

## Books Like Clothes: Engaging Young Black Men With Reading

**This article examines the ideological structures that shape reading for a young Black male within his 11th-grade English classroom and suggests that young Black men like the one featured in this study practice literacy based on unseen principles that shape their identity—that such young men, in a sense, wear “books like clothes.”**

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“Black men wear books like clothes,” Derrick explained to me. *Beowulf* must not have fit him, because he wasn’t wearing it.

“Man, I can’t take this!” he said to his friend Tony.

“I’m sayin’, Who...is *Beowulf*? I’m not gone need [to know] *Beowulf* to get a job. Nobody I know...knows [*Beowulf*].”

“I know what you sayin’.... This ain’t me.”

“Me either.”

I remember overhearing the young men complaining about reading *Beowulf* while not reading it at all. Yet they *were* discussing it, explaining how it wasn’t them. Derrick sat in the back of the room, his handsome, solid, and resolute face frowning in protest. He did not want to read *Beowulf*—didn’t see the purpose in it. His reaction to *Beowulf* was a deep ideological stance, which pivoted against a much larger academic subtext. Not reading *Beowulf* was an ideological response, an apparatus of belief-influenced practice that patterned his particular aversion to this particular academic text. That is, in not reading *Beowulf*, Derrick was not merely reacting to the text, but its subtext, situating himself among a long list of Black men who have sometimes tragically yet undeniably refused to read for school because they couldn’t see themselves in school texts (Noguera, 2008).

Derrick’s refusal to read *Beowulf* reveals literacy engagement as an ideological artifact, one that exposes a hidden literate process related to an individual’s understanding of her- or himself in relation to the socio-political subtext of the literate act. This aspect of Derrick’s literacy practice was illustrated in his statements of (not) being, what I call genres of self/difference, as prompted by his (not) reading *Beowulf*.

For Derrick, and perhaps for many other young men like him, reading corresponded with those sets of belief-influenced practices that intersect with the cosmologies of identity: belief about one’s self and one’s place in the world and possibilities for acting. It was also intimately tied to self-expression

and those ulterior understandings that many Black males share in their articulations of literacy (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). As such, this article asks: How might understanding the relationships between ideology and literacy, between motive and drive, help educators more effectively engage Black male students with academic reading?

## The Politics of Engagement: Examining Ideologies of Reading

Traditional approaches to studying Black males in literacy scholarship tend to rely heavily on deficit theories to explain why some Black men don't read in school (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Tatum, 2005; Young, 2007). This line of inquiry either implicitly or explicitly vilifies Black males for not reading: "What was wrong with Derrick? Was he lazy or barely literate?" It is not without suspicion that such questions foment in the shadow of stereotypes. Indeed, they have long loomed over the subject of Black males in a range of scholarly disciplines where it is not unlikely to find young Black men cast in negative light for not doing what other youth might readily do (Davis, 2001; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Kunjufu, 1995).

By contrast, more progressive scholars might argue that *Beowulf* lacked direct relevance to Derrick's life; therefore, he did not read it because it was not relevant to him. And without truly understanding why direct relevance may or may not have been important to why Derrick reads, such scholars would have simplified both Derrick and the act of reading, making the kind of conceptual error that too many of us in literacy studies make when we drive deterministic and essentializing wedges between people and their practices, assuming that all Black males or academic texts are alike.

Instead of assuming that Derrick or some supposed disconnection between him and the text was at fault for him not reading it, I focus on the ideological aspects of literacy that shaped Derrick as a reader. My goal in this line of inquiry is to understand the role of ideology as it intersects with literacy (and perhaps other competing or complementary ideologies) to comment on the relationship between young Black men like Derrick and their reading engagement.

In doing so, I hope to offer a set of suggestions for engaging young Black men with reading. I begin with a brief discussion of ideology and the politics of engagement.

