

# Kissing G.I. Joes

## Wide-awake, Critical Connoisseurship in Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy

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**A**T A PRESCHOOL in Central Texas, USA, the following scene unfolds. Without a soundtrack, the scene would look very familiar to almost any early childhood educator in the US: A teacher and his five-year-old students, in a circle, on a rug. They are singing in a daily, pre-nap ritual, prior to taking their places on their blue and red vinyl mats. The mats are already laid out for them with “softies” neatly arranged, symbols of their individuality – tiny pillows, stuffed animals, plush blankets -- first names etched in Sharpie®. But as we turn up the volume on the animated vocalists, we become more aware of their clinched fists pumping in the air to the rhythm of their *a capella* rendition of a song by the 80s punk band, Black Flag. The song is called “T.V. Party”:

*We're gonna have a T.V. party tonight! (All right!)*  
*We're gonna have a T.V. party all right! (Tonight!)*  
*We've got nothing better to do than watch T.V. and have a couple of brews...*  
*...I wouldn't be without my T.V. for a day! (Or even a minute!)*  
*Don't even bother to use my brain anymore! (There's nothing left in it!).* (Ginn, 1982, Side 1)

The teacher leads them through the original lyrics of the song, which include the names of several television shows once popular in the U.S., but that were canceled decades before his students were born: “*Hill Street Blues!*” He sing/chants as his students dance/stomp around the room. “*The Jeffersons!*” He continues. “*Dallas!*”

His students, who have sung this song many times, know that their teacher is recalling television shows from when he was young. They “piggyback” the song’s original content the next time the chorus comes around (Warren, 1984), calling out TV shows they currently watch: “*Sponge Bob!*” a boy calls out. “*Dora!*” chants a girl. “*Ben 10!*” “*Mickey Mouse Clubhouse!*!”

## **Introduction**

This article is an attempt to contribute to the conversation about the actions and the thoughts of teachers who are interested in critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2007) and the potential for this type of literacy as a tool of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2007) in early childhood settings. As part of a larger research project on early childhood educational practices, this article investigates the notion that there can be a recognizable and describable mindset that a teacher can have in order to prepare the type of learning environment in early childhood educational settings --and take actions in those environments-- that creates a “curriculum space” for critical pedagogy involving media texts (Cary, 2006). The opening vignette involves such a teacher. And the scene described, where young students sing a 30-year-old punk song with a middle-aged man about drinking beer and spending all evening watching television, is the unlikely starting point for this discussion. In this case we investigate the words and actions of a teacher who we identify as a practitioner of a version of “critical pedagogy” that itself bears explicitly describing. We call that pedagogical mindset “Wide-awake, critical connoisseurship.” We argue that this teacher’s framework of thoughts, as employed in his classroom, complicate the conversation about what it means to be a facilitator for students engaged in critical media literacy episodes.

In the coming paragraphs, we will attempt to situate this teacher and his actions within the current conversation on critical media literacy. In order to do so, we will first describe our methods for collecting the data and narrating it. We will then take a large section of our allotted pages to describe Mike as a person. We will juxtapose his words describing himself with our own words, describing him through an interpretation possible by current work in early childhood education (Bloch, Holmund, Moqvist, & Popkewitz, 2004; Cannella, 1997; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Soto & Swadener, 2005; Tobin, 2000). We will then describe part of the current state of scholarship in critical media literacy and present a framework for addressing how a teacher can bring a certain philosophy to this pedagogy. We will present evidence for how this teacher “fits” into this philosophy and, finally, allot just a few words to tell the story of the episode we call “The Kissing G.I. Joes.” [and some conclusions, thereof]. This disproportionate distribution of narrative space is made to highlight the philosophical weightiness of a teacher’s framework of thought in preparation for flashes of improvised moments of dialogic critical media literacy episodes, which have the potential to become points in an impressionist landscape of thought and action in the critical media literate teacher’s interruptive early childhood curriculum.

## **Our Methodology:**

### At what school did you hear that song, and where'd you dig up that teacher?

As a dual statement leading to the collection and analysis of data for this article and to begin to situate the opening vignette as applicable to a conversation on critical pedagogy and media literacy, we will introduce ourselves, the teacher who leads the unexpected fist-pumping ritual, and the school in which “TV Party” is an oft sung pre-nap song.

Both authors of this article are white, straight, male, middle-aged, able-bodied former early childhood educators who are full-time faculty in a department of curriculum and instruction of a large state university. They both taught in the same public school district during the 1990s in the city in which the preschool from the opening vignette is located. That city is in the southern part of the United States of America. Both authors purposefully gazed upon the data gathered at this preschool with the intention of finding moments of interruption to the normative discourses on gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and embodiment. Tim knew “Mike” from his days as an early childhood classroom teacher.

