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Roses in the Concrete: A Critical Race Perspective on Urban Youth and School Libraries

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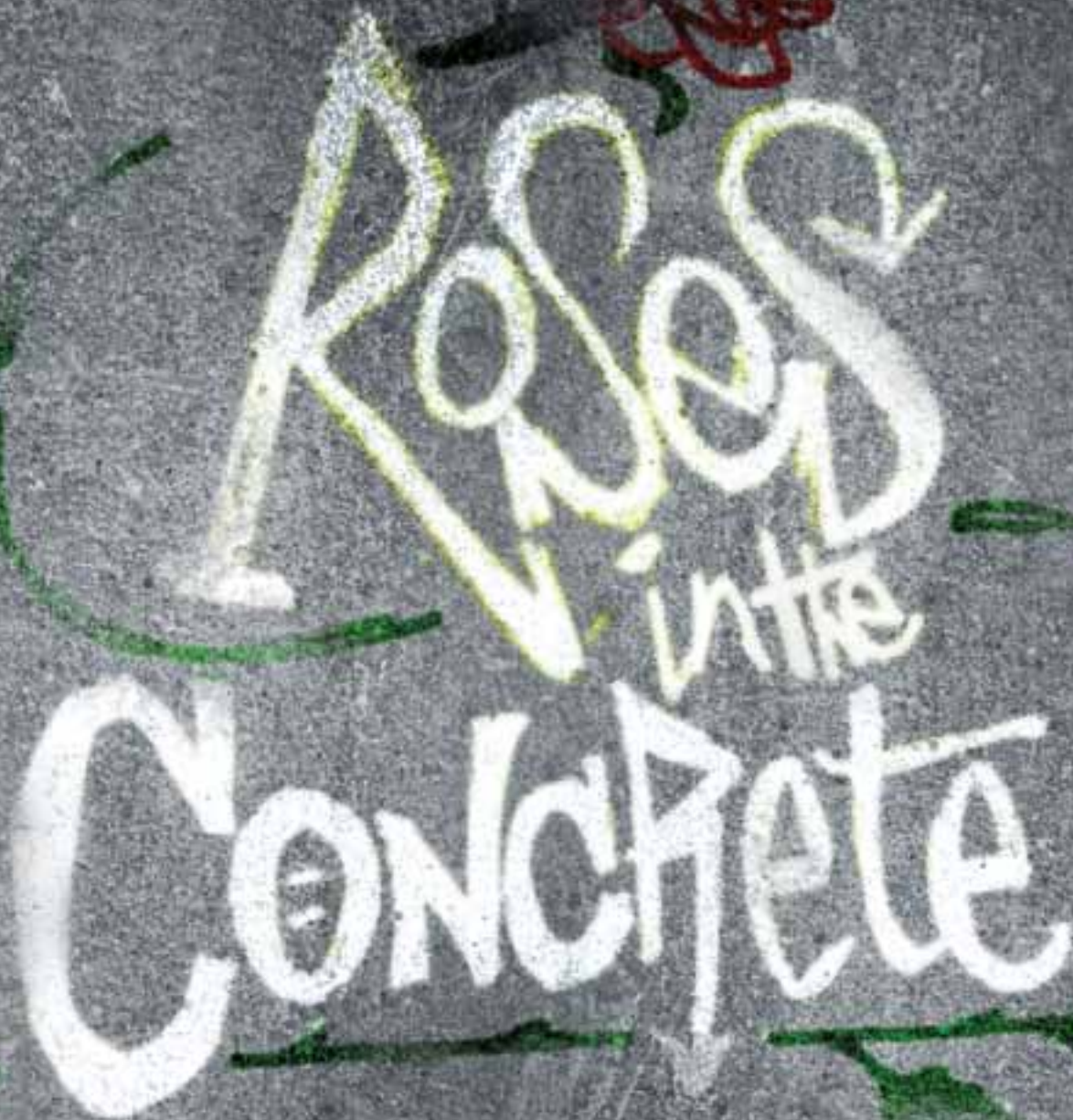
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A CRITICAL RACE PERSPECTIVE ON URBAN YOUTH AND SCHOOL LIBRARIES

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DID YOU HEAR ABOUT
THE ROSE THAT GREW

FROM A CRACK IN
THE CONCRETE?