### *Ideology*

Linguists such as Silverstein (1985) and Hanks (1996) debate what they see as the combination and interface between structure, activity, and ideology, a phenomenon they refer to as *total linguistic fact*. For them, the angles of total linguistic fact are hardly discrete, but overlapping, creating various kinds of societal inertia for both movement and stalling of particular literate acts in specific sociolinguistic directions. Bakhtin and Medvedev's (1978) concept of *ideological becoming* also situates the language participant beyond the event and in the deftly layered relationships that structure participation in the event. Hence, the concept of ideology as a particular layer in human activity (Hanks, 1996; Silverstein, 1985) is helpful for uncovering Derrick as reader.

According to Ball and Freedman (2004), ideology relates to "what Bakhtin calls an ideological self" (p. 5). As an identity apparatus, the ideological self is constructed in relation to an individual's present interests and past experiences—the totality of the surrounding ideological spaces that comprise an individual's pool of interests (Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1978). In this sense, the self—the motives and the drives that influence who we are—is constituted and governed in ideological space (e.g., mind, heart, internal belief structure, and so forth). These spaces connect to and through other ideological domains (e.g., homes, schools, religious communities), where "language use and literate abilities provide ways for people to establish a social place and ways for others to judge them" (Ball & Freedman, 2004, p. 5).

While the term ideology splinters into numerous definitions, I use it throughout this article to index the systems of belief that direct one's interests, expectations, and actions. Ideologies, a person's ways of looking at things, influence a person's engagement and participation in socially specific and culturally governed activities such as reading (Au, 1997; Jordan, 1999; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). There are, then, ideologies that relate solely to reading—"reading ideologies," or the arrangements of thought

and desire that influence one's reading practices. These particular ideologies are directly related to literacy engagement.

### **Literacy Engagement**

There is a vast body of scholarship on youth literacy engagement. This literature often forwards instructional models, or so-called scaffolding approaches, that more-or-less essentialize students into racial, linguistic, and gendered categories (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Gibbons, 2002; Kirkland & Jackson, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 1993). And while there are many publications of this kind, there are relatively few published studies examining how or why instructional approaches that link literacy and life might work. There are perhaps fewer publications that are critical of how certain linkages might essentialize youth of color, and still fewer that examine when and why such linkages might work with specific youth, particularly young Black men.

This article aims to fill gaps in the scholarly literature on literacy engagement by examining those ideological mechanisms—the “behind-the-scenes” processes and understandings—that reside beyond the scaffold and in the heart, mind, and soul of the reader. The study is situated critically, critiquing the school's language of remediation and its crisis vocabulary (e.g., “disengaged” or “disinterested” reader), which too often sets the stage for how we think about Black males in school settings (Ferguson, 2000; hooks, 2004; Tatum, 2005).

The general use of the adjective “disengaged” to describe Black male students, for example, assumes that they do not read. This couldn't be farther from the truth. Scholarship consistently points out that youth, regardless of race or gender, are active readers and writers, participating in vast social worlds where literate life (e.g., reading magazines, writing blogs, performing raps and identities, and so forth) is teeming (Alvermann & Marshall, 2008; Mahiri, 2004).

Based on this body of scholarship and similar intellectual propositions (cf., Kynard, 2008; West, 2008; Wible, 2006), adjectives such as “disengaged” when applied to youth readers and writers are not only inaccurate, they are misplaced. Youths are not failing to engage texts; many of the texts we teach

in schools are failing to engage youth (Mahiri, 2004). One might argue that it is not the school's job to engage students, but rather to provide students with foundational knowledge that prepares them for opportunities to participate in society. While this point is well taken, schools consistently prepare youth unevenly for opportunities to participate in society precisely because of the politics of engagement, which are shaped by social factors and flawed school designs, and not simply youth disinterest (Carspecken & Apple, 1992).

In addition, engaging youth in some meaningful way seems a prerequisite to learning. In this sense, the so-called “basics” (e.g., reading, writing, problem-solving, and so forth) aren't even basic, but intermediary skills that follow true foundational dispositions (e.g., readiness, curiosity, pleasure, play; Dyson, 2008). Then, before one learns to read, one must be interested in reading (Dyson, 2008).

