

# Performative Politics and Radical Possibilities Re-framing Pop Culture Text Work in Schools

ELIZABETH JOHNSON

*City University of New York, College of Staten Island*

**F**IFTEEN MINUTES INTO THE PERIOD a young man I will call Santo was embroiled in his poster project, working on the assignment for the day - to reflect on his essay writing process. Lucretia (a pseudonym for his classmate), who self identified as Black, female, and self-confident, walked into the room, leaned over to sign the late book next to the front door, and moved across the room to take a seat at our table - back row, middle aisle, alongside Santo, and across from me, a White, female graduate student, and former teacher. Lucretia's hair was pulled back to reveal two quarter-sized guitar earrings. She was wearing them with a lime green pearl necklace atop a brighter lime shirt under a turquoise hooded sweatshirt and corduroy cream tailored suit coat. Santo, also fifteen, and half-Dominican half-Ecuadorian wore a large, white IZOD polo shirt over baggy, faded blue jeans. His dark wavy hair was gelled back, revealing his girlfriend's leather necklace.

My digital audio recorder was in the middle of the table, and Santo's paper work was strewn before him. Santo cheerily greeted Lucretia as she approached.

Santo: Hi Lucretia.

Lucretia: Hi Santo.

Santo: I like your earrings. They look *awesome*. You're trying to be White today. I'm sorry.

Lucretia: No.

Santo: Okay.

Lucretia: Why'd you say that?

Santo: You're mad wrong.

Lucretia: Why'd you say I'm trying to be White?

Santo: Okay, okay, Lucretia, okay, you got me. You're White.

Lucretia: What are we doing? (Lucretia looks at Santo and refers to the class assignment.)

Santo: Um.

Lucretia: Miss Phagan (pseudonym for the head teacher)?

Santo: This. (He passes her his copy of the handout and directs her to the part they're working on.) The one that says 8%.

In this snapshot of classroom dialogue Santo joked that Lucretia was purposefully wearing guitar earrings to perform as a White person. He sarcastically complimented her and labeled the earrings “awesome.” His tone of voice was stiff and enunciated like a comedian imitating a middle class North-American White person. Interestingly, Santo was careful to bind her “White” subjectivity to “today,” suggesting her raced position or subjectivity could change with different accessories.

Lucretia quickly distanced herself from the White position as her “No” overlapped Santo’s accusation. And with a few turns, she changed the topic of conversation from whiteness to the assignment. But she seemed bothered. While she changed topics, she inquired into what motivated the accusation. He appeared to ignore her inquiry, rephrasing the joke more emphatically, “Okay, okay, Lucretia, okay, you got me. You’re White.” This jibe positioned Lucretia as a person *insistent* upon her whiteness. But she changed the subject, returned to her assignment, and refused his effort to lighten conversational tone or diffuse his comments through humor at her expense.

Here and throughout the rest of the conversation explored in this article, Santo and Lucretia, two focal participants in this study, performed and positioned one another racially. From a post-structural perspective, *performance* means that they each work to express racial identities to one another and the outside world through words, gestures, and dress, but these identities are not simply theirs for the making (Bettie, 2003). Their identities are also mediated, constrained, and juxtaposed with raced (and other) subjectivities produced by institutions, the media, and in this case, individual actors like themselves, who assign raced *positions* to one another (Bettie, 2003; Davies & Harre, 1990). Lucretia countered Santo’s understandings of race, whiteness, and their *performance*, while Santo took up a range of raced, classed, and gendered *positions*. I use post-structural performance theory to underscore the performative politics they both engaged “backstage,” beyond their teacher’s purview. Such struggles for pop culture text meaning represent fodder for contingent, radical, classroom curriculum largely missing from research on pop culture text curriculum *in* schools. Educators teaching for social justice from anti-racist, critical, and feminist perspectives must attune themselves to these curricular possibilities.

In this article, I analyze Santo and Lucretia’s conversation to reframe pop culture text work, effectively de-centering teacherly, pre-conceived notions of pop culture as TV, films, rap, or comics, to explore: 1) the texts we wear, carry, refer to, and engage with, 2) the ways we sometimes use these texts to negotiate race, class, gender, and sexuality, and 3) the identity work that takes place within these negotiations. Radical pop culture curriculum might develop around moments when performative politics and pop culture texts intersect (i.e., when people use particular speech, gesture, or dress to counter and disrupt monolithic and reific ways of being raced, classed, and gendered selves). I close with a few of the infinite, radical possibilities for pop culture curriculum that acknowledge and explore texts people use to perform and mis-read race and other identities in multiple ways.