PROVING NATURE'S
LAW IS WRONG IT

LEARNED TO WALK WITH
OUT HAVING FEET.

FUNNY IT SEEMS, BUT
BY KEEPING ITS DREAMS,

IT LEARNED TO BREATHE
FRESH AIR.

LONG LIVE THE ROSE THAT
GREW FROM CONCRETE

WHEN NO ONE ELSE
EVER CARED

TUPAC SHAKUR,
HIP HOP ARTIST

The late rapper Tupac Shakur wrote a poem called "The Rose that Grew from Concrete" that serves as a good metaphor for helping educators, including school librarians, to disrupt stereotypical metanarratives they might have about urban youth and replace them with new narratives of hope, compassion, and high expectations for all students. Tupac's poem is a good primer for discussing what school libraries and school librarians can do to better support urban youth's diverse backgrounds and literacy abilities. His poem can be seen as a commentary about the strength and resilience of urban youth who have not only survived, but often thrived, in a world that often looks at them with pity and contempt.

What lessons might we learn about educating urban youth based on the message embedded in Tupac's poem? Moreover, how might we reflexively look back at our own practices and policies in the school library to see how they accommodate (or do not accommodate) the experiences, backgrounds, and literacies of urban youth? Finally, what insights might Critical Race Theory (CRT) afford us in an analysis of school library programs and school librarians' practices as they relate to educating urban youth? These are questions that I will explore in this article to provide readers with the conceptual and practical tools for developing more culturally sensitive library spaces that support literacy development among urban youth.

A Note on the Term "Urban Youth"

Broadly speaking, the term "urban" is used to describe a diverse range of people who share a community with similar social, economic, and cultural conditions. Yet, more subtly, the term "urban" has become a placeholder used to describe a host

of people, places, and things—most of which carry a negative stigma. Gloria Ladson-Billings explains that in mainstream discourses a new language and construction of race have emerged that are particularly offensive toward nonwhite people but are cleverly disguised beneath conceptual categories that become placeholders for normative references to certain racial groups:

"Conceptual categories like 'school achievement', 'middle classness', 'maleness', 'beauty', and 'intelligence' and 'science' become normative categories of whiteness while categories like 'gangs', 'welfare recipients', 'basketball players', and the 'underclass' become marginalized and de-legitimized categories for 'blackness'" (1998, 9).

For example, to refer to someone as an "urban youth" may subconsciously invoke images of nonwhite teens living in impoverished neighborhoods riddled with crime and failing schools. While these conditions may be realistic for some segment of the urban youth population, they are certainly not representative of the whole. Countless urban youth have been brought up in middle-class, two-parent, stable, loving, well-educated families. Despite the term "urban youth" being quite loaded, I use it here to strategically reclaim its positive aspects. To that end, it should be noted that Hip Hop culture, which is one of the most revenue-generating, global, cross-cultural influences of our time, originated in cities across America through the talent and ingenuity of the young people. The fact that many suburban white youth embrace and embody elements of Hip Hop culture in their daily talk, dress, and musical listening preferences is indicative of the ubiquitous and powerful influence of urban youth culture.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the School Library

CRT is not a theoretical framework that most school librarians would be familiar with or exposed to in their professional studies. Thus, it is perhaps prudent to provide a brief overview of CRT and show the possible benefits of using this theoretical lens to examine school library practices. CRT falls within the larger critical sociological tradition. Scholars who consider their work “critical” share a common goal of understanding, explaining, and disrupting the causes of structural domination

and inequality in order to facilitate human emancipation and equity (Levinson et al. 2010). The intellectual origins of critical social theory are often attributed to the philosophers of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. In essence, critical theory challenged the biased nature of all knowledge, specifically knowledge that was transmitted via dominant institutions such as schools and the media (Morrell 2009).