“Mike” is the pseudonym for the anglicized nickname [like his actual nickname] of a straight, Latino, 40-year-old teacher who currently teaches at a private pre-K in Austin, Texas. The school has been lauded in the literature for its “developmental appropriateness” (Armstrong, 2007). But beyond a scholarly nod for its “quality,” this school is known in the community for its “alternative” curriculum and its attractiveness to families who resist the discourse on “normal.” The school is in a town known to be a progressive stronghold in a very conservative state in the US. Mike has been teaching there for 19 years, and his pedagogy, his philosophy and his identity have contributed in enormous ways to creating the school’s unique curriculum (Kinard, 2006). As described by both authors, Mike is an irreverent, contradictory, and brilliant early childhood teacher, and the particulars of his (and his colleagues’) days spent among young children are worth describing in greater detail in other venues. Mike lives a life of resistant action to narratives of gender, race, sexuality, language, technology, theology, athleticism, and age—in and out of the classroom (not to say that he is not also taken up by these discourses, but that his intentions are resistant). We will describe some of these attributes a bit more in a moment. The data presented in this research article was gathered as part of a larger ethnographic research project in which Tim returned to his former school and spent one year as an “intimate interloper” (Kinard, 2006). Using Chen’s (2009) framework for critical ethnography, Tim’s reflection on his “hermeneutically preparedness” (p. 23), his “encountering the unexpected” (p. 24), and his “noticing the unnoticed” (p. 25) in his exploration of teacher identity are part and parcel to the narrative of this article. Like Chen and Carspecken before her, we present this fragment of a critical ethnography in an attempt to contemplate culturally contextualized motivations for actions as relationships “between institutional orders and self-maintaining, self-adapting systems” (Carspecken, 2002, quoted in Chen, 2009, p. 20). Both authors are attempting, here, to further complicate that conversation by presenting a narrative of resistance to (and situatedness *in*) some of those systems. Although Jesse did not gather the data, he has also spent considerable time either visiting the school where Mike teaches or conversing with its teachers, and has contributed to the analysis of the data found there and co-narrated it.

In Tim’s voice: Mike and I began teaching at the same school within a few months of one

another and continued alongside one another, off and on, for nine years. In that time, my return to graduate school caught me up in the discourse of cultural studies (Gaztambide-Fernandez, Harding, & Sorde-Marti, 2004)—a complicated discourse to be swept by, considering the eventuality of trying to gaze upon Mike’s practice with deference to these concepts. I have always found Mike to be, as a person and as a pedagogue, controversial and a tumble of actions in conflict. I have been fascinated and wowed by him as a teacher, and also troubled and confused. It is in my attempts to “notice the unnoticed” while reconciling what one reviewer of an early draft of this article referred to as Mike’s seeming “‘un-awake, non-critical appreciation of popular culture’ as a construct of current teachers who have been saturated by popular culture, but need to become critically media literate for the benefit of their students” that the narrative of this article finds its purchase. Both authors of this article agree with the reviewer’s statement. We are attempting to address the question of why an early childhood teacher chooses to sing about chemically questionable behavior (“have[ing] a couple a brews”) and the celebration of mindlessly watching TV with those who, some would argue, are the most vulnerable consumers of popular culture—the ones to whom many believe the seeds of raced, gendered, sexually marginalizing, and othering messages are finding the most fertile soil. We attempted to “see” unexpected actions this teacher has taken that might provide us insight into his philosophy of his craft. In these efforts, the authors found evidence for something unexpected in the combined actions of this teacher and a pedagogical practice. This is not the telling of a heroic pedagogue, saving children from the oppressive texts of corporate kinderculture (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004). We are attempting to interrupt the idea that it could be possible for a critical pedagogue to take a clear and unwavering hero’s path toward the emancipation of her or his students. We are offering, rather, an example of how an awake, critical, connoisseur of popular culture and early childhood pedagogy can create, through a dialogic curriculum, possibilities for moments of the deconstruction of oppressive texts (including those texts that write a narrow script for what it means to be a critical pedagogue). This is the story of one, possibly successful, episode of critical media literacy couched in a classroom culture of dialogic pedagogy. But it is also the story of uncertainty in the tenets of “quality” early childhood education. It is told through the actions and words of a TV-Party-singing teacher named Mike, and the story culminates in an episode we call the tale of the “Kissing G.I. Joes.”

### **Mike in his own words: “Don’t kill your TV.”**

It all began around the time I saw Fonzie jump his motorcycle on Happy Days. I’m not all about killing your TV. You see those bumper stickers: “Kill your TV.” I’m not into that. If it weren’t for TV, I wouldn’t know anything but El Paso [a border town between the US and Mexico, but on the Texas side]. They’ve got this [television] show now called Trading Spouses. In that show people from different kinds of families end up living with each other’s husbands and kids for, like, a month or something. They totally end up seeing a different perspective on life ... Once I was talking to this dude at a party about that show, and he was like, “I’m not going to yell at my kid anymore after seeing that.” It allowed him a chance to look at himself.

