

"YOU JUST GOTTA KNOW HOW TO WEAR IT":  
A STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' STYLE PRACTICES

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THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

Drawing on sociocultural and critical approaches to language and literacy and taking aesthetic experiences to be characterized by the simultaneous stimulation of one's senses and emotions, this project identifies style practices as a kind of literacy that is particularly illustrative of the inherent aesthetic nature of literacy. Further, it examines how style practices figure in to the identity negotiations of youth. The project features the reported style practices of three students in a high school in a small urban community, examining the ways that the communicative and aesthetic natures of their style practices contribute to their identity negotiation practices.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### There It Is

And if we don't fight  
if we don't resist  
if we don't organize and unify and  
get the power to control our own lives  
Then we will wear  
the exaggerated look of captivity  
the stylized look of submission  
the bizarre look of suicide  
the dehumanized look of fear  
and the decomposed look of repression  
forever and ever and ever  
And there it is...

– Jayne Cortez, 1982

When I sat in the audience of a talk on campus this fall on mass incarceration and youth in Chicago by Mariame Kaba, I listened to her end with this poem, and I fought back tears. I became a high school English teacher because I believed that schools should be, could be places of hope, and I *did* want to “fight,” to “resist,” to “organize,” to “unify,” to work with students and colleagues to “get the power to control our own lives,” as the poet suggests that we do if want to save ourselves from the indignities of the unjust status quo.

During my fifth year as a public school teacher, though, I began to feel hopelessly certain that all of our efforts at fighting, resisting, organizing, and unifying were not actually moving my students, my colleagues, or me closer to having the power to control our own lives. Intense national- and state-level pressures to standardize curricula and raise the stakes of assessment (NGAC & CCSSO, 2010), and to identify students by their presumed deficits (ISBE, 2008), created the conditions for faculty, department, and team meetings dominated by discussions of how we could just get these kids to sit down, be quiet, and do their work,

especially given that our evaluations were going to hinge on their doing so. I came to see these discussions as a kind of symbolic teacher-on-student violence (Bourdieu, 2000) that informed the physical student-on-student violence that inevitably emerged throughout our building.

I was able to *be* at Kaba's talk, because I *wasn't* in the classroom. I stopped teaching high school English, seeking and finding support and guidance at the College of Education, because of my desire to reclaim hope by collecting evidence with which to support it. Cortez' poem works as a heuristic for my reclamation project. She lays out frankly the alternatives to hopeful commitment to working for justice in schools, using "wear[ing]" as a metaphor for the ways that identity is constructed through a series of choices about how to communicate the self to the other using whichever semiotic tools are on offer (Barthes, 1967). Choosing *not* to engage in liberatory action with others leaves me with unappealing options for what to metaphorically wear, Cortez's poem warns. And it'll be right "there" for me (and all) to see. To be sure, in taking this time to "reclaim my hope," what I've also done is reclaimed my White, middle-class privilege; my loving parents have financially supported me, and the option to retreat from considerations of the violences of racism and classism in schools (though, of course, not my implication in that violence) looms (Thompson, 2003). Thus, I read Cortez' poem as a righteous conviction and challenge to don a look that identifies me as still in the fight.

Under Dr. Arlette Ingram Willis' gracious advising, I've found new ways to wear my commitment to literacy education toward justice in public schools. In an article Dr. Willis wrote with Dr. Violet Harris (2000), they ask, "Who will, and who should, decide what reading is, and is not? Literacy has been socially, culturally, and politically linked throughout U.S. history. It has been driven by the ideas, values, and purposes of those in power" (p. 78). I spent five years

asking students to make meaning through reading and writing, but I would have done well to notice how they were already making meaning – through their sophisticated manipulation of all kinds of semiotic “stuff” – clothes, locker decorations, music, hairstyles, etc. While many of them opted out of reading as it was sanctioned in the classroom by the test-driven curricula designed by “those in power,” it was clear that they were reading and composing with the semiotic tools sanctioned by their peers in order to position themselves in their social worlds. Thus, with my work, I attempt to respond to Willis and Harris’ query about whose practices and which practices count as literacy by writing against the trivialization (and at times, the demonization) of students’ style practices.

Why my focus on style? During my fifth year in the classroom, I came to look forward to passing periods, the four-minute periods between classes, as a rare space (and I mean metaphorical, physical, temporal space) in which students and teachers could take a break from some of the official and unofficial obligations (Dyson, 2008) of our institutionally-defined roles. During passing periods, I wasn’t officially responsible for facilitating learning, and I often talked with students about an interest of mine, style – favorite stores, sources for inspiration, trends, etc. I looked forward to those passing-period chats, glimmers as they were of my waning sense of hope. With this project, I take a closer look into what it was about talking about style that relieved me so.

Ultimately, this project takes up the style practices of youth as demonstration that there is cause for hopefulness in fighting, resisting, organizing, and unifying for the humanization of our students and ourselves in public schools.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review, Conceptual Framework, and Research Questions

### Literature Review

Intentionally, I use *style* rather than fashion or clothing. If I were to write about *fashion*, I think, I would have to explore fashion history, become familiar with the most influential design houses, the high-end international runway scene, etc. *Clothing*, though, is too limiting. I need to be able to include hair, accessories, and the vague but significant “wear[ing]” that Cortez’s poem takes up. Keeping in mind Hebdige’s (1984) concept of style as signifying practice imbued with possibilities for sub-cultural identity creation, I discuss style practices in this project as a subset of literacy practices marked by their obviously aesthetic nature. In order to better understand my focal participants’ style practices, I have reviewed work that takes a sociocultural and critical approach to language and literacy practices and on aesthetic experiences. Below I offer a selected retelling of what I have reviewed both in order to articulate particular relationships among the work of scholars in those fields and in order to position my own work in those conversations.

