Where Have All the Public Intellectuals Gone? Racial Politics, Pedagogy, and Disposable Youth

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Rise of the “New” Public Intellectual
The crisis of meaning and politics facing the United States is, in part, strikingly evident in the emergence of a new breed of aggressive right wing public intellectuals who have given new importance to expanding the politics of the pedagogical into the diverse spheres of media and popular culture. Such intellectuals have redefined the meaning of cultural pedagogy as a potent force for social and political change in both the old and new electronic media. Public intellectuals such as Rush Limbaugh, Pat Robertson, Christina Hoff Sommers, and William Kristol—utilizing popular cultural sites such as talk radio, television news programs, op-ed columns in nationally syndicated newspapers, well-financed conservative magazines, and other public spheres—consistently and aggressively wage rancorous attacks on civil rights legislation, welfare reform, and social policies designed to benefit subordinate groups. Not only have such intellectuals given a radically different ideological slant to the notion of what it means to be a public intellectual, they have also created new sites of learning from which to shape popular opinion and provide the ground for retrograde public policy. The new conservative public intellectuals have put a low priority on children and the poor while simultaneously producing a public discourse that revives the disgraceful principles of Social Darwinism and the dictates of a racist science that links race and cognitive ability.

Financed largely by well-funded foundations such as Olin, Scaife, and the Coors family, conservative public intellectuals travel with ease between the commanding heights of media culture and the highest reaches of political power. The effects on democratic public life have been devastating. Across the nation, the dismantling of the welfare state appears to go hand-in-hand with the development of a growing right-wing culture of hate that promotes violence against women, gays, lesbians, and racial minorities. At the state level, fear and racial hatred appear to be inspiring a major backlash against the gains of the civil rights movement as affirmative action is openly attacked and anti-immigration legislation, such as Proposition 209 in California, sweep the nation.
cutbacks and the restructuring of the labor force have weakened unions and vastly undercut social services for the most vulnerable, including women with infants, children of the poor, and older citizens who rely on Medicare and other such benefits. Similarly, the assault on youth and the increasing instances of racial and gender discrimination are being accompanied by aggressive attacks on the arts and public funding coupled with assaults on those public sites instrumental in fighting AIDS, poverty, and the destruction of the environment.

One of the most incessant and insidious attacks waged by conservative public intellectuals has been on poor and black youth in the United States. Blamed for drug abuse, exploding crime rates, teenage pregnancy, spiraling cigarette addiction, and a host of other social and economic problems, youth are repeatedly scapegoated by politicians, the dominant media, and numerous liberal and conservative intellectuals. Examples of such scapegoating youth have become so commonplace in the media that they suggest the emergence of a new literary idiom. For example, commenting on contemporary youth in *Wired*, right-wing sensation Camilla Paglia bashes young people for their inability to think critically about any serious political issue. She writes:

I think [young people] become hysterical. They become very susceptible to someone's ideology. The longing for something structured, something that gives them a worldview, is so intense that whatever comes along, whether it's fascism or feminist ideology (which to me are inseparable), they'll glom onto it and they can't critique it. You see the inability of the young...to think through issues like date rape. (Paglia and Brand 79)

Paglia simply reinforces and legitimizes what has become a standard perception of young people in American culture, one that is echoed in Hollywood films such as *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), *Clerks* (1994), *Clueless* (1995), *Bio-Dome* (1995), and *Kids* (1996). In these films and others, kids are portrayed either as vulgar, disengaged, pleasure seekers or as over-the-edge violent sociopaths. Similarly, consider television sitcoms such as *Friends* that portray young people as shallow, unmotivated, navel-gazing slackers intent on making do without the slightest interest in a larger social and political world. While many of the characters frequently experience unemployment, low-wage jobs, and high credit debts, such experiences become at best fodder for comic relief and at worst completely nullified by their sporting hundred dollar haircuts, expensive makeup, and slick Greenwich Village-like apartments. These white middle-class youth are defined largely through their role as conspicuous consumers, their political indifference, and their intense lack of motivation to engage a world beyond their own self-indulgent interests.

