Public Pedagogy and the Responsibility of Intellectuals: Youth, Littleton, and the Loss of Innocence

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Youth is the last and almost always ignored category in the traditional list of subordinated populations (servants—i.e., racial and colonized minorities, women and children) who, in the name of protection, are silenced.

—Lawrence Grossberg

In rhetoric and composition studies, there has been a long legacy of attempting to combine theoretical rigor with social relevance. Within this critical tradition, rhetoric and composition theorists have approached language and writing as a form of cultural production by situating it within a politics that links theory to practice, literacy to social change, and academic discourses to the material relations of power shaping everyday life. Moreover, they have consistently attempted to broaden the meaning of such work by theorizing the primacy of pedagogy as an ethical and political practice within disciplinary formations. Rhetoric and composition theorists have made substantial contributions to broadening students' understanding of the interrelated dynamics of class, race, sexuality, and gender—specifically, the role these forces play in shaping the pedagogical landscape of the classroom and other public spheres. Furthermore, rhetoric and composition studies has coupled an attentiveness to questions of context—especially the importance of beginning where students actually are—with the need to intervene in and change such contexts, particularly those founded on deep inequalities that increasingly regulate the administration and organization of our schools and other institutions. Rhetoric and composition, in this instance, has aligned itself historically with progressive political projects aimed at providing the necessary pedagogical conditions for students both to recognize anti-democratic forms of power and to think critically about using their knowledge and
skills to change the oppressive conditions under which they learn and experience daily life.

Unfortunately, as the post-Littleton debate has clearly shown, educators in a variety of fields, including rhetoric and composition studies, have had little to say about how young people increasingly have become the victims of adult mistreatment, greed, neglect, and domination. The question of how young people experience, resist, challenge, and mediate the complex cultural politics and social spaces that mark their everyday lives does not seem to warrant the attention such issues deserve, especially in light of the ongoing assaults on minority youth of color and class that have taken place since the 1980s. Figures of youth and age circulate almost unnoticed. While educators in rhetoric and composition have learned to consider gender, race, class, and sexuality as part of a politics of education, they have not begun to think of youth as a critical category for social analysis or of the politics of youth and its implications for a radical democracy. The category of youth has not yet been factored into a broader discourse on politics, power, and social change.

In what follows, I attempt to address this lacunae in rhetoric and composition studies in particular and in educational theory in general by analyzing the current assault on youth, and I suggest that educators rethink the interrelated dynamics of politics, culture, and power as they increasingly erode those social spaces necessary for providing young people with the intellectual and material resources they need to participate in and shape the diverse economic, political, and social conditions influencing their lives. I also attempt to develop a critical language that both engages youth as a critical category and offers suggestions for the political and pedagogical roles that educators might play in addressing the crisis of youth, which is itself part of the broader crisis of public life, and I maintain that understanding the crisis of youth must be central to any notion of literacy, pedagogy, and cultural politics.

Central to the view developed here is the assumption that any viable notion of cultural politics must make the pedagogical more political because it is through the pedagogical force of culture that identities are constructed, citizenship rights are enacted, and possibilities are developed for translating acts of interpretation into forms of intervention. Pedagogy, in my view, is about putting subject positions in place and linking the construction of agency to issues of ethics, politics, and power. Recognizing the educational force of the cultural sphere also suggests making the political more pedagogical by addressing how agency unfolds within power-infused relations—that is, how the very processes of
learning constitute the political mechanisms through which identities are produced, desires mobilized, and experiences take on specific forms and meanings. This broad definition of pedagogy is not limited to what occurs in institutionalized forms of schooling; it encompasses every relationship that young people imagine to be theirs in the world, where social agency is both enabled and constrained across multiple sites and where meanings enter the realm of power and function as public discourses. Cultural politics, in this instance, must include the issue of youth culture and can no longer be abstracted from considerations of what happens to the bodies and minds of young people at a time in history when the state is being hollowed out and policies of surveillance, regulation, and disciplinary control increasingly replace a welfare state that once provided minimal social services (food stamp programs, child nutrition programs, child health programs, funds for family planning) designed to prevent widespread poverty, suffering, and deprivations among large numbers of youth. Children have been made our lowest national priority, a fact that is most evident as social policy in this country has shifted from social investment to a politics of containment. The crisis of youth does not simply reflect the loss of social vision, the ongoing corporatization of public space, and the erosion of democratic life; it also suggests the degree to which youth have been “othered” across a wide range of ideological positions, rendered unworthy of serious analysis as an oppressed group, or deemed to be no longer at risk but rather to be a risk to democratic public life (see Stephens 13). Indifference coupled with demonization make an unholy alliance that fails to foreground the importance of children’s agency and the role that young people can play in shaping a future that will not simply repeat the present, a present in which children are increasingly regarded as a detriment to adult society rather than as a valuable resource.