You can see yourself on TV. But, Fonzie on “Happy Days” [a situational comedy airing in the US in the 70s], that’s what set me off. There was this one episode, a real ratings grabber, where The Fonz was going to jump over the most trashcans anyone had ever jumped on a motorcycle. Of course he breaks his leg in the process, but I was out on the sidewalk that afternoon building a ramp. Turning the TV into physics.

He is a teacher, an athlete (his love of going over ramps on two wheels extends to this day. He remains a BMX “street style” bicycling enthusiast and was instrumental in getting a professionally designed skateboard and BMX park brought to his city to augment the very unofficial park that he and many of his friends of varying ages had designed, built, and maintained for over a decade). He is a man who is a connoisseur of that which we think of as both “pop culture” and “children’s media.”

Mike brings his love of popular culture into the classroom in many forms, songs being one of them. He sings, in his words, “...anything that sounds good being sung in a group. I like to sing songs. I love songs that will show them my love for it, not just little kids’ tunes...although, if one of those does it for me—and them—we’ll sing that song, too.”

### **Mike in the Authors’ words**

A perennial favorite among Mike’s students is the song from the opening vignette of this essay, the influential 80s punk band Black Flag’s condemnation of passive TV watching, “TV Party.” But songs from several eras and genres make the cut in Mike’s circle time: the White Stripes’ hopefully-cynical tune about life in school, “We’re Going to be Friends” (White, 2002); Waylon Jennings’ theme to the anti-authoritarian television hit, “The Dukes of Hazzard” (1979); Jimi Hendrix’ questioning of reality, “If 6 was 9” (1967); Reggae hits, Hip Hop hits, anything Mike takes in, loves, and finds thought-provoking, he turns back out to his students for their consumption and scrutiny. These songs include lyrical lines like, “...And we don’t notice any time pass/ We don’t notice anything/ We sit side by side in every class/ Teacher thinks that I sound funny/ But she likes the way you sing...” (White, 2002), and “...Fightin’ the system like two modern-day Robin Hoods...” (Jennings, 1979).

Mike is like a jazz artist with the students in his charge as fellow members of the improvisational ensemble. But a Jazz artist has to have an ear for what is going on around her, and to play with it. Mike “riffs.” He doesn’t schedule these moments of pedagogy; he waits, eyes and ears wide open, critical stance planted, his appreciation of the images his students bring with them to school well-rehearsed through years of a love of the art. When it comes to popular culture he has an active, wakeful eye to the artifacts brought in from the outside world—packed away in backpacks, but also stacked to the rafters in the unimaginably tall warehouses of his students’ minds—as the cultural instruments upon which pedagogical riffs can be played like the exchanges of jazz players. But along with his connoisseurship of popular culture, Mike is drawn to the idea of wide-awakeness. These ideas, these passions, have—in our opinion—a lot to do with Mike’s interruptive stance. We will describe some of them, but first, our understanding of Mike’s “interruptive” stance (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010).

### Early Childhood Education, Deconstructed

In Cannella's (1997) deconstruction of early childhood education, she questions the totalizing assumption that "childhood" is a distinct and "natural" stage of human life, separate, other, and *less* in its "obvious" need to be protected and advocated for. She creates an understanding of "childhood" as a social construction with a relationship to other constructions, like gender, race, or sexuality, in that they are products and sites of colonization (Cannella, 1997). She states that, "when these constructions are imposed on all human beings, power relations are produced that foster injustice, oppression, and regulation" (p. 157).

In our construction of the field, we have not heard the voices of younger human beings. Forcing them to live within constructions of "child," "development," and "professional practice," we have denied their very existence as people living their everyday lives. We have created them as the "Other" who must be spoken for (because they are immature, incompetent, needy, and lacking) and excluded (because they are innocent, savage, and require protection). (Cannella, 1997, p. 159)

As we hark to Cannella's and others' call to reconceptualize the field of early childhood education (Bloch, Holmund, Moqvist, & Popkewist, 2004; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Soto & Swadener, 2005; Tobin, 2000), we take up the challenging notion of entertaining the idea that perhaps we "...even decide that younger human beings would be better served if not positioned as children..." (Cannella, 1997, p. 160). We attempt to move, as Brown and Jones (2002) suggest "from emancipation to postmodernism" (p. 6), where, rather than defining authentic versions of quality early childhood practices, we uncover alternate threads of approach and meaning, we respect the notion that "We must see our rituals for what they are, completely arbitrary things...it is good to be dirty and bearded, to have long hair, to look like a girl when one is a boy (and vice versa); one must put 'in play,' show up, transform, and reverse the systems which quietly order us about" (Foucault, 1977, quoted in Slattery, 2001, p. 28).

