Theory Into Practice

Seeing and Hearing Students' Lived and Embodied Critical Literacy Practices

Elisabeth Johnson [a] & Lalitha Vasudevan [b]

[a] Literacy and English Education at the City University of New York, College of Staten Island

[b] Teachers College, Columbia University

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Elisabeth Johnson
Lalitha Vasudevan

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In this article, the authors argue that teachers and researchers must expand current verbo- and logo-centric definitions of critical literacy to recognize how texts and responses are embodied. Ethnographic data illustrate the ways that youth perform critical literacy in ways that educators might not always be prepared to see, hear, or acknowledge.

Elisabeth Johnson is an assistant professor of Literacy and English Education at the City University of New York, College of Staten Island; Lalitha Vasudevan is an associate professor of Technology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Correspondence can be sent to Dr. Elisabeth Johnson, 2800 Victory Boulevard, City University of New York, College of Staten Island, 3S-225, Staten Island, NY 10314. E-mail: elisabeth.johnson@csi.cuny.edu

THERE IS A MOVEMENT in critical literacy curriculum and pedagogy to study "everyday texts," i.e., the texts one encounters daily on billboards, in mailboxes, on TV, on school cafeteria menus, and on clothing labels (Vasquez, 2004). This move recognizes how young people analyze literary texts, as well as texts that have personal meaning and broad social implications in worlds beyond school. In noting this, we do not mean to dichotomize school and everyday texts, but to emphasize rich opportunities available through integrating young people's out-of-school textual engagements into schoolwork.

Centering everyday texts is crucial to enacting responsive, relevant critical curriculum. But everyday texts invite affective responses that exceed logical, rational, verbal, and written responses within a framework of critical analysis techniques (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Janks, 2002; Vasquez, 2004). For example, deconstructing a beloved cartoon or remaking an ad campaign might spark resistance, laughter, or a

carnivalesque moment when norms for classroom power relations and comportment are temporarily upended (Grace & Tobin, 1998). What else might such reactions signify? In this article, we regard these responses, similar to Sipe's (2007) reading of young children's performative responses, as critical performances—moments when students use their bodies to communicate their critical perspectives that, in turn, are positioned and interpreted by an outside audience. However, critical performances may be less recognizable as critical *literacy* given the verbo- and logo-centricity (a tendency to privilege spoken and written language over other communicative modes such as silence, visual image, laughter, gesture, music, etc.) of critical curriculum and pedagogy.

We make the case that teachers must expand current definitions of critical literacy to include a performance lens that recognizes embodied texts and responses. Following a working definition of *critical literacy*, we include two vignettes focusing on 10th graders who help us put these theories into practice; first Rukiya's,[1] then Santo's and Jessica's performances illustrate the silent, invisible, taboo, and politically incorrect ways people might embody and perform critical literacy daily. We conclude with implications critical performances have for teachers and researchers. Ultimately, we argue that students use their bodies to perform critical literacy— that is, to respond to and convey their critical engagements with myriad texts—in ways that are underrecognized, may defy rationality, or transgress teacher expectations for the politically correct or classroom appropriate (Janks, 2002).

Critical Literacy: A Contingent Definition

Critical literacy has taken many shapes on a not-so-linear trajectory. It is a term with distinct meanings "in particular places at particular times ... informed by our personal and professional histories" (Comber, 2006, p. 53). Certainly definitions are in constant, contextual negotiation as curriculum is enacted between students and teachers. However, context-specific definitions often foreground classroom teachers' experiences, charging them with scaffolding and recognizing particular critical literacy practices that largely depend on deconstructing texts. Moreover, many deconstructive activities fail to account for differential frames of reference, cultural histories, and personal experiences that make students' textual understandings distinct from those assumed by progressive pedagogues (Enciso, 2007). For example, identifying and deconstructing the media's manipulative machinations are commonplace critical literacy practices. Rather than positioning youth as duped by a capitalistic, consumer-driven economy, educators might begin asking about students' life experiences with money, family values about consumption, and what texts mean to them. Therefore, in the interest of recognizing contingent relationships with texts and capital, we turn to the body, a site where these complicated relationships play out across the lifespan.

The body is a text produced by socially circulating norms for gender, race, sexuality, class, age, and ability (Kamler, 1997). Through daily, bodily repetitions, (i.e., speech, gesture, and dress), we reproduce and reinscribe these meanings (Bettie, 2003; Butler, 1999; Youdell, 2006). For instance, people frequently position (i.e., assign seemingly fixed roles) babies dressed in blue as boys, teen girls as boy-crazy, and Latino youth as native Spanish speakers. But if one watches longer, listens differently, engages with, or suspends these readings, these people all might be understood otherwise (Gustavson, 2007).