### **A Performative Look at Pop Culture Texts and Racial Identities in the Classroom**

Radical popular culture text work in classrooms requires a performative look at: 1) discourses, 2) identity performances, and 3) positionality. Foucault (1979) details how people and institutions utilize popular images, stories, gestures, and metaphors to produce “discourses” (i.e., shifting systems of knowledge that produce taken-for-granted ways of knowing, thinking,

or believing). These seemingly natural ways of knowing filter through our speech, gesture, and dress as we perform who we are (Butler, 1999), positioning ourselves, and those around us (Davies & Harre, 1990). Simply put, we “put on different selves and assign roles to other people” (Bomer & Laman, 2004, p. 425) as we address each other, move, and dress.

Butler (1999) labels the ways discourses leak into our daily communications *discursive performances*. In urban schools, broader discourses of class, race, and ethnicity circulate in the speech, gestures, and/or dress of middle class White educators. Yet many do not see how these modes of communication (e.g., speech, gestures, and dress) in fact position student identities to particular name brand clothing or style (hooks, 1994; White, 2001). In many cases, students may in fact be mixing and matching particular styles and brands to perform more nuanced identities that subvert or challenge discourses that position urban youth as poor, violent, over-sexualized, and low-achieving (Knight, Dixon, Norton, & Bentley, 2006).

Through this post-structural notion of performance, discursive positions are fluid and multi-directional. In the case of classroom interactions, students simultaneously position and are positioned by one another in an infinite number of ways. As Youdell (2006) notes, “...changes do not take place through legislation and policy development (although such reforms for equity remain welcome); rather, they occur through practicing differently in the everyday, from moment to moment, across school spaces” (p. 40). Struggles for pop culture text meaning are events when students and teachers are practicing “performative politics” (i.e., performing, reproducing, and reinventing ways of being one another in school and the world at large).

### **Why Explore Performative Politics through Pop Culture Curricula?**

Fiske (1989) theorizes that the *act* of producing meanings for pop culture “things” (i.e., the wearing, speaking, watching, or singing of pop culture texts) *is* pop culture itself. He states, “Pop culture is not consumption, it is culture – the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system...” (p. 23). But these processes of meaning production are power struggles “over the meanings of social experience, of one’s personhood and its relations to the social order and of the texts and commodities of that order” (p. 28). In contrast to Fiske’s notion of pop culture, centering students’ popular culture “interests” has become a routine part of secondary English teachers’ curricula. Evidence of this “routine” can be seen in teacher magazines like the National Council of Teachers of English January 2004 issue of *English Journal* devoted to integrating pop culture texts into classroom curricula and standards mandating media literacy, technology, and media arts in 48 of the United States (Pailliotet, Semali, Rodenberg, Giles, & Macaul, 2000).

Teachers integrating pop culture into classroom curricula typically work to: 1) integrate pop culture texts like films, music, and magazines as a means to bridge student and teacher differences (Paul, 2000); 2) use films and songs to lure students to academic English and canonical works (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Marsh & Thompson, 2001); or 3) submit students’ favored pop culture texts or consumption practices to critical Marxist analysis. However, these routine practices with pop culture texts rarely include examination of the power dynamics that circulate micro-level struggles for popular culture text meaning in school between students themselves or students and teachers.

Given that people are constantly negotiating who they are and might be amidst broader societal discourses of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc., it seems disconcerting that local, micro-

level negotiations of race, class, and gender are absent from most research on what people do with pop culture texts in the classroom. In these negotiations, young people and teachers engage in “performative politics” (Youdell, 2004). This means they are both reproducing and countering those same discourses. Leaving micro-level negotiations of race, class, and gender, (i.e., performative politics) out of classroom, pop culture text work ignores radical possibilities these negotiations have to counter and confound reductive subjectivities in and beyond school. And without an awareness of the performative politics people engage in when living with, wearing, and classifying pop culture texts, even the most radical teachers’ pop culture curricula may produce false student consciousness for “empowerment” (Buckingham, 1998).

In the following sections, I summarize my study, situate it amongst work on youth and embodied pop culture texts, and return to analyze the identity work embedded within Lucretia and Santo’s March 27, 2007 conversations. I frame my analysis of their classroom performances amidst broader discourses of race, class, and gender to call attention to: 1) the discursive production of raced subjectivities; 2) the ways raced identities can be performed *and* positioned in school; 3) the ways race sometimes intersects with gender and class in invisible, seemingly natural ways; and 4) the multiple modes by which people perform raced identities and position others as raced subjects. Attending to these processes of racialization illustrates some of the ways young people in my study practiced performative politics (i.e., “made” and “did” race differently in school).

