

**E“race”ing, Enabling:
Toward a Critical Media Pedagogy in Secondary Literacy Classrooms**

A paper submitted for publication in the
Annual Proceedings of the NCTE Midwinter Conference
by

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February 2003

Most people spend as much as a third of their lives engaged with mass media. A person of 60 years of age, for example, has seen, read, or heard as many as 50 million advertisements (Sardar and Van Loon, 2000). Popular media, which are comprised of news reporting agencies, magazines, films, music, television, and the Internet are, for most people, the major source of information about their world. Kellner (1995) argues that media culture is now the dominant culture which socializes us and provides material for identity in terms of both social reproduction and change. The uncritical consumption of media texts that frame citizens as consumers or, worse, as criminals or objects of commodification in the service of dominant interests can lead to alienation and disempowerment. Kellner, in response to the dangerous potential of dominant media narratives, calls for a critical cultural studies that:

...conceptualizes society as a terrain of domination and resistance and engages in a critique of domination and of the ways that media culture engages in reproducing relationships of domination and oppression (4).

No group is more impacted by the dominant narratives of media culture than the urban youth of color. Giroux (1996) examines how working class youth are both commodified and criminalized by media culture. At the same time, however, he and other cultural theorists acknowledge that youth have created their own forms of media expression that simultaneously serve as sites of resistance and sites of cooptation by the culture industries (Lipsitz, 1994). Hip-hop music and culture, for example, are the authentic representations of the fear and rage of postindustrial urban youth. At the same time, though, this form of expression is captured and co-opted by corporate media who then market this culture back to youth in the service of profit. Regardless of whether its

consumption comes to good or ill, the sheer volume of time and involvement legitimates the mass media as a viable pedagogical institution with a strong impact on the lives of urban youth (Giroux, 1996).

It is also true that the media play a central role in the construction of race, class, and gender in problematic ways. Cornel West (1993) comments that the two biggest problems impacting the African-American community are too much poverty and too little self love with popular media contributing to both. Though this statement was originally applied to African-Americans, it can definitely be expanded to include other members of marginalized groups. That is, the messages sent to young people of color by the dominant media can lead to feelings of alienation and inferiority while also justifying individual and institutional racism. These consequences are so severe that the British Broadcasting Standards commission has gone so far to recommend that media studies be taught at primary school to mitigate the impact of mass media on the lives of youth (Sardar and Van Loon, 2000).

Equally as problematic and challenging as the pre-eminence of disempowering popular media narratives of urban youth of color is the paltry condition of literacy instruction for students of color attending America's urban schools. Numerous researchers (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gutierrez, 2000; Lee, 2001; Moll, 2000) have chronicled the challenges confronting these populations in America's classrooms with potentially devastating consequences for the myriad of youth who are systematically denied access to academic literacies. The very same students who are framed as illiterate or non-learners are the ones who engage in literate and literacy learning activities as they interact with popular media on a daily basis.

We begin this work here; from a sociocultural framework that views all students as learners and users of language and literacy as participants in everyday sociocultural activity (Cole, 1996) and seeks to make meaningful connections between out-of-school literacy practices and literacy instruction aimed at academic achievement, economic empowerment, and social change. We hope to make the case that a critical media pedagogy in secondary classrooms draws upon the authentic experiences of urban teens of color to accomplish these multiple aims.

A recent report by the National Reading Conference on literacy development among adolescents (Alvermann, 2001) calls for literacy educators to help students learn to more critically interrogate the mass media that play such a central role in their identity development and worldview. In this way, teaching the mass media is also an approach that can simultaneously promote academic and critical literacies. In order to function as empowered citizens with positive self concepts, urban teens of color need to be able to deconstruct and reinterpret the messages that are sent to them by media advertisers. At the same time, with the proliferation of independent news sources coupled with the concentration of news reporting agencies, these same youth need the analytical skills—the literacy skills—that enable them to make sense of the mixed and multiple messages about the world that are conveyed through the various news media. Young people need to understand the difference between reality and the media’s various representations of reality. Individuals wishing to remain informed need to learn to “read” news media carefully; they must also triangulate traditional readings with counter-readings of media texts. Critical citizens must also be producers of media texts writing or using other images when and where they can, whether through a web page, a community newsletter,

a brochure, an independent newspaper, a letter to the editor, or a message sent out on a listserv.

This paper outlines a framework for the critical teaching of media and cultural studies in urban secondary literacy classrooms as a way of promoting much-needed academic and critical literacies. We argue that a critical media pedagogy can help young people to identify concepts such as hegemony and ideology and understand that the mass media are not neutral entities. Through a problem-posing (Freire, 1970) and culturally affirming pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), students can also learn to deconstruct dominant media narratives and to create their own counter-narratives to the media's depiction of urban youth of color.

This paper also examines data gathered during several years of English teaching in an urban high school in Northern California. Both Duncan-Andrade and Morrell taught at this school for a number of years. Data are also analyzed from a summer seminar where urban teens were apprenticed as critical researchers studying urban youth's access to public spaces and social institutions. Each of these sets of data, we feel, reveals how a critical media pedagogy can simultaneously empower youth toward the media they confront while also imparting academic literacy skills. We conclude with a challenge to literacy educators to justify traditional practices that use alienating and irrelevant texts in diverse classrooms. We ultimately contend that new media texts are more relevant to and affirming of the everyday sociocultural experiences of students and can be used to teach the literacy skills needed for academic advancement, critical citizenship, and professional employment.