***Sociocultural and critical approaches to language and literacy*** By right of being human, all youth are capable of using systematic, rule-governed languages (Chomsky, 1959). In order to understand that language use, scholars who subscribe to sociocultural notions of language use take as the unit of analysis the communicative event (Hymes, 1972) or the literacy event (Heath, 1982; Street, 1984). Hymes’ (1972) communicative event (e.g. a conversation, a speech) is made up of communicative acts (e.g. words, gestures), which are informed by (and inform) larger communicative practices (e.g. teaching, insulting). Drawing on Shirley Brice Heath’s notion of a literacy event, or “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature

of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (1982, p. 93 as cited in Street, 2001, p. 20), Street extends Hymes' assertion of the contextualized nature of language use by critiquing scholarship that used an analytical divide between orality and literacy (e.g. Goody, 1968, 1977; Ong, 1982). Instead, Street insists that the unit of analysis in studying language use across orality and literacy should be the socially-constructed event as it instantiates larger social practices. Further, Street rejects notions of literacy as an "autonomous" set of technical skills in part because they attempt to universalize western literacy practices; he insists instead on "ideological" approaches that offer "a more culturally-sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another" by recognizing that literacy practices are "always rooted in a particular world view" (p. 1-2).

Thus, the study of language use must include significant attention to the context of that language use. We must consider the histories and ideologies that linger in any utterance as it is filtered through the mouth/hands of a speaker/writer (and her experiences) and the ears/eyes of a listener/reader (and *her* experiences) (Bakhtin, 1934). We must pay particular attention to the ways that those histories and ideologies are the products, and continuing enactments, of contact characterized by asymmetrical power dynamics (Pratt, 1991). Pratt critiques definitions of "linguistic (or literate) interactions" that come "from the point of view of the party in authority – regardless of what other parties might see themselves as doing" (p. 38). Scholars who write about critical language and literacy pedagogies (e.g. Alim, 2008; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Morrell, 2005) invite educators to explicitly centralize the marginalized language and literacy practices of marginalized people and to explicitly address and resist these asymmetrical power dynamics in order to transform them.



Several researchers have brought these sociocultural and critical approaches to bear on their examinations of the sophisticated, if largely unacknowledged or legitimized, language and literacy practices of youth, particularly, but not exclusively, youth of color. In *Homegirls*, Mendoza-Denton (2008) looks at language and literacy practices both within and beyond speech and printed text in an ethnographic examination of Latina youth gangs in southern California. She takes up, for example, clothing choices, drawings, hairstyles, make-up application, pronunciation, and word play as semiotic tools with which her participants enacted and resisted larger social structures like gender, nationalism, and race. Bucholtz' (2011) study of White youth in a multiracial high school in the California Bay Area, similar to Mendoza-Denton's, explores the relationship between language and literacy practices and race, with particular attention to the influence of "Black-pioneered" (p. 78) styles of language and literacy on White youth's language and style practices.

Of particular interest to me, since I'm approaching my own project from a teacher's perspective and with an eye toward implications for language and literacy *pedagogies*, is the way that the schools' language and literacy curricula figure in the backgrounds of both Mendoza-Denton's and Bucholtz' work. Mendoza-Denton describes the mass movement out of English as a Second Language course by the Salvadorian students at the school who switched their affiliation from the Sureños, the gang that aligned themselves with Mexico and the global South, to the Norteñas, who identified with the United States and the global North (pp. 137-141). At the school where Bucholtz conducted research, a course called Multiculturalism was controversial among some White students, who identified with Black-pioneered style practices to varying extents; they described themselves as victims of the course's discourse that they felt

inaccurately and unfairly made them into oppressors (p. 190). Finders' (1997) ethnographic study of the literacy practices of White girls in a rural junior high who organized themselves into groups that two of their mothers called the "social queens" and the "tough cookies" (p. 20), takes up more explicitly the relationship between school's "official expectations" and the "literate underlife" (p. 24) of youth. Her participants' identities as queens or cookies, informed by the particularities of their age, class, and gender, always existed alongside or in conflict with their identities as students as they were enacted through language and literacy practices.

Perhaps most directly, I'd like to put my work in conversation with Kirkland and Jackson (2009), who, working toward a theory of Black masculine literacies, draw in part on Black male youths' use of "phat gear" (p. 290-293) as a rule-governed symbol system for composing the self: "They fashioned themselves in multimodal layers (i.e., clothing stained with letters and pictures) and expanded what these texts could mean" (p. 291). Further, Kirkland and Jackson found that manipulating phat gear, coming up with new ways to style themselves, was significant to the youth in their study as "a way to stand out" in the social world as they read it (p. 290). What I seek to key in on and further explore is the aesthetic (i.e. sensory and emotional) value of that standing out.

***Aesthetic experience and its sensory and emotional qualities*** With this project, I hope to make the case that in addition to characterizing style as a literate practice with communicative value, and therefore a means of achieving sociopolitical efficacy, style practices can be understood as highlighting the aesthetic experiences inherent to literacy. In aesthetic experience, sensory and embodied interaction with the external environment harmonizes with internal, emotional stimulation; such harmonization is the stuff from which life is disrupted,

renews and grows (Dewey, 1934). We seek out aesthetic experiences, with varying degrees of effort, with no guarantee that we will achieve them; thus, aesthetic experience is about the creation or perception of the surprising, the unexpected, the new (Eisner, 2002).

Given my own experience of holding on to the glimmers of hope in those moments during passing periods when students and I talked about style, I'm interested in using Dewey's and Eisner's work to illuminate those glimmering moments. What is it about the attention to the obviously sensory – the visual, the tactile – and the obviously emotional – in my case, hopefulness – that make style practices instructive for educators interested in literacy practices?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I will approach style practices, understood as a subset of literate practices marked by pronounced aesthetic experiences, through the theoretical framework of identification as an ongoing process of negotiating the tension between structure and agency (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Ortner 1989). Global structures like class, gender, nationality, race (and more local ones, like popularity) are constituted by individual enactments of them, *and* individual enactments are informed by those structures. Individual enactments of global larger structures, though, are rarely perfect and therefore often work to revise those structures, ever so slightly.

*Identification* works better than *identity* “if one prefers to stress the process” (Hall, 2000, p. 6).

Thus, as I collect and analyze data on my focal participants' style practices, I filter my interpretation of those practices and experiences through questions of identification. In doing so, I want to be careful not to universalize the identification process which is itself a structure that is differentially informed by other structures like class, gender, and race.