### **Style, Dress, Jewelry, and Hair: Units of Analysis in a Larger Study**

In Fall 2006, I entered Ms. Nicole Phagan’s tenth grade classroom, hoping to explore how a teacher and her students performed and positioned one another’s identities as they “read” pop culture texts for a year. So I watched and talked with young people and their teacher about popular culture texts and how they functioned in school and their lives. While I conducted participant observations with the whole class of 23 students throughout the year, five young people and their teacher volunteered to construct photoethnographies of pop culture texts in their lives, do a series of in-depth interviews with me, and let me record their classroom interactions. Not surprisingly, the pop culture texts mentioned first were a far cry from the films, music, and TV shows most teachers use to bridge the cultural moat they perceive between young and old, teacher and student, urban and suburban, the popular and the canonical. As I asked participants to share experiences with popular culture texts in school, style and dress overwhelmingly took center stage. Picture after picture and chit chat after chitchat referenced closets full of clothes, fresh haircuts, favorite outfits, jewelry, new hairstyles, and jean piles.

The idea of young people using embodied pop culture texts to perform identities is not brand new. Several researchers center young peoples’ identity performances and subjectivity performatives with texts like clothing (see Bettie, 2003; Hagood, 2004; Fisherkeller, 2002; Forman, 2005; Knight et al., 2006; McCormick, 2003; Moje, 2000; Pomerantz, 2008; Swain, 2002; Youdell, 2004). But what is more surprising is the absence of these embodied texts in the literature on pop culture *in* the classroom, especially given the discursive positioning of pop culture texts as texts of “youth” and “urban” culture (Broughton, 2008; Valentine, Skelton, & Chambers, 1998), the preponderance of school efforts to surveil and censor student bodies and adornments (Foucault, 1979; Knight et al., 2006; McCormick, 2003), and the political power adornments take on when mixed, recontextualized, and worn on different peoples’ bodies

(Butler, 1999; Youdell, 2004). Moje (2000) studied the ways “gangsta youth” leveraged texts like gestures, dress codes, hand signs, tattoos, etc. to “claim power and space” (i.e., practice literacy), beyond school. But few researchers have worked to understand the ways young people use embodied pop culture texts *inside* the classroom, let alone the micro-level social politics that circulate such classroom practices.

While many literacy researchers explore the ways reading and writing print-based texts foster social mobility and equitable schooling practices, critical, sociocultural, and new literacies studies go one step further to also emphasize the importance of recognizing and building on non-dominant modes of communication that carry significance for youth often left out of research (Valentine et al., 1998), policy, and curriculum conversations (Moje, 2002). Participants in this study underscored the importance of these non-dominant modes of communication explaining how embodied texts were integral to racial and ethnic identity performances and tools for performing raced subjectivities differently.

With a year’s worth of data, I focused on moments when participants read one another’s style or dress. Then I filtered through these moments looking for times when normative subjectivities were challenged or made to mean differently (i.e., when patterned roles of gender, race, sexuality, etc. were performed in new, less predictable ways). I then returned to ask involved participants to review and contribute their opinions about scripts I’d constructed from audiotapes and observational fieldnotes. What I found was that my presence, research questions, and methods produced particular subjects in these follow-up interviews, whether those subjects agreed with my analysis or had different perspectives to contribute. This was especially the case in my follow-up conversations with Santo and Lucretia (St. Pierre, 1999), given the explicit location of race in the script and the tangibly raced differences we all lived.

While Lucretia began her reaction to the text with questions for me about my focus on *this* conversation, Santo had questions about the way he appeared in the text. He was concerned that *I* thought he was dumb and a racist against White people. In a separate forthcoming article, I devote time to discussing how my decision to isolate a particular classroom transcript about whiteness coupled with my own White, middle class researcher identity performances positioned Santo and Lucretia. To do so, I read comments about March 27’s events as another set of discursive performances and explore the subjectivities available to them in our interaction. What seems certain is that *talk* may not be the most fruitful mode for racial understanding though it is one of the modes most frequently used in research and the classroom (Jones, 2004).

Pollock (2004) cautions against “prompted race talk,” arguing that in the case of her research it “was always particularly packaged for a researcher” (p.11). Instead, she gathered “casual conversations” or “naturalistic interaction.” But the roots of this preoccupation with the verbal “dialogic” can continue, even in unprompted natural instances, to have colonizing effects (Li Li, 2004). Rather, I propose that teachers and researchers de-center speech and recalibrate our focus toward the variety of modes people employ (e.g., body movement, gesture, dress, silence, hair style, etc.) to perform and position raced and other identities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.) in and beyond classrooms. Such a shift is at the heart of Butler’s (1999) performance theory as she pushes people to consider the ways people move, dress, and gesture to confound or “trouble” the linguistic labels others employ to position them.