Three Myths about Youth and Culture

The current discourse about children’s culture is indebted theoretically and politically to three seemingly separate but interrelated myths, all of which function to limit democracy, jeopardize the welfare of children, and silence socially engaged scholarship. The first myth rests on the assumption that liberal democracy has achieved its ultimate victory and that the twin ideologies of the market and representative democracy now constitute, with a few exceptions, the universal values of the new global village. On this view, liberal culture becomes synonymous with market culture, and the celebrated freedoms of the consumer are bought at the expense of
the freedom of citizens. Little public recognition is given either to the limits that democracies must place on market power or to how corporate culture and its narrow definition of freedom as a private good may actually threaten the well-being of children and democracy itself. In short, the conflation of democracy with the logic of the market cancels out the tension between market moralities and those values of civil society that cannot be measured in strictly commercial terms but are critical to democratic public life. I refer specifically to values such as justice, respect for children, and the rights of citizens as equal and free human beings (see Benhabib 9).

The second is the myth of childhood innocence. According to this myth, both childhood and innocence are perceived as mutually informing aspects of a natural state outside the dictates of history, society, and politics. In this common-sense conception, children are viewed, Marina Warner suggests, as “innocent because they’re outside society, pre-historical, pre-social, instinctual, creatures of unreason, primitive, kin to unspoiled nature” (57). Marked as innately pure and passive, children are afforded the right to protection but are denied a sense of agency and autonomy. Unable to fathom childhood as a historical, social, and political construction that is enmeshed in relations of power, many adults shroud children in an aura of innocence and protection that erases any viable notion of adult responsibility even as it evokes it. In fact, the ascription of innocence, in large part, permits adults to avoid assuming responsibility for their role in setting children up for failure, in abandoning them to the dictates of marketplace mentalities, and in removing the supportive and nurturing networks that provide young people with adequate health care, food, housing, and educational opportunities.

The third myth mystifies the workings of an ever-expanding commercial culture that harnesses public dialogue and dissent to market values. This pervasive commercial culture is also evident in the obsession with careerism and professionalism and with the isolation of educators from politics and the pressing demands of civic life. This third myth suggests that teaching and learning are no longer linked to finding ways to improve the world; the imperatives of social justice are surrendered to a fatalism that renounces practical politics to accommodate the academic culture of professionalism and the ideology of disinterested scientific investigation. Edward Said insightfully comments on the twin dynamics of accommodation and privatization that inform the culture of professionalism at all levels of education:
By professionalism I mean thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for a living, between the hours of nine and five with one eye on the clock, and another cocked at what is considered to be proper, professional behavior—not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical and “objective.” (74)

The increasing isolation of academics and intellectuals from the world around them reflects corporate culture’s power to define pedagogy as a technical and instrumental practice rather than as an ethical and political act. Removed from the world of practical politics and everyday life, many educators are all too willing to renounce a sense of culture as an important terrain of politics and struggle. Buttressed by the pressures of professionalism and its attendant calls for neutrality, objectivity, and rationality, this approach offers little room to consider how ideologies, values, and power shape all aspects of the educational process. As British cultural theorist Richard Johnson points out,

Teaching and learning are profoundly political practices. They are political at every moment of the circuit: in the conditions of production (who produces knowledge? for whom?), in the knowledges and knowledge forms themselves (knowledge according to what agenda? useful for what?), their publication, circulation, and accessibility, their professional and popular uses, and their impacts on daily life. (461)

Moreover, mainstream educational discourse not only ignores the ideological nature of teaching and learning, it also erases culture from the political realm by enshrining it either as a purely aesthetic discourse or as a quasi-religious call to celebrate the “great books” and “great traditions” of what is termed “Western Civilization.” In both cases, any attempt to transform the nation’s classrooms into places where future citizens learn to critically engage politics (and received knowledge outside of the classroom) is dismissed as either irrelevant or unprofessional.