Cooking up the Canon: Examining the Use of Popular Culture in an Urban High School English Class

In the Fall of 1997, we began inserting elements of youth popular culture into each literature unit we taught with our 11th grade English classes. In practice, this meant an inclusion of a popular music video to go along with a poem we were analyzing, or a popular film to accompany a novel we might have been reading. While this may not appear to be all that unique or revolutionary, what we began to discover was that the more we deviated from the traditional approach to teaching literature, the more our students became engaged.

This section looks at the impact of popular culture through the lens of two focal students. Essentially, we chose to focus on the experiences of these two students because both were perceived by their previous teachers to be below average, and even marginal students at times. Greg, one of the focal students, had been classified as a “special needs” student. To our surprise, Shaun, the other focal student was also tested for special education when he was in the ninth grade. Both Shaun and Greg are African American males in a school whose median grade point average for African American males was 1.8 at the time.

Shaun told us the story of his special education experience during a formal interview session which took place at the end of the unit:

Shaun: When I first started school I wanted to be a writer. A journalist or a sports journalist, or basically anything to do with writing, I just came in and I liked writing, period point blank. My teacher, I’m not going to say any names but she’s a teacher up here now, she tried to kick me out of the class and told me that

I needed to go back to remedial English or something. So then my Mom came up to the school and they had a little conference and they told me I had to take the English placement test to see where I should go. And I took and it looks like, or it seemed that, I should go up like two units instead of back three like where she was trying to put me. So then they put me up in Mr. S's class, that's an ACP (Advanced) class. From then on it seems like every class that I had in English didn't make no sense. (From a formal interview with Shaun on May 20, 1998)

Although Shaun speaks with little regard for the events of his past, the negative impact of that experience on his academic self-confidence is obvious.

Greg and Shaun, like many students, were already making tremendous investments of time and energy in understanding and enjoying elements of popular culture. This led us to the logical conclusion that popular culture could become a bridge to teaching our students academic literacy and literary critique. For us, the emergent question was whether it mattered where, or from what, our students acquired these analytical skills? Greg and Shaun became powerful voices of critique against dominant ideologies that claim we should cling to the literature of the canon as the sole source of intellectual and academic material. Their stories are counter-narratives, arguing that conservative curricular strategies can act to disenfranchise many powerful minds from the academy.

Specifically, this segment relies on the lenses of Shaun and Greg to examine the ways in which a unit on the epic allowed students an effective way to interact with three key concepts of the course. The unit compared Francis Ford Coppola's epic film trilogy, *The Godfather*, to Homer's epic tale, *The Odyssey*. Three key literary areas are evaluated

as they became applicable to both the intellectual space surrounding the films and the more traditional intellectualism emerging out of discussions of the literary canon. The first of these concepts is “Critical Literary Perspective”, which is to say ways of critiquing and critically analyzing thematic issues and character actions in works we were studying. The second area is “Literary Concepts”, which are the basic units of literary identification such as theme, character, plot, and setting. The final area was “Literary Structure”, which when understood provides students with the tools to discuss and critique the author’s/director’s choice to use certain literary devices (i.e. allusion, rhyme) or cinematography to convey meaning.

Shaun: If you learn one way to cook on a stove, you can always go to another stove and learn to cook. That’s just like if you learn popular culture, you can come back and learn how to use canonical culture. Because learning, basically all you have to do is use your mind and be interested in what you are learning. Because if you are bored in class you are just going to doze off in class and sleep (aside: cause some teachers will let you sleep I ain’t even gonna lie.) If it’s interesting though, you’ll stay up and you’ll participate and you’ll try to get some points of information in. But no matter what you’ll always try to learn. But I think if you are allowed to learn from that pop culture and then that teacher tried to bring you into the canonical, or the regular text, I think if you are paying attention in this one (pop culture) and they can relate it to the other then the person will learn both ways. I can say for myself that I did that in this class.

(From a formal interview with Shaun on May 20, 1998)

Shaun seems to be able to say it better than we can. Like Shaun, we tend to believe that this principle also applies to learning. What it is that gets students to step to this metaphoric stove to begin to learn to cook up the literary canon? This study looked at whether or not the use of popular culture could provide that impetus to start the kettle of knowledge brewing for this group of students. For approximately three weeks, the class watched, took notes on, and analyzed *The Godfather Trilogy*. The class would spend approximately 35-40 minutes per day watching the film and then 15-20 minutes reviewing and interrogating the day's segment. In the middle of the second of the three films, students were introduced to *The Odyssey* through a 45-minute background lecture on the text, its major characters, the author and the central themes of the work and its time period. Students were then assigned nightly reading for homework while they continued to explore *The Godfather Trilogy* during class time. Class discussions then began to ask students to draw comparisons between the two works.

While the incorporation of popular culture was certainly rooted in the partnering of this film trilogy with the canonical text, it should not be overlooked that many of the classroom activities that followed the showing of the film were deliberately rooted in elements of the students' popular culture. The success or failure of those activities rests on the extent to which the students bridge the knowledge of the film text to their knowledge of the written text. This bridge allows the two bodies of knowledge—written and visual—to function both independently and cooperatively. It also creates mastery of key literary concepts of two rich pieces of text using the skill of comparative analysis. One example of the multi-layered student development comes in the frequent incorporation of oral based activities that require the inclusion of formal argument skills.

