Becoming Black: Rap and Hip-Hop, Race, Gender, Identity, and the Politics of ESL Learning

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TESOL Quarterly is currently published by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL).
This article is about the impact of becoming Black on ESL learning, that is, the interrelation between identity and learning. It contends that a group of French-speaking immigrant and refugee continental African youths who are attending an urban Franco-Ontarian high school in southwestern Ontario, Canada, enters a social imaginary—a discursive space in which they are already imagined, constructed, and thus treated as Blacks by hegemonic discourses and groups. This imaginary is directly implicated in whom the students identify with (Black America), which in turn influences what and how they linguistically and culturally learn. They learn Black styled English, which they access in hip-hop culture and rap lyrical and linguistic styles. This critical ethnography, conducted within an interdisciplinary framework, shows that ESL is neither neutral nor without its politics and pedagogy of desire and investment.

"The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of color-line," asserted Du Bois (1903, p. 13). If this is so, what are the implications of this prophetic statement for L2 learning and second language acquisition (SLA)? At the end of the 20th century, when identity formation is increasingly mediated by technological media, who learns what, and how is it learned? How do differently raced, gendered, sexualized, abled, and classed social identities enter the process of learning an L2? In a postcolonial era when postcolonial subjects constitute part of the metropolitan centers, what critical pedagogy is required in order not to repeat the colonial history embedded in the classroom relationship between White teachers and students of color? Finally, at a time when North American Blackness is governed by how it is negatively located in a race-conscious society, what does it mean for a Black ESL learner to acquire Black English as a second language (BESL)? In other words, what symbolic, cultural, pedagogical, and identity investments...
would learners have in locating themselves politically and racially at the margin of representation?

This article is an attempt to answer these questions. Conceptually, it is located at the borderline between two indistinguishable and perhaps never separable categories of critical discourses: race and gender. The article addresses the process of *becoming Black*, in which race is as vital as gender, and articulates a political and pedagogical research framework that puts at its center the social being as embodied subjectivities that are embedded in and performed through language, culture, history, and memory (Dei, 1996; Essed, 1991; Gilroy, 1987; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Ibrahim, 1998; Rampton, 1995). As an identity configuration, becoming Black is deployed to talk about the *subject-formation project* (i.e., the process and the space within which subjectivity is formed) that is produced in and simultaneously is produced by the process of language learning, namely, learning BESL. Put more concretely, becoming Black meant learning BESL, as I show in this article, yet the very process of BESL learning produced the epiphenomenon of becoming Black. I have argued elsewhere (Ibrahim, 1998) that to become is historical. Indeed, history and the way individuals experience it govern their identity, memory, ways of being, becoming, and learning (see also Foucault, 1979, pp. 170–184). To address questions of pedagogy in this context therefore requires attending to and being concerned with the linkages among the self, identity, desire, and the English(es) that students invest in.

BACKGROUND

This article is part of a larger ethnographic study (Ibrahim, 1998) that made use of the critical frames just described and the newly developed methodological approach called *ethnography of performance*. The latter argues that social beings *perform* (Butler, 1990), at least in part, their subjectivities, identities, and desires in and through complex semiological languages, which include anything that cannot produce verbal utterances yet is ready to speak: the body, modes of dress, architecture, photography, and so on (see Barthes, 1967/1983; Halliday & Hasan, 1985). The research, which took place in an urban, French-language high school in southwestern Ontario, Canada, looks at the lives of a

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1 Although I do not directly cite them, my work is greatly influenced by other critical discourses, especially postcolonial (see Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995) and cultural studies (see Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992). In fact, I see this article as a hopeful inauguration of a long dialogic journey between the encompassing field of cultural studies and the fields of ESL, applied linguistics, and SLA.
group of continental Francophone African youths and the formation of their social identity. Besides their youth and refugee status, their gendered and raced experience was vital in their moments of identification: that is, where and how they saw themselves reflected in the mirror of their society (see also Bhabha, 1994). Put otherwise, once in North America, I contend, these youths were faced with a social imaginary (Anderson, 1983) in which they were already Blacks. This social imaginary was directly implicated in how and with whom they identified, which in turn influenced what they linguistically and culturally learned as well as how they learned it. What they learned, I demonstrate, is Black stylized English (BSE), which they accessed in and through Black popular culture. They learned by taking up and repositioning the rap linguistic and musical genre and, in different ways, acquiring and rearticulating the hip-hop cultural identity.

BSE is Black English (BE) with style; it is a subcategory. BE is what Smitherman (1994) refers to as Black talk, which has its own grammar and syntax (see Labov, 1972). BSE, on the other hand, refers to ways of speaking that do not depend on a full mastery of the language. It banks more on ritual expressions (see Rampton, 1995, for the idea of rituality) such as whassup (what is happening), whadap (what is happening), whassup my Nigger, and yo, yo homeboy (very cool and close friend), which are performed habitually and recurrently in rap. The rituals are more an expression of politics, moments of identification, and desire than they are of language or of mastering the language per se. It is a way of saying, “I too am Black” or “I too desire and identify with Blackness.”