This point is important because it offers an alternative perspective—itself a rereading of sorts—of classrooms as filled with practices and products that are disengaging to many young people, particularly to the many young Black men who languish in schools disconnected from the content and instruction (Noguera, 2008). From this perspective, one should look closely at what Ball and Freedman's (2004) work terms the “political decisions” of schools, literacy classrooms, and texts that we “require” students to read.

By examining such decisions, the pedagogical architecture of the classroom is revealed—as well as the richness and complexity of the setting, its actors, their goals, and the cultural and pedagogical tools available in the setting that make the practice of literacy possible in the first place (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p. 4).

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## **Researching Ideology and Engagement**

### **Context**

**Participants.** The focal participant of this study is Derrick, whom I met at a battle-rap event at a local

university in 2003. I came to know him and five of his friends through a much larger ethnographic study conducted over three years, from 2003 to 2006.

My focus on Derrick in this article is purposeful because he, like many Black males his age, treaded the margins of success and failure, disaffected by school yet not completely forced out. He existed in what I refer to as a liminal state, a kind of academic purgatory that exists on the edges of school. While he did not read much in school, outside it Derrick wielded language and texts with the grace of a poet. Importantly, he was an interesting contradiction: a self-described “emcee” and “street nerd.”

Mr. Kegler, Derrick’s 11th-grade English teacher, also factors significantly in this article. I met him in the fall of 2004 after asking if I could observe Derrick in his British English class. The class was relatively diverse with students ranging from both genders (17 girls and 13 boys) and several ethnicities—11 Black (6 female, 5 male); 8 White (5 female, 3 male); 7 Latina/o (4 female, 3 male); and 4 Asian (2 female, 2 male). Mr. Kegler, a White male, taught one other year as regular full-time English teacher prior to teaching Derrick. In spite (or because) of his lack of experience, he was quite creative, willing to take risks, and had strong teaching credentials. He completed coursework in a highly reputable teacher preparation program and held a state-endorsed teaching certificate in English and psychology (see Table 1).

**Units.** During the first 18 weeks of the course, Mr. Kegler covered two units using two core texts: *Beowulf* and *The Iliad*. He taught *Beowulf* with a fairly traditional approach: Students read aloud in class and completed worksheets; Mr. Kegler provided “right answers.” When reading, he instructed students to take notes on characters and key events. “This information would be needed for the unit exam,” he

explained to them. After reading *Beowulf*, the class discussed it, summing up its plot and major themes, watched the 1999 film starring Christopher Lambert, and took a unit exam, which Derrick failed.

Mr. Kegler used a more creative approach to teach *The Iliad*, in part to better engage his Black male students. According to Mr. Kegler, it was “not easy for students to get into... *Beowulf*... especially [for] some of the Black boys.” As part of *The Iliad* unit, the class read selected *Batman* and *X-Men* comics and drew connections between the comics and the world. They discussed themes of revenge in *Batman*, drawing, for instance, comparisons between President Bush’s invasion of Iraq and Batman’s vigilante quest to redeem his parents’ memory. They discussed themes of racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination through *X-Men*, critiquing the social consequences of difference and intolerance.

The class would later read *The Iliad* as they read the comics, recreating *The Iliad* in a genre similar to the comics. Unlike *Beowulf*, they did not read aloud, but in small groups based on twenty or so scenes from the texts. Each group was responsible for closely reading and then translating their assigned scene into a comic strip. Once fully translated, students assembled their comic strips into a creative collection of scenes titled *The Ill* (see Figure 1). Copies of *The Ill* were distributed to the class to read and discuss, as had been done with *Batman* and *X-Men*.