In the ongoing project that is Mike's enacted resistance to dominant discourses in early childhood education, he goes so far as to transgress into sharing the punk rock anthems of his youth with the "children" of today. But he also listens to and sings those songs his students deem worthy of bringing to the pre-nap ritual. Again, he says, "I love songs that will show them my love for it, not just little kids' tunes...although, if one of those does it for me—and them—we'll sing that song, too." As members of Mike's age group, the authors—despite not having been "punk rockers" in the 80s—are familiar with the song, "TV Party." There is no mistaking the intentions of Greg Ginn, Henry Rollins, and the rest of the band called, "Black Flag." The lyrics, attitude, instrumentation, and aesthetic approach to music forged by Black Flag were intended as a scathing, cultural critique of the US capitalist culture in the 80s. Mike and many others who grew up with an ear to the ground for resistant and alternative discourses knew that the lead singer, Henry Rollins was "straight edge," meaning he did not use alcohol at all, ever, nor did he



use illegal drugs. “Having a couple of brews” was silly behavior in the eyes of Henry Rollins, and still is, although he has left the genre of punk rock, to become an author, poet, spoken word artist, story-teller and critic (e.g. Rollins, 2001).

Despite what we know about the songwriters’ critical intentions, and despite our willingness to understand childhood as a social construction, we—the authors—admit to a desire to protect Mike’s students from the possibility of misinterpreting the song as a celebration of mindless consumption, and we question the quality of the “developmental appropriateness” of Mike’s pedagogical choice. But Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) answer our fears with this caveat:

It seems to us that the discourse of quality can be understood as a product of Enlightenment thinking, and modernity’s zest for order and mastery. As such, it views the world through a modernist lens, and complements modernist construction of the young children and early childhood institution. The language of quality is also the language of the early childhood institution as producer of pre-specified outcomes and the child as empty vessel, to be prepared to learn and for school, and to be helped on his or her journey of development. (p. 87)

The story of Mike’s pedagogy is, in part, our story of struggling with our own modernist thought. As the “Kissing G.I. Joes” part of the title of this piece is intended to suggest, we want there to be a tidy way to emancipate children from the constraints of heteronormative thinking (Sumara & Davis, 1999). We found an instance where Mike questioned *for* a child and *with* a child the intentions of the narrative of war toys as they play into hyper-masculine ideals. But the story is not as simple as a teacher providing a student with a changed worldview based on one planned, pedantic lesson. Mike’s pedagogy is one of dialogue, with moments of didacticism, moments of improvisation, and moments of media texts being introduced without comment at all. In order to describe the thinking and the actions of Mike as a critical pedagogue, we must first establish some of the most salient debates in the field of “critical media literacy.”

### **Critical Media Literacy and Popular Culture**

Advocates of *critical media literacy* call for teachers to practice “creating a media-literate citizenry that can disrupt, contest, and transform media apparatuses so that they no longer possess the power to infantilize the population and continue to create passive and paranoid social subjects” (Semali, 2003, p. 275). Critical media literacy pedagogy attempts to develop analytic tools to help readers in their transactions with multiple forms of text.

Scholars like Share (2009) and Wyatt and Kumi (2007) discuss critical media literacy as a potential space for active construction of meaning, especially in terms of confronting hegemonic representations and developing complicated alternatives that foreground identities often marginalized in mass media and mainstream society. In these counterhegemonic efforts, is where —when we witnessed the moment we call the “Kissing G.I. Joes” episode—we saw potential for a complicated conversation. We will share the narrative of the kissing G.I. Joes

after we contextualize Mike, the leader of this episode, a little more.