With these thoughts in mind, this article focuses on *my* analysis of an interaction between two students during a one hundred minute block period English class. I argue that through words, gestures, and dress, Lucretia and Santo not only negotiated meanings for a pair of earrings, but also challenged what it meant to be White, Black, and Latino in a large urban high school

English classroom. I do so, not to “get things right,” but instead to prompt researchers and teachers to see and hear differently as they explore identity work with pop culture texts in school.

### Locating Lucretia and Santo’s Conversation in Room 323

In this article, radical possibility is explored as a moment of “performative politics” (Youdell, 2004), exemplifying the critical link between politics, pop culture texts, and curricular possibility in classrooms. I selected this conversation because of the visible, intricate ways Lucretia and Santo discussed race *and* embodied pop culture texts during class. Discussions about racial readings and misreadings of embodied and other pop culture texts rarely took center stage in room 323. In fact, like routine classroom practices mentioned in earlier sections, teacher planned curriculum with pop culture texts in this classroom usually worked to lure students to canonical text work or bridge perceived student/teacher differences. While it is certainly not my intention to hold up group work as a “best practice” or idealize its potential for ensuring a socially just classroom community, small group work appeared to provide greater opportunity for moments of student-student performative politics and possibility in room 323. In short, peer work provided more opportunity for students to confound taken for granted notions of race, gender, sexuality, and class amongst peers, but typically beyond teacher purview.

Lucretia and Santo’s conversation was unique and useful as it made these politically charged, sometimes silent micro-negotiations over identity more transparent. To illustrate, Santo read Lucretia’s earrings and positioned her as White, but discursive conflict ensued as Lucretia countered with performances of Black identity. Lucretia’s political, performative moves effectively challenged his rationale for such positioning and prompted him to read his own raced identity performances and the ways he was and refused to be positioned as White outside school. Performances like theirs provide insight into the ways students are in fact teaching us and one another about who they are, were, and can be through struggles over pop culture text meanings.

### Lucretia and Santo: Who They Were Sometimes

Before we return to the dialogues at the start of the article, a bit of background information on Lucretia and Santo helps set the scene. When I asked Lucretia and Santo to describe themselves and their ideas about pop culture for the research, they articulated how they performed their own respective identities and positioned themselves amongst their peers. Note how Lucretia worked to re-inscribe Black woman subjectivities through style choices, while Santo performed a range of ethnic identities through language use, music taste, and style affinities, performing a half-Dominican half-Ecuadorian identity, confounding what it meant to be “Hispanic” or “Latino” in school.

Lucretia was a fifteen-year-old Black woman to whom conveying an image of confidence was important. Without it, you’re an “easy target.” Lucretia confided:

If somebody came into class, not necessarily a bum, but not rockin’ the styles that everybody’s rockin’, it could affect how you react to them, how they react to you. If they see your style as different, they might like you, definitely with your classmates. And certainly if you’re not pop culture about style and hairstyle, if you’re not getting along

with students, or getting along, it totally affects your work in class and over all (L. Edwards, personal communication, March 19, 2007).

So Lucretia took great care to select clothing, do her hair, and don accessories that projected an image of self-assuredness. But this image was not like all her Black classmates. In her own words, “I dress different from other, I don't want to say Black people, but mostly, what do you call it? .... There's not another word. I'll just say that. Most Black people match. I don't dress like that. I dress colors. I think I'm matching, but people say, ‘*She's* not matching.’” While such comments might have stuck with Lucretia, she did not let them bother her or dictate her clothing decisions because she was not just trying to fit in. In fact, she decided to “buy stuff that sets me apart from the others.” Lucretia's statement highlights pressure to conform and the accompanying psychosocial/academic ramifications dressing or performing race differently may have in school.

Nonetheless, Lucretia made concerted efforts to distinguish herself from normative performances of Blackness she sees at school. While she did not question her racial identity in my presence, she chose to perform this identity in a way that she hoped might re-inscribe what it meant to dress Black in the eyes of peers and other audience members. But efforts to perform Black girl differently met scrutiny, misreading, and critique. In her discussion with Santo, her performance was read as White, a position she alternatively rejected, interrogated, and ignored.