On the other hand, represented through a celluloid haze of drugs, crime, and sex, black youth—as in a slew of recent Hollywood films including *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *Sugar Hill* (1993), *Menace II Society* (1993), and *Clockers* (1995)—are viewed as menacing and dangerous. In addition, popular representations of youth in the music press take on a decidedly racial register as they move between
celebrating the politics of cynicism and rage of white singers such as Alanis Morissette and Courtney Love, on the one hand, and giving high visibility to the violent-laden lyrics and exploits of black rappers such as Snoop Doggy Dog and the recently deceased Tupac Amaru Shakur.

Caught between representations that view them as either slackers, consumers, criminals, or sell outs, youth increasingly are defined through the lens of commodification, scorn, or criminality. If not demonized, youth are either commodified or constructed as consuming subjects. For instance, in the world of media advertising prurient images of youth are paraded across high gloss magazines, pushing ethical boundaries by appropriating the seedy world of drug abuse to produce an aesthetic that might be termed “heroin chic.” Capitalizing on the popularity of heroin use in films such as *Trainspotting* (1996), fashion designers such as Calvin Klein portray barely dressed, emaciated youthful models with dark circles under their eyes as part of an advertising campaign that combines the lure of fashion and addiction with an image of danger and chic bohemianism.

Market researchers represent one of the few groups that appear attentive to how youth think, feel, behave, and desire. One such company, Sputnik, sends “youthful spies” to seventeen cities to find out what youth wear, like, buy, and desire. Identifying five youth subcultures, it offers its “research” findings to clients such as Reebok, Levi Strauss and Pepsi-Cola. Whether seen as a market for commodities or commodified as in the recent Calvin Klein underwear ads, kids are stripped of their specificity, agency, and histories. And yet, the popular press rarely takes up how children are exploited through a market logic that grinds up youth in order to expand the margin profits of the corporations. Such exploitation may constitute a more familiar, less sensational form of violence being waged against kids in the dominant media, but it is a violence that is rarely acknowledged as such.

Yet, the corporate exploitation of youth does not account for the insurgent racism that breeds a different register of violence against young people. Racism feeds the attack on teens by targeting black youths as criminals while convincing working class white youth that blacks and immigrants are responsible for the poverty, despair, and violence that have become a growing part of everyday life in American society. Racism is once again readily embraced within mainstream society. As the gap between the rich and the poor widens and racism intensifies, neo-conservatives and liberals alike enact legislation and embrace policy recommendations that undermine the traditional safety nets provided for the poor, the young, and the aged. As the reality of high unemployment, dire poverty, inadequate housing, poor quality education, and dwindling social services are banished from public discourse, white and black youth inherit a future in which they will be earning less, working longer, and straining to secure the most rudimentary social services.

In addition to being demonized by certain elements of the media, young people often find themselves inhabiting a postmodern world of cyberspace
visuals, digitally induced representations of reality and a social landscape consisting mainly of malls, fast food restaurants, and convenience stores, punctuated by economic downsizing and escalating unemployment. The adult world provides few markers for negotiating this terrain; instead, it offers youth a world in which social mobility, the promise of economic security, and the house in the suburbs provide an increasingly irrelevant set of referents for gauging one’s relationship to the so-called American dream. As evidence of the nation’s diminishing commitment to equality of opportunity, working-class and youth of color are increasingly warehoused in educational institutions where rigid discipline and defunct knowledge are coupled with a cultural addiction to excessive individualism, competitiveness, and Victorian moralism.