The ability to express oneself is a trait that is valued in virtually all youth cultures, and with the onset of endless court dramas in the media culture of past and present, this curriculum sought to pull this skill into the class.

This was made possible through assignments such as the “Submissive vs. Subversive Debate” where students were asked to choose sides to determine whether the major female characters in *The Odyssey* and *The Godfather Trilogy* were submissive to the patriarchal power structures of their day, or if they were actually able to empower themselves by subverting that power structure. Through these types of activities, students were able to plug into the elements of the film to show knowledge of the literary concepts we were trying to impart to the class.

The “Submissive vs. Subversive Debate” was introduced to the class in the form of the following question:

Compare/contrast Athena and Penelope as characterizations of the female in classical literature. Are they strong? Are they subservient to the males in their society? Are they able to manipulate the system to get what they want or do their efforts merely reinforce their subordination? How do they compare to the women of *The Godfather*?

Since the class had performed similar exercises before, there was minimal discussion about the process. The probing of the question began by asking the students for examples of characters from past literature that appear submissive, but are actually subverting social expectations. Two students, one of whom was Greg, gave characters from films that we had watched in the course. While both of the examples provide powerful testimony to the potential of film to teach literary concepts, in Greg’s example is the most

powerful evidence of this. Greg referred to Andy from *Shawshank Redemption*, a film that we had watched in his sophomore year. He argued that Andy's character had played the game of prison so that he could plot his escape from that world. Greg argued further, that Andy was only able to accomplish this by giving the appearance of conforming to the larger social expectations of him as a prisoner at Shawshank prison. Our field notes for that day note that the examples students provide, the ones that are most immediate and long lasting for them, easiest to recall, are both from films (Field notes, March 6, 1998).

In providing this example, Greg demonstrated a retention not only of the content of the film, but he has also articulated an understanding of two of the three major literary concepts that we hoped to impart to the students in the course. Greg showed an understanding of "literary perspective" by performing an analysis of Andy's motives. He also performed another form of "literary perspective" by making a feminist critique of Andy's place as an otherized character that must abide by the rules of an oppressive system in order to find the freedom that he seeks. Greg also showed an understanding of some of the "literary concepts" that the course taught by showing a retained understanding of the themes and characters from *Shawshank Redemption* and their relationship to the works that we were studying at that time¹.

Shaun's confidence manifested itself in his taking the lead role in his debate group. What struck us most about his taking of this role was the reception of his classmates to his positioning himself in that way. Where Shaun had traditionally been on the margins of most group projects and classroom discussions, his classmates both

¹ This ultimately resulted in Greg transferring these same arguments to his critical essay, which required a comparison of the film and the novel from the unit.

embraced his leadership position and openly recognized his expertise in the film. Shaun recognized this in his comments on the film during a post-unit interview: “everybody kept asking me who all the characters were and what was going on, like I knew” (Interview, April 20, 1998).

In the final day of group preparation, the group decided that they wanted to meet over the weekend to make sure that they were ready for the opening day of the debate on the following Monday. Shaun volunteered his house as the meeting place for their subgroup which went a long way in showing the level of investment he was making in ensuring that his group was ready for the debate. After their meeting place was settled, Greg wanted to get the group to tighten up their argument behind the characters of *The Godfather*, so he asked each person to summarize what they felt was the crux of their argument. Without any volunteers forthcoming, Greg articulated what he felt should be the crux of their argument, saying that they should “argue for the reversal of the roles of power by using Kaye [one of the lead female characters in the trilogy]” (Field Notes, March 10, 1998). The group agrees that Kaye is a central piece to their argument with oral affirmation, but also by writing it down in their notes that they planned to use for the debate. As they wrote in their personal notebooks, each of the other two group members moved to Shaun’s side to look at his notebook, checking to see if their notes matched his. As this happens, an interesting chain of events occurs:

*Greg articulates another point in their argument and Shaun seems perplexed, saying “ I agree with what you are saying but I can’t make my pen write it like that.”

*Shaun then reaches across the desks and hands Greg his notebook and says,
“You write it, just like you just said it.”

*Greg smiles and writes out his statement (Field Notes, March 10, 1998).

The exchange of power, influence, and expertise are particularly powerful here because of who was handling the power. Both of these students were willingly sharing a tremendous amount of intellectual power between themselves. Neither of them felt challenged by the other and Shaun’s willingness to admit that Greg said it better than he could shows his comfort in his own role as the leader of the sub-group. In addition to his figurative sharing of power through the acknowledgement of Greg’s intellect, there was also a literal transference of power when Shaun passed his notebook to Greg so that he could put his words in it. Since the notebook had previously been the centerpiece of the group’s intellectual capital, and it was Shaun’s notebook, his willingness to pass that symbol of power to Greg holds a powerful moment in the cooperative learning paradigm. In the power of that moment it is easy to overlook the group’s interrogation of the film for its potential to prove their argument. As they articulated the stance that they planned to take, they were using the film to develop skills of formal argument by using both literary perspective and literary concepts.