Likewise, what critical literacy means in school can differ from the ways people read, write, speak, listen, and gesture critically beyond teacher radars. This leads us to conceptualize critical literacy as performed (Blackburn, 2003), positioned (Bomer & Laman, 2004), and produced (Youdell, 2006). This means that what it means to be critically literate is produced by widely circulating social norms for critical literacy. Youth and teachers mirror and disrupt these norms every day, as they perform and position each other. What counts as critical literacy might be speaking, dressing, or gesturing to express

a particular way of being that belies, subverts, and exposes social norms and power imbalances. Such performances are critical because they allow youth to explore and expose ways power circulates.

Teaching and research in the areas of critical media literacy and multimodality have expanded verbo- and logo-centric definitions of literacy to include a focus on ways that media texts work in multiple modes (e.g., the ways sound, image, and text work in tandem to position and produce messages; Jewitt, 2008; Siegel, 2006; Vasquez, 2007). We encourage a turn to the local, daily texts of the body to disrupt reductive interpretations of young people's classroom performances and expand meanings of text and literacy. Embodied texts like clothing, hair, and accessories are those most frequently used to position students (Forman, 2005) and fundamental to identity work in which we all engage (Pomerantz, 2008). Moreover, affective relationships to embodied texts take complicated, conflicted forms absent in many logical, rational rubrics for critical literacy practice (Janks, 2002[2]).

Critical Performances in an English Classroom

During 2006–2007, Liz Johnson, one of the authors of this article, conducted a year-long ethnographic study that focused on teacher and student negotiations surrounding pop culture text meanings on which the following vignettes are based.[3] She did not set out to study critical literacy with this project. Instead, she wondered what pop culture texts were important to young people and how those texts were used when participants performed themselves and positioned one another in school. Through observational field notes, ethnographic interviews, and photo-ethnographies,[4] Liz identified a range of popular texts in this classroom, (e.g., gestures, clothing, and accessories including personal tech such as iPods, cell phones, PlayStation Portables, etc.).

As Liz examined the ways young people identified themselves using these texts, she frequently saw and heard students who questioned

the ways power circulated in school, media, and social texts. But instead of labeling these ways of reading the word and the world *critical*, focal youth used different terms for these performances, for example, "speaking loud enough to be heard," "speaking open-mindedly," having "swag," "speaking the 100% truth," and "talking about life in the community." Although some critical performances took center stage,[5] most occurred backstage in interviews with Liz, or for peer audiences.

Ms. Nicole Phagan, the tenth-grade English teacher in Room 323, encouraged students to "go deeper" and "get political" by analyzing the subtext of what they read and wrote. Even though she invited critical perspectives, these perspectives were paired with opposing perspectives, which often mirrored perspectives of adults responsible for student discipline and control (Foucault, 1979). We argue that such practices produced a classroom space that privileged multiple over critical perspectives and positioned literacy as a neutral practice.

The classroom and individual interview contexts for the two vignettes included audiences that both recognized and failed to recognize these youths' performances as critical literacy. In saying so, we wish to illustrate the ways critical literacy is an embodied performance that is always and already occurring, regardless of whether or not it is recognized as such. We hope these illustrations provoke new ways to see, hear, and foster students' critical performances in school.

Looks Can Be Deceiving: Critical Performances in Less Likely Places

Everybody thought 16-year-old Rukiya was popular, or "down," as she put it. She hung out with a school crowd reputed for frequent spending on new clothes and kept up with the latest fashion trends, i.e., wearing fresh Uptowns and Jordans almost weekly, matching clothing colors to sneaker details, donning hot orange streaks in silky black tresses, and sporting what peers dubbed the "gangsta preppy" look. This meant she juxtaposed "gangsta" brands like Rocawear

with "preppy" brands like Aeropostale. Her style attracted my attention. Many classmates admired her flair. And others, like Jessica, disclosed dressing's importance for Rukiya: "She's [Rukiya's] motivated to come [to school] when she has new clothes to wear" (Field notes, May 5, 2007).