## **Research Questions**

With this research, then, I ask two questions: (1) How do style practices illuminate the aesthetic nature of literacy practices? And further, (2) how do style practices figure in to the identity negotiations of youth in an urban high school?

## Chapter 3: Methods

### Site

I conducted my study at Millennial High School,<sup>1</sup> located in a small city in the Midwest of the United States. Millennial is the newer of two high schools in its district; it is one of three public high schools in the city. Public record of the school's demographics indicate that 48.8% of the students are White, 32.6% are Black, 8.5% are Asian, 5.6% are Hispanic, 4% identify with two or more races, 1% are Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and .3% are American Indian. Students who qualify for free or reduced lunch make up 48.1% of the population and 1.9% of the students are homeless. Students who receive special education services and English as a Second Language services make up 10.8% and 1.3% of the population, respectively. These numbers represent a shift in demographics since the early 2000s when the school was "near 70% white" (Millennial Principal, personal communication, March 2, 2014). Having signed a consent decree admitting to inequitable access to educational opportunity that particularly harmed African-American students in the district, district administrators orchestrated this shift, wanting to make the two high schools "demographic mirrors of one another;" they did so through what is "frequently described as a 'trading of the fields' within the district. Instead of the wealthy, mostly white students from the Strawberry Fields subdivision attending Millennial, they were bused to [the other high school in the district]. And, instead of the poorer, largely black students from the Prairie Fields subdivision attending [the other school], they were bused to Millennial" (Millennial Principal, personal communication, March 2, 2014). The demographics of Millennial are also influenced by the movement of many White families

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<sup>1</sup> This school name and the names of participants used later are pseudonyms that I chose.

and/or wealthier families in the city to the two local parochial schools and to the nearby university's laboratory school.

The day at Millennial is divided into eight fifty-minute periods wherein students are offered a traditional college preparatory curriculum with special emphasis put on English and mathematics, the two subjects tested by statewide standardized assessments that are consequential for district funding. While juniors and seniors at Millennial are generally allowed to leave the building for a full fifty-minute lunch period, that period is divided into two for ninth and tenth grade students, who spend half of the period at lunch in the cafeteria and half of the period in study hall.

I chose to enter this research site through study hall because, from my prior professional experience as a teacher at Millennial (addressed more thoroughly below), I know that study hall, despite its name, is often a fairly unregulated time/space. Think recess. Another distinctive aspect of study hall is that, unlike most of the courses at Millennial, it is not ability-tracked. Ability tracking has exacerbated racial segregation at Millennial, an observation of my own from my time as a teacher there, confirmed by my former students, colleagues, and administrators, and reinforced by the literature on tracking in general (e.g., Burriss & Garrity, 2008; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 1985). Study hall was thus the ideal place for me to both get a chance to interact with students without disrupting any curricular work and to do so in a setting that allowed me to see how students group themselves both with and against the ways that they are institutionally grouped.

Because of my interest in style as a kind of literacy, I moved from Study Hall into each participant's English class. Doing so allowed me to see each participant in a tracked<sup>2</sup> and more structured setting (e.g., in a seating chart, with a class routine). Doing so also allowed me to make observations about each participant's enactment of English-class learning and to collect samples of their written work. Such data helped me to contextualize participants' style practices in relation to the literacy practices legitimized by the school.

### **Participants**

In study hall, with the goal of achieving approximate representation of the school's official demographics and as well as variety in terms of style, I identified eight of the nine participants, the ninth emerging from my later observations of participants in their English classes.

Of my participants, six are girls and three are boys.<sup>3</sup> Of the girls, two are African-American, one is Arab, and three are White. Of the boys, one is African-American, one is Multiracial, and one is White. I did not ask the participants to disclose their sexual orientation, but one of the participants came out to me as queer. None of the participants disclosed any information to me about their families' incomes, though money worries fairly commonly emerged as we talked about style and buying clothes in particular. The participants described

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<sup>2</sup> As each of my three focal participants are ninth graders, it bears mentioning that when I taught at Millennial, I taught ninth grade English, collaborating with the other ninth grade English teachers on curricular matters. At the time, all of the teachers on that course team, including myself, were engaged in efforts to de-track the course, and therefore, on principle, some of them refused to design much distinction between the general and the accelerated courses. Of the two ninth grade English teachers I observed, one of them taught the same lesson in the general and the accelerated classes, and the other taught different lessons.

<sup>3</sup> I had initially identified two more male participants, but they or their caretakers ultimately declined to consent to participation in the study.

their families in this way: four of the them were raised by their single mothers, one by his father and step-mother, one by his grandmother, and three by married parents. The participants ranged from only children to one of many siblings; one was a twin, and one had a same-age adopted sister. Though I'll let three of them do much more descriptive work when it comes to style below, the participants ranged from highly engaged with it – buying books on fashion and using them daily, watching several reality TV shows about style, planning to study fashion design – to explicitly unengaged with it – choosing music, athletics, or academics as places to put energy instead. All but two of the students were tracked into an accelerated English class, an overrepresentation that I discovered after having selected them. Of the other two, one was tracked into a general English class, and the other was tracked into a “self-contained” English class as per the specifications of that participant’s Individualized Education Plan.

### **Focal participants**

I’ve chosen to highlight the insights of three focal participants whom I selected by prioritizing representativeness of the range of style practices I learned about and clarity of examples.

Maleek is an African-American, male, ninth grade student. I first identified him as a potential participant when I watched him one day, headphones up and Hip Hop music just loud enough for me to hear, dance energetically in his seat, speaking to no one, for most of the twenty-five minutes of the period. He kept his hair in a hi-top fade with a side part. He would typically wear slim-fitted jeans, a designer belt, and a designer t-shirt or sweatshirt. He always had on a puka-shell necklace. More than once when he noticed me taking notes on what he was wearing, he would help me out by telling me the brand names of each item. In English,



Maleek consistently copied any written notes he was asked to take, but I rarely saw him generate his own written work. During class, he frequently listened to music on his headphones and carried on prolonged silent conversations and gesture games with a student who sat across the room from him.