The debate became the first time in the unit that the film was not the centerpiece of discussion. For the first time in the unit, both the film and the written text would carry equal weight. This seemed to weigh heavily on Shaun who openly admitted that he hadn’t read much of *The Odyssey*. On the second day of the “Submissive vs. Subversive Debate”, as the class lined up their three “speaker desks”, Greg and Shaun sat themselves in two of the front row desks which faced the opposing side’s three “speaker desks”.

Sitting in one of these desks was a significant act as it meant that you were one of the primary debaters for your side for that day. Seated, Shaun took out *The Odyssey* and his notes and said to Greg and Isaac, “I’ll stick to *The Godfather* cause I don’t know shit about this book.” Shaun’s comment here speaks volumes about issues surrounding rights and authority to lead the debate. Shaun saw himself as an expert, but because of his lack of expertise in the written text, he shied from the discussion/debate of the themes.

Despite his lack of confidence to discuss *The Odyssey*, today was to be Shaun’s day in the spotlight. In the rebuttal to one of the primary arguments of the Submissive Team, Shaun upstaged all of his group partners by dominating their rebuttal time with multiple references to the film. He posited the argument that Connie’s character was absolutely subversive to the patriarchal power structure of the family by empowering herself to give orders to Vincent. While this argument was well grounded and definitely had merit, the way in which Shaun developed the argument for the class showed a level of analysis and investment in the film that was unparalleled. Initially, Shaun used his notes as a crutch to develop his rebuttal argument, double-checking each point before he would make it. However, as he loosened up and realized that the class was following his argument, he hit full stride. Ultimately he provided an analysis of multiple characters from the film (Michael Corleone, Connie Corleone, Kaye Corleone, and Vincent Mancini). He acted out their exact lines with voice inflection and body language. At one point he played three characters simultaneously, acting out the scene in *Godfather III* where Vince and Connie tell Michael about Vince having to kill Zaza’s hit men.

Shaun’s understanding of the need to change inflections in his voice, his facial expressions, and his body language to portray the different characters and their levels of

power and influence, reflected an understanding of “literary structure”. What Shaun essentially did was to get inside the language of the concepts of the canon without ever mentioning the literature of the canon. What Shaun forced us to question here was whether there was a fundamental difference between his ability to show this knowledge through the film, and the ability of someone who can show that knowledge through a more traditional text?

Although a large majority of the students showed the ability to move between the film and the book, Shaun never formally showed that connection. Still, we cannot help but think that his aversion to traditional literary texts emerged out of a long history of uncaring pedagogy. In his post-unit interview, Shaun spoke about his previous English classes:

Shaun: it seems like every class that I had in English didn't make no sense. All we did for Mr. S was summarize, and then sometimes critique, but not like we have to do in this class. Pretty much all we did was summarize and then we just read out of that big old English book that they give out to all students. So, I would say that this class is different because you have us using our mind and critiquing and thinking back on the rest of my English classes we never really did nothing like that. We just read, summarized and moved onto the next chapter (Formal Interview, April 20, 1998).

It seems reasonable to conclude that without the incorporation of popular culture into the unit, through the film and the debate, Shaun may never have engaged with the unit at all, losing the opportunity to display his critical thinking skills. His confidence rested in his understanding of the film and its characters, but he did not yet make the connection that

this understanding was, indeed, showing a mastery of the literary concepts and language that the course hoped to teach him. Classifications of student abilities, especially through grades, prove to be the most stigmatizing and debilitating for students like Shaun that find it nearly impossible to wash out the stains splattered on to their academic identity by someone else. There is no miracle cure for academic marginalization—only time and access to the center of the discourse can heal that wound. It would take time to undo the years of disenfranchisement that Shaun had come to feel.

The inclusion of popular film in that assignment, both through the film and the activity itself, kept Greg interested in the unit and allowed for him to have continual brushes with the canonical text that he was not reading at that point. Had there been no inclusion of *The Godfather*, it is unlikely that Greg would have been willing to make the same level of investment in the debate because he would have known from the outset that the primary work being discussed was one that he had not read or studied. Instead, what happened was that Greg's interest was held long enough for him to make an investment of both time and intellect in the unit. This interest fostered itself into not only a mastery of the concepts of literature being taught, but ultimately manifested itself into his mastery of a good portion of the canonical text which he might otherwise have utterly rejected. In fact, Greg's portion of the debate was so poignant that when the bell rang in the middle of his argument, not one student moved to gather their materials—it was as if the bell had never rung at all. This is, for us, the most powerful evidence of Greg's mastery of the concepts, the unit, and of the power that comes with knowing, and the sharing of that knowledge. Everyone stayed seated and writing until Greg finished his argument about the hypocrisy in the text around the treatment of women. Not one person moved or

packed up their books! This is also a powerful statement about the power of student voice to hold the attention of their peers. To be able to speak and hold a class past the bell is to have captured the essence of teaching and learning. The students became learners at this point, no longer subject to the basic rigor of the institution that served to determine when education began and ended. This moment transcended the notion that a conversation of intellectual merit shall only require 55 minutes and need not run beyond that for any reason.

“What knowledge is of most worth?” This is a deceptively simple question, however, since the conflicts over what should be taught are sharp and deep. It is not “only” an educational issue, but one that is inherently ideological and political. Whether we recognize it or not, curriculum and more general educational issues have always been caught up in the history of class, race, gender, and religious conflicts in the United States and elsewhere.