By Black popular culture, on the other hand, I refer to films, newspapers, magazines, and more importantly music such as rap, reggae, pop, and rhythm and blues (R&B). The term hip-hop comprises everything from music (especially rap) to clothing choice, attitudes, language, and an approach to culture and cultural artifacts, positing and collaging them in an unsentimental fashion (Walcott, 1995, p. 5). More skeletally, I use hip-hop to describe a way of dressing, walking, and talking. The dress refers to the myriad shades and shapes of the latest fly gear: high-top sneakers, bicycle shorts, chunky jewelry, baggy pants, and polka-dotted tops (Rose, 1991, p. 277). The hairstyles, which include high-fade designs, dreadlocks, corkscrews, and braids (Rose, 1991, p. 277) are also part of this fashion. The walk usually means moving the fingers simultaneously with the head and the rest of the body as one is

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1 By continental African, I mean Africans from the continent Africa, as opposed to diasporic African (the populace of African descent that does not live in Africa, e.g., African Americans). I use youths interchangeably with students, boys, girls, males, and females, given their arbitrary nature as a social construct.
walking. *The talk*, however, is BSE, defined above. Significantly, by patterning these behaviors African youths enter the realm of becoming Black. Hence, this article is about this process of becoming and how it is implicated in BSE learning.

In this process, the interlocking question of identification and desire is of particular interest. It asks the following: Who do we as social subjects living within a social space desire to be or to become? And whom do we identify with, and what repercussions does our identification have on how and what we learn? This question has already been dealt with in semiology (Barthes, 1967/1983; Eco, 1976; Gottdiener, 1995), psychoanalysis (Kristeva, 1974; Lacan, 1988), and cultural studies (Bhabha, 1994; Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992; Hall, 1990; Mercer, 1994). I have not yet seen it raised, let alone incorporated seriously, in ESL and applied linguistics research. For instance, Goldstein (1987) focuses on the linguistic features of Black English as found in the speech of a group of Puerto Rican youths in New York City. However, she does not address the issue of what it means for Puerto Rican youths to learn Black English. What investment do they have in doing so? And what roles, if any, do race, desire, and identification have in the process of learning? Instead, Goldstein offers a very meticulous syntactico-morphological analysis. One approach does not rule out the other, but I strongly believe that it would be more fruitful for ESL pedagogy and that the nature of SLA would be better understood if both were located within a sociocultural context. Language, Bourdieu (1991) argues, has never been just an instrument of communication. It is also where power is formed and performed based on race, gender, sexuality, and social-class identity. My work differs from Goldstein’s study in that it moves toward a cultural, political, and stylistic analysis.

In what follows, I discuss the research’s guiding propositions, contentions, and questions and look at how I as the researcher am implicated in the research and the questions I ask. This is followed by a description of the methodology, site, and subject of my research. I then offer examples of African youths’ speech in which BSE can be detected to demonstrate the interplay between subject formation, identification, and BESL learning. I also offer students’ reflections and narratives on the impact of identification on becoming Black. Centralizing their everyday experience of identity, I conclude with some critical pedagogical (Corson, 1997; Peirce, 1989; Pennycook, 1994) and didactic propositions on the connections between investment, subjectivity, and ESL learning. Beginning with the premise that ESL learning is locality, I ask the following: If local identity is the site where we as teachers and researchers should start our praxis and research formulations (Morgan, 1997; Peirce, 1997; Rampton, 1995), then I would contend that any pedagogical input that
does not link the political, the cultural, and the social with identity and, in turn, with the process of ESL learning is likely to fail.

My central working contention was that, once in North America, continental African youths enter a social imaginary: a discursive space or a representation in which they are already constructed, imagined, and positioned and thus are treated by the hegemonic discourses and dominant groups, respectively, as Blacks. Here I address the White (racist) everyday communicative state of mind: “Oh, they all look like Blacks to me!” This positionality, which is offered to continental African youths through netlike praxis in exceedingly complex and mostly subconscious ways, does not acknowledge the differences in the students’ ethnicities, languages, nationalities, and cultural identities. Fanon (1967) sums up this netlike praxis brilliantly in writing about himself as a Black Antillais coming to the metropolis of Paris: “I am given no chance, I am overdetermined from without . . . . And already [italics added] I am being dissected under White eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed [italics added]. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality” (p. 116).