Like Mike, many teachers recognize the powerful connection that pop culture images and themes offer in terms of inviting students to be participatory learners (Callahan & Low, 2004; Maness, 2004). But debates rage around the central point of whether creating savvy critics of the hegemonic messages in children's media robs children of the pleasure they derive from being media literate and being self-directed in reading texts. Wyatt and Kumi (2007) make a distinction between critical media literacy that is protectionist versus one that uses a framework grounded in cultural studies. The protectionist stance, "a pedagogic equivalent of a tetanus shot" (p. 3), positions audiences, especially young ones, as vulnerable and passive. In this view, students are seen as victims, or dupes, of mass media messages. On the other hand, a cultural studies lens on critical media literacy positions audiences, including young ones, as active constructors of meaning who can not only learn to critique hegemonic representations often found in mass media but also create new and alternative representations. Bragg (2007) critiques protectionist media literacy and teacher-centered critical pedagogy as totalizing, coercive, and dogmatic. This critique mirrors those of other scholars (such as Buckingham, 2003; Ellsworth, 1990; Hoechsmann, 2006; Sefton-Green, 2006) who have also taken issue with heavy-handed and didactic forms of critical pedagogy relating to media and popular culture, as well as paralleling the social construction of childhood purported by the reconceptualists of that field (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 1997). Bragg (2007) states, "The narrative of enlightenment through media education was problematic in that it figured the teacher (and his/her 'tools') as hero and made media education a negative enterprise focused on saving young people from themselves" (p. 59). She argues that such a stance views young people through a deficit lens and underestimates what young people already do when engaging with media texts. She is critical of the regulatory nature of pedagogy that crushes the pleasure audiences derive from engagement with media, advocating working with young people rather than against them. As it fits into this thinking, working with young people does not mean letting go of social critique, rather it allows for more complex understandings of youth culture and agency. Such an approach recognizes that young people can simultaneously take pleasure in the consumption of popular media while also constructing critical understandings of it. Hoechsmann (2006) argues, "What is required in this context is a more flexible way of conceiving social change, a more inclusive emancipatory agenda which does not turf the uninitiated out on their ears for not living up to prevailing political orthodoxies" (p. 30). Critical media literacy grounded in a cultural studies framework offers a space for teachers and students to co-construct meanings that are complicated, allowing for critique of hegemony without squashing pleasure derived from media consumption (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Dyson, 2006; Luke, 1999).

Given the lenses of these scholars of critical media literacy, we see great potential for dialogic and subversive curricula when teachers allow spaces for youth to explore and engage with popular culture and media in ways that embrace the complicated natures of identity, culture, and literacy. When Mike creates a space for students to enlist their own favorite TV shows in Black Flag's fist-pumping condemnation, he does so without tearing away the pleasure that having [and singing about] a TV party permits, but possibilities of trust through dialogue are laid as a groundwork for future, more teacher-directed and interruptive actions taken on Mike's part.



In order for us to illustrate our understanding of Mike's actions, we have to trace back through the current trends of critical media literacy and investigate the philosophical framework that creates the opportunity for Mike to conceptualize his "riffed" actions.

### **Wide-awake, critical connoisseurship: Three converging paths**

Based on the idea that a teacher's worldview influences his or her actions in the classroom (Freeman, 2002), our readings of Mike's *actions* are enormously hinged upon our narrative around his *thought*. As stated, we believe his actions are like those of the great trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, who seemed to effortlessly contest the structures of jazz. But, again, Gillespie's actions were but momentary reflections on a studied worldview and philosophy about the potential for his craft. Perhaps Mike is not the intellectual giant Dizzy Gillespie is, but he, like many of those students touched by Gillespie's intellect, is an active student of his art, pursuing alternative courses of actions, informed by attempts at being a wide-awake, critical connoisseur.

We have identified threads of philosophical motivation that can guide an approach to critical media literacy that is more grounded in a cultural studies framework. Here, we combine the concepts of three educational theorists in an admittedly imperfect, but metaphorically strong, triangle that represents the philosophy behind our purported ability to recognize what we are calling Mike's "wide-awake, critical connoisseurship." The theorists' contributions to educational philosophy use words that we found in Mike's descriptions of important events and people in his life outside and inside the classroom. Again, we will use our words to summarize the theorists, then juxtapose those words to Mike's own.

The three theorists whose concepts we combine to create the unwieldy descriptor: *wide-awake, critical connoisseurship* are Maxine Greene, Paulo Freire, and Elliot Eisner. The concepts of these theorists are that of "wide-awakeness" (Greene, 1977), critical consciousness (Freire, 1997), and connoisseurship (Eisner, 1998).

Greene's contribution to the triangle of thought is metaphorically captured when a teacher sees her learning environment with the eyes of a stranger; the texts, actions and narratives that one takes for granted in everyday life—her "normal surroundings"—become suspect locations of meaning-making (Block, 1998, p.15). Stranger's eyes offer the possibility of seeing anew, making the normal "strange," creating a space where new approaches, including student-led approaches to learning take place.

These "stranger's eyes" are referred to by Greene and her students as being "wide awake" (Block, 1998; Greene, 1997; Morris, 1998; Salvio, 1998) – unclouded by "presuppositions that fix...visions of the world" (Greene 1973, quoted in Morris, 1998, p. 132). Greene seeks to "question her familiar world ... to name it and act so that she can transform, through her own actions, her own life (Greene, 1988, quoted in Salvio, 1998, p.100). Greene (1973) sees this wide-awakeness, at the height of its application, as being "critically attentive" (p.11).

And if teaching is approached with stranger's eyes and tended to with attempts at conscientization, pedagogy can have an emancipatory effect (Freire, 1997). Freire's (1997) argument for a pedagogical approach that creates a dialogue is where we find Mike's thinking

particularly applicable. Freire's (1973) vision of conscientization, or critical consciousness, leads to social transformation. This happens when teachers engage students in a problem-posing education that positions teachers as learners alongside the students in a dialogic pedagogy, which arises from the real life experiences and needs of the learners. Mike's naptime ritual is not didactically counterhegemonic but dialogically complicated.