Brette is a White, female, ninth grade student who told me right away when I explained my project to the students in her study hall that I would find out some interesting things by interviewing her and her friends since they all have such different styles. Typically, Brette wore fitted sweatpants, a t-shirt, and gym shoes. She always wore her long, straight, dark blonde hair down. No make-up. Her backpack, she told me, weighed less than ten pounds, but always looked bulging because of the separate binders she kept for each class. In her Accelerated English class, Brette was deliberately engaged with the teacher, frequently raising her hand to participate and often waiting with her hand up for the teacher's attention even as her peers disregarded that convention and carried on the discussion without her.

Aisha is one of the girls in the group that Brette sat with. She is a female, ninth grade student who identifies as Arab. Her family moved to the United States from Jordan when she was seven and makes trips back every other year. Whereas I came to be able to roughly predict what Brette would be wearing each time I visited, Aisha was much more prone to mixing it up. She wore a headscarf (her term) and used under-layers to adhere to her community's norms for modesty. Typically, though, her layers were tightly fitted. Often she would wear skinny jeans with a fitted tank top, a scarf knotted loosely around her neck, and a long cardigan, which she would belt at the waist. She color-coordinated throughout each ensemble. In her Accelerated English class, though she ultimately produced any written work asked of her, Aisha frequently

bounced her focus around among the teacher, the friend who sat next to her, and the demands of homework and studying for other classes.

### **Researcher positionality**

Prior to conducting this research, I spent five years teaching English at two local high schools; the last year I taught was at Millennial. During my last two and a half years in the classroom, I also completed graduate coursework in Education at the nearby University. As I said above, I left my job as a teacher at Millennial because I could sense that I was approaching burn out, but even as I left the classroom to conduct this research, I've continued to be involved in the school, collaborating with the principal and other teachers to develop a literacy initiative, and in the district, helping to plan district-wide seminars on social justice issues. In short, I never really stopped seeing myself as a teacher.

It is also worth noting something about my own literacy practices, in particular about the subset of literacy practices that is my focus here: style practices. I am a White woman in my late twenties, and I trace my own style awakening to my experience at an all-girls, private, Catholic high school at which I had to wear a uniform. I can vividly remember, in ninth grade, noting particularities of how some of the older girls wore their uniforms and modeling my own styling of that plaid skirt and white polo after them. I continue to be enthusiastic in my style practices; for example, in my last couple of years as a teacher, I took up the practice of seeking out and following style blogs as sources of both visual and emotional inspiration. I relay this information not only to reinforce my point that style is about more than clothes, but also to suggest that my Whiteness and my family's ability to send me to private school do create some

blindspots for me in terms of perceiving and making sense of race and racism as well as the implications of economic inequity.

In collecting and in reviewing the data for this project, I tried to be vigilant about noting when, where, and how my practice was informed – in constraining and in generative ways – by my identification as a teacher, as a White person of relative privilege, and by my own literacy and style practices.

### **Data collection**

As is likely already apparent, I took up my research question using qualitative methods, looking to observation, informal interviews, photos, and written work for English classes as sources of data. I began my data collection process by obtaining permission first from the principal and subsequently from the teachers assigned to a few study halls. Having been granted access to those study halls, I identified potential participants in the way that I described above. After getting theirs and their caretakers' consent, I began documenting what I could about their style and their interactions with me and with others. Early on in this process, I also sought out quiet places (most frequently the school library) and the permission of study hall teachers to leave the classroom with my participants. Then, I conducted and audio-recorded informal interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) wherein I asked each participant, without a predetermined list of questions, about their everyday experiences at Millennial and about their style practices.

Eventually, I started to go along with each participant to their English classes, having received permission to do so from their teachers. In their English classes, I left my audio-recorder on participants' desks but did not sit near them, for the most part, since all of the

teachers whose classes I observed had seating charts and there were no empty seats near my participants. I tried not to interact with anyone during the English classes, but made descriptive and reflective notes as I watched, adding to those my headnotes after leaving the school (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

I audio-recorded and transcribed the entirety of each informal interview and much of each English-class visit, bringing those transcriptions together with my own handwritten observation notes and photos taken during my visits in order to write a set of field notes for each visit. I stored those field notes electronically, collecting twenty sets over the course of four months, which, together with ten analytical notes I made, and copies of several work samples, came to just over three hundred pages of data.

### **Data analysis**

Once my data was collected, transcribed, and printed out and organized chronologically, I read through it to refamiliarize myself with what I had seen, heard, and noted, and so that I could inductively generate possible codes (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Doing so brought up 396 potential codes, which I then condensed to thirty-two, still too many to use to make sense of my data. I organized those thirty-two codes into four themes, and I re-read the data chronologically, using colored sticky notes to identify instances of each theme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By then becoming more familiar with the data, I narrowed my focus to several salient stories the data tell with the goal of allowing a few significant findings to emerge (Geertz, 1973) for which I could provide rich and clear evidence.

In identifying particularly telling illustrations, I considered the way that my conceptual framework – the tensions between powerfully constructing structures and persistent human agency – mapped onto the focal participants’ descriptions of their style practices.

## Chapter 4: Findings

In identifying style practices in my data, with special attention to their communicative and aesthetic values, and in analyzing them through the concept of identification, three interconnected assertions emerged. First, style was, in part, one medium through which each focal participant read and wrote themselves into and against larger social structures as they were conceived of as both local (e.g. family, “popular”) and global (e.g. race, class, gender). Doing so afforded a sense of efficacy, an ability to participate deliberately in those structures rather than being passively defined by them. That said, none of the participants seemed as interested in achieving this sense of efficacy as they did in the pleasure associated with doing something new (to them), creating possibilities outside of those established structures. Secondly, that doing something new was not merely a product of choice; for each focal participant, negotiations with particular given social structures, and with people in their lives with commitments to those social structures, had to be contended with. Ultimately, each focal participant, to varying extents, claimed that style was most importantly a medium for creativity, of doing something new (again, to them) that helped them to move beyond adherence to their given positions in relation to local and global social structures. The focal participants consistently described such work in emotional terms.

Though analytically I separated these three assertions – style and literacy, style and aesthetic experience, and style and identity negotiation – below I illustrate their interconnectedness in my interpretation of salient excerpts from the data. I chose the excerpts for representativeness and clarity.