While other subfields within critical social theory typically apply a class-based, Marxist-style critique of society, CRT places race and

racism squarely at the center of its analysis. For CRT scholars, race and racism are endemic to U.S. society and embedded in the country’s social fabric. Yet, CRT scholars also recognize the fact that race does not function independently of other modes of domination, such as classism or sexism. In fact, CRT scholars are critical of any sociological analyses that focus solely on race without recognizing that racial oppression exists in multiple layers based on gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality (Dixon and Rousseau 2006).



Reimagining School Library Practices Using CRT

Disrupting Cultural Deficit Views

One of the first steps to reimagining school library practices with urban youth in mind is for school librarians to check their negative biases and assumptions about urban students. It is important to not allow outward conditions such as dress, speech patterns, and other cultural signifiers to shape how educators view and instruct students.

CRT scholars critique this kind of cultural deficit thinking. They describe it as a kind of liberalism that works against people from historically underrepresented backgrounds. This liberal view, according to CRT scholars, minimizes the structural forces that underlie various forms of oppression and sees society as primarily merit-based where individuals are rewarded through sheer hard

work. One CRT scholar Garret Duncan found that his white student researchers enacted a similar sort of liberalism in their fieldwork with inner-city youth. Duncan, who is an African American researcher, noted how these student researchers articulated a “false empathy” toward the youth in the research site. He observed that:

“On the one hand, I saw the research problem mainly in terms of the role of a broader racist culture in undermining the human potential of the children in the research setting. The student researchers, on the other hand, understood their work as helping a group of unfortunate, underprivileged children take advantage of the offerings of a fundamentally just society” (Duncan 2002, 91).

The kind of false empathy that Duncan described is reminiscent of late Hip Hop artist Tupac Shakur’s poem where he describes how, at first, the rose in the concrete is marveled at, but ultimately it is pitied because of its tattered facade. To help avoid this kind of false empathy, it is critical for educators to begin to look past the damaged and dangerous caricatures of urban youth that flood the media and avoid seeing them as “other people’s children” (Delpit 1995).

Honoring Students’ Voices and Life Experiences

Listening to students’ life stories and becoming interested in the music, television shows, and other influences in their lives is another important step in reimagining school library spaces with urban youth in mind.

CRT scholars in general maintain that people of color speak from an experience framed by racism and that to appreciate their perspective,

we must allow them to “name their own reality” or give voice to their unique racialized experiences.

Educators at secondary schools and colleges have already started to design classes based on urban interests such as Hip Hop music. Some states even have mandated learning standards to teach Hip Hop studies within the context of traditional academic disciplines such as history, fine art, and language arts. Educators who have studied the use of Hip Hop in the classroom have suggested that it is a viable means of promoting traditional academic literacies (Morrell 2004; Morell and Duncan-Adrade 2008; Haddix 2011). The push behind these types of educational innovations seems to be a collective respect for Hip Hop culture and music. Moreover, Hip Hop embodies the passion, grit, and realness of the urban experience, so it is particularly fitting to use in urban school settings.

Recognizing Structural Inequalities

Many educators are afraid to reach and teach some urban youth because of educators’ perception that urban youth are prone to violence or have violent tendencies.

However, many experts believe violence to be a learned behavior that arises out of unequal distribution of resources and lack of opportunities. Therefore, one way school librarians can teach from a standpoint of compassion is to guide youth in inquiry projects that help them answer questions about some of the larger social issues that directly affect their community. I have described this approach to teaching in the school library as critical inquiry and offered some practical examples of what this might look like in K–12 school library settings (see Kumasi-Johnson 2007, Kumasi 2008).