One measure of the despair and alienation youth experience can be seen in the streets of our urban centers. The murder rate among young adults 18 to 24 years old increased 65 percent from 1985 to 1993. Even more disturbing, as James Alan Fox, the Dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University, pointed out recently is that “murder is now reaching down to a much younger age group—children as young as 14 to 17. Since the mid-1980s, the rate of killing committed by teenagers 14 to 17 has more than doubled, increasing 165 percent from 1985 to 1993. Presently about 4,000 juveniles commit murder annually” (19). With soaring indices of poverty among children, a changing world economy characterized by subcontracting, an explosion in domestic sweatshops, and the proliferation of low-wage factory jobs, the most notable feature about the crisis of democratic public life appears to be the expendability of youth.

In a society gripped by the desire to lose itself in a rendering of mythic past and an equally strong desire to relinquish responsibility for the future, youth become one of the main casualties of such a crisis. As a case in point, the assault on youth is happening without the benefit of adequate rights, fair representation, or even public outcry. Children can’t vote, but they can be demonized, deprived of basic rights, spoon fed an ethos of excessive materialism and forced to put up with a glut of commodified violence in the media. Contrary to the logic of a conservative dominated congress, building more prisons will not solve the problem; neither will reducing student loans, or privatizing public schools. What can academics, cultural workers and other public intellectuals do in light of such an onslaught against children’s culture? What pedagogical and political possibilities exist within and outside of schools for progressives to address the economic, political, and racial problems destroying the hopes of a decent future for the next generation of youth? The effects of such an assault on both young people and the fabric of democratic life poses an urgent challenge for educators to redefine the connection between their roles as public intellectuals and their responsibility to address the major social problems facing young people today. Such a task means, in part, addressing how strategies of interpretation, critique, and intervention might be fashioned within those institutional and pedagogical spaces that provide representations for how youth defined themselves and how they are defined by adult society.
Public Intellectuals, Youth, and the Politics of Culture

If higher education represents one crucial site to educate young people to address the central problems of unemployment, racism, and the major political dilemmas faced by a generation of poor white and black youth, academics will have to address the nature of the current assault on education and its relationship to a broader attack on the basic foundations of democracy. The threat posed by the increasing vocationalization of education and the ongoing attempts by liberals and conservatives to remove all obstacles to the regulation of corporate practices and eliminate the language of equity and social justice from broader discussions about public life suggests that public intellectuals must begin to join together to create a national movement for the defense of public education and other public goods.

Rather than exclusively serving the stripped-down needs of the multinationals, educators and other cultural workers need to develop counter-public spheres and transformative pedagogical conditions in a variety of sites. Such a task would aim at enabling students to critically engage diverse forms of literacy, writing, and knowledge production through the broader lens of public problem solving in order to better understand and transform the political, economic, and ideological interests that shapes the post-industrial world they will inhabit. Central to such an effort would be developing a new discourse for making visible those historical narratives that recount the important struggles for democracy that have unfolded in social movements extending from the civil rights struggles of the 1950s to the oppositional politics waged by organizations such as Act Up in the 1990s. Such movements need to be studied both for the pedagogies and politics at work in the struggles against injustice and engaged as transformative forms of knowledge to be incorporated into the curriculum.

Academics and cultural workers must also redefine the purpose of public and higher education not as a servant of the state nor to meet the demands of commerce and the marketplace but as a repository for educating students and others in the democratic discourse of freedom, social responsibility, and public leadership. At the heart of such a task is the need for academics and other cultural workers outside of the university and other educational sites to join together and oppose the transformation of the public schools and higher education into commercial spheres largely responsible for “the training and credentializing of the growing technical-professional managerial work force” (Strickland). This means not only waging battles against the new professionalism with its rather gutless retreat into a version of post-war new criticism within higher education, or challenging the forces of privatization that threaten public education, but also vigorously opposing those institutional and pedagogical instances of power, discourse, and social practice that silence education for citizenship, abstract learning from public life, and remove politics from questions regarding ownership over means for the production of knowledge. Schools need to provide students with conditions for learning acts of citizenship and a sense of democratic community. And, as Robert Hass, the Poet Laureate of the United States, elegantly reminds us: “The market doesn’t make communities. Markets make
networks of self interested individuals” (19). Schools have a more noble political and pedagogical role which is to “refresh the idea of justice, which is going dead in us all the time” (22).