Santo was a sixteen year old who self-identified as “a family man, softy” and a lifetime resident of the Bronx. According to Lucretia, “Santo doesn't have a clique, but he's kind of cool with everybody” (L. Edwards, personal communication, April 19, 2007). He was not shy about his penchant for rock, metal, alternative, and acoustic music. Santo dressed kind of preppy himself but admired peoples' fashion sense when they mixed styles. For example, he was a big fan of swirling “White” or “preppy” name brands like Aeropostale with “gangster” name brands like Pepe. His usual dress was: a pair of baggy brand name jeans, loose collared shirt, and zip front hoodie, weather permitting.

Santo labeled himself half-Dominican half-Ecuadorian, an ethnic heritage he dubbed “...a weird mix. Not many people seen my kind.” In his eyes, this mix of ethnic heritage affected how people acted and ate, gave them a sense of pride, and in his case, limited the people he hung out with. For example:

Santo: I hang out with Dominicans, but I don't hang out with Black people because I don't feel like I can connect with them. Not that I'm racist, but I don't feel I can connect. So...like a form of music. Some of them like rap. I don't like that. Some like hip hop and I hate that. So it sort of affects how I really connect with them.

Jill: ...Like Rukiya [a Black bi-racial student], would you say you connect with her?

Santo: Yeah, I would. She listens to rap and hip-hop sometimes, but not always.

Jill: Would you say she's Black?

Santo: I don't know if she is or isn't. I've never really asked her.

Jill: How could you tell?

Santo: I wouldn't assume.

Jill: When you define Black, for you, how would you define it then?

Santo: That's a hard question. People who act gangster or ghetto. I don't mean to be racist, but dark skin. But some are lighter, lighter than me (S. Burgos, personal communication, November 28, 2006).

For this research project, Santo did not perform a particular raced or ethnic identity. He offered up his ethnic make-up in one interview but, during this research, did not claim to perform a consistent raced or ethnic identity. In one moment, he spoke Spanish across the English literature classroom with a Dominican friend. In another, he bantered with a non-Spanish speaking Puerto Rican friend about rock music he liked that the friend could only nod and listen to. Some days he countered friends' assertions that his music taste was White, implying a "non-white" identity rather than self-identifying with a particular racial or ethnic group. And in his talk with me above, he idolized the style mixing of his bi-racial friend Rukiya who, by her definition, "reps Black." She might be Black, but he "never really asked her...I wouldn't assume."

While Santo told me he didn't really connect with Black people, he hung out with several young people that self-identified as Black. So for Santo, Black was not necessarily about the color of your skin. It was more "People who act gangster or ghetto." Here he articulated Blackness as a raced *and* classed performance given his focus on acting "ghetto or gangster" – two references to raced subjectivities that also carry classed connotations in the U.S. Yet, people who "act gangster or ghetto" were not people he could connect to. And while he tried to push the theory to include some components of biology, citing dark skinned people, he realized it fell apart as he included people with skin "lighter than me." So in Santo's eyes, Blackness was a way of "acting," not a skin color. But even though it was a way of "acting" it was not an identity he thought might be performed differently in a way he might connect with - at least not yet.

### **It's All About Whiteness One Day in English Class**

As we left Lucretia and Santo at the start of this article, he had just finished positioning her as "White today." His words, while fleeting, and phrased jokingly, lingered in the air. She challenged this position with pointed questions about the motivations for his charge. After his lack of response, she changed the subject. But in the next exchange, Lucretia rejected Santo's positioning. Notice how after a 4 minute silence Lucretia indirectly revisited Santo's joke.

\*\*\*\*\* (4 minute time lapse working in silence)\*\*\*\*\*

Lucretia: You know I had these earrings on yesterday, Santo?

Santo: Hmm?

Lucretia: I had these earrings on yesterday.

Santo: Huh?

Lucretia: I had these earrings on yesterday.

Santo: You did, alright? I didn't notice them.

Lucretia attempted to call Santo's attention to the flaw in his observation skills, and perhaps, as a result, his accusations. She seemed to hint that though she had worn these earrings the day prior, he hadn't positioned her as White. How could she have been Lucretia, Black woman one day and Lucretia White woman the next if the earrings, alleged evidence of her whiteness, were worn both days? As if sensing the inherent logic of her argument, Santo ignored Lucretia, but finally pointed out that he hadn't noticed them, effectively leaving her argument to float in mid-air between them, invalidated by his lack of attention, maintaining the power to label her willy nilly at his observational whim. In this brief statement, if Santo left open the possibility that had he noticed them, she would have been positioned as White then, too. Notice how he continued

performing this role in the following exchange, this time shifting scrutiny to Lucretia's manner of speaking.

\*\*\*\*\*A minute working in silence goes by\*\*\*\*\*

Lucretia: What's her name [pointing to the new student teacher]? You know her name?

Santo: Miss Simpson. No wait Miss Miller [a student-teacher working in their room].