At first glance, these three powerful myths appear to have little in common; however, I want to propose here that it is impossible to invoke any one myth in any meaningful way without invoking the others. What links these three seemingly disparate mythologies? Quite a lot, I believe: in their deployment, they excuse the adult world from any notion of responsibility toward youth by appealing to a thriving economy, the natural order, or disinterestedness; they reproduce race, class, and cultural hierarchies; and they limit citizenship to a narrowly privatized undertak-
ing. What all three myths ignore is the increasingly impoverished conditions that future generations of youth will have to negotiate. They also ignore the fact that childhood is not a natural state of innocence; it is a historical construction. Childhood is a cultural and political category that has very practical consequences for how adults "think about children and conceive of childhood," and the way in which adults conceive of youth has very real consequences for how children will view themselves (Jenks 123).

The Politics of Innocence

On the one hand, by claiming that childhood innocence is a natural rather than constructed state, adults can safely ignore the power imbalance between themselves and children; furthermore, they can continue to think that children have neither rights nor agency since they exist beyond the pale of adult influence, except when they must be protected from aberrant outside forces. On the other hand, the myth of childhood innocence provides a way of denying the effects of real social problems on children. It is, in other words, a way for adults to shift attention away from the pressing problems of racism, sexism, family abuse, poverty, joblessness, industrial downsizing, and other social factors that have made the end of the twentieth century such a dreadful time not only for many adults but also for many children, who are especially powerless in the face of such forces.

By clinging to the assertion that a thriving free market economy (with its insidious consumer-based appropriation of notions of freedom and choice) provides the greatest good for the greatest number, adult society diminishes, as Henry Jenkins observes, "the role of politics in public life in favor of an exclusive focus on individual experience—on a politics of personal responsibilities and self-interest rather than one of the collective good" (11; see also Berlant). This view makes it all the easier for adult society to transform social problems into individual problems while at the same time downsizing the public sphere, eliminating government-funded safety nets for children, and replacing legislation aimed at social investment with punitive policies whose aim is social containment, discipline, and control. In this approach, the logic of the marketplace blames kids—especially those who are poor, Latino, or black—for their lack of character; it also dismantles social services that help them meet their most basic needs. Without understanding the social experience of actual children, contemporary society confronts the sometimes perilous, though hardly rampant, consequences of drug use and violent behavior by prosecuting
young people as adults, stiffening jail sentences for young offenders, and building new prisons to incarcerate them in record numbers.\(^8\)

What complicates the intersection of the myths of innocence, the universalized child, and the democratic pretensions of corporate culture is the way that these myths erase the exploitative relations of class, race, and gender differences even as they reproduce them. The appeal to innocence by conservatives and liberals alike offers protection and security to children who are white and middle-class—that is, the conditions of their innocence are defined within traditional (racial-, class-, and gender-coded) notions of home, family, and community (Berlant 5).

Public reactions to the 1999 killings at Columbine High School indicate that innocence is mediated along racial and class lines, as comments of residents of Littleton, Colorado, which were widely reported in the press, clearly suggest. Patricia Williams, for example, noted that some residents laid claim to a racially-coded legacy of innocence by proclaiming that “it couldn’t happen here” or that “this is not the inner city” (9). Williams argues that such comments reflect what she terms “innocence profiling,” a practice often directed at privileged white kids who, in spite of their behavior, are presumed too innocent to have their often criminal behavior treated seriously. According to Williams, the two teenage killers, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris

seem to have been so shrouded in presumptions of innocence—after professing their love for Hitler, declaring their hatred for blacks, Asians and Latinos on a public Web site no less, downloading instructions for making bombs, accumulating the ingredients, assembling them under the protectively indifferent gaze (or perhaps with the assistance) of parents and neighbors, stockpiling guns and ammunition, procuring hand grenades and flak jackets, threatening the lives of classmates, killing thirteen and themselves, wounding numerous others and destroying their school building—still the community can’t seem to believe it really happened “here.” Still their teachers and classmates continue to protest that they were good kids, good students, solid citizens. (9)

Williams registers how the myth of innocence works to protect privileged white kids, and her assessment rings true in view of the fact that the national press appeared dumbfounded that these two teenage gunmen from affluent families could have murdered twelve fellow students and a teacher before taking their own lives. One TV reporter at Columbine referred to one of the killers as “a gentleman who drove a BMW” (Milloy C9). Other media accounts emphasized how much promise these boys had
and analyzed their criminal behavior largely in psychological terms. They were described as alienated, pressured, and stressed out—terms that are seldom used to describe the behavior of nonwhite youths who commit crimes.

