

David E. Kirkland

# “The Rose That Grew from Concrete”: Postmodern Blackness and New English Education

For David E. Kirkland, the New English Education locates English language arts in the realities of youth, where texts emerge from students’ lives, and the notions of reading and writing in English classrooms are open to revision. Kirkland reflects on how “postmodern Black experience, especially as seen in hip-hop, gives English teachers one way of envisioning the New English Education.”

---

The idea that there is no meaningful connection between black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics or culture must be continually interrogated.

—bell hooks, “*Postmodern Blackness*”

I studied a group of young Black men for three years. According to their tests and their teachers, the young men were not supposed to be literate. They, like so many other urban youth who are classified as “struggling” or “striving,” were supposed to be drifters, barely literate, straddling the frontiers of failure. Yet for three years, I documented the ways that literacy dramatically and dynamically unfolded in their lives. I held my breath as all of them fought through labels of low literacy or, worse, “troubled” behavior. These young men were far from illiterate. They read, but they read in ways we English teachers sometimes fail to value, respect, and acknowledge.

By absorbing their ways with words, I learned a crucial lesson about literacy. Ideas about reading and writing in English classrooms should always be subject to revision, especially in an evolving postmodern world where all things are contextual and subject to change. In this article, I reflect on the New English Education, which, for me, represents a movement in adolescent literacy studies to situate English language arts (ELA) in the lives and realities of today’s youth. It is not a movement to replace the canon or the classics, but to complement them, to add to them in a way that makes

today as significant as yesterday. It takes place in the pedagogical “third space” (Gutiérrez and Stone). In this space, texts are variable, emerging out of students’ lives, and English teachers are reflective practitioners, entering students’ lives to develop the capacities and dispositions needed to facilitate a process of critical thought and reflection. Finally, using bell hooks’s notion of postmodern blackness, I will discuss the relative limitlessness of the (r)evolution, looking specifically at the ways the postmodern Black experience, especially as seen in hip-hop, gives English teachers one way of envisioning the New English Education. To begin, I start with a story.

## A Place to Begin: Critical Reflection and Personal Transformation

For the past five years, I have enjoyed teaching English methods courses at two major universities. To come to terms with linguistic and literary complexities of teaching English, I constantly reflected on the changing world around me and how my experiences as a Black male helped me understand and move my students beyond the limits of English standards. My understanding of English was rooted in a unique place, where the human experience and

my American experience came alive in languages and literatures that were outcasts in classrooms.

It was not until I began to take a hard look at one of my research participants, Shawn, that I could make sense of the limits of English standards. I always felt that *English* was beautiful. I loved the character of its words and the personality behind the language. I relished the charisma of the classics and dreamed past midsummer nights. I had an attraction to English early on but was fast realizing that English standards did not look like me, sound like me, or think like me. While they represented English, the standards represented a narrow English, one that did not necessarily include me. As a result, my relationship with English was one that receded into shadows, where I never read aloud, where I never fondled books in public.

Shawn and his friends, whom I did resemble, sanctioned texts and ideas hidden in the cultural

**I had an attraction to English early on but was fast realizing that English standards did not look like me, sound like me, or think like me. While they represented English, the standards represented a narrow English, one that did not necessarily include me.**

worlds of their unacknowledged and nonstandard literate realities. Shawn, the most vocal and least academically successful of the group, read all the time. He read hip-hop, which fed his friends and him a steady diet of words—language laced with tight beats, rhymes, and rhythms. Hip-hop also gave them poetry to read, such as the poems featured in the book of slain hip-hop icon Tupac

Shakur. I listened as Shawn and his friends read Tupac's poetry book like they listened to his albums, discussed it like Black folk discussed gospel, and recited passages from it like thespians quoted lines from Shakespeare. They were doing all of this outside of their English classrooms. In many ways, Tupac and other hip-hop artists had become their ELA teachers, and hip-hop itself had become central to their language and literacy learning.

Through hip-hop, the young men were learning about themselves and about a postmodern world set apart from the standardizations of traditional English education, which, to this day, is rooted in elite, esoteric traditions (Barnett; Morrison; Trainor). English standards still seemed affixed to ideas that reflect a narrow slice of the world.

Once so beautiful, English classrooms have been left to bask in the mirror of yesterday's glory. Unfortunately, ELA teachers are continuing to be groomed to see only the limits of this beauty. We ELA teachers too often fail to learn that English could sustain a beauty without limits.