**Maleek: “It feels like you, like, fresh or something.”**

For Maleek, the visual and emotional value of style lie in the ability to “pop out,” to dress himself in such a way as to resist easy visual categorization, something made easier by access to expensive clothes but attainable also through the right emotional approach. He and I sat together in the hallway outside his Study Hall, and he explained it to me:

“So where do you get your ideas for what to wear?” I ask. Maleek is quick with his response: “It come natural.” Given the ways that he goes on to deliberately define his style *against* his mom’s and his sister’s, I’m curious about to what extent his style is really “natural[ly]” his own: “Um, so you-so your mom wears stuff that matches. Your sister’s got more of a vintage style. What would you say your style is?”

“Just skinny jeans and stuff,” he responds. “I, I, like, I don’t even know my, I don’t know my style. I just know what I like to wear.” I press, “Mm-hm. But there’s not a name for it?” “Mm... I like Levi’s. Yeah, it’s not no, like, vintage and stuff. It’s not really a name for the stuff that I wear. It’s, like, mediums. It’s, like, in between. I want something that’s, like, gonna pop out.”

Three things strike me about Maleek’s attempts to describe his style. First, when pressed, he tried to define himself in the positive, to give a name for his style, but ultimately, he slipped into defining himself in the negative. While his mother and sister have nameable styles, he claimed, his didn’t have a name; it is not that well established. In his view, what he was doing was new, and therefore still existed only in the sensory realm, outside of language. The visual nature of his style was accentuated by the approximations he finally came up with: “mediums” and “in between.” In both cases, he offered spatial terms that presumably put his style in relationship with the divides between various nameable styles. Not only could his style not fit

squarely inside any of those dividing lines, it could not be constrained by their terms either; it popped out. As such, Maleek's style practices seem to engage Hip Hop style as Tricia Rose (1994) describes it: "a style that cannot be easily understood... a style has the ability to create counterdominant narratives" (p. 84-85). Finally, I pause at his use of "Levi's," a brand of jeans that Maleek elsewhere reported liking, in his first attempt to name his style as a whole (rather than naming some of its component parts: "skinny jeans and stuff." Something he said later during my data collection, as we online shopped in the school library one day, helped me to make sense of this "Levi's" thing:

When he asks me which website I want him to use, I ask him to go to whichever site he'd usually shop on. "I got a website. I got a website," he responds, "but I don't, I don't give it away, 'cause like..." I interrupt, laughing, "You don't want me to know?" "I don't want *anybody* to know. Don't nobody know... It's where I got my [Hermès] belts from. It's real... Yeah, they have everything. They got True Religions [jeans]. Have you seen my new [Nike] shoes?" When he showed them to me, on a different website, I checked the price, "Did you pay \$250 for them?" He grinned, "Nope. That's the catch."

Later, after he'd showed me a few of his favorite items, I ask, "When you see clothes that you like, how does that feel?" I ask if it's comparable to other aesthetic experiences like eating delicious food or hearing good music. "Uh... mm... It feels like you, like, fresh or something," he starts. "When you got on new clothes. It's like a feeling, like, you know what you have. And you know what people, you know that pe-, you know what you have. You know what people gon' think or see that you have."



Clearly, the positively connoted newness of feeling “fresh,” the emotional value of style for Maleek, was a deeply intersubjective process; he felt fresh when he knew that his style practices traded on others’ knowledge of the expensive brand-name items to which he had access. (A quick search taught me that a Hermès belt can cost upwards of eight hundred dollars, and True Religion jeans cost between two hundred and three hundred dollars.) More than the expensive items themselves, though, Maleek’s grinning refusal to share the URL of the website where he gets “everything” without getting caught up by perhaps prohibitively high prices suggested pride in his own creative way of gaining access to financially-determined exclusivity. In repeating, “I got a website,” Maleek claimed a kind of ownership over the website that sells expensive brand-name items at affordable prices, and he reserved his right to withhold others’ access to that source: “I don’t give it away.” His insistence on protecting the privacy of his knowledge of the website, especially in contrast with his reliance on the knowledge of others for attaining a “fresh” feeling about his own style, evinced a value for an intangible like knowledge that exceeded the value for the expensive, brand-name items themselves. Thus, “Levi’s” made sense as at least a first draft of a name for his style since the brand name could work as a signifier for this broader practice of creativity.

Maleek reinforced this prioritization of the intangible over tangible elements of style practices when he explained how someone without access to expensive, brand-name items could still avoid looking like they didn’t have that access:

“I mean you can have any type of style; you just got know how to, you just gotta know how to, how to wear it. Like, you can have a bogus style; you just gotta know how to wear it, make it look nice. Like, like just some, like, some bum-bum clothes, and still

make it look, look nice. You know how to wear it. If you know how to, like, add your own stuff into it.”

Fascinated, I respond, trying to understand, “Is it about, like, actually picking and matching pieces together in a creative way?” He builds on my understanding, “That and, like, the way you think, ‘cause if you, like... When you smile, you look better, and it brings out your clothes more. But if you, like, mad that your clothes are, like, bum, you’re gonna look like a bum.”

Here, Maleek pairs “bogus” with the heavily classed epithet “bum” to make clear that looking economically poor was not desirable. Whatever his aversion to established local structures like “vintage” and “matching,” above, class structures powerfully and explicitly informed his style practices. That said, while unabashedly motivated to avoid looking poor and thus not locating his style practices totally outside of class’ influence, Maleek offered quite accessible possibilities for resisting passive reception of one’s classed identity. “Know[ledge of] how to wear” and a “smile,” two intangibles that cost nothing, he asserted, have transformational capacities. There was a clear relationship for Maleek between happiness and style practices that leverage knowledge of existing constructs toward creating something new. In short, Maleek’s style practices were characterized by reading the possibilities on offer to him from structural forces like class and creating something new that builds on but transcends those possibilities.