In other words, continental African youths find themselves in a racially conscious society that, wittingly or unwittingly and through fused social mechanisms such as racisms and representations, asks them to racially fit somewhere. To fit somewhere signifies choosing or becoming aware of one’s own being, which is partially reflected in one’s language practice. Choosing is a question of agency; that is, by virtue of being a subject, one has room to maneuver one’s own desires and choices. That is, although social subjects may count their desires and choices as their own, these choices are disciplined (Foucault, 1979) by the social conditions under which the subjects live. For example, to be Black in a racially conscious society, like the Euro-Canadian and U.S. societies, means that one is expected to be Black, act Black, and so be the marginalized Other (Hall, 1991; hooks, 1992). Under such disciplinary social conditions, as I will show, continental African youths express their moments of identification in relation to African Americans and African American cultures and languages, thus becoming Black. That they take up rap and hip-hop and speak BSE is by no means a coincidence. On the contrary, these actions are articulations of the youths’ desire to belong to a location, a politics, a memory, a history, and hence a representation.

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3 I understand praxis as a moment, a borderland of the intersection of discourse, action, and representations (Freire, 1970/1993, chap. 3). These representations and borderlands are mutually dependent and shoulder one another to create a web of meaning that can be deciphered only when all the strings are pulled together.
Being is being distinguished here from becoming. The former is an accumulative memory, an experience, and a conception upon which individuals interact with the world around them, whereas the latter is the process of building this conception. For example, as a continental African, I was not considered Black in Africa; other terms served to patch together my identity, such as tall, Sudanese, and basketball player. However, as a refugee in North America, my perception of self was altered in direct response to the social processes of racism and the historical representation of Blackness whereby the antecedent signifiers became secondary to my Blackness, and I retranslated myself: I became Black.

**METHOD**

**Site**

Between January and June 1996, I conducted a critical ethnographic research project at Marie-Victorin (MV), a small Franco-Ontarian intermediate and high school (Grades 7–13). MV had a school population of approximately 389 students from various ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. Although it is a French-language school, the language spoken by students in the school corridors and hallways was predominately English; Arabic, Somali, and Farsi were also spoken at other times. The school had 27 teachers, all of whom were White. The school archives show that until the beginning of the 1990s, students were also almost all White, except for a few students of African (read Black) and Middle Eastern descent.

For over 6 months, I attended classes at MV, talked to students, and observed curricular and extracurricular activities two or three times per week. Because of previous involvement in another project in the same school for almost 2 years, at the time of this research I was well acquainted with MV and its population, especially its African students, with whom I was able to develop a good relationship.

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4 For Simon and Dippo (1986, p. 195), critical ethnographic research is a set of activities situated within a project that seeks and works its way towards social transformation. This project is political as well as pedagogical, and who the researcher is and what his or her racial, gender, and class embodiments are necessarily govern the research questions and findings. The project, then, according to Simon and Dippo, is "an activity determined both by real and present conditions, and certain conditions still to come which it is trying to bring into being" (p. 196). The assumption underpinning my project was based on the assertion that Canadian society is "inequitably structured and dominated by a hegemonic culture that suppresses a consideration and understanding of why things are the way they are and what must be done for things to be otherwise" (p. 196).

5 All names are pseudonyms.
Being the only Black adult with the exception of one counselor and being a displaced subject, a refugee, and an African myself had given me a certain familiarity with the students’ experiences. I was able to connect with different age and gender groups through a range of activities, initially “hanging out”6 with the students and later playing sports with various groups. I was also approached by these students for both personal guidance and academic help. Because of my deep involvement in the student culture, at times my status as researcher was forgotten, and the line between the students and myself became blurred; clearly, we shared a safe space of comfort that allowed us to speak and engage freely. This research was as much about the youths themselves and their narration of their experiences as it was about my own; in most cases, the language itself was unnecessary to understand the plight of the youths and their daily encounters, both within MV and outside its walls.

Significantly, at the time of this research, students (or their parents) who were born outside Canada made up 70% of the entire school population at MV. Continental Africans constituted the majority within that figure and, indeed, within MV’s population in general, although their numbers fluctuated slightly from year to year. However, with the exception of one temporary Black counselor, there was not one teacher or administrator of color at the school. Despite this fact, the school continued to emphasize the theme of unity within this multicultural and multiethnoracial population. The slogan that the school advertised, for instance, was *unité dans la diversité* (unity in diversity). This discourse of unity, however, remained at the level of abstraction and had little material bearing on the students’ lives; it was the Frenchness of the school that seemed to be the capital of its promotion. That is, the French language, especially in Canada, represents a form of extremely important *symbolic capital*, which, according to Bourdieu (1991), can be the key for accessing *material capital*—jobs, business, and so on. Given their postcolonial educational history, most African youths in fact come to Franco-Ontarian schools already possessing a highly valued form of symbolic capital: *le français parisien* (Parisian French).