Because of this, a better way of phrasing the question, a way that highlights the profoundly political nature of educational debate, is “Whose knowledge is of most worth?” (Apple, 1990)

If, indeed, we hope to empower the young people that have, by virtue of their birth, been excluded from equal opportunity, we must change the way that we teach them in our public schools. While there has never been a shortage of contracts written to fix this problem, there has been a drought on solutions that actually work. What our research uncovers is but one possible avenue to finding those solutions.

There is a space within the youth popular culture that students already embrace and invest in daily for learning the very concepts that we hope to teach them. However,

it is not enough to provide patronizing inclusions of short stories by people of color in “that big old English book that they give out to all students” (Interview with Shaun, April 20, 1998). Nor is it enough to tack on a popular film or the hip rap song of the day. These adjustments to the outlines of our courses have produced little to no impact on the educational attainment of the students that these changes promised to empower. Quite simply, it is not enough to just incorporate elements of popular culture into the syllabus. The elements of the popular culture of the learner must pervade the assignments as much as it has come to plaster the classroom walls in the form of posters and flags.

Students who may never fully embrace the “great works” do possess an understanding of the major elements of text and can display mastery of the complex literary concepts we hope to teach them. Our experience as teachers and researchers begs the question: What is at the root of our desire to continue to insist that students master an arbitrary list of texts, that, for arbitrary reasons, we have come to believe are most valuable and important? Surely we see the logic in Shaun’s image of the stove, and yet while our students bring knowledge of the newest and most efficient range ovens with them to our classrooms, we insist that they learn to gather kindling and strike the flint.

The Hip-Hop Project

As part of their involvement in a summer research seminar for teens, a group of students decided to study the multiple impacts of hip-hop music and culture on inner city youth and the potential implications for literacy instruction in secondary schools. The research seminar, known as “Special Topics in the Sociology of Education” is offered annually as a collaboration between a local university and surrounding urban school

districts. The students, entering juniors and seniors, come together to study works that introduce them to critical social theory, research related to urban education and urban sociology, and critical qualitative research methods. The centerpiece of the seminar is an independent critical research project that is completed by the students, who work together in groups of four or five. Led by a mentor, either a graduate student or practicing teacher, the student team creates a question, locates relevant literature, designs a study, collects and analyzes data, and writes a report to share with university faculty and community activists. Over the four year history of the seminar, student-generated research has been published on web sites and read by local and state politicians. Student work has also been featured on local and national media outlets.

It is important to add that the student-participants in the summer research seminars are not selected based on superior grades or recommendations. To the contrary, the students who participate often have marginal academic records or are labeled as “at risk” by their respective institutions. Of the student participants in the hip-hop group, for instance, none held higher than a 2.3 grade point average and none were enrolled in the Honors or Advanced Placement track at their high school.

The four students interested in the hip-hop project centered their work in social reproduction theory and critical literacy. They read works from MacLeod (1987) and Bourdieu (1977) to understand how the structure and culture of urban schooling leads to the reproduction of social inequality. Certainly, one facet of this structure would include hegemonic curricula, or assignments that reflected the norms and interests of the dominant elites in society. The following is an excerpt from the students’ final report:

The Sociology of Education is a field of study that seeks to explain how forces of social reproduction help to maintain inequality in educational achievement.

Sociologists of Education also explore ways to enable teachers, students, parents, and communities to alter or disrupt these forces. For example, the powerful elite, which are less in population, have power over the masses, which are overflowing in population. Social Reproduction is the way that the powerful elite have control over the masses. It refers to the ways in which dominant institutions (like school) promote social inequality. This allows a small dominant group (oppressors) to maintain control over a much larger subordinated group (oppressed) (Hip-hop Project, 1999).

As a response to curricula intended to promote dominant interests through “justifying oppression and excluding people’s cultures,” the group looked to Freire and Macedo’s (1987) critical literacy or an empowering reading of the word and the world. Specifically, the group focused in on the following statement from Freire and Macedo:

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. Reading the word is not merely preceded by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. Words should be laden with the meaning of the people's existential experience, and not of the teacher's experience. A critical reading of reality constitutes an act of what Gramsci calls counterhegemony (36).

The students surmised that the inclusion of hip-hop culture in secondary curricula could play a vital role in a Gramscian-inspired counterhegemonic curriculum. Again, we quote liberally from the student report:

Understanding the world you live in will help you become conscious of your oppression. When you are conscious of your oppression, your ideology will change and when your ideology changes, your actions will change. Then it becomes possible to change the world you live in. Having a problem such as oppression and being conscious of that problem will help you become critical of your actions and this can change your interpretation of the powerful elite and your struggles. When you change your interpretation of your struggles, transformation can begin. Hip-hop culture can help urban youth become conscious of their oppression because it relates to their own experiences and teaches them to be themselves, fight for what they believe in, and pursue their dreams (Hip-hop Project, 1999).

As part of data collection, the students took photographs that depicted the impact of hip-hop culture and music on youth in their communities. They designed a survey that was distributed to students in the area, and they conducted formal and informal interviews with students, classroom teachers, and neighborhood residents. The research showed that students and teachers agreed that hip-hop music and culture have a major impact on the lives of urban youth, although there was general disagreement over the nature of this impact. For instance, several students pointed toward artists such as Lauryn Hill as examples of how hip-hop music could lead to increased self-esteem and social

critique among youth. Others, however, pointed toward hip-hop's violent images and negative references to women as bitches and hoes.