Considering the aesthetic nature of Maleek’s style practices helped me to make sense of how he engaged the literacy practices prescribed in his English class. When Maleek’s class engaged with the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet* one day, for example, I watched him resist the

particular literacy practices on offer to him from his teacher and yet engage with the text anyway, on his own (decidedly embodied) terms:

The class is reviewing a list of vocabulary terms that Mr. James wants them to consider as they're beginning to read and watch Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and think about the ways that gender is constructed in that text. Maleek plays with Eddie, his friend sitting across the room, throwing up his middle finger at him, a gesture of faux-disrespect that moves into both boys fully extending their arms toward each other, fingers pointed: "Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!"

The worksheet done, they start the movie, and Mr. James pauses it for the first time at, "Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?" He relates thumb-biting to raising one's middle finger, and Maleek grins, raising his middle finger again at Eddie. When Mr. James asks what usually happens when people play-fight, several students say at the same time that a real fight often ensues. Maleek sucks his teeth and looks annoyed with that answer. Then, he reengaged Eddie and continued with their gesture-games, moving on into fake boxing. When the bell is about to ring, Maleek and Eddie get up and start fake sword-fighting.

Mr. James asks them to have a seat while he previews what will happen in the movie tomorrow by asking them what happens when a fight happens at school. Several students say that an administrator comes and everybody gets in trouble. Maleek protests, not him. If he's at the fight, he's going to escape before getting into trouble.

Here, Maleek took up the text on offer but rejected the literacy practices expected by the teacher. Instead, Maleek embodied his understanding of the escalating tension in the text

through his play with a friend, thus opting out of the academically legitimized literacy practices and into more obviously embodied, social ones. Further, his insistence on his ability to stay out of trouble when everyone else is getting caught by the authorities highlighted the sense of unique craftiness he saw in himself that was reinforced by his style practices.

**Brette: “I want to like what I look like without [makeup.]”**

Brette’s desire to practice style completely outside of existing structures went quite a bit further than Maleek’s somewhat ambivalent rejection of them. For Brette, the emotional value in style practices emerged out of her ability to resist constructions of “pretty[ness]” that, though, much easier to just go along with, demanded three costs that Brette would not pay: complicity in the exclusion of “uncool” kids, some embodied and tactile discomfort, and structural contingencies on her self-esteem.

Brette and I sit in the library one afternoon during her study hall, and I’m remarking on the intricacy of her explanation of the ever-present, ever-shifting social dynamics of the school’s marching band. “Yeah,” she says, “Yeah, I’ve always liked to do that, and, like, understand how other people are feeling, and I’ve never liked to see people left out. Like, my mom always likes to tell the story of when I was in, um, preschool, how my preschool class was the only class that didn’t have any cliques and groups in it ‘cause I wouldn’t let anybody be, like, better than anyone else.” I chuckle, but she continues, serious, “And I wouldn’t let anyone be left out. So I never like it when people are, like, disliked for no reason. And I always try to help out.”

“It’s funny to think about preschoolers having cliques,” I offer, sheepishly. She smiles, “They do, though. It’s really weird. It’s like, yeah. Although in elementary

school and in preschool, it's not as bad. And even our middle school wasn't that cliquey." I "hm" periodically to indicate that I'm with her. "Like there were groups that didn't hang out with each other, but it wasn't like, 'This is the popular group, and these are the uncool people,' Like... It's more of that in high school, though." She goes on: "Like, you see in the movies, like, the well-defined cliques, like you're either in this group and you're in either in this group, but it's really not that way here. I haven't met anybody that I was like, 'Oh, they're definitely, like, one of the popular kids.' Or met somebody and been like, 'Oh, they're part of the geeks.' Like... it's not really super obvious or anything."

Because I want to know more about the particular constructions of "popular" and "uncool" at Millennial, Brette explains to me that it's usually people who are multi-talented, people who are good singers *and* athletic *and* smart, for example, who are popular. She goes on: "And it's always the people that everybody is like, 'Oh, they're so pretty.' That's often what it is, too." "So, appearance is part of that, too?" I ask, double-checking. "Yeah," she says, laughing, "Unfortunately... I always think it's stupid that everybody has to look a certain way to be cool. Like, all the popular kids wear all the same stuff... I don't know, they all just wear the stuff that everybody's like, 'Oh my gosh, that's so cute!' But you never see anybody who's popular that doesn't wear that stuff." I'm curious, so I ask "Hm. Makes me wonder if they actually like it or if it's just part of the identity?" Brette answers, "A lot of the culture and wanting to be thought of as pretty. A lot of people that dress like that, you hear them complaining a lot like, 'Oh my gosh,' like, 'This shirt is itchy, and the scarf is annoying.' And, 'These boots are too tight,'

or whatever. And I'm like, 'Well, then why don't you just wear something more comfortable like I do,' and they're like, 'But I want people to think I'm pretty!'"

She laughs and continues, "I used to try. I don't try anymore though. 'Cause, like, I figure you can't please everybody, and it's really not comfortable. None of that stuff is comfortable. Like, I'm not gonna go all day... 'Cause you have to sit all stiff and stuff so that you don't mess anything up. And you can't really do anything at all except sit there and talk to people."

There's a clean narrative arc to Brette's commentary (which I've edited down some, but left in chronological sequence) that follows her childhood efforts to prevent and breakdown any "cliques" emerging among her preschool classmates. It continues through elementary school and middle school where those cliquish tendencies intensified just as did, presumably, her ability to read the nuances of those tendencies, and it ends at her ninth-grade self, resolved to a one-woman resistance of the pressures of ubiquitously-established constructions of appealing femininity. With this narrative, she claimed a long-standing commitment to transcending the lines drawn by structures like "popular[ity]" and "uncool[ness]," and further, she claimed a capacity for observing the subtleties of those constructs' enactment that transcended the purely visual. Whereas her peers stressed their desires to look "pretty" or "cute" by acquiring a collection of items that everyone else had, Brette could hear complaints about "itch[iness]," and she noticed the awkwardness of "stiff" postures involved in enacting prettiness as a way of getting to "talk to people." Thus, despite her repeated claims to retreating into "[comfort]" and thereby consistently *not* following all the rules for enacting prettiness, Brette's style practices

actually demonstrated her ability to do something more complex with her style, in her view, than what the popular girls were doing.