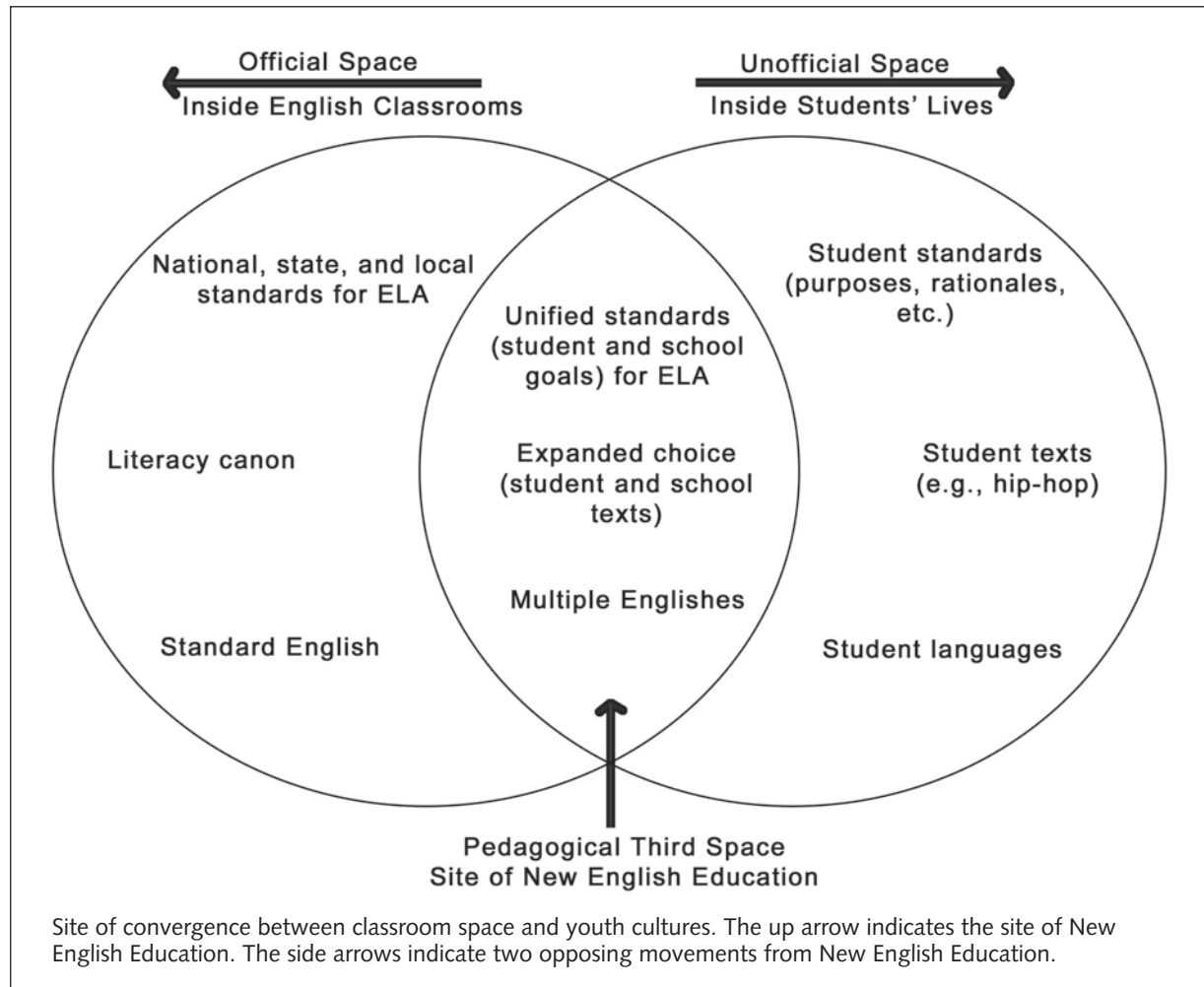
To realize this limitless beauty, I am now peering out into the vastness of the moment, recognizing the opulent diversity of Shawn and his friends and the textual eclecticism rich in their lives. Their interaction with hip-hop was a curious phenomenon that made me reconsider what counts as English and reexamine hip-hop's role in this definition. It has essentially expanded my understanding of English, as there has been much conversation about using hip-hop in ELA classrooms. For example, Ernest Morrell and Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade have used hip-hop in ELA classrooms to help students make sense of the classics, for after all there is a beauty in the classics worth making visible. However, as I began to see the beauty in hip-hop, whole, I also began to see that hip-hop should never be imported into the classroom as a trick to get students to read canonical literature—to conceive of beauty backwards. I instead began to see hip-hop as a rich resource capable of adding value to today's English classrooms (see fig. 1), allowing all ELA teachers to conceive of beauty moving forward.

