

# “#Literate Lives Matter”: Black Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening in the 21st Century

Literacy Research: Theory,  
Method, and Practice  
1-11

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## **Abstract**

Literacy for African Americans has never been merely about skill development and text comprehension. Its primary purposes and foci have been liberation, empowerment, and self-determination. From slave narratives to contemporary liberation movements assisted by social media, African Americans have deployed literacy strategically to as Paulo Freire says, “to read the word and the world.” This lecture draws on the author’s family and personal history along with her research career to illustrate that “literate lives matter!”

## **Keywords**

Black literate practices, literacy for liberation

On Saturday, August 22, 2015, a group of 11 women, 10 of them Black, boarded the Napa Valley Wine Train as a part of an outing of their book club, “Sistah’s on the Reading Edge.” Their plan, like that of most of the riders, was to enjoy the beautiful wine country, tour wineries, and taste a variety of wines in the relative comfort and safety of a train. What happened turned out to be something much less than a

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“pleasant” Saturday afternoon excursion. Shortly after their 11:00 a.m. departure, the women were told they were being “too loud.” Despite lowering their voices, the train manager again approached them and said, “This is not going to work” and when the train pulled into the St. Helena Station, all 11 women, including an 83-year-old grandmother, were escorted off the train and met by the police. Although the women were not arrested, they were returned home via van and were humiliated by the implication that they were not civil enough to remain on the train (see Sernoffsky, 2015).

As I reflected on this incident, I was reminded of some similar experiences I have had as a Black professional woman interacting with other Black professional women in the midst of what can only be described as a “White space.” For more than a decade, my sister-in-law, a long-time friend, and sometimes two or three additional women friends and I vacationed together for a week at a Mexican health spa. Our group, ranging from three to six Black women, came together based on our friendship not our professional identities. In general, “work talk” was forbidden, but we spent many meals—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—talking and laughing about growing up in Black communities in East Coast cities, family members, strange things we saw or did in exercise classes while at the spa, and various states of embarrassment we encountered during spa treatments.

It was not unusual for one of the many White female spa goers to stop by our table or seating arrangement to let us know that we were having “too much fun!” That statement, usually made in a light-hearted manner, always seemed to me a form of policing Black bodies. It was a way of telling us that we were not conforming to their norms and, after all, this was their space. Sure Oprah had attended the ranch and bought it out for a week for her staff, and a well-known Black magazine editor often came with her friends, but we were ordinary, everyday Black women, and we needed to demonstrate that we understood how to act in these special places. Like the women on the train, we were supposed to behave according to someone else’s standards.

I cite these examples because they underscore the fact that as much as we tout the “protective factors” afforded by education and literacy, in particular, Black people continue to be vulnerable to insult and violence just for being Black. There exists a powerful link between the form of literacy in which Black people engage and their eventual liberation.

## **Literate Lives in Historical Context**

Now I would like to shift my comments to a historical moment and the story of a woman.<sup>1</sup> Her name is Cora Lyles Woodward. She was born in 1896 in a Fairfield County, South Carolina town called Blair. Cora is important because of the way race delimited her world and her possibilities and how her racial identification underscores the way “research” functions to serve ongoing narratives of superiority/inferiority, citizen/alien, intelligent/unintelligent, and human/inhuman for example. Much of our understanding of complex societies comes from an absolute reliance on the way the

empirical accurately reflects reality. In Cora's case, the 1920s census tells us that she was a housewife married to Robert P. Woodward, mother of three, and designated by the census enumerator as a "mulatto"—child of mixed race (Black/White) parents. Ten years later, Cora shows up on the 1930s census again as a "housewife" and now mother of seven children. This time the enumerator lists her as a "Negro." How did Cora's racial identity shift in 10 years? The simple answer that demographers provide is that the racial categories have changed.