Unlike crimes committed by youth in urban areas, the Columbine massacre prompted an enormous amount of national soul searching over the loss of childhood and the threats faced by white children living in affluent areas. Senate Majority leader Trent Lott called for a national conversation on youth and culture. Sociologist Orlando Patterson challenged the dominant media response to Littleton and the racially-coded notion of innocence that informed it. He asked in an op-ed column in the *New York Times* what the public response would have been if “these two killers had not been privileged whites but poor African-Americans or Latinos?” He responded that “almost certainly the pundits would have felt it necessary to call attention to their ethnicity and class” (A31). Actually, Patterson’s comments seem understated. If these young people had been black or brown, they would have been denounced as bearers of a social pathology. Moreover, if brown or black youths had exhibited a previous history of delinquent behavior similar to Harris’ and Klebold’s (including breaking into a van and sending death threats to fellow students over the Internet), their punishment would have been more than short-term counseling; they would have been roundly condemned and quickly sent to prison. But since white middle-class communities cannot face the consequences of their declining economic and social commitment to youth, such young people generally are given the benefit of the doubt, even when their troubling behavior veers to the extreme. White middle-class children too often are protected by the myth of innocence and considered incapable of exhibiting at-risk behavior. And if they do exhibit deviant behavior, blame is placed on the “alien” influence of popular culture (often synonymous with hip hop) or on other “outside” forces that are removed from the spaces of “whiteness” and affluence.

Innocence in this exclusionary dialogue functions in a highly discriminatory way and generally does not extend its privileges to all children. In the age of Reagan and Clinton, the notion of innocence does not apply to some children, and it is being renegotiated for others. Historically, poor children and children of color have been outside the boundaries of both childhood and innocence and often have been associated with the cultures of crime, rampant sexuality, and drug use. In fact, they are frequently perceived as a threat to the innocence of white middle-class youths who inhabit increasingly fortress-like suburbs, shielded from
the immorality, violence, and other "dangers" lurking within multi-ethnic cities (see Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures* and *Channel Surfing*). In dealing with youths whose lives do not fit the Ozzie-and-Harriet-family profile, innocence traditionally invokes its antithesis. In short, the rhetoric of innocence and its promise of support and protection typically have not applied to youths who are poor, black, and brown.

Yet, there is some evidence that the rhetoric of innocence has changed in the 1990s. While minority youth are seen as utterly disposable, today white, suburban youth increasingly face the wrath of adult authorities, the media, and the state (see Males). As Sharon Stephens cogently argues,

There is a growing consciousness of children at risk. But the point I want to make here is that there is also a growing sense of children themselves as the risk—and thus of some children as people out of place and excess populations to be eliminated, while others must be controlled, reshaped, and harnessed to changing social ends. Hence, the centrality of children, both as symbolic figures and as objects of contested forms of socialization, in the contemporary politics of culture. (13)

Although some children are considered to be "at risk," more and more kids are viewed as a major threat to adult society, in spite of the fact that different groups—depending on their class, race, gender, and ethnicity—engender different responses. Innocence is not only race-specific, it is also gendered. The romantic notion of childhood innocence idealizes motherhood at the expense of power and relegates women to the private realm of the home where they assume their duty as primary caretakers of children. As public life is once again separated from the domestic sphere and the role of women continues to be limited to an idealized notion of maternity, mothers are required to maintain the notion of childhood innocence. The ideal of childhood innocence infantilizes women and children at the same time that it reproduces an extreme imbalance of power between adults and children and between men and women.

The growing assault on youth is evident not only in the withdrawal of government-supported services—once created with their interests in mind—but also in the indignities young people suffer on a daily basis. For example, schools increasingly subject youth to random strip searches, place them under constant electronic surveillance (such as the use of cameras in buses) and force them to submit to random drug testing. Young people are denied any dignity or agency, and not just in urban schools. Surveillance, control, and regulation are enjoying a renaissance in the
aftermath of the school shootings, as evidenced in the increased demand for armed security guards and metal detectors in affluent suburban schools. The post-Littleton climate normalizes what at another time might have been perceived as an extreme reaction: the Dallas-based National Center for Policy Analysis has issued a statement calling for the arming of public school teachers. Not surprisingly, the media characterized this as a legitimate intervention (Tucker C5).