## Data Collection

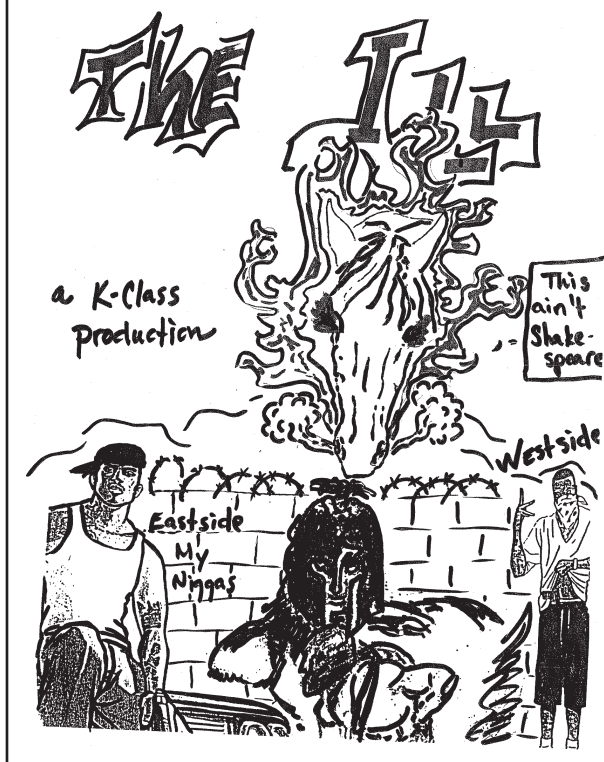
With Mr. Kegler’s permission, I took extensive notes of his class, typically from the back of the room. Derrick sat near me, cordial and quiet. I was close enough to him to hear his discreet conversations, capture key interactions between him and his peers, and observe him participating in important literacy events. I also gathered samples of his and other students’ work

**Table 1 Participant Information**

Focal participants	Description of participant	Description of participant interaction during <i>Beowulf</i> unit	Description of participant interaction during <i>The Iliad</i> unit
Derrick (student)	Black male teen; 15 years of age (at time of the study)	Hands-off; typical; disengaged with the texts	Interactive; atypical; highly engaged with texts
Mr. Kegler (teacher)	White male teacher; 26 years of age (at time of the study)	Hands-off; traditional; disengaged with Derrick	Interactive; progressive; very engaged with Derrick

*Note.* The terms *typical/atypical* are used to express variations in Derrick’s regular classroom behavior.

**Figure 1 Collaborative Student Text  
"The Ill"**



as well as curriculum materials. While they do not factor much into this article, these materials have provided me an important resource for understanding the relationship between ideology and engagement.

In addition to taking notes and collecting artifacts, I talked with Derrick regularly, at least three times per week before, during, and after his English class. Mr. Kegler and I also spoke regularly, but less frequently (and more formally) than I had with Derrick. I digitally recorded all conversations and archived them into a computer file. Some transcripts have been slightly altered (i.e., words omitted) at the suggestion of blind reviewers to eliminate or reduce the occurrence of offensive language. I logged my field notes into an electronic journal and catalogued artifacts of student work using a standard data-archiving approach (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

### **Data Analysis Framework**

My goal for analysis was to generate theory, in the interpretive sense (Quantz, 1992), about Derrick's reading engagement with respect to his larger beliefs about reading itself. To this end, I reduced data by

charting changes in Derrick's thoughts about and understandings of himself as a reader from statements of difference, such as "this ain't me," to statements of self, such as "this is fun." This shift in language from what I call genres of difference to genres of self indicates a related shift in ideology. It suggested that Derrick found himself in one text as opposed to the other—and, in doing so, he complicated the idea that Black males don't enjoy reading.

To understand how and why this shift happened, I employed a second level of analysis, categorizing the difference between the two units according to their pedagogical situations. After establishing initial codes, I conducted more focused coding related to the texts and their teaching: "breaking down field notes [and other data sources] even more finely into *subcodes*" to uncover tensions, "new themes and topics and new relationships" that would help me answer my questions regarding the relationship between ideology and engagement (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 161). I explored how Derrick saw himself in relation to particular texts introduced within particular pedagogical situations. At this third level of analysis, I examined how Derrick voiced himself as a reader through various statements of identity.