At the same time, progressives must revive critical attention to conflicts within the terrain of culture and representation that lay at the heart of struggles over meaning, identity, and power, particularly as they address issues regarding how youth are constructed and increasingly demonized within a broader public discourse. Unfortunately, many progressives have viewed the struggle over culture as less significant than what is often referred to as the “concrete” world of material suffering, hunger, poverty, and physical abuse. While such a distinction suggests that representations of homelessness and its actual experience cannot be confused, it is also imperative to understand how physical reality and discourse interact. The struggle over naming and constructing meaning also concerns how we constitute moral arguments and judge whether institutions, social relations, and concrete experiences open up or close down the possibilities for democratic public life. Struggles over popular culture, for instance, represent a different but no less important site of politics. For it is precisely on the terrain of culture that identities are produced, values learned, histories legitimated, and knowledge appropriated.

Culture is the medium of public discourse and social practice through which children fashion their individual and collective identities and learn, in part, how to narrate themselves in relation to others. Culture is also the shifting ground where new and old literacies—ways of understanding the world—are produced and legitimated in the service of national identity, public life, and civic responsibility. As a site of learning and struggle, culture becomes the primary referent for understanding the multiple spheres in which pedagogy works, power operates, and authority is secured or contested.

At stake here is a rejection of the increasingly fashionable notion that such struggles are merely viewed as a stand-in for some “real” politics that are at worst inevitably replaced or at best delayed. Instead such struggles should be viewed as “a different, but no less important, site in the contemporary technological and postindustrial society where political struggles take place” (Gray 6). This should not suggest that academics or other cultural workers engage cultural texts as the privileged site of social and political struggle while ignoring either the historical contexts in which such texts are produced or the underlying economic and institutional forces at work in producing, legitimating and distributing such texts. Clearly cultural texts must be addressed and located within the institutional and material contexts of everyday life without reducing the issue of politics, pedagogy, and democracy to simply questions of meaning and identity. At the risk of overstating the issue, I want to emphasize that I am not suggesting public intellectuals reduce the politics of culture to the politics of meaning, but recognize that any progressive notion of cultural politics and pedagogy must be concerned with “relations between culture and power because...culture is a crucial site and weapon of power in the modern world” (Grossberg 142).
If educators and others are to develop a cultural politics that links theoretical rigor and social relevance, they also must further the implications of such a politics by acknowledging the importance of those diverse educational sites through which a generation of youth are being shaped within a postmodern culture where information and its channels of circulation demand new forms of understanding, literacy, and pedagogical practice. This suggests progressives address how and where politics are being constructed and used in a global world steeped in visual and electronically mediated technologies that are refashioning the control and production of new information-based knowledge systems. Kids no longer view schools as the primary source of education, and rightfully so. Media texts—videos, films, music, television, radio, computers—and the new public spheres they inhabit have far more influence on shaping the memories, language, values, and identities of young people. The new technologies that influence and shape youth are important to register not merely because they produce new forms of knowledge, new identities, new social relations, or point to new forces actively engaged in new forms of cultural pedagogy, but also because they point to public spheres in which youth are writing and creating their histories and narratives within social formations that are largely ignored or only superficially acknowledged in trendy postmodern symposiums on music, youth, and performance.