Ever since the U.S. Census Bureau began asking the question, "What is your race?" the available categories have been shifting and changing with White and Black as constant yet polar opposites. In between, there were categories like "Mongoloid," "Indian," "Mulatto," "Quadroon," and "Octoroon" (Lee, 1993). These last three categories are reminiscent of the Napoleonic categorizations that emerged out of Louisiana where, like blood quantum theories regarding "Indian-ness," blackness is being determined according to the perceived amount of "black blood" one has. Thus, a mulatto is the product of one White parent and one Black parent (e.g., President Obama, Halle Berry, Lenny Kravitz, and Mariah Carey). A quadroon has one Black grandparent and an octoroon has one Black great grandparent. The point of these classifications was to codify issues of inheritance and social status along with maintaining the myth of White supremacy. It is interesting to note that citizens of Mexican descent were considered White and the basis for the famous Lemon Grove School District decision (1931) rested on the notion that Mexican Americans were White not Black or American Indian (Ferg-Cadima, 2004).

But, Cora Lyles Woodward's racial identification change is not merely about the shift in federal racial classifications for it is important to recognize that Cora never fit the category of "mulatto." She was not the product of a White and Black union. Her mother was Black and her father was reputedly Black and American Indian. However, visually she appeared to be solely African American. Why then, does the enumerator give her a more "privileged" identity than her husband Robert Preston Woodward who is identified throughout the census as "Negro?" My interest in the Woodwards is not merely academic. Robert and Cora Woodward were my grandparents, but the puzzle of Cora's shifting racial identity also intrigues me as a scholar. I want to argue that Cora Woodward is granted an almost honorary whiteness because of the response to the U.S. Census form Column #16 that asks about a person's literacy. While the form indicates that Robert is illiterate (I can attest that he was not), Cora's designation is literate. I want to argue that education and race—in this case, literacy and race—have been intricately linked for centuries and, until we begin to unpack those linkages, we will continue to struggle to make sense of how race operates in our research and scholarship.

My own parents had interesting literacy biographies. My father began life in a rural part of Dillon County, South Carolina, in a small town called Latta, where he did not have the benefit of regular schooling. As the son of a sharecropper and subject to the Supreme Court edict known as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), my father attended school whenever he was not in the fields, sowing and reaping the farm's crops. This

amounted to about 3–4 months of schooling in a one room, dilapidated school with his six siblings. By the time he was 12 years old, he and an older brother decided to leave home to seek a better life in the northern city of Philadelphia. Isabel Wilkinson (2010) gives a graphic description of the way rural southerners made their way to the northern or western cities. She contests the notions of White scholars who insisted that the migrants were ignorant and lacked ambition. Instead, she asserts the Blacks who made their way north were the ones with a vision and desire to participate in a better world. When my father arrived in Philadelphia, he did not return to school. He worked for about 4 or 5 years until he was able to pass himself off as old enough to enter the armed services. Despite not having the advantage of formal education, my father was literate. He regularly read the newspaper and had a special affinity for biographies, particularly biographies of African Americans.

My mother's story was a little different. Her family also originated from South Carolina in rural Fairfield County near Spartanburg. Her parents were also sharecroppers, but in an important twist, her father landed a job as a stevedore on the Pennsylvania Railroad. From the time Robert Woodward saw the opportunities available in Philadelphia, he planned to relocate his growing family of five children. And again, not unlike the stories Isabel Wilkerson tells in her brilliant book, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (2010), my grandparents secreted their family to the north under the cover of night. My mother was a preschool child who began and completed K–12 education in the School District of Philadelphia.

My mother and her siblings were lifelong readers. Her younger sister, Laretta, owned the complete works of William Shakespeare. My mother completed three newspaper crossword puzzles each day in ink! She was a master at solving cryptograms. She loved language and read vociferously. She is one of the six people I know who actually read my doctoral dissertation. What literacy researchers probably would not understand about a household like mine is that although we did not have “highly educated parents” and we did not own a large stock of books, we had plenty of access to texts. We shared books and magazines with neighbors, friends, and relatives, and we owned library cards. A visit to the barbershop or beauty parlor was an opportunity to read the latest *Ebony* or *Jet* magazines. Sunday school classes were places for reading instruction, as the teacher and your peers were there to assist in a supportive manner. We were taught that literacy was crucial for liberation.

My elementary teachers (in our hypersegregated Philadelphia elementary school) reinforced this notion that literacy was crucial to our liberation. We were encouraged to read, and the notion that students would not (or could not) learn to read was anathema to our teachers. We would read, and they saw it as their job to guarantee that fact. My fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Ethel Benn, explained to us that African Americans were among the only group of people prohibited from learning to read. That told us that there was something special and sacred about literacy. They helped us to understand that in a democratic society, literacy was a crucial tool; and if we wanted to get ahead, we would have to become literate.