With stranger's eyes focused on oppressive messages, a teacher can apply her pedagogical expertise to create opportunities for change. But it takes a deep well of experience, love, and appreciation to "see" *actions that can be taken* involving the images and themes that resonate with students. In a moment, we will reveal the story of the kissing G.I. Joes, where Mike looks at textually oppressive toys and sees them with strangers' eyes, but it is in his love of these toys, not his hatred of their message, that his actions are part of a dialogue. Love is the key.

Eisner calls those who can appreciate the art of teaching on the level it takes to creatively act, "*connoisseurs*." Connoisseurship is the art of appreciation. It can be displayed in any realm in which the character, import, or value of objects, situations, and performances are distributed and variable, including educational practice (Eisner, 1998, p. 63).

We extend this connoisseurship across the gulf between "adult" understandings of media texts to the pop culture themes and images that resonate with children. When a teacher deeply appreciates the toys, images, themes, games, and media that are marketed to children on an aesthetic level, she can act as a sommelier does in her connoisseurship of wine, guiding one through the menu, playing on strengths and taste, bringing out potential. In our case, the wide-awake, critical connoisseur can bring out potential for change in the construction of the mind. For, as Eisner states, we are born with brains, but our "minds are largely made" (1998, p. 18).

It is not enough to simply embrace the reconceptualist-sounding desire to dismantle the social construct that separates "child" from "adult" and to begin to interact with children as if they were adults. We do not think that is what Mike practices. It is also not enough to embrace the idea that a cultural studies approach to critical media literacy creates an environment for early childhood pedagogy where all media is welcomed for consumption. For Mike to act as a critical pedagogue, he must be awake to possibilities of action hitherto unseen as "appropriate;" he must create a dialogic curriculum, with actions designed to provoke his students and himself into "consciousness," and he must appreciate the popular culture on a level where his inclusion of it comes with the kind of love that only a well-versed guide can offer.

### **Mike [again, in his own words] on The Underground: Wide Awake**

*...So down on 9<sup>th</sup> Street we've been digging dirt and piling up [BMX bike] jumps for years. We can get 15, 18, 20 feet off the ground jumping over those things. Pro bikers from New York, Michigan, all over come down here to ride our park. The word just spreads. Even though most people in [our city] just drive right by it, unaware of what's going on there. But there's a network of communication that doesn't have to be the information that everyone else is hearing. There's an underground. I love that. I love*

*that there are things that people are hearing, knowing, right now, that most people don't have a clue about—that I don't have a clue about. I wonder what's going on that I don't know anything about. ... It's like when I was a kid, and my Aunt's boyfriend, Tyrone, brought Sugar Hill Gang over and we put it on my Grandma's killer, old-school console—one of those where you slide open the top level and there's a bowl of sugar cookies sitting on the right side. Underneath the cover there's a turntable where you can stack up as many albums as you want to listen to, and then it just pours out. I couldn't believe what I was hearing:*

*"I said a-hip hop, a hippy to the hippy*

*The hip hip a-hop and you don't stop*

*Ah-rock it to the bang bang boogie..." (Sugar Hill Gang, 1979).*

*I couldn't believe how awesome it was. We would just jump on the bed for hours and listen to Sugar Hill.*

This illustration of Mike's thinking is two-fold. His love of popular culture's music is apparent. But there is another narrative in his words. His description illustrates his elation at the idea that there is always a possibility for discovering a new line of thought. This doesn't mean simply discovering new things, it means discovering a whole network of thinkers and thinking: a counter-discourse, a counter-narrative. In keeping with the "wide-awakeness" of Greene's appeal for us to see our educational settings with the eyes of a stranger, Mike revels in the fact that there are those "un-awake" enough that he and his fellow BMX cyclists aren't even seen, despite the towering mounds of dirt they have piled up to jump over, but that a network of like-minded people around the globe are somehow awakened to their efforts. Efforts Mike sees as important and meaningful in terms of bringing a self-directed brand of physical education to a new set of young people worldwide. Mike's words illustrate the passion he has for counter-narratives and for the new literacies created out of new forms of expression, like hip-hop was when he was young.

### **Teachers as Cool Dudes; Teachers as Counter-Narrators**

I have dreams where I tell this one older kid I grew up with, "Dude, I want to tell you what you did for me and how much you helped me in my life." He has no idea what a teacher he was. I remember going over to his house and hearing Prince coming out the front door. I was like, "Prince!?! What?!" And his little brother said, "Yeah, my brother likes this weird...black music and stuff." I thought, "That's cool. He's into it, and that's cool." Now Prince is in the Rock-N-Roll Hall of Fame. That guy knew. That opened me up to stuff. I realized back then the worth of opening yourself up to new stuff. ... BMX was definitely not the only world he opened up to me. It was about respect.