As I reflect on the New English Education, I am thinking of ways to negotiate the neo-normative complexities of the twenty-first century—diversity, technology, and hybridity—to promote meaningful relationships with and learning opportunities for students who come from hip new worlds quite different and far more spectacular than the ones currently present in most English classrooms. The recent emergence of hip-hop in English classrooms presents a case for examining these postmodern complexities in English education.

### **Moving Forward: The Case of Hip-Hop in the English Classroom**

The purpose of this section will not be to endorse a hip-hop teaching method or a kind of hip-hop instructional recipe for the postmodern English educator. I would love to present Grandma's five steps to do hip-hop in the English classroom or chicken soup for the hip-hop teacher's soul, but this

FIGURE 1. Third Space Model



is not possible. Instead, this article has talked about the movement in English education to expand English classrooms in ways that make room for the new literacies that now constitute our world and students' lives. In this section, I focus on hip-hop as way of seeing that world multiply, dynamically, and vernacularly to render New English Education and its literacies visible, even amenable, to ELA teachers.

Before I continue, I need to define *postmodern blackness*. Postmodern blackness is the conceptual lens through which I have come to see hip-hop in English pedagogy as an example of the evolution of English education. Through the lens of postmodern blackness, hip-hop exists in this new world and is not just a passport to the old. Postmodern black-

ness gives me a lens to see hip-hop in a world having no fixed boundaries, a world continually in flux due to the constant movement of things, the collision of differences, the ongoing ruptures of particular norms, and the geneses of new forms of life and being (Berlin, "Poststructuralism"; Butler; Derrida; Elbow; Foucault; hooks).

This complex worldview, or set of simulated sets of semiotic scenes, necessitates complex or critical approaches to English education. It requires stops, still images in the motion of a fast-moving world, where English teachers can reflect on the altered terrain of ideas, literacy practices, and resources that constitute students' lives, material concerns, and disparate identities. While these

stops must happen in rhythm with the beating heart of societal changes, New English Education can benefit from being balanced on the axes of authentic concerns regarding these postmodern shifts in literacy. These concerns include, but are not limited to, social and cultural awareness of new trends in language and society.

Postmodern blackness reiterates the idea that cultural, social, economic, and technological conditions of our age are constantly shifting. These shifts have given rise to a decentralized, multimedia-dominated society in which norms are continuously revised, ways of living are continually improvised, and new technologies for communication and meaning making are regularly being devised. There are no standard-bearing, singular, or objective sources for representing, communicating, and responding to human conditions. Human conditions, or human experiences, are rich and diverse, elaborated on in tension through texts and conversations that take into account the contexts in which they were composed.

This new vision for English teaching reveals a "contemporary discourse which talks . . . about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of otherness" (hooks 343). Within the discourse of New English

**Postmodern blackness reiterates the idea that cultural, social, economic, and technological conditions of our age are constantly shifting.**

Education, which calls for the expansion of literacy, texts, experiences, and cultural artifacts, subjects that emanate from neglected experiences (e.g., femaleness, otherness, blackness, and so forth) can be revealed and valued in En-

glish classrooms. hooks surmises that the traditional ways, which "render [people] invisible . . . are not likely to produce liberatory theory that will challenge . . . domination, or promote a breakdown in traditional ways of seeing and thinking about reality, ways of constructing aesthetic theory and practice" (343).

The revelation of postmodern blackness in a world obscured by White subtleties and not-so-subtle textual dominance makes literacy practices found in hip-hop important to the postmodern shift in New English Education. Other scholars interested in hip-hop and postmodernity offer an assessment similar to hooks's. According to

Lawrence Grossberg, "The postmodern sensibility appropriates practices as boasts that announce their own—and consequently our own—existence, like a rap song boasting of the imaginary (or real—it makes no difference) accomplishments of the rapper. They offer forms of empowerment not only in the face of nihilism but precisely through the forms of nihilism itself: an empowering nihilism, a moment of positivity through the production and structuring of affective relations" (qtd. in hooks 345). Another way to put it: hip-hop is "a form of 'testimony' for the underclass," which "has enabled underclass black youth to develop a critical voice, [or] as a group of young black men told [hooks], a 'common literacy'" (345).