## Literacy and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

When I began researching culturally relevant pedagogy over 25 years ago, I was not particularly focused on literacy. However, in the course of the project, it became clear that literacy was an important site of inquiry. In an article titled, “Liberatory Consequences of Literacy: A Case of Culturally Relevant Instruction for African American Students” (Ladson-Billings, 1992), I probably said enough to make the majority of the literacy research and practice communities angry. I asserted that the arguments over reading *method* were less significant than the actual commitment to ensure our children become literate. Instead of loving a method, I urged teachers to care about kids! If the method teachers love does not work, they have a moral obligation to try something different.

In one part of my study, I observed two of the eight teachers, well matched on a number of indices (e.g., age, experience, activism, community engagement, etc.), and saw that despite using very different methodologies, students in their classrooms were achieving high levels of literacy. Rather than allegiance to methodology, the teachers demonstrated allegiance to their students and a belief in their own pedagogical efficacy. The teachers could see the bigger implication of not ensuring that the students developed adequate literacy skills.

Beneath the surface, at the personal ideological level, the differences between the teachers’ instructional strategies seemed meaningless. Both wanted their students to become literate, and both believed that their students were capable of high levels of literacy. The teachers’ understanding of literacy included the following (adapted from Ladson-Billings, 2009):

1. Recognizing that students whose educational, economic, social, political, and cultural futures were most tenuous must be helped to be intellectual leaders in the classroom. These teachers made an extra effort to encourage and support African American boys and were able to incorporate Black male popular culture into their teaching;
2. Apprenticing students into a learning community rather than teaching them isolated and unrelated bits of knowledge or skills. Both teachers embedded the teaching of skills in larger contexts;
3. Legitimizing students’ real-life experiences as a part of the “official” curriculum. Even though the teachers both selected literature for their students to read, they depended heavily on the experiences of the students to make the literature come alive;
4. Participating in a broad conception of literacy that incorporates both literature and “orature.” What counted as literacy was broadly defined in each of these classrooms where students were permitted to ask their own questions and search for their own answers;
5. Engaging together in collective struggle against the status quo. The teachers were not afraid to let students know that societal expectations were generally

low, but they demonstrated that their expectations were exceptionally high. This statement was a challenge to conventional wisdom;

6. Teaching in ways that reflect the political nature of the work. Both of these teachers developed a sociopolitical and cultural vision that involved knowing that they needed to move away from cultural deficit explanations for African American students' school achievement. They also spoke often with students about the political nature of their work. Ultimately, the teachers understood that "literate lives matter!"

## **#Black Literate Lives Matter**

Today, we are in a moment of social media, citizen journalism, and instant communication. The literacy skills our students recruit are far more complex than the ones we were taught and continue to teach. They use multiple platforms with which to communicate, and they demonstrate multiple literacies. While we may rail about their failure to read traditional texts and write in standard forms, we are ignorant of communication forms like Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Snapchat, or Periscope. Instead, we decry the demise of English because our youth are inventive with language. I imagine that Chaucer could not stand what was happening to language during his era!

One of the advantages of this new media and creative language use is that youth have been able to connect the broader social and civic concerns of their lives in ways that school literacy has failed to do. While many adults were watching the events of what is now called "Arab Spring," U.S. youth were seemingly disengaged. However, when Syrian hip-hop artist Omar Offendum and his colleagues set the Egypt situation to music, I was able to engage a group of African American students in Hartford, CT, who thought they had no connection to events on the other side of the globe by using the video #Jan25 (<https://youtu.be/sCbpiOpLwFg>). By interspersing news footage with powerful beats and lyrics, Offendum helps young people see the struggle for freedom in Egypt from the ground level.

Many of us have seen how the developments in Ferguson, Missouri, triggered a new sense of activism among young people across the country. The vehicle for that activism has been the social media platforms that recruit this new literacy our youth embrace. More than selfies with "duck lips" or pictures of restaurant meals, youth were organizing, strategizing, and cooperating via social media. They were writing blogs and online op-ed pieces. They were tweeting and posting a variety of ideas and engaging with each other across the country and the world. Unfortunately, school became the place where such activism was squashed. A school district near Ferguson prohibited teachers from engaging with the events of the day. Thus, many students are increasingly viewing school as irrelevant to their lives. Unfortunately, those students tend to be the ones whose academic futures are often in jeopardy.