Popular culture represents more than a weak version of politics or a facile notion of innocent entertainment. In its various registers—from cinema to fanzine magazines—popular culture constitutes a powerful pedagogical site where children and adults are being offered specific lessons in how to view themselves, others, and the world they inhabit. In this sense, the cultural texts that operate within such spheres must be addressed as serious objects of social analysis by anyone who takes education seriously. But recognizing that Hollywood films, for instance, function as teaching machines demands more than including them in the school curricula as a matter of relevance; it also demands that educators interrogate such texts for the connections they propose between epistemology and ethics. For instance, as Geoffrey Hartman has argued, there is a pedagogical connection between “how we get to know what we know (through various, including electronic media) and the moral life we aspire to lead” (Hartman 28).

Raising ethical questions about cultural texts is not meant to deny that such texts register different readings for youth. On the contrary, I am proposing that popular culture texts have important pedagogical consequences. Difficult as it may be to gauge what is precisely learned from reading, listening, or engaging such texts, educators need to analyze how popular texts function as public discourses. Further, educators must be critically attentive to how such texts work intertextually, either resonating or conflicting with ideologies produced in other sites which serve to legitimate or resist dominant policies, and social relations. Educators cannot treat popular texts as if they were hermetic or pure; such approaches often ignore how representations are linked to questions of power and broader social struggles. Reading popular texts through a political
and ethical lens means educators, students, and others refuse to limit their analyses to formalist strategies designed to decipher a text's preferred meanings. Instead, educators should ascertain how certain meanings under particular historical conditions become more legitimate as representations of reality and take on the force of common sense, in turn shaping a broader set of discourses and social arrangements. By focusing on representations of popular culture as public discourses, it becomes possible to shift our attention away from an exclusive focus on narrow, formalistic readings of texts in order to explore the ways in which such texts bear witness to the ethical dilemmas that animate broader debates within the dominant culture. Such pedagogical inquiries become particularly important when raising questions about the political limits of representation—particularly when they portray children in degrading terms, legitimate the culture of violence, and define agency and desire outside of the discourse of compassion and moral responsibility. Expanding the political importance of the pedagogical also raises the crucial issue of what role academics and other cultural workers might play as critical agents, that is, as public intellectuals willing, as Raymond Williams argues, "to make learning part of the process of social change itself" (158).

As the right wing wages war against sex education, condom distribution in schools, free speech on the Internet, and school libraries that carry allegedly "pornographic" books, there is a curious silence from progressives and other radical cultural workers about the ways in which children are portrayed in films, advertising, and media culture in general. Little is said about how the media floods popular culture with representations of senseless violence, misogynist images of women, and black men as lazy, drug-crazed and dangerous. While it is important for progressives to continue to argue for freedom of expression in the defense of films or other cultural forms that might be deemed offensive, they also need to provide ethical referents within such discourses in order to criticize those images and representations that might be destructive to the psychological health of children or serve to undermine the normative foundations of a viable democracy.

Appeals to the First Amendment, the right of artistic expression, and the dignity of consent are crucial elements in expanding cultural democracy, but they are insufficient for promoting an ethical discourse that cultivates a politics of non-violence, self-responsibility, and social compassion. Progressives must begin to demonstrate a strong commitment to exposing and transforming structures of domination that operate through the media and particularly through those spheres that shape public memory and children's culture. That children derive meaning from the media suggests a broader concern for making those who control media culture accountable for the pedagogies they produce. Larger-than-life violence, sensationalism, and high tech special effects in the media can promote a "psychic numbing" and moral indifference in children. Sanctioned cruelty and racism in the popular media often hides behind what Theodor Adorno discerns as an "an obscene merger of aesthetics and reality" (Adorno in Hartman 27).
Zygmunt Bauman is correct in arguing that "there is more than a casual connection between the ability to commit cruel deeds and moral insensitivity. To make massive participation in cruel deeds possible, the link between moral guilt and the act which the participation entails must be severed" (148). All too often this is precisely what happens when culture is completely commodified, when popular culture is viewed as morally neutral or irrelevant, and when subordinate groups are excluded as moral subjects within dominant regimes of representation. But rather than being addressed by the progressive educators and others, such issues are often rearticulated by right-wing fundamentalists whose basic aim is to close down rather than expand the imperatives of a social and cultural democracy. Progressive educators need to build upon a significant body of theoretical work in which popular culture is not exempt from the discourse of political analyses and moral evaluation. At the very least, popular culture as an important site of contestation and struggle should not be handed over to conservatives such as Bob Dole and William Bennett who find in such a sphere a convenient scapegoat for reasserting a Victorian inspired morality and a nostalgic rendering of the past in which young rappers would have been turned over to the "cold war" police and teen mothers would have been forced to put their offspring in state sponsored orphanages. In opposition to such a discourse, progressives must neither romanticize nor dismiss popular cultural texts. On the contrary, such texts along with other forms of traditional knowledge (high-cultural texts) must become serious objects of critical analyses both within and outside of academia.