This resistance of the hegemony of “pretty” was Brette’s *new* (to her) thing (even though for her, it was *also* her old thing), which I would liken to Maleek’s website. In stressing that all of the popular kids wear the same things and giving several examples of her own critical analysis of *their* style practices, Brette made her own style practices recognizable. The “they’re like”/“I’m like” distinction was key. Thus, Like Maleek, Brette’s style practices contribute to an intersubjective identification process. Unlike Maleek’s willingness to acknowledge the influence of class structures on his style practices, though, Brette framed her style practices within her desire to obliterate such divisive structures because it was emotionally difficult for her to recognize the implications of those divisions. She “never like[d]” when people were excluded “for no reason,” “cliques” not counting as a justified reason to her. Nguyen (2012) writes about such a desire, by White young women, to collapse the boundaries between people put up by social structures, and in so doing to enact “an aesthetics of access... through which the personal and the political are collapsed into a world of public intimacy” (p. 174). That is, through deeply aesthetic literacy practices (especially through the creation and circulation of anti-establishment and feminist ‘zines), the White young women she described created spaces for girls to love themselves and each other. Embedded in such explicitly feminist efforts, though, was an inattention to “histories of desire for access and attachment to racial, colonial others” (pp. 174-175) that thus characterized such efforts as at best unintentionally ignorant and at worst violently racist. Nguyen’s critique helps to illuminate the identity work in Brette’s

style practices as implicitly racially-informed in addition to the colorblind gendered analysis that Brette explicitly offered.

I saw the emotional elements of Brette's style practices perhaps most clearly one morning when I was able to sit near her in her English class. As the class readied itself for a debate on whether or not Title IX, a law that mandates equal funding to girls'/women's and boys'/men's athletic programs, was still necessary, she filled me in on the last debate, over whether or not make-up hurts girls' and women's self-esteem:

We're whispering to each other as Ms. Ainsley checks in with various students, making sure everybody's got their notes sheet ready to go. "Guys were talking about make-up, and they obviously had no idea what they were talking about," Brette tells me. She says that she had been assigned to argue the affirmative, "But I really do agree. It'd be better if everybody just didn't because it makes the people who don't wear it feel like they have to." "Do you wear make-up?" I ask, probably an obvious question. "No. I want to like what I look like without it."

She "want[s] to" like what she looks like without make-up. Wants to, not does. This instance helped me to see that Brette's campaign against hegemonic social constructs was not solely motivated by her impulse to control the behavior of others. Her own sense of self-esteem, her ability to appreciate her own appearance, was on the line, too.

**Aisha: "Like, you get happy!"**

Aisha, in stark contrast to Maleek and Brette, was blatantly interested in accurately reproducing existing structures, such as popularity, with her own style practices. From her perspective, enacting style practices that allowed her to fit in *was* an exciting, creative pursuit.



She made this case one day as she and I sat with Angela, another of my participants, in an empty classroom next to their Study Hall:

I ask them both, “Um, what do you guys think about clothes? Do you care about them? Do you think about them?” Aisha jumps in right away: “Yeah, it’s like one of my favorite things to do. Like, when I shop, it’s like, like, it takes your mind off of things, And, like, seeing what’s in and stuff. It’s, like, a hobby. It’s, like, shop and stuff...”

She trails off, noticing that I’m writing. “Yeah, I’m just writing down your outfit for today,” I explain. “Oh,” she laughs, and I join her. My writing obviously interfered with my listening because I ask, “Um, so do you think it’s, like, a stress-reliever?” “Uh-huh,” she says, but subtly corrects me, “And it’s, like, fun buying new clothes. Like, you get happy!” All three of us laugh. “And, like, you wanna wear them the next day,” she adds.

I agree with her and ask, “Why do you think it’s so fun?” “I don’t know,” she starts, “like, your clothes kind of define your personality, and, like, they get people to talk to you. Like, if you’re always dressed regularly, they’re probably gonna notice you.”

Aisha’s emphasis on the *excitement* of finding clothes that will define her in such a way as to invite interaction with peers demonstrated the active nature of that practice, especially when contrasted with the more passive descriptor that I offered, “stress-reliever.” Given that she wore a headscarf, a practice which she told me prompted “stupid questions like, ‘Do you shower with it?’ and ‘Do you have hair?’” from her non-Muslim peers, seeming “[regular]” took some doing. The simultaneity of Aisha’s attempts at “dressing regularly” and her continuing choice to wear a headscarf complicates the common non-Muslim perception of that particular

style practice as a site of absolute subjugation (Jarmakani, 2012). Thus, fitting in is Aisha's new (to her) creation, a source of "happ[iness]" for her.

Later in that same conversation, Aisha asserted that her style has changed drastically since middle school. She attributed the evolution to the dynamic demands to which she had to respond:

"Okay, so, like, at the beginning I really didn't care how I dressed, like, even sixth grade year. I used to just come in, like, sweats and, like, a black hoodie or whatever. And then, like, eighth grade year, I sort of started caring. And then, like, during high school, I actually, like, started reading magazines and looking up styles and stuff and, like, shopping without my mom always having to choose, like, what I need to wear."

Intrigued, I follow up, "So tell me more about looking at the magazines. How does that help?" She explains, "It, like, shows what's in. Like, there's a app. It's called Pose, and it shows you, like, what to wear for, like, the fall or for summer or whatever. And it has, like, all these ideas and stuff." I interrupt, "So do you, when you see an idea, do you just look for something..." Aisha picks up my sentence, "Similar to it?" I confirm and go on, "Like, do you try to recreate an outfit, or do you...?" She picks up again, "Yeah. Or, like, if I don't know how to wear this shirt 'cause it doesn't look good with something certain, then I just try to, like, look it up, and see what it would look good on." I tell her that that seems like a good idea, and she confirms. "Uh-huh. 'Cause I've bought shirts that I've regretted buying 'cause they don't look good on anything, so..." she laughs. Angela chimes in, laughing too, "We've all done that!"

Laughing as well, but wondering about the source of her regret, if it's because she's wasted her money, I ask, "Who, who buys them? Do you buy them or..." "No," she says, "my mom buys my clothes. Like, I pick them out, but she buys them, and she has to approve them." "Mm. There's a test, a final test!" I say. "Yeah," Aisha concludes, nodding and smiling.