Lucretia: Excuse me, Ms. Miller? Excuse me, Ms. Miller? Would you come over here?

Santo: What a respectful way of saying is, "Can you please come over here, Ms. Miller?" I don't know. I'm just joking. Please.....

Santo's tone was very proper sounding, stilted, almost aristocratic. He laughed at himself, to himself. He stretched back in his seat, arms out behind him, chair tilted, almost tipping over. As Santo spoke, Lucretia and Ms. Miller went over Lucretia's responses to the assignment. Santo took a different approach in this stretch of conversation, almost teaching Lucretia how to perform middle-class whiteness effectively, identifying the flaws in her White student performance and displaying his knowledge of not only embodied but also *linguistic* components to raced and classed subjectivities, one that he effectively joked Lucretia needed to work on. Yet he did this under the guise of "respect" for the teacher - a form of respect never demanded in this classroom. His use of the term "respect," as opposed to an explicit term for classed positions, may have suggested *his* discomfort with conversations about class, a lack of public discourse or everyday vocabulary for talking about social class distinctions, and/or the ways class distinctions are naturalized as behavioral norms for classroom etiquette (i.e., respect for the teacher).

Ten minutes passed. During the ten minutes, there were small exchanges between myself and Lucretia. She pointed out to me that she was writing the same phrase over and over. But no words or looks were exchanged between Santo and Lucretia. They worked independent of one another until Santo remarked, "Okay, Lucretia. You seem rather mad or sad. It's okay, Lucretia. I got your back, literally." As Santo was saying this to her, he lifted his hand up to her back and rubbed it softly in a circle. Her shoulders tensed up, and she looked at him, to the side, out of the corner of her eye, seemingly skeptical but smiling a tiny, possibly weirded-out smile. "Okay, you can stop now," Lucretia advised, as I breathily laughed through an exhale at their exchange.

As Santo took note of Lucretia's quiet working manner, he returned to the issue raised; but now, instead of joking, ignoring, or sparring, he positioned Lucretia as angry, offended, or saddened. Rather than apologizing for the remarks, rethinking them, or starting a new topic, he moved in, physically, to caress her back and offer his friendship and comfort. It was unclear how serious he was, but Lucretia seemed both humored and put off by his touch and verbal attention to her seemingly emotional state. Her willingness to remain humored hinted at the unique form of masculinity Santo performed in the room. While it was hard to imagine Santo caressing one of his male classmates in such a way it was even harder to imagine another boy in class caressing a girl in such a way. Such overt physical displays of friendship across gender lines were rare and only carried out by Santo who seemed to perform masculinity in a way that afforded him the space to joke and play around with girls without being positioned as flirtatious or physically threatening. Nevertheless, his move to caress and comfort Lucretia diverted attention away from his acts of raced and classed positioning, a move that, like his earlier efforts to joke that Lucretia was insisting on being White, might be read as an attempt at diffusing tension.

My reaction, as a bystander, breathy laughter, might be read as sarcastic siding with Lucretia, a willful attempt to make my observer status known; a seized opportunity to perform as a light-

hearted, but non-judgmental adult who wanted to laugh along with them, rather than regulate them. What seems most important, though, is that Santo retracted his hand and they returned to twenty minutes of silence before the topic was revisited. Note the change in Lucretia's tenor in this upcoming exchange and her efforts to not only halt the conversation but also critique its topic and position Santo as someone obsessively dwelling on not only the topic of race but also more specifically, whiteness. Santo tried on some new roles too.

About twenty minutes passed. At this point, the PA (public address system) announcements had been playing for about two minutes. As they come to an end, the female announcer closed the broadcast in a sing-song voice with commercial-style, affected happiness.

PA: ...Thank you once again and have a nice day! Have a nice day!

Santo: She sounds so White.

Lucretia: Oh, would you *stop* saying about *whiteness*?!

Santo: Okay. I'm Black. Why do you think I'm racist? I know you think that!  
(laughing lightly)

Lucretia almost erupted with exasperation. But in the face of one emphatic burst, Santo whizzed through positions, agreeing with Lucretia, identifying himself as Black, intuiting her exasperation as an accusation of racism, and rounding all three out with a hint of laughter to keep the conversation light. His laughter could be read as nervous, sadistic, apologetic, or curious. But none of his responses were met with a reaction beyond silence as Lucretia returned to her work, not responding with eyes, words, or gesture. Lucretia performed a "good" student trying to do her work in class, a Black female tired of dialoguing about race with this Latino male, a young woman unwilling to tell Santo who he was or define who *she* would be for him. Her silence implied a string of answers and questions to his inquiry and assertion (Li Li, 2005). Was he racist? Was he Black? Did she think that? Was she mad? In the midst of her silence, he was left to search for answers or move on himself. While Lucretia's silence may have implied answers to Santo's questions, it simultaneously placed the burden for answering those questions on Santo, forcing him to consider *his* conceptions of race, what she said and did not say and the source of *his* discomfort about their conversation. It might also be read as evidence of Lucretia's comfort with discomfort in conversations about race and racism.