The student research here is corroborated by the work of Giroux (1996) and Lipsitz (1994) who also speak to the multiple positive and problematic outcomes associated with participation in hip-hop culture. Lipsitz, for example, identifies hip-hop culture as a struggle between the forces of youth resistance and commodification of the culture industries. Although hip-hop culture is an expression of the rage and frustration of postindustrial urban youth (Rose, 1994) it is ultimately dominant business interests that determine how the product is marketed and distributed to the youth from whom it is inspired. Giroux also sees hip-hop as a powerful example of youth critique and resistance, a potent counternarrative of life for youth remaining in postindustrial cities long after the jobs and hopes of industry have departed. His critique, however, is similar to the students in that he sees much of the product that is marketed promoting the criminalization of males and the fetishization of working class females as objects of sexual desire.

Many early theorists of hip-hop (Baker, 1993; George, 1999; Rose, 1994; and Tabb-Powell, 1991) make the distinction between the roots of hip-hop culture and the product that is marketed to youth worldwide. In our own work (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, 2002) we express the importance of textual selection in any classroom units that incorporate hip-hop music and culture. This is no different from the criteria of textual selection in which literacy educators engage with canonical texts. None of this, however, detracts from the students' findings or the potential role of hip-hop in a

counterhegemonic curriculum. The point of the research is not to blindly celebrate all that calls itself hip-hop. To the contrary, the students' desired to critically interrogate hip-hop as a viable subject of academic study. In this sense, their work is truly an example of the critical cultural studies called for by Giroux and Kellner.

The student research paper concludes with several recommendations that the students generated for secondary literacy teachers. We will excerpt them here as they are presented in the report:

As a result of our research, the group has come up with the following recommendations for teachers, administrators, and researchers:

1. Teachers should listen to the students' opinions on how they want to learn and what they feel should be taught.
2. As much as possible, curriculum should reflect the experiences of the students.
3. Teachers should understand that school structure and curriculum choices help to promote inequality in achievement. It's not just the fault of "bad" kids who don't want to learn.
4. Teachers should talk with students about social inequality in school to help them become conscious of their oppression.
5. Teachers should make an effort to understand hip-hop culture because it reflects the experiences of their students and has such a tremendous impact on their students' lives.

6. There should be a forum at Pacific High School for us to share our research with teachers and to discuss more student-focused alternatives for the school curriculum.
7. Some ways that teachers might include hip-hop in their curriculum include:
 - Examining the messages that artists are trying to send through their songs to promote discussions among students.
 - Looking at the experiences of the artists and having the students relate to their own experiences.
 - English teachers can examine the use of language in hip-hop and how it relates students' use of language.
- Hip-hop music can be taught in comparison to other forms of African-American music like Jazz.
- Special courses should be offered that reflect student interests. Students in these courses should be allowed to conduct and publish their own research on topics like hip-hop and explore such issues as: why artists use certain language, why themes such as poverty and struggle appear often in the lyrics.
- Teachers can compare the themes in current rap songs with similar themes in older literary works to help students make the connection between their world and the world of literature (Hip-hop Project, 1999).

This student-generated report is an example of the type of critical cultural studies that empowers urban youth of color over the popular media in which they are immersed.

Students left the research with a sophisticated sense of the multiple roles that hip-hop

music and culture played in their lives along with a framework and a language for explaining these different outcomes associated with participation in hip-hop culture. To a person, the students admitted that they would be more critical consumers of hip-hop culture. Further, the students were able to take an empowering position vis-à-vis the curricular offerings at their school. In addition to submitting this report, the student participants also presented their findings and recommendations to the English department at their school and to a local conference for English teachers. Later in that same school year, one of the teachers actually allowed these students to incorporate hip-hop texts into their curriculum.

Finally, in addition to being an example of critical cultural studies, this is an illustration of effective adolescent literacy instruction. These students, entering juniors at the time of the research, read complex academic texts, designed interview protocols and surveys, transcribed interviews, and wrote a lengthy report as part of the research process. All of these reading, writing, and research skills were directly related to the academic literacy requirements of secondary schooling.

The Critical Media Project

One year later, at this same summer research seminar, another group of students found themselves immersed in a project related to the media's interactions with and portrayals of urban youth of color. It was the summer of 2000 and the seminar, located in the host city of the Democratic National Convention, focused upon an examination of youth access as it related to the city of Los Angeles and the DNC. The group that we will

concentrate on for this analysis chose to examine youth access to the media and the media's portrayal of urban youth of color.

The group began its work on the premise that millions of people rely on mainstream media reporting for their information about themselves and the world; most of which is consumed uncritically. A second premise was that youth, and in particular youth of color, were frequently portrayed in negative terms by these dominant media narratives. The group consulted literature from cultural theorists such as Kellner (1995) who speak to the role that media play in constructing reality and call for a critical pedagogy of media culture to counter the negative impacts of these dominant narratives on members of marginalized populations. From their analysis of the literature, the group develops a definition of critical media literacy that is not so terribly dissimilar from one that appears earlier in this article:

Critical Media literacy: To obtain facts from the media text necessary: to examine, ask questions, analyze and critically dissect all the forms of culture, language, issues of power, positionality within a text that may create particular meanings, identities, and to shape and transform the material and social conditions of our culture and society. To question reality vs. perception. To examine who the experts are on the story. To consider what you believe is the most accurate, reliable, and factual source of information from the different types of resources or media. To explore how culture, society, and polity are structured and work (Critical Media Project, 2000).