Education as a Performative Practice
In what follows, I want to explore briefly how elements of a performative pedagogy might be constructed within a radical project so as to affirm the critical but refuse the cynical, establish hope as central to political practice but eschew a romantic utopianism. Pedagogy in this context becomes performative because it opens a space for disputing conventional academic borders and raising questions "beyond the institutional boundaries of the disciplinary organization of question and answers" (Grossberg 145). Performativity reclaims the pedagogical as a power relationship that participates in authorizing or constraining what is understood as legitimate knowledge, and links the critical interrogation of the production of symbolic and social practices to alternative forms of democratic education that foreground considerations of racial politics, power, and social agency.

As a performative practice, the pedagogical opens up a narrative space that affirms the contextual and the specific while simultaneously recognizing the ways in which such spaces are shot through with issues of power. Referencing the ethical and political is central to a performative and pedagogical practice that refuses closure, insists on combining theoretical rigor and social relevance, and embraces commitment as a point of temporary attachment that allows educators and cultural critics to take a position without becoming dogmatic and rigid. The
pedagogical as performative also draws upon an important legacy of theoretical work in which related debates on pedagogy and popular culture can be understood and addressed within the broader context of social responsibility, civic courage, and the reconstruction of democratic public life. Cary Nelson’s insight that cultural politics exhibits a deep concern for “how objects, discourses, and practices construct possibilities for and constraints on citizenship” provides an important starting point for designating and supporting a project that brings together various educators, academics, and cultural workers within and outside of the academy (Nelson and Gaonkar 7).

At stake here is a notion of the pedagogical that provides diverse theoretical tools for educators and cultural workers to move within and across disciplinary, political, and cultural borders in order to raise new questions to provide the context in which to organize the energies of a moral vision, and to draw upon the intellectual resources needed to understand and transform those institutions and forces that keep “making the lives [young people] live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihumane” (Hall 18).

At the risk of overstating the issue, young people inhabit a society that is not only indifferent to their needs but scapegoats them for many of the problems caused by the forces of globalization, downsizing, economic restructuring, and the collapse of the welfare state. Those youth who have come of age during the culture of Reaganism that began in the 1980s are increasingly used as either bait for conservative politics—blamed for crime, poverty, welfare, and every other conceivable social problem—or “defined in relation to the processes and practices of commodification” (Grossberg 27). The attack on youth coupled with an insurgent racism in America have transformed the field of representations, discourse, and practices that shape today’s youth into a battleground. Targeted as trouble and troubling, dangerous and irresponsible, youth face a future devoid of adult support, maps of meaning, or the dream of a qualitatively better life for their own families.

