc.	Six LADP Police officer in riot gear with batons are on top of a protester who is trying to cover his head with his arms
LA Opinion	Protester – 2 Police – 7 Manifestantes – 12 Disturbance - 1	3 – issues mentioned – Oil drilling, nuclear weapons, spending money on schools	Three pictures – one cop hitting one person, calm protesters walking and holding signs, and a picture of other calm demonstrators

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Ernest Morrell is an assistant professor in the Urban Schooling division of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles. His work examines the intersections between indigenous urban adolescent literacies and the “sanctioned” literacies of dominant institutions such as schools. He teaches courses on literacy theory and research, critical pedagogy, cultural studies, urban education, and ethnic studies. Morrell is the author of two books, *Linking Literacy and Popular Culture: Finding Connections for Lifelong Learning* (Christopher-Gordon) and *Becoming Critical Researchers: Literacy and Empowerment for Urban Youth* (Peter Lang).

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