Scholars outside of cultural studies have also insisted that hip-hop influences a kind of literacy, perhaps more accurately—a radical, new literacy. Chief among them, critical linguist Geneva Smitherman, commenting on rap, one aspect of hip-hop, maintains that hip-hop "is a contemporary response to conditions of joblessness, poverty, and disempowerment" (269). Smitherman admits that "rap has its violence, its raw language, and its misogynistic lyrics" and argues that "rap music is not only a Black expressive cultural phenomenon; it is, at the same time, a resisting discourse, a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against White America's racism and Euro-centric cultural dominance" (2).

Hip-hop's influence transcends race, however, having influenced students from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds. While hip-hop primarily focuses on the experiences of inner-city Black youth, more than 70 percent of hip-hop tracks are purchased by White, middle-class teenagers. Responding to Cornel West's statement on the changing world and altered landscape of social situations for many groups, hooks writes, "The overall impact of the postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance" (344). Acting as more than just a voice to report Black social conditions, hip-hop in all its postmodern significance calls attention to those deep feelings which, for hooks, are shared across "the boundaries of class, gender, race," and which "could be fertile ground for the construction of

empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition” (344) in new century ELA classrooms.

To understand hip-hop in the lives of Shawn and his friends, I had to critically reflect (Cochran-Smith and Lytle; Collins; Florio-Ruane; Freire) on the various contexts and experiences in which they were situated and the new meanings that emerged. As process, this practice of critical reflection—looking back as one looks forward—offers me a way to “extend and elaborate on the literacy practices [students] already own and value” (Alvermann 25). In terms of scope, critical reflection gave me an indication of Shawn’s and his friends’ everyday literacies and the competencies they exhibited when reading, talking, and writing about things that mattered to them (Knobel; Moje). While it offered me a way to stimulate thinking about how to teach English in new ways for a new world, hip-hop alone is not the cure for failing classrooms (Brown).

While hip-hop has offered me a forum to talk about New English Education, ongoing critical reflection is still needed to “respond to alterations in our basic understanding of self, society, and the nature of human value fostered by today’s economic and cultural conditions” (Berlin, *Rhetorics* 57). Hence, we ELA teachers must develop reflective practices that address the implications of youth’s new and “multiple literacies for classroom instruction” (Alvermann 2). In addition, we ELA teachers must constantly evaluate the ways that, according to Shawn, “hip hop make you think about real issues,” “about who you are,” and about “what it’s like to be poor and Black.” What other resources exist in the postmodern world that can help enrich, enchant, and enliven our English classrooms? Perhaps most important, what other textual resources exist in the postmodern world that can help us exhume and examine the human story to make us better, to help us to understand one another? For after all, is this not the fundamental idea of English? For Shawn,

Hip hop tells a whole new story, the story you don’t want to hear. It talks about stuff that be happenin on the streets, in people’s like me lives . . . more than people slangin dope and that thang to make a dolla to make rent when rent past due. It’s all about the reality of my world, Kirk, and it ain’t

always found in no textbook . . . Hip hop don’t sugar coat it with cute language.

My point here is that the traditional practices of English teaching require change. New English Education gives ELA teachers a way to incorporate the artifacts of student life (e.g., rap, body art, graffiti, and so on) into classrooms to not only help advance students’ academic literacy development but to ultimately adjust how literacy is conceived of, practiced, and assessed. Few ELA teachers can dispute the impact that cultural shifts such as hip-hop have had on our society, students’ literacy development, and students’ understandings of the world. If we hope to transform society into a better place for everyone and equip students with the academic competencies needed to improve their qualities of life, then we must also take notice and learn with and from students in their postmodern and, dare I say, hip-hop situations.

### Growing from Concrete: Teaching English in the Postmodern World

The emergence of hip-hop in English education seems to be a beginning that has only begun to move ELA teachers to reflect critically on students’ lives, to consider the complex eddies, waves, and flows of postmodernism expressed in English classrooms (Alexander-Smith; Alim, *Roc*; Cooks; Fisher; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade). However, students, who have become intimate with the conflicted yet profound aesthetic (e.g., poetry, art, clothing, music, and so on) of postmodernity expressed in hip-hop texts and apparel, appear to be more sensitive to the postmodern complexities in English classrooms than we as educators appear to be. According to Shawn,

Our world ain’t the same. It’s changin everyday . . . and we still readin about dead White folk everyday. What you mean, ain’t nobody else said nothin important in, what, four hundred years? We usin cell phones, and they still showin us how to use a

**What other resources exist in the postmodern world that can help enrich, enchant, and enliven our English classrooms? Perhaps most important, what other textual resources exist in the postmodern world that can help us exhume and examine the human story to make us better, to help us to understand one another?**

rotary dial. . . . But it's like Tupac said, it's time to make some changes.