At issue is how youth and race are constructed within new realities that offer both a warning and a challenge to all educators concerned about furthering political and economic democracy in the United States. This is more than a matter of naming or bringing to public attention the scandal that constitutes the conservative attack on youth and the insurgent racism that parades without apology across the American landscape. There is also the matter of what Jacques Derrida calls “performative interpretation.” That is, “an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets” (51). As a pedagogical practice, “performative interpretation” suggests that how we understand and come to know ourselves and others cannot be separated from how we are represented and imagine ourselves. How youth and race are imagined can best be understood through the ways in which pedagogy weaves its “performative interpretation” of youth within all those myriad educational sites in which electronic technologies are redefining and refiguring the relationship among knowledge, desire, and identity. Youth and racial identity are constituted within and across a plurality of partially disjunctive and overlapping communities—such communities or public spheres offer creative
possibilities even as they work to constrain and oppress youth and others through the logic of commodification, racism, and class discrimination. Educators must begin to reclaim the political as a performative intervention that links cultural texts to the institutional contexts in which they are used, critical analysis to the material grounding of power, and cultural production to the historical conditions that give meaning to the places we inhabit and the futures we desire.

At a time when racism and violence against young people has become a growth industry, it is necessary for educators to begin to understand the ways in which the concepts of youth and race function within particular pedagogical and political discourses. At stake here is more than simply providing a critical reading of different cultural texts or the languages that construct them. On the contrary, as I have repeatedly stressed, I am more concerned with how such texts contribute to our understanding of the expanding pedagogical and political role of cultural spheres that are often dismissed as mere entertainment or a showcase for consumer goods. Central to such a concern is how such spheres can be rearticulated as crucial pedagogical sites actively shaping how youth are named and produced in this society. Youth in this instance becomes more than a generational marker; it also becomes an ethical referent reminding adults of their political, moral and social responsibility as public citizens to prepare future generations to confront a world we have created.

The growing demonization of youth and the spreading racism in this country indicate how fragile democratic life can become when the most compassionate spheres of public life—public schools, health care, social services—are increasingly attacked and abandoned. Part of the attempt to undermine those public spheres that provide a safety net for the poor, children, and others can be recognized in the ongoing efforts of the right to “reinstall a wholly privatized, intimate notion of citizenship” (Nelson and Gaonkar 7). Such a constrained notion of citizenship reinforces and legitimates right-wing attempts to shift policy initiatives at the local, state, and federal levels away from investments in social services to policies that support widespread efforts aimed at surveillance and containment. Such policies have resulted in the proliferation of laws passed in nearly a thousand cities to either inaugurate or strengthen curfews designed to keep youth off the streets and to police and criminalize their presence within urban space.

In the new world order, citizenship has little to do with social responsibility and everything to do with creating consuming subjects. Such a constrained notion of citizenship finds a home in an equally narrow definition of pedagogy and the racial coding of the public sphere. In the first instance, pedagogy is defined by conservatives so as to abstract equity from excellence in order to substitute and legitimate a hyper-individualism for a concerted respect for the collective good. In the second instance, it is presumed in both the media and in the representations that flood daily life that the public sphere is almost exclusively white. Blacks are rarely represented as a defining element of national identity or as an integral presence in the various public spheres that make up American life. Reduced to the spheres of entertainment and sports, blacks occupy a marginal
existence in white America's representation of public life, largely excluded from those public spheres in which power and politics are negotiated and implemented. While the immediate effects of this assault on public life bear down on those most powerless to fight back—the poor, children, and the elderly, especially those groups that are urban and black—in the long run the greatest danger will be to democracy itself—and the consequences will affect everyone.

If public intellectuals are to address the interrelating problem of racism and the scapegoating of young people in this society, pedagogy as a critical and performative practice needs to be addressed as a defining principle of their work. That is, those cultural workers—journalists, performance artists, lawyers, academics, media representatives, social workers, teachers, and others—who work in higher education, public schools, the mass media, the criminal justice system, the social services, and related fields need to make those issues that bear down on youth in their daily lives a central and mediating concern of their work. The forces that construct, shape, produce, and legitimate the identities, spaces, values, and opportunities that give meaning to how poor white youth and youth of color imagine themselves and their relationship to the future must be addressed and linked to broader struggles for recognition, civil rights, social justice, and equality. While such concerns may appear too sweeping for some, it is precisely around the discourse of rights, recognition, and social justice that many academics and other cultural workers have rallied to the support of other subordinate and oppressed groups attempting to overcome the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