After careful, multilevel, systematic, and rigorous analysis, I finally interpreted data, drawing conclusions to explain the relationship between ideology and engagement and the ideological shift that happened as Derrick moved from one unit to the next. By examining the content of Derrick's belief statements and the contexts in which he read, I was able to understand Derrick as a reader and, more importantly, how this particular identity was shaped by an inner system of motives that encouraged him to read.

### **Teaching Derrick: Navigating Genres of Self/Difference in an English Classroom**

Derrick enjoyed reading texts from genres along the lines of his particular world views and responsive to his internal and external self, a point I hope to make clear later in this article. Such texts spoke to Derrick and offered him a point of entry into the act of reading that was neither hostile to nor consistent with, but



instead fodder for the construction of his identity as a reader. According to Derrick, “Reading is something... [that’s] gotta come from your soul.” It was this sacred space of thought, of desire—the site of his true character—that nourished him as a reader.

By contrast, texts seen outside the soul, to Derrick, were “soulless” artifacts with troubling consequences. One could argue that Derrick was less resistant to “soul-less” texts as he was to the deeply disconnected situations in which texts could be tortuously presented (e.g., “*Beowulf* is killing me”). Then, Derrick’s (dis)interest in reading existed between the tensions of text and context—beyond the page, in a place where one’s sense of self is also shaped.

According to hooks (2004), Black males often find school texts and contexts hostile. Many of them participate in school under conditions of extreme duress, developing what some scholars regard as a healthy but eventually harmful skepticism of the way social institutions such as schools present knowledge (hooks, 2004; Kirkland, 2009; Young, 2007). Derrick’s own critique of reading in school existed within this larger tradition of skepticism. According to him:

What they want us to read in school is for brainwashing you. You know. I mean I can read, but I don’t read in [Mr. Kegler’s class] because it’s like he’s trying to change me, change the way I see myself and the way I think. I don’t like... how things get set up. Why do we have to read *Beowulf*? Why can’t we just read... something that I want to read? (10/6/04)

For Derrick, reading was an act tied to desire as opposed to imposition not to be restricted by a canon or force fed through a stale menu of texts. For him, reading was affected by how texts were taught, presented, and examined.

Traditional approaches to ELA instruction have long enforced master narratives, where canonical texts act as toolsets for reifying the status quo (Hurley, 2005; Ranker, 2007). In this way, Mr. Kegler’s *Beowulf* unit sanctioned but also disallowed for the production and consumption of certain linguistic, cultural, and symbolic forms and functions of reading that might have brokered a more engaging experience for Derrick that was more consistent with who he was as a reader. Derrick called the unit “boring” because “it wasn’t” him—and because it most likely bored him.

Reminiscent of Ogbu’s (1990, 2003) foundational studies of conflict between Black youth and school cultures, the politics of competing (reading) ideologies can enforce stiff barriers around particular literate acts (cf. Young, 2004), particularly for young Black men like Derrick. According to Derrick, “I can read that stuff, but it ain’t me... They want me to act like somebody I’m not.” These barriers seem impenetrable. For Black males who wish to distinguish their ideological selves from the confined space of classrooms—spaces entrenched in the dominant scripts of literate performance that work to deform Black male subjectivities (Ferguson, 2000; Haddix, 2009)—these barriers are also socially constructed obstacles to learning.

Moreover, the social inflections of identity, which help to shape (but do not completely influence) a reader’s ideologies, also sanction various kinds of valued textual expressions and acceptable reading and writing habits. These are, of course, habits of mind—the forges of literacy that frame the reading and the reader well before the actual act occurs.

I refer to habits of mind—particularly when such frames of thought express one’s abstract identity—only known though such genres of self that articulate desired being particularly when they are voiced and map out other structures of identity that billet beliefs. The texts that Derrick enjoyed reading tended to correspond with such frames—with his internally informed systems of drives and values where he understood reading as familiar, fun, practical, relevant, nonoppressive, and cool (cf. Kirkland & Jackson, 2009).