In these words we hear the ideas of a teacher who is very much in an embrace with popular culture. In speaking with Mike we never asked him specifically about the raced discourse of popular music (Giroux, 1996). But he, himself, saw—when led by a trusted mentor—that there is

a raced discourse dictating whom certain pop artists' work were intended to be enjoyed. Standing on the porch of his friend's house, listening to an African American artist play from the stereo inside, Mike deconstructed a race line that he'd not transgressed before. It was the respect for his friend's connoisseurship of pop music that led him there, without even being face-to-face with his friend. He is a connoisseur, desires to be wide awake, and is driven by a sense of critical commitment to change. These are themes that come out in natural conversation when asked about how he sees himself as a person and as a teacher. Mike's ability to see TV sitcoms as conduits for the self-directed study of physics (as well as unheeded cautionary tales about the danger of breaking one's leg jumping trash cans) and his openness to pop music as a means for race-interruptive ways of understanding, lead us to believe that he approaches the media world for children without a fear of what the themes, images and narratives "tell" our students about identity but sees these aspects as potential sites for dialogue. He is interested in creating "underground" discourses in digging up the landscape to literally explore the potential heights one can achieve by digging a hole. We believe these quotes, which are but a few of many similar statements, indicate that Mike is a teacher who sees his everyday environment with the eyes of a stranger, who gazes critically at the identity marginalization of the popular media, and who consumes popular culture with eyes, ears, and discriminating palate of a critic; in short, Mike is a teacher who is a wide-awake, critical connoisseur. And given this framework of thinking about his craft, the following story can make sense as part of a dialogic critical media literacy curriculum.

**Kissing G.I. Joes: A powerful critical media literacy episode in very a brief moment of pedagogical improvisation**

This episode begins in the inanimate bodies of two toys from the "G.I. Joe" line by Hasbro Toy Company. "G.I. Joe" toys, in the US and many other parts of the globe, are the toy-world's bifurcating answer to the hyper-stylized, patriarchal version of femininity found in "Barbie" dolls. G.I. Joe toys are soldiers. And if Barbie is really only good for trying on clothes, G.I. Joe is only good for fighting. The following is an excerpt from [Author One]'s field reflections as he attempts to make sense of notes from a day of ethnographic research:

Mike sits next to a five-year-old student on the steps that lead to the playground at their school. Lying on the steps between them are two dolls—action figures, some might say. The two eight-inch figures are exaggerations of men, bulging muscles, cubed heads. One is in military combat regalia; the other's body is covered in futuristic, but bellicose, body armor. The figures are plastic and have limited range of motion in their limbs, whoever left them there either intentionally or unwittingly left them lying with their arms extended, face-to-face. Having been constructed in this culture and having spent many hours as a child playing with G.I. Joes, I would have said they looked like they were fighting, lying there like that. I have no doubt that this is what their manufacturers and marketers would want me to think. Mike and the boy have been watching the children

play on the playground and intermittently chatting as they sit together. Mike notices the boy's eyes dart to the two G.I. Joes. He asks the student, "What are those guys doing?" The boy doesn't hesitate: "They're fighting." Mike doesn't say anything for a while. They talk of other things, then seemingly as an afterthought Mike says, "I think they're hugging. Yeah, he's giving him a kiss. They're not enemies at all." The boy looks at them. He says, "Hmm. Maybe," then his gaze returns to the playground, or a bit beyond (Kinard, field reflections).

This brief interaction sets this teacher apart as able to act upon his framework of thought, a "wide-awake, critical connoisseurship." We were in a public school Kindergarten classroom recently, the teacher in the class we visited, whose style we had been admiring, said, "OK, it's time to line up. I want a line of boys and a line of girls." In our experiences, this type of gender demarcation with young children is more the norm; it is the hidden curriculum of schooling (Apple, 1990) that there is a line of action, a line of thought, and a literal line that is male, a line of actions, thought, and body that is female. Boy and girl. Mike's thoughts and actions illustrate a different approach to a similar issue of gender performance (Butler, 1999). Mike has a critical pedagogy stance, in which inscribing a person's body with a particular way of being is an anathema, oppressive and heteronormative (Warner, 1991). But Mike also uses his wide-awakeness to look on the texts of his learning environment with the eyes of a stranger. He uses this wide-awakeness to then act upon that which he and his student know one another shares, a love of the toys, images, themes, and narratives of popular culture (his connoisseurship), to open up a counter-narrative, to which the boy responds, "Hmm, maybe."