The student research group also focused on the Insider-Outside perspective of corporate media showing how the people on the inside—usually those most closely

aligned with power—often control the dissemination of information that influences the lives of the outsiders and how these outsiders live and make sense of their own situation. This point was further elaborated in their argument of the relationship between the dominant interests in society and the *Media Optic*, which they defined as the way the media views: events, incident, facts, who are the experts, what voices and stories are heard, the complexity of a situation, or themes etc. and what effects how media views the phenomenon. Finally, this group theorized the concept of the *Media Filter*—how the media interprets, filters, and frames a phenomenon with some examination of how the media’s positionality, corporate structures, marketing strategies, finance backers, etc. may influence what stories are told and what voices are heard, and who benefits from the story.

In order to gather data for their research, the students interviewed and followed members of the mainstream media during their coverage of the Democratic National Convention. They also distributed a survey on attitudes toward the media to various participants in the convention’s activities including activists, politicians, and delegates. Next, they conducted a sophisticated content analysis of the coverage of the major daily newspapers during the week of the convention, specifically as this coverage related to framing youth involvement in protests at the convention (see Table 1 for sample analysis).

The critical media research group found that most people did get their information about local events from the corporate media. In their interactions with members of the media, they found that editors and publishers did encourage a certain reading of youth as volatile, disruptive, and delinquent. Reporters, for instance, admitted that even if a youth

protest was peaceful and substantive, if there was one incident of violence or mayhem, then that would lead. A protest without violence or mayhem was actually not considered as news. It is significant to note that, in their analysis of the daily news coverage of the Democratic National Convention, few links were ever made between youth activists and the causes that they represented. The student research paper concluded with the following observations and recommendations:

1. Many of students may have a tendency to read and interact with mainstream media without questioning the perspective, the experience, the truth, the author's positionality, and the expertise of others, let alone how it might affect students in process of and identity formation, how they interact with others, or how decisions are made regarding youth, youth issues, and youth activists.
2. It is highly possible that in the process of accessing various types of media (i.e. newspapers, television shows, internet, radio, etc. in addition to what they learn from peers, family members, communities, and other forms of text), many students may consciously or unconsciously question and/or learn what it means, for example, to be stereotyped and silenced in the United States from those whose language evokes a particular history, position of power, and oppression over others.
3. Given media coverage and the structure of many stories will likely remain unchanged, students must be instilled with a more critical awareness of the language, social construction of identity and how race/ethnicity relations is discussed in media.

4. In particular, we need to encourage students to critically think, raise questions as to what factors may affect who students think they are, what they can become, how they think of others, how students interact with others, to examine issues of power, and to analyze relationships particularly Black and Latino youth relations.
5. Students need to be trained in critical media literacy and seen as experts on youth to be empowered to change our future for the better (Critical Media Project, 2000).

The media study group provides another example of first rate critical research on the power of media narratives. The detailed content analysis of the major daily news coverage is the material of graduate theses and professional publications. The students were profoundly affected by the dissonance between their own experiences of events surrounding the convention and the eerily uniform miscoverage by major news outlets. LaShonda, one of the student-researchers in the media group, had this to say in her final journal:

LaShonda: I feel that my group learned a lot from all the things that we have done. We now see that there are a lot of people that are out there that will ask you for your voice, but when you are ready to tell them they might not want to here what you have to say. I feel that we seen a lot of the media only showing the bad things that went on at the convention. When we talked to some of them they said that they only put things on TV that people want to see. If the protest was peaceful then people did not want to see it. From being down there I see that youth have to stand up and be loud. The reason I say that is if you are not loud

you will not be heard. Some times the system is not working for you but working against you (Excerpt from LaShonda's journal, August 15, 2000).

Several of LaShonda's colleagues decided to contribute to local media outlets or create their own. One member of this group wrote a multi-page feature in her high school paper and a few others joined their high school journalism staffs with the intent of providing socially-informed reporting. A few submitted their work to online publications, while still others presented their work to national conferences for educational researchers and activists for social justice. This textual production underscores our argument that critical media pedagogy cannot only be concerned with the critical consumption of existing media texts. Educators interested in engaging in critical media pedagogy must also see as their aim to create texts that speak out against the workings of the dominant media while, at every turn, providing perspectives of contemporary events from marginalized voices.

Conclusion

Like West (1993), hooks (1994) has argued that one of the most pressing problems facing poor communities is low self-esteem. She attributes this to an on-going barrage of negative images of the poor in popular culture. Hooks continues by saying that this low self-esteem makes it "impossible for [the] younger generation to move forward even as it makes their lives physically unbearable" (171). She concludes that to change this, educators must intervene at existing sites of representation. This intervention can come in many forms, including pressuring the producers of media to provide more accurate and positive representations of poor and non-white groups. Equally as powerful would be a pedagogy and curriculum that gave students the critical

media literacy skills to critique these media representations so as to develop counter-narratives.

Our students tell us, in their dress, in their actions and in their words that they want to be taught. But, if we listen carefully, they will also tell us what we can use to teach them.