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Understanding Whiteness

It is no secret that the school librarian workforce is comprised primarily of middle-class white females. By contrast, our nation's schools are increasingly comprised of students from nonwhite, non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Thus, exploring the meaning of whiteness and the ways it might function (either implicitly or overtly) in school library practices and school librarians' belief systems is paramount to a discussion such as this. Several scholars have been dissecting how whiteness plays out in real educational contexts (e.g. Carter 2007, Haviland 2008, Kirkland 2010).

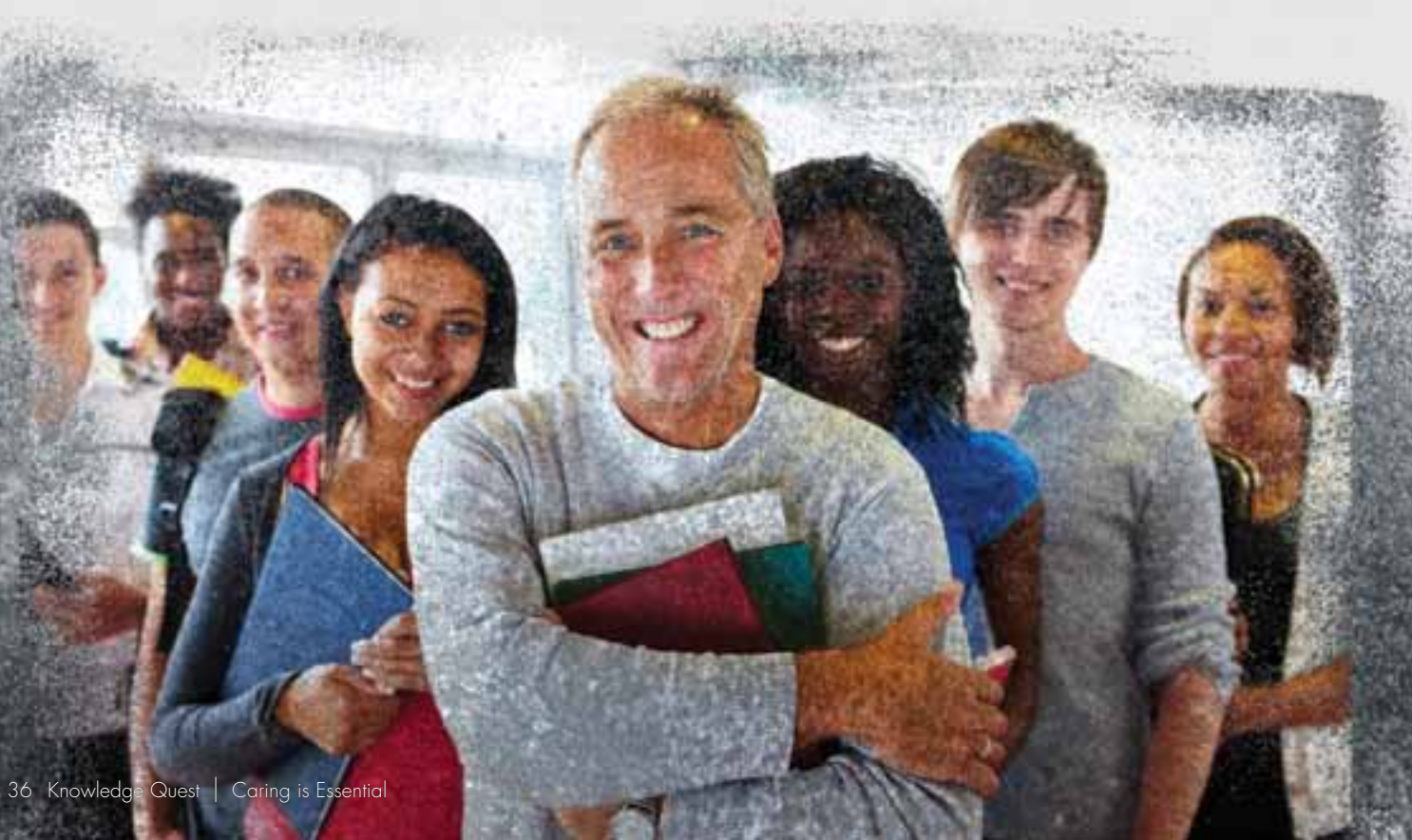
CRT scholars maintain that whiteness holds material and symbolic property value in the United States. Audrey Thompson explains that when "conceived of as legal or cultural property, whiteness can be seen to provide material and symbolic privilege to whites, those passing as white, and