I also assumed Rukiya was obsessed with spending on clothing, shoes, jewelry, and hairstyles. It frequently came up in her peer conversations. For example, during a project when students created life-sized diagrams of Shakespeare characters from *Othello*, Rukiya called friends' attention to the "Rodrigo" group that had drawn sneakers on the character's feet. And when students strutted down room 323's aisles, catwalk chatter fluttered between Rukiya and her tablemates: "She's here with the earrings thuggin' big;" "Do I got too much curls?"; and "Everybody who wears Converse everyday wears Converse every day. It's like an everyday thing. Not no Uptowns . . . You can't wear white Uptowns every day."

Along these lines, I initially noted that Rukiya seemed to perform the clothes-obsessed teen in her photoethnography, as she took many pictures of clothing and shoes when asked to photograph the popular culture texts important to her. When I asked her to talk about the snapshots, Rukiya positioned clothing as a text, critical to performing and positioning identities, geographic and ethnic locations, and socioeconomic status: "I feel like clothes make a person. They describe basically you, your background, where you come from, what's in your house. . . . " She went on to describe how "everything is connected: TV, music, friends, dressing, phones. Everything is like all connected, like everything. It starts from TV. We see the girls modeling, being in the videos, but we want to look like them; we want to be like them." With "we see" and "we want," Rukiya positioned herself and her peers as the *duped teenager* who falls victim to the forces of targeted marketing, while aspiring to mimic lifestyles promoted by fashion models, television shows, and popular music.

As the conversation unfurled, Rukiya explained that clothing and accessories were important texts in her identity performances and

texts she relied upon to read others. However, she didn't consider it "wise" to pay lots for consumables such as food and lip gloss, even though peers and Lil Mama, the rap artist, made claims to the contrary. She explained:

> *Rukiya*: A new song came out called "Lip Gloss" by Lil Mama. I don't know if you ever heard of it.
>
> *Liz*: No. You have it? We'll hear it.
>
> *Rukiya*: It talks about lip-glossness [sic].
>
> *Liz*: How so?
>
> *Rukiya*: And now you hear everybody. She talks about her lip gloss, how when she put it on how she do it. When she walks down the hall everybody looks at it. And now, to be honest, you hear a lot of girls now they wanna go get MAC lip gloss. Before they used to go to beauty supply for 99-cent lip gloss. Now they wanna buy fifteen-dollar lip-gloss from MAC, Victoria Secret. And I'm like, "Are you serious?" Like they now wanna do that just because the video came out. That shows how much of an influence videos and songs have on us.
>
> *Liz*: But it doesn't. Tell me your reaction to something like that.
>
> *Rukiya*: Me? Stuff like that, it doesn't bother me because I feel like just with food, for example, my friend Daniel, my mother, when she goes food shopping, she buys name brands of Western Beef. She'll buy a can of corn. It won't be Del, Dole, whatever. It'll be the Western Beef and he [Daniel] feels like he's so. For his mother, everything she buys is, everything she buys is like name brand. And when he comes to my house he'll be like, "Ewww, I can tell a difference. Ewww," this and that. To me there's no difference. And the reason I'm bringing that up is because MAC lip gloss and 99-cent lip gloss look the same on your lips. There's no difference for me to spend fifteen dollars when I could spend a dollar and save money. So for me, I think of it more [sic] wiser.

Rukiya started positioning herself with duped teens, but later positioned herself apart from this trope by stating her preference for cheaper consumables, i.e., 99-cent lip gloss, Western

Beef brand foods, etcetera. Even though Rukiya initially noted an early desire to look and be like a model, desire was halted when wearable items lacked performative valence or tangible difference. Items worth money improved social positioning, feeling, and being. Items not worth the price looked or tasted the same, but cost more. Notably, Rukiya never hid her lip gloss tubes from view as she usually refreshed her shine at the table before dismissal. With each lip gloss application, Rukiya performed a wise spender: wiser to her, frugal to some, and cheap to others.

From Political to Satirical: Recognizing a Range of Critical Responses

During English class, Santo, a 15-year-old Dominican–Ecuadorian boy was usually playful. He sang things like, "When you loop de loop you poop," jokingly called his teacher Ms. Phagan the Phagster, and blurted "shitake mushrooms" when he blundered. Santo frequently volunteered to talk in center stage, teacher-facilitated discussions, sharing elaborate personal and political opinions.