**Participants and Procedure**

My research subjects encompassed these youths and part of a growing French-speaking continental African population in Franco-Ontarian

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6 Staying somewhere to familiarize oneself with the place, its people, and their ways of being in that space. In the school, these sites are informal, such as hallways, the schoolyard, the school steps, the cafeteria, and the gymnasium, where the people in them are comfortable enough to speak their minds.
schools, which I refer to as Black Franco-Ontarians. Their numbers have grown exponentially since the beginning of the 1990s. The participants varied, first, in their length of stay in Canada (from 1–2 to 5–6 years); second, in their legal status (some were immigrants, but the majority were refugees); and, third, in their gender, class, age, linguistic, and national background. They came from places as diverse as Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), Djibouti, Gabon, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, and Togo. With no exception, all the African students in MV were at least trilingual, speaking English, French, and a mother tongue or L1,7 with various (postcolonial) histories of language learning and degrees of fluency in each language.

On my return to MV in January 1996 to conduct my research, I spent the first month talking to and spending time with male and female African youths of different age groups, with their permission as well as their parents’ and the school administration’s. I attended classes, played basketball, volleyball, and indoor soccer, and generally spent time with the students. After a month, I chose 10 boys and 6 girls (see Table 1) for extensive ethnographic observation inside and outside the classroom and inside and outside the school and interviewed all 16. Of the 10 boys, 6 were Somali speakers (from Somalia and Djibouti), 1 was Ethiopian, 2 were Senegalese, and 1 was from Togo. Their ages ranged from 16 to 20 years. The 6 girls were all Somali speakers (also from Somalia and Djibouti), aged 14–18 years.

I conducted individual interviews as well as two focus-group interviews, one with the boys and one with the girls. All interviews were conducted on the school grounds, with the exception of the boys’ focus-group interview, which took place in one of the student residences. The students chose the language in which the interviews were conducted: Some chose English, but the majority chose French. I translated these interviews into English. The only Black counselor and the former Black teacher were also interviewed. The interviews were closely transcribed and analyzed. I consulted school documents and archives and occasionally videotaped cultural and sport activities; on two occasions, I gave tape recorders to students in order to capture their interactions among themselves (Rampton, 1995).

7 Mother tongue is the first-acquired language whereas L1 is the language of greatest mastery. One’s mother tongue can be one’s L1, but one can also have an L1 that is not one’s mother tongue. This is quite common in postcolonial situations.
TABLE 1
Background of Participants Quoted in the Article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Other information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amani</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Very active politically and culturally; organized Black History Month activities and wrote a theatrical play for the occasion; did not hesitate to speak her mind even before the highest official in the school’s administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asma</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>Was considered one of the beauties of the school; was one of the school’s most popular students; was proud of her mastery of French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aziza</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Had a sister and two brothers at MV; came from a well-to-do, almost bourgeois family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hassan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>Although born in Ethiopia, presented himself as a Djiboutian as he grew up in Djibouti; was politically active; was considered by school administration and peers as an elder; received several social and academic awards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamal</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>Had dropped out of school for a period of time; at the time of the interview was holding a job while going to school part-time; was host of a local radio show airing rap in English and French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juma</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>Lived in the house where the focus-group interview with the boys was conducted; learned the Somali language by living with Somali students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukhi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>Was quiet but held strong opinions; was one of the school’s best basketball players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Najat</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>Came to Canada when she was 8 years old; lived with her single mother and her sister, who used to attend MV but transferred to an English-language school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omer</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>As an elder, spoke on behalf of African students before the school administration; was sought out for guidance by students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>Had been at the school since Grade 7; was considered the “Michael Jordan” of the basketball team and “the rapper” of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samira</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>Was popular; organized a fashion show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shapir</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Had dropped out of school for one term; was taking advanced courses while enrolled in a co-op program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Becoming Tri- or Multilingual: Sites and Sides of ESL Learning

Most Francophone African youths come to a Canadian English-speaking metropolis, such as Vancouver or Winnipeg, because their parents happen to have relatives in that city. I asked Hassan why his parents had considered moving to an English-speaking city as opposed to Quebec, a French-speaking province.