For urban youth like Shawn, societal growth (i.e., changes) has not been stunted. Rather, the world is changing, and youth bear witness to its changes (Alim, "Critical"; Dyson; Fisher). As we

**Hence students are, in the truest sense of Tupac's words, "roses that grow from concrete," and hip-hop, carved defiantly in the soil of postmodernity, is a telling footprint of their beauty.**

ELA teachers begin to recognize a changing world, it must be clear to us that students are not bystanders in the midst of change. They are trailblazers, forging a path toward postmodernity, resisting and affirming resistance to high modernity, and ushering in the post-

modern moment in languages and literacies within the multiple contexts of youth cultures—some Black and some hip-hop but both as dynamic as they are radical (Corsaro). The brave among us will follow them.

Hence students are, in the truest sense of Tupac's words, "roses that grow from concrete," and hip-hop, carved defiantly in the soil of postmodernity, is a telling footprint of their beauty. The image of concrete—that unbendable soil from which some of our most disadvantaged students arise—presents the new century with a searing portrait of a new rationality that disrupts outdated norms and trite traditions of thought in English education. It illuminates a world, a setting, and an unrehearsed reality that get lost somewhere in translation between the pages of traditional texts that constitute English standards and reduce to monolithic morsels the cultural richness of languages and literacies that articulate the nonstandard lives of today's youth.

Rich and diverse expressions and experiences are necessarily privileged in the defining textual unity of postmodern cultures like hip-hop and give meaning to students' marginal worlds. The case for teaching hip-hop in English classrooms isn't because we cannot do anything else to help students learn language and make sense of/with texts. Students are, in fact, learning these lessons without us. Shawn has taught me this, and the stain of his lesson is yet visible in his words: "When I read other emcees lyrics, I am reading about my life."

In this era, English education will be as much about how texts make meaning of individuals like Shawn as it is about how individuals like Shawn make meaning of texts. Beyond using hip-hop to trick students into reading the canon, a more salient question is, why aren't we using hip-hop anyway to help students make sense of the world and make meaning of their lived situations? Take Shawn's sentiment as an example: other emcees whom he has never met can tell his story in their lyrics, narrate his life through their words. More importantly, Shawn's story is only fully told by other emcees, who help him tell it, to see it, and to understand it. Shawn's story, in hip-hop, is etched in the unfolding and vivid narratives of the moment, where one can reclaim one's self by "intercourse" (Butler) another's words, beings, and ideas.

In the ardor of English standards, it is unclear whether or not ELA teachers are being led to believe and to think wholly about English through a vacuum of a singular world inaccurately linear, too certain, and far too limiting. While they can offer us much, English standards may never be able to write themselves fully into students' lives as hip-hop does. As such, it is important to question how texts and the textual traditions that we in English education embrace lead ELA teachers to abide by the failed assumption that roses (our students) only bud in fields (our classrooms) well manicured by standards and traditions (Applebee). In a world where ideas, experiences, realities, and languages are multiple, diverse, and constantly in negotiation—in a world where roses indeed penetrate concrete—the answer might surprise us. As we move forward with New English Education, a construct that privileges the lives and identities of the present without forsaking the past, it is vital that ELA teachers begin to listen (Fiumara), to *reflect* on students' lives and *redefine* literacy to *reframe* English classrooms for the twenty-first century in a way that gives them new meaning, new messages, and new life.

#### Works Cited

- Alexander-Smith, AnJeanette C. "Feeling the Rhythm of the Critically Conscious Mind." *English Journal* 93.3 (2004): 58–63.
- Alim, H. Samy. "Critical Language Awareness in the United States: Revisiting Issues and Revising Pedagogies in a Resegregated Society." *Educational Researcher* 34.7 (2005): 24–31.