Sometimes Santo sat with Jessica, a 16-year-old Chinese American who usually wore white t-shirts and skinny jeans atop black Converse Allstars. She was into Velcro wallets, sometimes painted her nails black, and loved the band AC/DC. Jessica's attendance in this first period class was fairly sporadic and she left school unexpectedly. When she was in class, Jessica actively participated in teacher-facilitated discussions and spent a good deal of small group work time chatting with peers in side conversations about life outside of school, e.g., her job at the Kosher Chinese restaurant, hook-ups, and the latest fights and make-ups between friends.

I witnessed several of Santo's critical performances across the year, including his center stage efforts to counter the Iraq war, critique George W. Bush, and position teacher edits as censorship. I also recorded Santo's numerous critical performances centering race. These took place backstage for classmates and me. The following events offer some insight into a few ways Santo used backstage spaces for playful, critical

performances in interviews with his tablemates and me.

Early in data collection, I sat with Santo, who was working on a small group skit for history class the following day. Out of teacher earshot, Jessica, one of his group members asked, eyeing Santo, if anyone had seen *The Amazing Racist*[6] on Youtube.[7] With that, the young Chinese American launched into a scene about the racist in a sushi bar, transitioning to the racist in a Mexican restaurant, urging store employees not to throw tomatoes at him because "your cousin picked that!" She closed describing the racist confronting a Chinese guy with a leashed dog, asking if "he will make fried dog." Jessica and Santo were rolling with laughter. She pointed at him as he laughed, doubled over. Santo one-upped the story, remembering that the racist said, "Mexicans can only do two things: work and have babies." With this, he and Jessica erupted with laughter, Santo almost falling from his chair.

Their conversation transitioned to talk beyond the scope of assigned classwork, transgressed their peer's comfort level, and seemed to subvert their teacher's earshot. To illustrate, Santo and Jessica discussed *Jackass 2's*[8] Fart Mask scene, a butt beer tube, *Saw 3*,[9] dancing in iPod commercials, X-rated iPods, and scenes of the elderly in *Jackass 1*. After a few exchanges, their tablemate, Corey, reminded them of my presence, and, presumably, classroom norms for adult-sanctioned topics, warning, "Stay on topic guys. She's [Liz] writing everything you say" (Field notes, October 26, 2006), but Jessica and Santo continued. When Ms. Phagan checked in, Santo mentioned that the film *The Alamo* would fit with their project. When she exited, Santo and Jessica turned to discuss *Harold and Kumar*,[10] Hilary Duff,[11] and *Space Balls*.[12]

Beyond teacher purview, but before me, Santo and Jessica discussed a variety of topics typically taboo in classrooms. Rather than belabor race with serious concern, or ignore it—two possible responses in race talk—they played with race and racism just like they played with topics like old age, farting, and pornography. Even though being serious about or ignoring racial issues were not the only approaches for race-work in school, race

was rarely centered in official classroom work and playing about racial issues was certainly not the norm.

To some, Santo and Jessica's banter and giggling might seem off-task. Through my eyes and ears, the rambunctious physicality, continued performance despite adult presence, and willingness to joke freely and politically incorrectly about race disrupted norms for race talk and democratic dialogue in the classroom. Who decides when, why, and how we have critical conversations about race? And who says these interactions have to be serious? In their conversation, Santo and Jessica demonstrated how embodied responses and critical readings can expose unequal power relations without sounding like the nightly news.

Here Santo and Jessica performed and positioned one another as White, non-White, and Chinese in words and gestures surrounding the *Amazing Racist* video. Their critical performances underscore the affective dimensions of pop culture texts and the affordances of playful backstage conversations about race and racism. They also expose the limitations of representing critical curriculum in the classroom as a serious, center-stage endeavor. Santo and Jessica's backstage talk illustrated how young people negotiate textual meaning for contingent media texts in ways that are more creative and complicated than often planned for by teachers. Santo and Jessica used pop culture texts to make a space where they could broach race talk, joking about race and its role in their lives. The students' use of "politically incorrect" humor to joke about race and racism counters dominant discourses of democratic dialogue, race talk, and antiracist curriculum in school that portray appropriate class talk as teacher-mediated exchanges filled with silences, conflicts, and outbursts (Boler, 2004).

Recognizing the Unseen in Adolescents' Critical Literacy Performances: Implications for Practice

How one engages with an artifact, context, or text changes one's relationship to it. Similarly,

modes of response and ways of reading expressions and performances change how people make sense of one another. Thus, we situate our understandings about critical literacy within the discursive practices of youth themselves, which are not limited to prevailing definitions and images articulated by distant others—e.g., researchers, educators, curriculum writers, educational policymakers. In doing so, we shifted our research stance to consider how young people such as Rukiya, Santo, and Jessica were embodying criticality as they performed themselves in various contexts, through interactions with the material, cultural, and discursive texts around them. Such a stance has implications for classroom practice.