First of all, we had relatives who were here. Yes, secondly, because there is French and English. It is more the relative question because you know when you go to a new country, there is a tendency to go towards the people you know. Because you don’t want to adventure in the unknown; and you can’t have, you also want to get help, all the help possible to succeed better. (individual interview, French)\(^8\)

In this context, in which English is the medium of everyday interaction, African youths are compelled or expected to speak English in order to be understood and in order to perform simple daily functions like negotiating public transport and buying groceries. In the following excerpt, Aziza recounts her early days, when her competence in speaking English was limited:

If I want to go to the boutique, I have to speak to the guy [she called him monsieur] in English because he doesn’t speak French. If I go to the shop to buy clothes, I have to speak in English, you see. It is something that you have to do; you have to force yourself. In the early days, I used to go with my sister because my sister spoke English. So I always took her with me. Then I had to go by myself because she was not always going to be by my side. I had to speak, I had to learn to speak English so I can help myself, and I can you know, I can deal with anything, you see. So, in other words, you are obliged, it is something you can’t escape from. Because the society is Anglophone, the country is Anglophone, the services are in English, you see, that’s why. (individual interview, French)

For the youths, the inescapability of interacting in English translates into a will to learn English rapidly. Popular culture, especially television,
friendship, and peer pressure, all hasten the speed of learning. The African students felt peer pressure especially in their early days in the school, when they were denigrated for not speaking English. Franco-Ontarian students, Heller (1992, 1994) explains, use English in their everyday interaction, especially outside class. If African students want to participate in schoolwide as well as in- and out-of-class activities, they have no option but to learn English. Once learned, English becomes as much a source of pride as it is a medium of communication, as Asma explained:

If you don’t speak English, like in my Grade 7, “Oh, she doesn’t speak! Oh, we are sorry, you can explain to her, she doesn’t understand English, la petite. Can you?” They think that we are really stupid, that we are retarded, that we don’t understand the language. Now I know English, I speak it all the time. I show them that I understand English [laughs], I show them that I do English. Oh, I got it, it gives me great pleasure. (group interview, French)

Asma addresses, first, the teacher’s condescending manner of speech on realizing that Asma did not speak English. Undoubtedly, this condescension leads to more pressure on Asma and African students in general to learn English. Secondly, her narrative addresses the threshold desire of a teenager who wants to fully participate in dominant markets and public spaces. Her inability to speak English, which would allow her to make friends, obstructs full participation. Yet making friends, and even learning English, is influenced by the popular imaginary, representation, and culture: television. I asked students in all of the interviews, “Où est-ce que vous avez appris votre anglais?” (Where did you learn English?). “Télévision,” they all responded. However, within this télévision is a particular representation—Black popular culture—seems to interpel late (Althusser, 1971) African youths’ identity and identification. Because African youths have few African American friends and have limited daily contact with them, they access Black cultural identities and Black linguistic practice in and through Black popular culture, especially rap music videos, television programs, and Black films. Following is a response to my query about the last movies a student had seen:

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9 A disparaging expression commonly used to patronize and belittle.
10 In another context, Asma argued that one reason for wanting to speak English is that I didn’t want people talking behind my back. I wanted to so badly learn English to show them that I could do it [laughs]. And to speak English like they do. And I am really really I’m happy I did that. I’m very proud of myself (group interview, French).
11 The subconscious ways in which individuals, given their genealogical history and memory, identify with particular discursive spaces and representations and the way this identification participates hereafter in the social formation of the Subject (identity).
Najat: I don’t know, I saw *Waiting to Exhale* and I saw what else I saw, I saw *Swimmer,* and I saw *Jumanji,* so wicked, all the movies. I went to *Waiting to Exhale* wid my boyfriend and I was like “men are rude” [laughs].

Awad: Oh believe me I know I know.

Najat: And den he [her boyfriend] was like, “no, women are rude.” I was like we’re like fighting you know and joking around. I was like, and de whole time like [laughs], and den when de woman burns the car, I was like, “go girl!” You know and all the women are like, “go girl!” you know? And den de men like khhh. I’m like, “I’m gonna go get me a popcorn” [laughs]. (individual interview, English)

Besides showing the influence of Black English in the use of *de,* *den,* *dat,* and *wicked* as opposed to, respectively, *the,* *then,* *that,* and *really really good,* Najat’s answer shows that youths bring agency and social subjectivities to the reading of a text. These subjectivities, importantly, are embedded in history, culture, and memory. Two performed subjectivities that influenced Najat’s reading of *Waiting to Exhale* were her race and gender identities. Najat identified with Blackness embodied in a female body; the Black/woman in burning her husband’s car and clothes interpellates Najat.

Another example in a different context demonstrates the impact of Black popular culture on African students’ lives and identities. Just before the focus-group interview with the boys, *Electric Circus,* a local television music and dance program that plays mostly Black music (rap/hip-hop, reggae, soul, and rhythm and blues) began. “Silence!” one boy requested in French. The boys started to listen attentively to the music and watch the fashions worn by the young people on the program. After the show, the boys code switched among French, English, and Somali as they exchanged observations on the best music, the best dance, and the cutest girl. Rap and hip-hop music and the corresponding dress were obviously at the top of the list.