Here again, Aisha described<sup>4</sup> the creative efforts that went into enacting two complex sets of rules: seasonable trends and her mother's expectations. Both sets of rules were shifting; seasonal trends are perhaps more obviously temporary and changing, but the rearrangement of her mother's approval process from the beginning to the end of her shopping practices was also notable. Likewise, both sets of rules were not totally explicit. They were ascertainable only in piecemeal ways, hence her need for the app that offered suggestions for how to style particular items and for her mother's continued presence in her shopping. Further, since she denied my suspicions about the financial nature of the "regret" she experienced after acquiring a new item that doesn't "look good," it is possible that this negative emotional experience emerged from her recognition that she had failed to successfully adhere to the various sets of rules she identified.

Thus, similar to Maleek, the agential nature of Aisha's style practices, especially within her shopping experiences, existed in the space for creativity that she cleverly established among overlapping and sometimes conflicting structures. That space was figurative but, unlike

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to describing these efforts to improvisationally ascertain and meet expectations, Aisha demonstrated them when she anticipated and tried to match my thinking as I asked follow-up questions. In doing so, she showed me her sensitivity toward others' meaning-making and ultimate perceptions of her and her capacity to actively interrupt and extend that meaning-making process.

Maleek's, which he described in spatial terms, hers had temporal tendencies. She postponed her mother's access to approval (or disapproval), and she corrected past mistakes by seeking out advice as to how to make them work. And of course, both of these temporally-defined style practices existed on the timeline of her evolving style practices. I also watched Aisha use time-lapse as a space for agency in her English class:

Mr. James leads a whole-class discussion and annotation of Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Boy and Egg," and while he does, Aisha studies for a Biology test, staring at the notes in her binder on fish and amphibians. When Mr. James asks the class to spend the rest of the period writing a paragraph that makes a claim about the poem and supports it with textual evidence, Aisha slouches, sighs, and says to Sarah, her friend sitting next to her, "I *can't* write. I'm so *sick* of writing." Then, she sits up, turns her body in her seat so that's she's directly facing Sarah, rather than her desk, and waits for about forty-five seconds. After that pause (during which Sarah is writing), she turns her body back toward her desk, picks up her pencil, and starts to write.

Though she did eventually comply with Mr. James' expected literacy practice, writing the paragraph, she also indicated an understanding of another set of expectations, her biology teacher's, *and* she created some space for her own embodied expression of resistance that draws on simultaneity (e.g. listening to Mr. James and studying for another teacher's test) and passing time (e.g. waiting before writing) as resources. I find this quite comparable to her use of time to happily create space for agency in her style practices, heavily informed as they are by both the expectations set out by constructions of "[regular]" and the expectations of her mother.

As I suggested above, recognizing the aesthetically generative (in the sense that she was creating newness and generating excitement for herself) nature of Aisha's style practices is only possible when understood through the lens of her identity as an Arab immigrant and a Muslim young woman. Maira argues that in post-9/11 America, "it is important to consider the affective dimensions of technologies of empire because U.S. imperialism is an assemblage of political, historical, and economic structures but it is also a psychic apparatus" (p. 241). Aisha's style practices inform her identification process through what Maira calls "imperial feeling" or "the complex of psychological and political belonging to empire that is often unspoken, but always present in daily life" (p. 241). Though Aisha never brought up Islam as an influence on her style practices (with the significant exception of her discussion of her choice in eighth grade to start wearing a headscarf), she did often frankly relate the ways that being Arab, being Muslim, and being an immigrant dominated her social life with family and peers. Thus, as Maira suggests, "imperial feeling" was always present in the background of her style practices.

## Chapter 5: Implications and Further Questions

High school students' style practices can be perceived as a resource to be leveraged toward the development of traditionally academic language and literacy practices as they are described in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (NGAC & CCSSO, 2010) and enacted in English Language Arts classes across the United States. While some English Language Arts educators may trip on the problem of high school students' style practices uncritically playing into corporate interests and hegemonic notions of attractiveness, I would argue, first, that those fears should be mitigated by examinations of the ways that the inherently aesthetic nature of style practices helps to create space for agency at the point of contact between those structures and the lives of students. And further, I ask: Why not take up as topics for thinking, reading, writing, and talking the influence of global corporations and patriarchal, White supremacist structures of attractiveness? Doing so would both affirm and challenge students' style practices.

Students' style practices, though, are also a humane complication of language and literacy practices as they are traditionally prescribed, not just because they're multimodal (even though this multimodality is distinct in its embodied, sensory nature), but also because they have inherent emotional value. Aesthetic experiences are embedded in style practices, and style practices are a kind of literacy practices. Though style offers a particularly compelling illustration of the relationship between embodied emotion and communication, I'd argue that such a relationship also exists in language and literacy practices as they are enacted in print, in speech-giving, in web-surfing, etc. Boredom, for example, is an emotional experience stimulated (or not stimulated?) by sensory and embodied perceptions of the environment; this

boredom can be happening at the same time that a student is ineffectively reading a print text. My point is that high school students' style practices, because they make obvious their sensory and emotional aspects, can illuminate those aspects in language and literacy contexts where they are less immediately apparent.

So what? This year of full-time graduate study over, I'm on my way back to the high school English classroom. I'll go with back with my eyes open to style practices, to be sure, but I'll also go with these lingering questions: How can English Language Arts teachers, given the current constraints on the profession that I mentioned in my introduction, create the conditions wherein they and their students they can play with the implications above? I felt like I had to quit before; how can knowing what I know now prevent that from happening again?

Two related questions: What does it look like for teachers to facilitate students' assimilation of style practices into traditionally and continuingly legitimized language and literacy practices? And, more radically, what does it look like for teachers to facilitate a style-informed revision of legitimized English Language Arts values as they're enacted in language and literacy curricular, instructional, and assessment practices?

Ultimately, in spite of the intensification of standardized accountability and deficit-oriented discourses for students and teachers, I find that there is reason for hope for those of us interested in education as a means of disrupting captivity, submission, suicide, fear, decomposition, and repression. And it is there every day for the seeing in students' style practices; they're wearing hope. And there it is.

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