Increasingly, along with growing youth activism, we are seeing a new space for literacy that is emerging directly from youth culture—specifically hip-hop. Hip-hop is

the exciting, innovative, youth aesthetic that allows literacy to be the site of real self-expression and creativity. More and more universities are embracing it as a scholarly field of inquiry. Harvard University, under the directorship of Professor Marcyliena Morgan, is home to the hip-hop archives. Cornell University maintains a hip-hop collection. Each year Ohio State sponsors a hip-hop literacies conference. And, for the past 10 years, the University of Wisconsin–Madison has offered the nation’s only hip-hop arts tuition scholarship through its “First Wave” Program. Scholar/artists like Martha Diaz at New York University have documented close to 400 hip-hop courses and programs across the nation. Currently, a group of scholars, teachers, students, artists, and community activists meet in an online community every Tuesday night at 9:00 p.m. Eastern time in a Twitter<sup>®</sup> conversation known #HipHopEd. This dynamic and participatory community takes up school curriculum, pedagogy, social justice, art, and activism using and exploring hip-hop.

My current work is exploring the way hip-hop reinvents and revolutionizes “culturally relevant pedagogy” by incorporating and leveraging youth culture to ensure students’ academic, social, cultural, and civic success. The built-in limitation of my original formulation of culturally relevant pedagogy is its location in elementary classrooms. As researchers, our task is often to simplify and manage complex environments, sometimes in artificial ways, in order to be able to make some scholarly claim. In the case of my theory development, I chose elementary classrooms because of their self-contained structure. In them, I would be able to watch teachers over time with the same group of students teaching multiple subjects. This attempt to minimize variables allowed a focused study of a group of teachers but provided little information about the complexity of teaching a single subject to more than 100 students in different classroom configurations that is characteristic of secondary school teaching. Additionally, without focusing on secondary teachers, I had little opportunity to observe how youth culture (more likely expressed by adolescents) was made manifest and taken up (or rejected) in the classroom. It is this addition to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)—the expression of youth culture as a part of the “cultural competence” and “sociopolitical consciousness” components of the theory—that forms the basis for what I consider to be the (r)evolution of CRP (Ladson-Billings, 2014). And, this (r)evolution needs to begin in teacher education.

## **“You Must Learn”**

My initial indication that the culturally relevant pedagogy focus of my own institution’s teacher education program was suspect came in 1996 when a young, bright African American male student came to see me about his concerns with the teacher education program. He was a nontraditional student from the standpoint of both age and experience. Although born and raised in the local community, right after high school (which was for him a less-than-successful experience), he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. After completing his naval service, he married, became a father, and entered college at a historically Black university. His desire to be closer to family brought him

back to our community where he was determined to earn a degree from the state's flagship campus.

He came to see me because I was one of two African American faculty in the department, and he had grown weary of sitting in classes with young, naive, White 20-year-old women from suburban (and in some cases, rural) Midwestern communities. In his own words, he "just can't take this!" We discussed his career goals, and I learned he ultimately wanted to open and operate his own school. During this time, I perceived this notion to be less today's "Charter School" model than what I knew as a "Black Independent School" (Shujaa, 1996). Ultimately, we designed an independent major for him with a combination of curriculum and instruction, educational policy studies, and business school courses. We focused on his need for methodology, foundational knowledge, and business acumen. Among the curriculum and instruction courses he took was my graduate course, "Multicultural Perspectives on Education." There he quickly found an intellectual home and developed a greater sense of what he wanted to accomplish. I saw him as an "outlier" in a population of prospective teachers, navigating our teacher education program.

Over the next several years, I received additional complaints about the "unbearable whiteness" of our program, and in a number of cases, I made similar individual program plans for those students. In every case, they were students of color (primarily African Americans) who felt the established program failed to meet their needs. However, I approached these complaints as individual and specific. It was not until about 5 years ago that the director of our award winning First Wave Hip-Hop Scholars Program<sup>2</sup> approached me with the magnitude of the "problem" of our program.