### From Positioning to Reflections on Being Positioned

Twenty minutes later, Santo moved from positioning Lucretia's earrings and voice to a conversation with *me* about his own experiences reading and being read as White, at the intersection of class and masculinity. Specifically we talked about a poster purchase Santo was considering and the White businessman he didn't want to look like if he carried the large poster to school on the subway. In this conversation, Santo did not address Lucretia directly. Instead, she sat a silent audience member to his performance for us, interjecting herself at critical junctures to further question Santo's racial understandings.

Twenty minutes later Santo started talking about a poster he was going to get to finish the project at home. He waffled between a large colored poster and a small white one. At first he seemed excited about a larger, colored poster, different from all the white posters his classmates would be using, but in the end, he decided on the more compact white poster and explained why.

- Santo: I don't need a big huge one. It's just gonna take up Miss Phagan's space.
- Me: And you have to carry it
- Santo: Yeah.
- Me: on the subway.
- Santo: Yeah. Yeah and people are gonna be like, "Look at that dumb ass." Actually White people, they have, I'm just saying, because they have their projects in some big, big, bag. It's huge. And they be pulling it out to show all their businessmen like, "This is what we did. We created a pie chart."
- Lucretia: They do that *on the trains*? (She turns to look at Santo as she says this and stares a little bit.)
- Santo: Yeah they do, on the four [subway train], when it's empty of course. Not when it's full. But like this morning they did it too. He [a White businessman] took out his little...and said, "This is what we do. The schematics on this is different from this," and it was some big words I didn't understand.

Here Santo's voice changed to the hyper-enunciated White voice he used before when talking about Lucretia's earrings looking "awesome." But this time his performed White voice sounded a little less goofy, booming with more authority, as though in a business meeting, until he returned to his everyday voice and positioned the words of the White businessmen on the train as "big words he didn't understand." Lucretia, though not an oral contributor to the initial conversation, was very present as well and, while silent in voice, made herself known once again by questioning Santo's assumptions about White businessmen. Through her tone, a stare, and a statement she called his story of pie charts on the subway into question by asking, "They do that *on the trains*?" This question positioned Santo as a young man still obsessed with race and implausibly so. To counter these questions, Santo wielded more detailed and contemporary evidence of *the morning's* train ride, which train he was referring to, the time, when it wasn't full, and performed the White businessmen's conversation in tone, language, and gesture for me, a White female university researcher, and Lucretia, his Black female classmate.

Santo's performance reflected the intersections of academic, raced, classed, and gendered identities as he contemplated the logistics of hauling a poster to school. At first, the excitement of distinguishing himself from his classmates elated him, until, with my question, he realized that not only would such an acquisition take up extra space, but it would also position him publicly as a dumb ass, a White man, and a businessman – no one he wanted to be. In these statements, Santo performed for me, a White female researcher in his class who he sometimes called Miss, or a teacher, other times called Jill, and sometimes called "not like the other teachers." Perhaps my White skin prompted him to qualify his conclusions about White dumb asses with their posters on the trains as he noted, "Actually White people, they have, I'm just saying, because they have their projects in some big, big, bag. It's huge," in order to make sure that I understood it was because of big bags and not some sort of intrinsic dumb-assness White people have. Perhaps he even specified White businessmen so as not to include me in the White category he positioned. It would be easy to read Santo's refusal to carry a poster and risk being categorized as a White businessman dumbass as an echo of Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) assertions that young African-American and other "involuntary minority" youth equate normative school achievement with "acting White." However, in the context of this conversation with Lucretia, my White, middle-class, female performances as an audience member, and his typical standout participation in class, Santo's poster conundrum seemed strategically different.