As Derrick commented, “I love reading comics. They’re fun, and they relate to me.” Derrick’s sense of self was important to his engagement with texts such as comics, and he believed that his sense of self could be found in or constructed through such texts. By contrast, Derrick saw *Beowulf* as different than himself (e.g., “this ain’t me”). The text represented something unfamiliar, boring, impractical, irrelevant, oppressive, and uncool—and therefore not useful for constructing subjectivity, a sense of self and possibilities for acting.

For Derrick, reading *The Iliad* was different. And he alone led his group in translating most of their sections of the text:

It wasn't like we were reading even though we were. It was kind of fun; like, I could relate. It took some time trying to figure out what [Homer] was talking about, but I got it when we talked about it and put it in our own language. (12/15/04)

*The Iliad* shares much with *Beowulf*; both are classical texts canonized in most ELA curricula. However, the association among *The Iliad*, the comics, and the pedagogical moves Mr. Kegler made to decanonize *The Iliad* shifted the text away from the dominant reading ideologies of formalistic literacy and brought it more in line with the pragmatic reading ideologies of contemporary populism. "Fun," Derrick's initial response to the text, did not simply mark his pleasure with reading, but also expressed a much deeper and organic association—in his words, "I could relate."

Reading for some Black males may require bridging ideological distances, creating a conduit capable of offering readers opportunities to find themselves and what they believe among the universe of words. As this bridge became available, Derrick both read and comprehended *The Iliad*, using the texts as a form of self-expression.

## "I'm Achilles": Reading as Self-Expression

Derrick: Nigga, I'm Achilles.

Tony: Nigga, you ain't Achilles. You a ho like Paris.

For Derrick and Tony, terms such as "nigga" and "ho"—despite having controversial lineages—operated in an intimate cultural-linguistic tradition not uncommon to young Black male interlocutors who frequently and playfully alter word meanings and spellings (Smitherman, 1999). As such, the terms residing in their readings deserve some discussion.

Liberalities with language exemplify the deeper connections the two young men were making through the use of *The Iliad/The Ill*. Not only did the two young men understand the texts, they used the texts to understand themselves. This is evident in Derrick and Tony's exchange, where Achilles and Paris become symbols for self-expression. This form

of self-expression does more than just appropriate characters from a text: It interprets the text and its characters in rich, meaningful ways.

A number of examples exist of youth strategically using controversial symbols to express critical thought and identity: the performance poetry of New York City teens (Fisher, 2007), the tattoos of Black males in the Midwest (Kirkland, 2009), the rap lyrics of youth in multiethnic communities in Southern California (Paris, 2009). The ways in which youth express meaning and identity are often provocative, sophisticated, yet jarring (Smitherman, 1999). For many of my readers, there will never be sufficient reason for the used of terms such as "nigga" and "ho," even playfully. However, the goal of my description here isn't to draw attention to controversial language, but to illustrate how Derrick integrated a text into himself using a vocabulary meaningful to him and his peers, as opposed to a vocabulary that was not.

I find it meaningful that the young men used vernacular inside school to express their deep understandings of the text, and yet outside school they cast characters from within it to take part in their verbal play. Perhaps most importantly, they used the characters to "signify" on selves and others (Smitherman, 1999) in a space where the boundaries of cultural heritage and the politics of engagement began to blur.

In this way, Derrick's interpretation of *The Iliad* was rich and consistent with the analysis of most literary scholars. According to him,

This story [is] about competing ideas about life. Helen is that girl you always wanted to get with and you get with her. Then, you fight to keep her. I know there is so much more to this, but I think this is part of it. I think the story is a metaphor for how, in life, you better watch what you ask for. You might get it. (12/8/04)

Derrick's reading of Paris, a main character from *The Iliad*, is also worth noting here: "I don't think Paris is right. He sold his whole family out...and then acted like a punk when [they] came for [Helen]." Consistent with common literary interpretations, Derrick's reading acknowledges Paris's known complexities in scenes and language drawn from his reality. Moreover, his interpretation of the text suggests that he thoughtfully and critically read it, made it

his own, and made sense of it by using his life and language as lenses (cf. Rosenblatt, 1978).