Assuming Mike knows what the boy might be thinking about the action figures, he attempts to interrupt his student's notions of the text the two dolls present as they lie there, touching. This interference is calculated and pointed. Many months after recording this vignette in field notes, Tim asked Mike about it. He did not remember the episode but stated,

*You know, I wasn't aware of that stuff when I was a kid. Not even recently, really. When I first started here [at this school] I would have never even thought about those kinds of toys as being anything but violent -- COOL, but violent. You have to be told about that stuff. But I figure there's better ways of telling people stuff. They can see it if you open your eyes and help them see for themselves.*

Mike is a teacher who has chosen to "show up, transform, and reverse the systems which quietly order us about" (Foucault, 1977, quoted in Slattery, 2001, p. 28). Again, in Slattery's (1997) words, "For Foucault this resistance isolates the individual and creates 'special cases' which do not allow for generalizations" (p. 28). This teacher attempts to interfere with the assumptions about the actions of bodies costumed certain ways (even if those bodies are inanimate plastic figures). Or as Freire (1997) puts it:

The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a "circle of certainty" within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the



person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. (p. 21)

Mike saw the potential for altering the mind of his student, altering the reality of the storied, plastic bodies at his feet. But this moment is only a node in a matrix of pedagogic action and thought, based on the creation of a dialogue between community members—not solely didactic intervention. Mike saw the boy’s attention flit to the action figures and took the opportunity for planting a grain of thought. Taken alone, the little story of the kissing G.I. Joes would be a heavy-handed and teacher-directed invasion of the child’s love of the war toys of his age. Without Mike being a willing participant in bringing the texts of popular culture into the learning environment as a site of pleasure, Mike’s “strange” idea would not have the potential we believe it to have in transforming the marching orders of these toys. In fact, without Mike and his colleagues being willing to create a dialogic approach to popular culture’s texts, the two violent action figures might not even be allowed on the school property. Most schools in our area take that tactic.

### Conclusions

We waited until our conclusion to abbreviate the unwieldy descriptor, “wide-awake, critical connoisseurship,” into a tidier acronym, WACC, and we revel in the irony of the contradictory meanings of the descriptions of a teacher as WACC, considering the use of the term, “whack,” in some youth cultures of the US as meaning “appalling.” Whether or not readers of Mike’s actions take on a protectionist agenda and see his singing of “TV Party” with his students as “whack” and his didactic interruption to the heteronormative tales of the G.I. Joes as WACC, or whether readers take a more cultural studies approach and see a little bit of WACC potential in the dialogic approach of Mike’s curriculum—but maybe see his heavy-handed redirection over the G.I. Joes as a little whack—we hope to have brought the actions, words, and thoughts of this particular teacher as a complication to the conversation about critical media literacy in early childhood educational settings. We have come to believe that for a teacher to act upon a framework of thought that is WACC in terms of the texts of popular culture, the explicit relationship between pleasurable sharings of complicated texts and the explicit introduction of interruptive readings of marginalizing texts must be used in tandem and on a continuum, trusting students [and themselves] to contribute to an ongoing dialogic approach to media imagery and themes.

When engaging students with critical media literacy, teachers must try to move fluidly between roles, ranging from that of learner to that of guide, and sometimes “authority.” This is a balancing act that opens space for pleasure as well as critique, and even the pleasure of critique. This is done with an eye toward imagining a more just social order. Therefore, critical media literacy that engages students with popular culture texts must navigate the politics of pleasure and acknowledge the pleasure of politics (Gainer, 2007,



p. 113).

It is in this balance that we find potential for enacting a strong critical curriculum in early childhood educational settings.

### Epilogue

This is a coincidence of sorts. But it cannot really be called that. Tim currently runs a summer program for 3- to 10-year-olds in a public elementary school relatively near the school where Mike teaches. Tim has a separate set of permissions from his institution's internal review board to speak with and use the words of his young students for scholarly work. As the winds of research would have it, one of Mike's former students, now a 7-year-old and about to begin second grade, attends this "Summer Workshop." Months after an initial draft of this article was submitted for review, Tim asked this student if she remembered singing the song, "TV Party" when she was a student of Mike's. She did. And she stated that her little sister currently sings it, as well. In an imperfect attempt to gain a little insight into whether or not Mike's singing of that song creates any of the dialogic claims this article makes, he asked: "What do you think the guy singing that song thinks about TV?" The young student replied with a long, almost silent, "Uhhmmmmmm." Followed by the almost Twanian, "I don't know." Then she offered, rather than an answer, a question, "Do you mean the guy that's singing the song or the guy he's pretending to be?"

Whether singing about having a couple of brews and staying up all night watching TV is WACC or whack, and whether or not suggesting that bellicose toys might be showing affection has any mind-altering effects, this one 7-year-old ex-student of Mike's seems to understand the difference between the performance of one's identity and the performance of sarcasm in a song. We cannot help but feel bolstered in our belief that such a sophisticated understanding of authorship and intention in songwriting could be facilitated by a dialogic critical media literacy curriculum.

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