Santo, a young, half-Dominican half-Ecuadorian male from the Bronx, today not White, and at moments, Black, actively separated himself from these men and their way of performing with a change in tone of voice, posture, words, and by playing ignorant to their vocabulary. First, he audibly and visibly separated himself from the White businessmen he described as he followed his performance of *their* talk and action with *his*. Santo's performance of self not understanding their "big words" could have been a strategic move to distance his language from White businessman language as opposed to linguistic ignorance. A young man who frequently shared verbatim literary quotes and historical facts in English class and employed similar vocabulary in conversation with school adults performed this ignorance. As he performed a young man unable to understand their "big words" I wondered how much of his lack of comprehension was about them being *businessmen* and how much of it was about them being *White*. He didn't just position them as White guys, or White men, but as White businessmen – a particular economic *class* of workers that certainly might have been synonymous with whiteness for Santo in that moment, but was certainly not representative of White poverty, White femininity, or White skin all by itself. What seemed most important in his performed ignorance was that he was not to be misconstrued as one of them as he positioned his masculinity, race, and class apart from them. With ten minutes of musing quiet, the bell rang, class ended, and we went our separate ways.

### **How Can this Lens on Pop Culture in the Classroom Support School Work?**

Rather than focusing exclusively on the teacher's pedagogical agenda or on students' pre-existing literacies like much pop culture in the classroom literature does, (e.g. Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Dyson, 2003; Kist, 2005; Moje, 2000), this post-structural performance theory lens zooms in on struggles for the meaning of popular culture texts (i.e. moments of performative politics and radical possibility in this classroom). This is one means by which we might map the politics being practiced in this public school space (Dolby, 2003). In this case, the struggle occurred between an embodied text, a researcher, and two students. Lucretia and Santo read Lucretia's earrings differently. As they shared these readings, they performed their particular identities and positioned one another. Through these performances and positions, they reproduced *and* countered what it meant to be Black, Latino, or White in this classroom as well as the ways these raced identities and subjectivities intersected with classed and gendered identities. Moments like these, when racial subjectivities are re-inscribed and identities are performed, represent nuanced renderings of popular culture in the classroom and may reframe interpretations of seemingly unimportant classroom events as performative, pedagogical acts with potential for political change. Educators interested in re-radicalizing pop culture text work might notice, elicit, and write pop culture text curriculum to explore identity performance and subjectivity production in and beyond school.

Specifically, teachers using pop culture texts in their classrooms might consider and explicitly address identity performances and positions in their classrooms as they plan to enact lessons. For example, questions Lucretia raised about Santo's preoccupation with whiteness might precipitate debate about when and where analyses of pop culture texts, like guitar earrings, should be considered for their racial connotations, the effects acts of positioning have on the wearer, and counter interpretations that arise when we engage performative and critical lenses to interpret texts in use. Conversations about embodied and non-print texts like these might be

extended to include explicit raced, classed, and gendered readings, considering the ways classed and gendered readings are critical to denaturalizing racial hierarchies (Guinier, 2006).

An educator looking to explore raced, classed, or gendered identity performances like Lucretia and Santo's that inevitably happen in classrooms, often outside teacher purview, should proceed with caution given the tension that exists between co-opting and engaging students' lived experiences for the purposes of classroom learning. Teachers concerned with co-opting could begin conversations about identity performances and positioning with Santo and Lucretia's dialogue – just one example of the many ways we negotiate, produce, and might shape our own and other raced, gendered, classed, aged, and sexualized locations. Below, I list some questions to provoke class talk and offer up some performance activities to scaffold re-interpretation of the script. Questions move from script-talk to perspectives on personal experiences, but this is by no means a complete list of questions nor a closed activity. Young people might be encouraged to:

1. Write and/or perform a scene in response to Lucretia and Santo's conversations.
2. Re-write Santo and Lucretia's exchange as a more "politically correct" dialogue, highlighting linguistic guises for performing and positioning identities in school.
3. Add characters to align with Lucretia or Santo, changing the dynamic.
4. Read or perform script re-interpretations to spur student or teacher lead discussions.

### Questions

1. What are the consequences of Santo accusing Lucretia of being White? What might people gain from accusing people of being White? How is it different in different places, between different people, in front of different people, or in front of no one?
2. What are the consequences of Lucretia's silence? Her attempts to fight back? What would you do in her situation? Why? What do you think of her approaches?
3. When was the last time someone accused you of acting like a different person? How did this feel? What did you do?
4. What is the difference between a stereotype and a real identity or person? How are you similar to stereotyped categories you might fit into (e.g., gender, race, class, sexuality, age, etc.)? How are you different from categories you might be positioned in?
5. How do people show us who they are? How do you? When is it okay for someone to show himself or herself as a different person? When isn't it? Why?
6. What experiences does this vignette remind you of? How were yours different?

Those involved in the discussion should be prompted to attend to the multiple non-verbal ways people participate in such a discussion that include gesture, eye contact, and silence. For it is in reading these tiny embodied texts and actions (i.e., identity performances) that we can begin to identify the multiple modes through which race, class, gender, and sexuality are being performed, positioned, and made to mean differently in classrooms.

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