sometimes honorary whites. Examples of material privilege would include better access to higher education or a choice of safe neighborhoods in which to live; symbolic white privilege includes conceptions of beauty or intelligence that not only are tied to whiteness but that implicitly exclude blackness or brownness" (2001).

We might look in several areas if we were to scrutinize how whiteness functions in school library practices and is embedded in school librarians' belief systems. Materially speaking, a quick glance at the school library collection would help uncover which racial group's knowledge is most represented in the books—both in terms of the racial backgrounds of the authors as well as the content of the books themselves. If there is a lack of cultural diversity in the collection (translated as books by and about nonwhite people), or if the books that are available contain stereotypes and biased representations of nonwhite people, then that can be seen as a significant area that needs improvement.

Symbolically speaking, the school librarian might inadvertently promote and make visible books and programs that mainly cater to the majority white youth population (e.g., Harry Potter and Twilight books, or Gothic themes). Meanwhile, books with nonwhite themes and characters might be highlighted only during cultural-heritage weeks or months. This practice might reinforce whiteness as the normative and superior cultural influence in the school library.

In terms of the atmosphere, school librarians should be sensitive to the fact that many youth of color feel like outsiders in library spaces and deem the school library as sole "property" of the librarian. For example, a diverse group of African American youth who participated in my dissertation research described their school librarian as "Not opened-minded" (Kumasi 2008). They went on to state "the library is like her house." These feelings of disconnect and exclusion should be attended to by school librarians, if they want to



make all their students feel welcome. The young Black scholars in my book club research also commented that they would like to see in their school library more pictures and books that represent their cultural heritage. They also stated that they wanted their school librarian to be able to sponsor or facilitate programs that celebrated their cultural history and literary tradition. One such program that school librarians can sponsor at their schools is the African American Read-In. This event is held annually at schools, churches, and libraries across the nation, and takes on many formats including: author visits, spoken-word events, panel discussions, writing projects, and more (see NCTE 2012).

Conclusion

This article merely scratches the surface at using the tools of CRT to examine school library practices and school librarians' belief systems that might marginalize urban youth. School library scholars who want to further examine their practices

and beliefs for potential racial bias or privileging might read CRT scholarship more closely on their own (see Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Since CRT was developed by and for people of color, its analysis is already designed to account for marginalized viewpoints and experiences. Finally, if urban youth are like roses in the concrete and can grow in spite of severe neglect, then what might the world look like if these youth were given the right amount of nurturing in their homes, communities, and schools?

We in the school library can do our part by planting seeds of hope, compassion, and high expectations in the urban youth whom we might serve. This endeavor may mean doing the often messy—yet critical—work of holding our own practices up to scrutiny to see how they might cause cultural disconnects for certain students. The question we must ask ourselves is if we are willing to engage in this work. I hope the answer is a resounding “Yes!”



Kafi Kumasi's
research explores
the intersections of
urban education,
school librarianship,

multicultural education, and adolescent literacy. Her recent research has centered on examining cultural-competence preparation among library and information science students. An article reporting on this research, entitled “Are We There Yet? Results of a Gap Analysis to Measure LIS Students' Prior Knowledge and Actual Learning of Cultural Competence Concepts,” was selected as a 2011 ALISE Best Conference Paper and appears in the *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 52, no. 4.



Visit <www.ala.org/aasl/knowledgequest> to view the online exclusive article, **Youth Development and Care Define The Possibility Project**, by Michael Hanchett Hanson.

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