For Derrick, the experience of reading was constituted by his experience—and, in some important ways, it even constituted his lenses for viewing and his scripts for participating in the world. It was, for him, an ideological act, connected to his core: an act of the “soul” reflected in his view of the world, mirrored in his image of himself. Reading for school, in Derrick’s view, was neither neutral nor divorced from the very ideologies that fueled his politics of engagement. He was a reader, who wore books like clothes. He read what fit him, and did not read what didn’t.

## “Black Men Wear Books Like Clothes”: Implications for Teaching Reading to Black Males

It would be helpful for educators to think of reading as extension of self. That is, it might be helpful to think of reading as something greater than a mere literate act, but as a “lens on the self” that requires “language arts classrooms [to] inevitably engage self-knowledge in a broader sense” (Eva-Wood, 2008, p. 575). “Rewriting [*The Iliad*] in my way made it... my own,” Derrick explained. The translated text *The Ill*,

like his other statements of affirmation, was a genre of self, fully different from the “many books [we] read in school.” This self corresponded with Derrick’s expressed beliefs: “We never get to do stuff like this in class. We never read our language in print.... I think they know what they [are] doing. They want you to... fail.” For Derrick, reading was never a politically innocent act. It sat in tension at the base of an incredible ideological tug between self and other, fully realized in a sea of beliefs that shaped who he was.

The ideologies of reading delineate lines of success and failure, not always corresponding with lines that bind young Black men to particular social locations. Black men like Derrick do not loathe reading; they loathe the incredible sacrifice required when reading for school. They loathe the texts working as a uniform outfit not necessarily stitched to fit them, but forged in fabrics of socialization that reshape them into something that feels strangely irregular.

If reading for Black males is an ideological act; then, the teaching of reading to Black males should seek to correspond with Black male reading ideologies. That is, teachers can bridge the distance/dissonance between Black males and school through a set of curricular and pedagogical moves that strive for ideological harmony between Black males and texts. Such moves will require reshaping choice: What to read, and why? Answering such a question will require information: Who are our students, and how do their histories and deep sociologies shape who they seek to be and how they read?

As we rearrange the curriculum around the sensual textualities expressed in youth consciousness, heated and difficult-to-assuage questions will arise concerning the importance and effectiveness of current ELA curricula and its canon. There will be intense resistance to updating ELA curricula with youth-cultural texts and hard to bend mandates and ideologies that unfortunately stabilize the hegemony of certain literatures. But if we are to intervene on behalf of a flailing Black male student population, we must be courageous and insist on updating ELA and its curricular choices.

In this regard, there is a second move to be made, one that is pedagogical. It does not require changing the curriculum, *per se*. Rather, it requires that educators tailor books to fit youth like a seamstress would mend clothes, offering youth a rich wardrobe of

### Take Action!

Teachers can begin using these ideas in their courses by addressing the following two questions:

1. What are my students’ ideologies of reading; that is, how might they wear books like clothes?
2. Once I understand my students’ reading ideologies, how might I tweak my teaching of reading to match their beliefs about and understandings of reading in their lives?

For teachers of Black male students, answering these two questions can provide vast opportunities for engaging texts (as opposed to disengaging ones). That is, the practice of reading for young Black men is rarely about reading alone. It is about who they are, what they believe, and who they want others to see them as.



processes that allow vintage texts to fit their “socially situated identities” (West, 2008). It seeks to center the youth unlike the current movement in adolescent literacy studies, which seems to want to privilege dominant discourses and those dated designs, off-putting to many young people.

To conclude this article, I return to where we began, in the back of Mr. Kegler’s classroom, seated between two young men who were not reading. Their postures are emblematic of classrooms across the nation: the piecemeal image of young Black men refusing to read. However, this scene is not fixed, although it gets tragically photocopied into our social imagination, promoted only by our collective failure to connect reading with who Black men are. It is up to us to reconfigure this failed scene and insist on another that is capable of characterizing a new sort of narrative, a story much like Derrick’s—of young men, though tossed into a hostile world driven by its own unique social claims for textual engagement, who find themselves no longer naked but wearing the word and the world.

## Notes

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