- . *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Alvermann, Donna E. "Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents." Chicago: National Reading Conference, 2001.
- Applebee, Arthur N. *Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.
- Barnett, Timothy. "Reading 'Whiteness' in English Studies." *College English* 63.1 (2000): 9–37.
- Berlin, James A. "Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice." *Rhetoric Review* 11.1 (1992): 16–23.
- . *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*. Urbana: NCTE, 1996.
- Brown, Ayanna F. "Using Hip-Hop in Schools: Are We Appreciating Culture or Raping Rap?" *The Council Chronicle*. Nov. 2005. 24 Jan. 2008 <[http://www.ncte.org/portal/30\\_view.asp?id=123024&source=gs](http://www.ncte.org/portal/30_view.asp?id=123024&source=gs)>.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Cochran-Smith, Marilyn, and Susan L. Lytle. "Relationships of Knowledge and Practice: Teacher Learning in Communities." *Review of Research in Education* 24 (1999): 249–306.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. "Reflections on the Outsider Within." *Journal of Career Development* 26.1 (1999): 85–88.
- Cooks, Jamal A. "Writing for Something: Essays, Raps, and Writing Preferences." *English Journal* 94.1 (2004): 72–76.
- Corsaro, William A. *The Sociology of Childhood*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. 1967. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1976.
- Dyson, Anne Haas. "Popular Literacies and the 'All' Children: Rethinking Literacy Development for Contemporary Childhoods." *Language Arts* 81.2 (2003): 100–09.
- Elbow, Peter. "Making Postmodernism and Critical Thinking Dance with Each Other." In "Interlude: Read(Writ)ing Constructed Literacies with Colleagues." *Reinventing the University: Literacies and Legitimacy in the Postmodern Academy*. By Christopher L. Schroeder. Logan: Utah State UP, 2001. 222–26.
- Fisher, Maisha T. "Open Mics and Open Minds: Spoken Word Poetry in African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities." *Harvard Educational Review* 73.3 (2003): 362–90.
- Fiumara, Gemma Corradi. *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*. Trans. Charles Lambert. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Florio-Ruane, Susan. "More Light: An Argument for Complexity in Studies of Teaching and Teacher Education." *Journal of Teacher Education* 53.3 (2002): 205–15.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon, 1977.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 1968. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Herder, 1972.
- Gutiérrez, Kris D., and Lynda D. Stone. "Synchronic and Diachronic Dimensions of Social Practice: An Emerging Methodology for Cultural-Historical Perspectives on Literacy Learning." *Vygotskian Perspectives on Literacy Research: Constructing Meaning through Collaborative Inquiry*. Ed. Carol D. Lee and Peter Smagorinsky. New York: Cambridge UP, 2000. 150–64.
- hooks, bell. "Postmodern Blackness." 1991. *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. 3rd ed. London: Arnold, 1996. 341–47.
- Knobel, Michele. "'I'm Not a Pencil Man': How One Student Challenges Our Notions of Literacy 'Failure' in School." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 44.5 (2001): 404–14.
- Moje, Elizabeth Birr. "But Where Are the Youth? On the Value of Integrating Youth Culture into Literacy Theory." *Educational Theory* 52.1 (2002): 97–120.
- Morrell, Ernest, and Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade. "Promoting Academic Literacy with Urban Youth through Engaging Hip-Hop Culture." *English Journal* 91.6 (2002): 88–92.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992.
- Shakur, Tupac. *The Rose That Grew from Concrete*. New York: MTV, 1999.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Trainor, Jennifer Seibel. "Critical Pedagogy's 'Other': Constructions of Whiteness in Education for Social Change." *College Composition and Communication* 53.4 (2002): 631–50.

**David E. Kirkland** is assistant professor of English education at the Steinhardt School at New York University. His professional interests include youth culture, African American language and literacy, and urban teacher education. He was formerly a fellow of The NCTE Research Foundation Cultivating New Voices program. *email:* dk64@nyu.edu.

#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Kirkland reminds teachers of the importance of including students' interests in classroom instruction. One way to do this is through music—most students listen to some kind of music. Most students are aware of the ways that music can be distributed—and some have probably participated in sharing music themselves. "Copyright Infringement or Not? The Debate over Downloading Music" takes advantage of students' interest in music and audio sharing as part of a persuasive debate unit. Students investigate the controversial topic of downloading music from the Internet. Students use graphic organizers and interactive Web tools to synthesize information and evaluate content and point of view. Students map their information and take a stand on the controversy by developing persuasive arguments on the position that they present in a class debate on the subject of downloading. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=855](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=855)