The moments of identification in the above examples are significant in that they point to the process of identity formation that is implicated in turn in the linguistic norm to be learned. The Western hegemonic representations of Blackness, Hall (1990) shows, are negative and tend to work alongside historical and subconscious memories that facilitate their interpretations by members of the dominant groups. Once African youths encounter these negative representations, they look for Black cultural and representational forms as sites for positive identity formation and identification (Kelly, 1998). An important aspect of identification is that it works over a period of time and at the subconscious level. In the following excerpt, Omer addresses the myriad ways in which African youths are influenced by Black representations.
Black Canadian youths are influenced by the Afro-Americans. You watch for hours, you listen to Black music, you watch Black comedy, Mr. T, the *Rap City*, there you will see singers who dress in particular ways. You see, so. (individual interview, French)

Mukhi explored the contention of identification by arguing that

We identify ourselves more with the Blacks of America. But, this is normal, this is genetic. We can’t, since we live in Canada, we can’t identify ourselves with Whites or country music, you know [laughs]. We are going to identify ourselves on the contrary with people of our color, who have our lifestyle, you know. (group interview, French)

Mukhi evokes biology and genetic connection as a way of relating to Black America, and his identification with it is clearly stated. For all the students I spoke to, this identification was certainly connected to their inability to relate to dominant groups, the public spaces they occupied, and their cultural forms and norms. Black popular culture emerged as an alternative site not only for identification but also for language learning.

“‘A’ait, Q7 in the House!’”

For the students I interviewed, rap was an influential site for language learning. The fact that rap linguistic performance was more prevalent in the boys’ narratives than in the girls’ raises the question of the role of gender in the process of identification and learning.

On many occasions, the boys performed typical gangster rap language and style, using language as well as movement, including name calling. What follows are just two of the many occasions on which students articulated their identification with Black America through the recitation of rap linguistic styles.

Sam: One two, one two, mic check. A’ait [aayet], a’ait, a’ait.
Juma: This is the rapper, you know wha ’m meaning? You know wha ’m saying?
Sam: Mic mic mic; mic check. A’ait you wanna test it? Ah, I’ve the microphone you know; a’ait.
Sam: [laughs] I don’t rap man, c’mon give me a break. [laughs] Yo! A’ait a’ait you know, we just about to finish de tape and all dat. Respect to

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12 Host of a local rap music television program called *Rap City*, which airs mostly U.S. rap lyrics.
13 A’ait = all right; Q7 = the clique to which the students belong; *in the house* = present.
my main man [pointing to me]. So, you know, you know wha ’m mean, ’m just represen’ in Q7. One love to Q7 you know wha ’m mean and all my friends back to Q7 . . . Stop the tapin’ boy!


Shapir: Yo, this is Shapir. I am trying to say peace to all my Niggers, all my bitches from a background that everybody in the house. So, yo, chill out and this is how we gonna kick it. Bye and with that pie. All right, peace yo.

Sam: A’ait, this is Sam represen’in AQA [. . .] where it’s born, represen’in you know wha ’m mean? I wanna say whassup to all my Niggers, you know, peace and one love. You know wha ’m mean, Q7 represen’in for ever. Peace! [rap music]

Jamal: [as a DJ] Crank it man, coming up. [rap music] (group interview, English)

Of interest in these excerpts is the use of BSE, particularly the language of rap: “respect to my main man,” “represen’in Q7,” “peace out, wardap,” “’am outa here,” “I am trying to say peace to all my Niggers, all my bitches,” “so, yo, chill out and this is how we gonna kick it,” “I wanna say whassup to all my Niggers,” “peace and one love.” On the other hand, when Shapir offers “peace to all” his “Niggers,” all his “bitches,” he is first reappropriating the word Nigger as an appellation that is common in rap/hip-hop culture. That is, friends, especially young people, commonly call a Black friend Nigm without its traditional racist connotation. Second, however, Shapir is using the sexist language that might exist in rap (Rose, 1991). These forms of sexism have been challenged by female rappers like Queen Latifa and Salt-N-Pepa and were critiqued by female and male students. For example, Samira expressed her dismay at the sexist language found in some rap circles:

OK, hiphop, yes I know that everyone likes hiphop. They dress in a certain way, no? The songs go well. But, they are really really, they have expressions like fuck, bitches, etc. Sorry, but there is representation. (group interview, French)

Here, Samira addresses the impact that these expressions might have on the way society at large perceives the Black female body, which in turn influences how it is represented both inside and outside, rap/hip-hop culture. Hassan as well expressed his disapproval of this abusive language: “Occasionally, rap has an inappropriate language for the life in which we live, a world of violence and all that” (individual interview, French).