The director explained that a large number of his program's scholars had deep desires to be teachers but found our teacher certification program stifling and disconnected from the urban realities that they came from and to which they intended to return. The impetus for teaching as a career for these students was linked to their own identification of teachers who helped guide them and make school success a reality. Unfortunately, their experience with our teacher preparation programs resulted in frustration and disappointment. Some few persisted while others dropped out and changed majors, and still others pursued teacher certification through alternative certification programs.

Initially, I thought my role might be to help construct a more structured "independent major," but my meeting with the director and several of the First Wave scholars indicated that they were seeking a specially designed course (with me) that would help them integrate their art into a pedagogy that could be developed and deployed in urban classrooms. For some reason (perhaps the lingering boredom and discomfort I was feeling with the traditional program), I agreed to take on the challenge of designing a course that incorporated hip-hop and pedagogy.

In addition to designing these courses and working more closely with the First Wave scholars, I developed a deeper connection with a variety of academics who were already doing this work. Scholars like Christopher Emdin of Teachers College, Columbia, Jeff Duncan-Andrade at San Francisco State, Patrick Caminagn of the

University of San Francisco, Ernest Morrell of Teachers College, Dawn Elissa Fisher of San Francisco State, Elaine Richardson, aka “Docta E” of Ohio State University, and Maisha Winn of the University of Wisconsin–Madison understand why it is important for university scholars and researchers to stay engaged with communities and schools—as teachers and community activists. Morehouse College professor Marc Lamont Hill has found ways to engage media and conduct research. H. Samy Alim of Stanford University is working with hip-hop in global contexts. Sam Siedel, working with TC Ellis, has helped to document the work of the High School of the Recording Arts, where students previously headed for failure gain a second chance to put their knowledge and skill in popular culture and the arts to work for both fun and profit.

The works of these scholars and the First Wave students with whom I work encourage me to be more expansive in my thinking about what it means to develop Black literate lives and for what it means to assert that those Black literate lives matter. For example, in one class session, we began looking at Nigerian American poet Teju Cole’s use of Twitter to write poetry. Consider a few of Cole’s poems:<sup>3</sup>

Wives are flammable, a police inspector of Wasia of Okokomaiko has found.

Not far from the Suralere workshop where spray painter Alawiye worked, a policeman fired into the air. Gravity did the rest.

And this one that reflects a news article from a 1912 *New York Times*:

Since Carter, the man he shot dead on 34th Street and 5th Avenue was a Negro, Plitt was at first not held. But now he is in custody.

My students relished the opportunity to turn the academic readings from the course into tweets. I also maintained live Twitter feeds, so that our conversation could entertain multiple voices. You can read some of our amazing tweets at #flow375.

Currently, a group of our First Wave students have started a project known as the JVN Project that is an afterschool writer’s workshop for high school students that honors the memory of one of their cohort members, John “Vietnam” Ngyuen who lost his life in a swimming accident. High school students who write in this project are notorious for not writing in traditional classrooms. But, at JVN, they are free to express themselves and share trials and triumphs without judgment or condemnation.

In closing, I would like to share an example of one of my former students, Jonathan Williams, who is now teaching children’s theater and is a perfect example of this Black literate lives perspective.<sup>4</sup> A careful listen to Jonathan’s poetry reflects ALL the things teachers of literacy claim they want students to learn. His work is rich with symbolism, metaphors, similes, alliteration, and imagery. The difference between what happens in school and what he is doing is that his work has meaning for his

life! This is the future of our work if we intend to make any real difference in the lives of young people. If we are going to change the awful trajectory that urban youth appear to be on regarding school success—low high school completion rates, out of control suspension and expulsion rates, over assignment to special education, and lack of postsecondary readiness—we have to reach them in new and more creative way. We must demonstrate that Black Literate Lives Matter!

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### Notes

1. Portions of this section adapted from Ladson-Billings (2012).
2. First Wave is the first of its kind scholarship program for gifted students in the hip-hop arts. The students receive full tuition scholarships and have multiple opportunities each semester to publicly showcase their artistry.
3. These poems were taken from Cole's National Public Radio Interview in 2011. Retrieved electronically on December 1, 2015, from <http://www.npr.org/2011/02/13/133686644/an-immigrants-quest-for-identity-in-the-open-city>
4. The video is available at <https://youtu.be/MEVmeJ1NVqU>

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