Ignoring the attack on a generation of young people who appear to have become utterly dispensable to the dominant governing and cultural institutions of society does not bode well for the future of democracy. Demonizing youth not only absoives adults and academics of their civic responsibilities as critical citizens, it also weakens the conditions for carrying on pedagogical and political struggles crucial for a healthy democracy. Addressing the problems of youth both within and outside of the academy suggests reclaiming the space of political and pedagogical work so as to find ways to inspire students to address the pressing problems of joblessness, segregated schools, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate child care and health coverage as well as the economic, gender, and racial basis of injustice and inequity that permeate contemporary society. Such a project implies a fundamental redefinition of the meaning of pedagogy as a political discourse and the role of academics as public intellectuals. Defining themselves less as marginal, avant-garde figures or as professionals acting alone, educators must recover their role as critical citizens and organize collectively in order to address those economic, political, and social problems that must be overcome if young people are going to take seriously a future that opens up rather than closes down the promises of a viable and humane democracy.
Notes

1For instance, see the work of Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, Dinesh D’Douza. While an extensive list of sources documenting the growing racism in the dominant media and popular culture is too extensive to cite, some important examples include: Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell, John Fiske, Jeff Ferrell and Clinton R. Sanders, Herman Gray, Michael Dyson, and Giroux’s Fugitive Cultures. For a summary of the double standard at work in the press coverage of rap music, see Art Jones and Kim Deterline.

2For a recent commentary on the funding of the right, see Robert Parry. For an extensive historical analysis of the rise of right-wing movements and politics in the United States, see Sara Diamond.

3On the resurgence of the right in American politics, see Chip Berlet.

4On the politics of race and blame in the United States, see Kofi Buenor Hadjor.

5See, for instance, Ruth Sidel.

6For a specific analysis of Calvin Klein’s commodification of youth, see Giroux, Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today’s Youth.

7I address this issue in Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture. See also, Stephen Kline, Ellen Seiter, and Michael F. Jacobson and Laurie Ann Mazur.

8On the politics and economics of wealth, welfare, and race, see Melvin L. Oliver & Thomas M. Shapiro.

9For an excellent analysis of these issues, see Harry C. Boyte.

10Strickland lays out specific strategies for addressing the particulars of such a struggle within the university itself.

11It is hard to believe that any serious scholar of contemporary youth can ignore the political importance of the cultural terrain in shaping the identities of young people. For one such instance, see Mike A. Males. Males believes that how young people learn to imagine themselves, others, and their place in the world is determined almost exclusively by generational forces and economic considerations. The political and pedagogical force of cultural institutions simply drops out of his account of young people.

12For an analysis of this issue, see Lawrence Grossberg.

13In this case, I am referring to work in the art world in which the performative, pedagogical, and political mutually inform each other. For instance, see Catherine Ugwu, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Suzanne Lacy, Nina Felshin, or Carol Becker.

14I discuss this issue in more detail in Disturbing Pleasures, Fugitive Cultures, and in Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today’s Youth.

15See Stanley Aronowitz, The Death and Rebirth of American Radicalism.

Works Cited


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**Winterowd Award Winners Announced**

The annual W. Ross Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book on composition theory published in 1996 was awarded to James A. Berlin for *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*, and Honorable Mention was awarded to John Schilb for *Between the Lines: Relating Composition Theory and Literary Theory*.

The 1995 W. Ross Winterowd Award was awarded to Xin Liu Gale for *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom*.

This annual award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd. The selection committee was chaired by Thomas West. Professor Winterowd presented the 1996 awards during the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition meeting at the CCCC Convention in Phoenix.

Send nominations for the 1997 W. Ross Winterowd Award to Sidney I. Dobrin, Co-Editor, *JAC*, Department of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-2115.