In rap style, one starts a performance by “checking the mic”: “One two, one two, mic check.” Then the rapper either recites an already
composed lyric or otherwise "kicks a freestyle," displaying the spontaneity that characterizes rap. The rapper begins the public performance by introducing herself or himself with a true or made-up name ("Yo, this is Shapir") and thanking her or his "main man," or best friend, who often introduces the rapper to the public. Specific to gangster rap, one represents not only oneself but a web of geophysical and metaphorical spaces and collectivities that are demarcated by people and territorial spaces: "represen'in Q7," "a'ait, this is Sam represen'in AQA." At the end of the performance, when the recitation or freestyle is completed, again one thanks the "main man" and "gives peace out" or "shad out" (shouts out) to the people.

The boys were clearly influenced by rap lyrics, syntax, and morphology (in their broader semiological sense), especially by gangster rap. In learning ESL in general and BSE in particular through music, Jamal used significant strategies, including listening, reading, and repeating: He was listening to the tunes and lyrics while reading and following the written text. Acting as a DJ, he then repeated not only the performer’s words and expressions but also his accent.

Depending on their age, the girls, on the other hand, had an ambivalent relationship with rap, although they used the same strategies as Jamal in learning English through music. For example, during a picnic organized by a group of males and females, the females listened to music while following the written text and reciting it (complete with accents) along with the singer. The girls' choice of music (including songs performed by Whitney Houston and Toni Braxton) differed in that it was softer than that chosen by the boys and contained mostly romantic themes.

For the most part, the older females (16–18 years old) tended to be more eclectic than the younger ones in how they related to hip-hop and rap. Their eclecticism was evident in how they dressed and in what language they learned. Their dress was either elegant middle class, partially hip-hop, or traditional, and their learned language was what Philip (1991) calls plain Canadian English. The younger females (12–14 years old), on the other hand, like the boys, dressed in hip-hop style and performed BSE.

In spite of their ambivalent relationship to rap and hip-hop, I detected the following three features of BE in both the older and the younger girls' speech:

1. the absence of the auxiliary be (19 occasions, e.g., "they so cool" and "I just laughing" as opposed to they are so cool and I am just laughing);
2. BE negative concord (4 occasions; e.g., "all he [the teacher] cares about is his daughter you know. If somebody just dies or if I decide to
shoot somebody you know, he is not doing nothing [italics added]"; the expression would be considered incorrect in standard English because of the double negative); and

3. the distributive be (4 occasions, e.g., "I be saying dis dat you know?" or "He be like ‘Oh, elle va être bien’ [she’s going to be fine]").

These BE markers are both expressions of the influence of Black talk on the girls' speech and performances of the girls' identity location and desire, which they apparently ally with Blackness. (For a description of BE features, see Goldstein, 1987; Labov, 1972.)

Performing Acts of Desire

I have identified rap and hip-hop as influential sites in African students' processes of becoming Black, which in turn affected what and how the students learned. Their narratives also show that the youths were quite cognizant of their identification with Blackness and the impact of race on their choices. In the following conversation, Mukhi reflected on the impact of rap (as just one among many other Black popular cultural forms) on his life and the lives of those around him:

Awad: But do you listen to rap, for example? I noticed that there are a number of students who listen to rap eh? Is . . .
Sam: It is not just us who listen to rap, everybody listens to rap. It is new.
Awad: But do you think that that influences how you speak, how . . .
Mukhi: How we dress, how we speak, how we behave [italics added]. (group interview, English)

The linguistic patterns and dress codes that Mukhi addresses are accessed and learned by African youths through Black popular culture. As I have noted, these patterns and codes do not require mastery and fluency. Indeed, they are performative acts of desire and identification. As Amani contended,

We have to wonder why we try to really follow the model of the Americans who are Blacks. Because when you search for yourself, search for identification, you search for someone who reflects you, with whom you have something in common [italics added]. (group interview, French)

Hassan supported Amani as follows:

Hassan: Yes yes, African students are influenced by rap and hip-hop because they want to, yes, they are influenced probably a bit more because it is the desire to belong may be.
Awad: Belong to what?
Hassan: To a group, belong to a society, to have a model/fashion [he used the term *un modèle*]; you know, the desire to mark oneself, the desire to make, how do I say it? To be part of a rap society, you see. It is like getting into rock and roll or heavy metal. (individual interview, French)

Hence, *one invests where one sees oneself mirrored*. Such an investment includes linguistic as well as cultural behavioral patterns. In an individual interview, Hassan told me it would be unrealistic to expect to see Blackness allied with rock and roll or heavy metal, as they are socially constructed as White music. On the other hand, he argued emphatically that African youths had every reason to invest in basketball—which is constructed as a Black sport—but not hockey, for example.