Andrade: Shaun, you mentioned KRS One [a popular rap artist] and Yancy you affirmed that he is deep. What is it about him specifically that you would term as ‘deep’, and do you think that there should be a place in schools for his work to be talked about, and to give students the language to not just listen to him but to then be able to discuss him academically?

Shaun: The reason I say he is deep is because he talks onto subjects that people usually don’t want to talk about. Let me think of one song [pause] (to himself: I’ve got so many songs in my head). I could probably remember it if I started singing some of the verses...I’ll tell you when I get home cause I know I’ve got it in my tape collection.

But, he talks about *his* family; he talks about how *he* grew up, he talks about how his life was in the projects, he talks about how his life was when he got into school, he talks about everything in his life. The reason why I would say he’s deep is because I can relate to almost everything he said. Just like back in the day my favorite book used to be *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*. I know right now that sounds like a stupid book but it was by Walter Dean Meyers. I remember back in the day I was like “I’m gonna be just like him”. Because he just wrote

about everything that I thought never could be read about. He talks about playing basketball in the streets. You don't ever see anyone out there write a book just about playing basketball in the streets. Anything that I can relate to, or get a grasp to, that will make me think about more, I'm gonna try to get more information about that, more and more until I can't get any more, but I doubt that would ever happen. ...If they had a Goodie M.O.B., 2Pac, or KRS One class, that's automatic. People already know about them, they already listen to them, so they already have influence over people. So that's just going to make them want to come to the class even more to learn what they are talking about (Interview with Shaun and Yancy, April 20, 1998)

Educators rightly believe that on-going training and continuous education are effective measures to decide on what is best for our children to learn. However, we have gone increasingly wide of the mark in our efforts to devise strategies for getting them to learn those things. Rather than using the strengths that they bring with them to our classrooms, we have made it our personal mission to separate that which they already know from that which we feel they must know. This, in our opinion, has been our fatal flaw.

As far back as 1951 researchers were calling for schools to develop critical media literacies through the curriculum:

...urging that schools include courses in their curricula which teach the critical evaluation of TV, and of other mass media. These observers argue that we are leaving the age of the spoken and written word and entering the age of pictures. It is high time, they say, that our classrooms caught up with the outside world (Shayon, 1951: 86, as cited in Reeves 1999).

At a time when estimates are that 99% of US households have at least one television and some 70% percent have two or more (Reeves 1999) the time has come for teachers and schools to recognize and use popular media as a powerful tool for connecting students to the curriculum. As Postman (1985) puts it, “the problem does not reside in *what* we watch. The problem is *that* we watch. The solution must be found in *how* we watch” (160, as cited in Reeves 1999).

Schools must step up to the challenge of the 21st Century and help students develop the language to counter the sophisticated politics of public portrayal that target them every day. In so doing, two positive outcomes can be achieved for young people. First, as we have demonstrated in multiple ways in this paper, students’ academic literacy skills can be developed and accelerated. Second, students can learn to develop counter-narratives that allow for a sense of empowerment to disrupt those negative images and create their own realities.

Students engage daily in all of the aspects of school that we are convinced they have no interest in. Our mistake has been in our unwillingness to recognize this and to capitalize on it in our classrooms. As Kozol (1991) notes in *Savage Inequalities*:

It occurred to me that we had not been listening much to children in these recent years of “summit conferences” on education, of severe reports and ominous prescriptions. The voices of children, frankly, had been missing from the whole discussion.

This seems especially unfortunate because the children often are more interesting and perceptive than the grown-ups are about the day-to-day realities of life in

school. For this reason, I decided, early in my journey, to attempt to listen very carefully to children and, whenever possible, to let their voices and their judgments and their longings find a place within this book—and maybe, too, within the nation’s dialogue about their destinies. I hope that, in this effort, I have done them justice (Kozol, 1991).

Kozol is quite correct. When, as educators, our curriculum, our assessments, and our schools become as inclusive as he hopes his book will be, our search for motivated learners may very well be concluded.

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Table 1: Newspaper analysis (Sample)

Newspaper on Aug. 15	Word Count	Coverage of youth activist/protest issues	Pictures
USA Today	Weapons – 13 Police – 6 Fire – 1 Protester –5 Students –0 Youth - 1	None	At nighttime, four protesters surround a fire, two with handkerchiefs covering their mouths. One protester is putting a piece of paper in the fire out of the 8000 youth at concert/demonstration area
LA Times	Weapons – 2 Police – 20 Arrest – 2 Riot – 5 Protester – 4 Youth – 2 Gas Masks – 1 Students – 2	None	Five cops of color walking in the middle of the street with riot gear preparing for any riots that may break out.
Chicago Tribune	Protester – 22 Violence – 7 Weapons – 5 Police – 27 Fire –1 Anarchists - 2	2 issues mentioned – “Human need not corporate greed” and “Occidental Petroleum Inc.	Six LADP Police officer in riot gear with batons are on top of a protester who is trying to cover his head with his arms
LA Opinion	Protester – 2 Police – 7 Manifestantes – 12 Disturbance - 1	3 – issues mentioned – Oil drilling, nuclear weapons, spending money on schools	Three pictures – one cop hitting one person, calm protesters walking and holding signs, and a picture of other calm demonstrators