This erosion of students’ civil rights is often coupled with school policies that eliminate recess and sports programs, especially in those schools short of financial resources and supplies—schools largely attended by poor, working-class children. At the same time, young people are increasingly excluded from public spaces outside of schools that once offered them the opportunity to hang out with relative security, work with mentors in youth centers, and develop their own talents and sense of self-worth. Like the concept of citizenship itself, recreational space is now privatized as a commercial profit-making venture. Gone are the youth centers, public parks, outdoor basketball courts, or empty lots where young people played stick ball. Play areas are now rented out to the highest bidder, and children are invited to “play” in places where they are “caged in by steel fences, wrought iron gates, padlocks, and razor ribbon wire” (Kelley 44). As public space disappears, new services arise in the privatized sphere to take “care” of youth. In Framing Youth, Mike Males insightfully argues that these new “kid-fixing” services have ominous consequences for many young people:

> Beginning in the mid-1970s, kid-fixing services erupted to meet the market. They were of two kinds. Prison gates opened wide in the 1980s to receive tens of thousands more poorer teens, three-fourths of them non-white. Confinement of minority youths in prisons increased by 80 percent in the last decade. ... At the same time, mental health and other treatment centers raked in huge profits therapizing hundreds of thousands more health-insured children. ... Youth treatment is now a 25 billion dollar per year business with a “record of steady profit growth.” (12)

Young people often bear the burden of new, undeserved responsibilities and pressures to “grow up.” At the same time, both their freedoms and their constitutional protections and rights as citizens are being restricted. Where, outside of the marketplace, can children locate narratives of hope, semiautonomous cultural spheres, discussions of meaningful differences, and nonmarket based democratic identities?
Although adult caretakers and a number of social commentators recognize the new burdens placed on young people, adult concerns about the ways in which childhood is changing and the new sets of responsibilities it places on youth often are defined through highly selective discourses, those closely tied to the class and racial nature of the young people under discussion. For example, liberal commentators on children’s culture, such as Neil Postman and David Elkind, argue that the line between childhood and adulthood is disappearing due to the widespread influence of popular culture and the changing nature of the family. Postman believes that popular culture—especially television and child-friendly technologies such as VCRs and computer games—have undermined, if not corrupted, the nature of childhood innocence.

Indeed, the high melodrama of adolescent life—captured in television’s Dawson’s Creek and the hip cynicism of South Park (in which one unfortunate eight-year-old, working-class kid named Kenny dies violently every episode)—does seem to be a far cry from the family drama of the Brady Bunch or the innocence of the Peanuts cartoon series that raised an earlier white, middle-class generation. Young people’s access via the Internet to every kind of pornography and the technologically advanced, hyperreal violence of home video games will alarm adults raised on an occasionally titillating issue of National Geographic and the flash of the pinball machine. It seems, however, that Postman mourns not only the loss of childhood innocence but also the Victorian principles of stern, hard-working, white middle-class families unsullied by the postmodern technologies of the visual age. Curiously, Postman’s attack on the corrupting influence of popular culture says little about the media’s role in presenting an endless stream of misrepresentations of black and poor youth. Nor does Postman analyze the role of corporate culture in trading on the contradictory appeal of childhood innocence to exploit its sexual potential and to position young people as both the subject and the object of commodification. Postman’s nostalgic longing for high culture constitutes a modernist dream pitting the culture of print (with its own legacy of racist and sexist imagery) against a visual culture that allegedly promotes self-indulgence along with illiteracy; both cultures morally tarnish young people and condemn them to a passive and demeaned role in public life. Postman directly attributes the loss of childhood innocence to the rise of electronic technologies and the mass appeal of popular culture.