**CONCLUSION: IDENTITY, DISCIPLINE, AND PEDAGOGY**

Analogously, the desire on the part of African youths, particularly the boys, to invest (Peirce, 1997) in basketball is no different from their desire to learn BESL. Learning is hence neither aimless nor neutral, nor is it free of the politics of identity. As I have shown, an L2 learner can have a marginalized linguistic norm as a target. But why would these youths choose the margin as a target? What is their investment and politics in doing so? And what role, if any, do race, gender (sexuality), and differences in social class play in their choices? In other words, if youths come to the classrooms as embodied subjectivities that are embedded in history and memory (Dei, 1996), should we as teachers not couple their word with their world (Freire, 1970/1993)?

Clearly, my perspective is an interdisciplinary one that may have raised more questions than it has satisfactorily answered. However, my intention has been to ask new questions that link identity, pedagogy, politics, investment, desire, and the process of ESL learning by borrowing from cultural studies. I have discussed how a group of continental African youths were becoming Black, which meant learning BESL. Becoming Black, I have argued, was an identity signifier produced by and producing the very process of BESL. To become Black is to become an ethnographer who translates and looks around in an effort to understand what it means to be Black in Canada, for example. In becoming Black, the African youths were interpellated by Black popular cultural forms, rap and hip-hop, as sites of identification. Gender, however, was as important as race in what was being chosen and translated, and by whom and how it was chosen and translated.

Choosing the margin, I emphasize, is simultaneously an act of investment, an expression of desire, and a deliberate counterhegemonic undertaking. The choice of rap especially must be read as an act of
resistance. Historically, rap has been formed as a voice for voicelessness and performed as a prophetic language that addresses silence, the silenced, and the state of being silenced. It explores the hopes and the human, political, historical, and cultural experience of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993). As Jamal argued,

Black Americans created rap to express themselves; how do I say it? Their ideas, their problems, [and] if we could integrate ourselves into it, it is because rappers speak about or they have the same problems we have. (individual interview, French)

Such problems may include human degradation, police brutality, and everyday racism (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Essed, 1991).

If learning is an engagement of one’s identity, a fulfillment of personal needs and desires (of being), and an investment in what is yet to come, any proposed ESL pedagogy, research, or praxis that fails to culminate in these will quite obviously not draw in the youths described in this article and is therefore bound to be unsuccessful, if not plainly damaging. Identity, as re- and preconfigured here, governs what ESL learners acquire and how they acquire it. What is learned linguistically is not and should not be dissociable from the political, the social, and the cultural. Hence, to learn is to invest in something (e.g., BESL) that has a personal or a particular significance to who one is or what one has become. Because language is never neutral, learning it cannot and should not be either. Thus we as teachers must, first, identify the different sites in which our students invest their identities and desires and, second, develop materials that engage our students’ raced, classed, gendered, sexualized, and abled identities.

I therefore identify and propose rap and hip-hop (and Black popular culture in general) as curriculum sites where learning takes place and where identities are invested. In the language of antiracism education (Dei, 1996; hooks, 1994), this proposition is, on the one hand, a call to centralize and engage marginalized subjects, their voices, and their ways of being and learning and, on the other, a revisit to this question: In the case of African youths, whose language and identity are we as TESOL professionals teaching and assuming in the classroom if we do not engage rap and hip-hop? That is, whose knowledge is being valorized and legitimated and thus assumed to be worthy of study, and whose knowledge and identity are left in the corridors of our schools? To identify rap and hip-hop as curriculum sites in this context is to legitimate otherwise illegitimate forms of knowledge. As Bourdieu (1991) shows, wittingly or unwittingly, schools sanction certain identities and accept their linguistic norm by doing nothing more than assuming them
to be the norm; we as teachers should remember that these identities are raced, classed, sexualized, and gendered.

However, because rap and hip-hop are also historical and social productions, they are as much sites of critique as they are sites of hope. As noted, rap and hip-hop are not immune to, for example, sexism (and homophobia; see also Rose, 1991). Therefore, they should not be readily consumed but should be critically framed, studied, and engaged with. To be able to do so, however, teachers need first to be in tune with popular culture, for television, music, newspapers, and other media—not the classroom—are increasingly the sources from which students learn English. Second, teachers who are unfamiliar with popular culture should engage the Freireian notion of *dialecticism*, in which their students can become their teachers. In practical terms, this might mean planning activities in which students explain to the teacher and to the rest of the class what rap and hip-hop are and what they represent to the students.

Rap and hip-hop are also sites of hope and possibility: the hope that all learners (from dominant groups or others) can be introduced to and be able to see multiple ways of speaking, being, and learning. In the case of African students, in particular, rap and hip-hop are sites of identification and investment. To introduce them in the classroom, to paraphrase Freire (1970/1993), is to hope to link their world, identities, and desires with their word. To put it more broadly, maybe the time has come to close the split between minority students’ identities and the school curriculum and between those identities and classroom pedagogies, subjects, and materials.

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