For instance, we attended to the ways critical literacy was evident in unexpected postures and practices that might otherwise be dismissed as *off task* or *duped* (e.g., laughter, humor, and modes of dress). Young people engage with texts in and out of school-sanctioned instructional time. Their criticality is packaged multimodally, embodied, and expressed across space and time. Considering the embodied dimensions of critical literacy not only increases curricular relevance for students as it centers texts circulating in their lives, but it is a pedagogical posture that also assumes students perform critical literacy in ways we might not be positioned to see, hear, or acknowledge.

Educators will inevitably encounter unplanned moments that challenge classroom norms or teacher comfort—moments when critical literacy is possibly being performed differently. In such instances teachers might ask one another and themselves: Why are particular ways of speaking, moving, and dressing disallowed? Who's invested in such rules? Where or when are taboos lifted? Why? How might this moment mean otherwise? But the question remains, what are teachers to do with these performances? And what about performances like those from Rukiya, Santo, and Jessica—performances beyond teacher purview? If one assumes critical literacy to be at once performed, positioned, and produced, educators become integral to both the positioning of these performances in curriculum, and the classroom production of critical literacy.

This means creating curricular conditions that position students' visible and invisible critical performances at the center of classroom inquiry, that position students as critically literate in a range of modes and genres, effectively producing critical literacies that look and sound different, that surprise students and teachers, and provoke questions about the ways we define, identify, and assess what it means to be critically literate in school.

We invite teachers to assume a stance that dances on the edge of co-optation and dismissal of students' texts, and to design projects that ask students to describe and document issues and concepts on their own terms, with texts that might surprise or disrupt what projects and content are about. For example, teachers interested in tapping into students' already wise, but possibly invisible critical consumption practices, might initiate critical projects with inquiries into how and why we (and other people) do and don't spend money. Juxtaposing value systems with context-specific, contingent data would surely yield surprising information for students and teachers while compiling a broad spectrum of situated experiences to question, discuss, and wonder beyond. Moreover, students' local inquiries could be pushed and framed by contemporary documentaries or Internet exploration about life and spending in other countries. But to encourage students to push boundaries, to surprise us and their peers, teachers will likely need to acknowledge and even break classroom norms and taboos—modeling their own critical performances that, like the politically incorrect jokes between Jessica and Santo, might not fall under the readily recognizable rubric of critical literacy. By leaning pedagogically into the critical literacy performances of students, teachers can unpack and build on literate practices in seemingly taboo classroom acts.

Notes

1. All participant names are pseudonyms.
2. Illustrates limits of critical media analysis through affective response.
3. To retain the lead author/researcher's positionality in this study, these vignettes are written in the first person. For more about this study, see Johnson (2009) and Johnson (forthcoming).
4. Photoethnography is a method used in participatory action research to provide participants the opportunity to document and describe their perceptions on the topic of inquiry (Farough, 2006). Even though this was not a participatory action project, Liz sought insights into participant understandings and negotiations of popular culture texts. According to Pink (2001), conversations around photos may challenge researcher understandings of how participants position themselves in relationship to other people, social phenomena, and the conducted inquiry.
5. In the 1950s, Erving Goffman, a prominent Canadian social psychologist, utilized dramaturgical concepts to theorize distinctions between the performed and private self. His front- and backstage assume that there are not audiences for backstage performances. Poststructural performance theory conceptualizes people in perpetual performance (Bettie, 2003; Butler, 1999; Youdell, 2006). Here, center and backstage distinguishes performances loud enough to garner whole class attention from backstage performances for far fewer, imagined, or absent audience members.
6. A series of videotaped comedy works by Ari Shaffir, a Los Angeles stand-up comedian, which features him acting in an overtly racist manner.
7. A video sharing Web site where users can upload, view, share, and respond to video clips.
8. A 2006 comedy film based on the MTV series *Jackass* compiling stunts, pranks, and skits.
9. The third installment in the horror film series, released in 2006.
10. Characters in a stoner comedy film series.
11. American actress, singer, songwriter, and entrepreneur born in 1987 and famous for starring on the TV show *Lizzie McGuire*.
12. A science fiction parody film directed by and starring Mel Brooks, released in 1987.

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