Such a focus conveniently absolves Postman of the need to question the class, gender, and racial coding that informs his view of the American
past or to question how the political dynamics of a changing economic climate—rather than popular culture—result in reduced funding for public services for young people while simultaneously eroding their freedoms and their possibilities for the future. Postman largely ignores the fact that popular culture is not only a site of numerous contradictions but is also a site of negotiation for kids. Popular culture is one of the few places where they can speak for themselves, produce alternative public spheres, and represent their own interests. Moreover, it serves as one of the most important sites for recognizing how childhood identities are produced, how affective investments are secured, how desires are mobilized, and how learning can be linked to progressive social change. In many ways, Postman’s position is symptomatic of the call from many adults and educators, in the aftermath of the Columbine murders, to censor the Internet, banish violent video games, and restrict online services for young people. Rather than acknowledging that the new electronic technologies allow young people to immerse themselves in crucially important forms of social communication, to produce a range of creative expressions, and to exhibit forms of agency that are both pleasurable and empowering, adults profoundly mistrust the new technologies—all in the name of protecting childhood innocence. Rarely is there a serious attempt to find out what kind of meanings children bring to these new electronic cultures, how these cultures enhance the agency of children, or what youth are actually doing with these new media technologies.

In his work on adolescents, prominent child psychologist David Elkind also points to the loss of childhood innocence, but he places the blame on the changing nature of the American family and on the shrinking opportunities American families offer to most children. He cites the increased responsibilities that children now have to assume with the growing number of two-parent working families, divorced parents, and single-parent families. Elkind also shows his nostalgia for a bygone era that afforded youth greater opportunities to develop their own games, culture, and adolescent activities. For Elkind, the rise of the middle-class “superkid” is a classic example of how children are conditioned to perform tasks similar to those performed by their parents in the outside world—a world marked by shrinking resources, increased competition, and an inflated Horatio Alger notion of achievement (Hurried 149-50).

In both critiques of contemporary youth culture, the nostalgia for childhood innocence makes childhood appear largely white, middle class, static, and passive. Children in these discussions are denied any agency
and live in dire need of protection from the adult world. As such, youth seem to live outside of the sphere of the political, with all of the implications such a terrain carries for viewing childhood within rather than removed from the varied social, economic, and cultural forces that constitute adult society. More importantly, this selective notion of childhood innocence has almost nothing to say about a generation of poor and black youth who do not have the privilege of defining their problems in such narrow terms and for whom the shrinking boundaries between childhood and adulthood result in a dangerous threat to their well-being and often to their very lives. For example, as the war against youth escalates, politicians such as Texas legislator Jim Pittis have attempted to pass state laws that would apply the death penalty to children as young as eleven. Such laws are aimed at poor kids who live in a world in which their most serious problem is not how to complete excessive amounts of homework. On the contrary, these young people live with the daily fear of being incarcerated and with the ongoing experience of improper nutrition as well as inadequate housing and medical care. Shut out from most state-sponsored social programs and public spaces, Latino and black youth bear the burden of an adult society that increasingly views them as a threat to middle-class life and thus as disposable; or, it reifies them through a commercial logic in search of a new market niche. In this instance, not only is the notion of innocence problematic because of the exclusions it produces, but it has become highly susceptible to the worst forms of commercial appropriation.

The eighteenth century’s romantic notion of childhood is losing prominence and is being reinvented, in part, through the interests of corporate capital. The ideal of the innocent child as an “object of adoration,” Anne Higonnet observes, has turned all too easily into “the concept of the child as object, and then into marketing of the child as a commodity” (194). Capital has proven powerful enough both to renegotiate what it means to be a child and to expand the meaning of innocence as a commercial and sexual category. The force of capital has overridden or canceled out a legacy of appeals that once prompted adults to enact and to enforce child labor laws, protection from child predators, and educational entitlements for children.
Corporate Culture and the Appropriation of Innocence

It is time to recognize that the true tutors of our children are not schoolteachers or university professors but filmmakers, advertising executives and pop culture purveyors. Disney does more than Duke, Spielberg outweighs Stanford, MTV trumps MIT.

—Benjamin Barber

The ascendancy of corporate culture has created conditions in which adults can exhibit what Annette Fuentes calls a “sour, almost hateful view of young people” (21). For example, a 1997 Public Agenda report, *Kids These Days*, echoes adults’ growing fears of and disdain for young people. The authors of this report found that two-thirds of the adults surveyed thought that kids today were rude, irresponsible, and wild (Farkas et al. 1-15). Another fifty-eight percent thought that young people will make the world either a worse place or no different when they become adults. Unfortunately, such views are not limited to the findings of conservative research institutes. Former Senator Bill Bradley, a prominent liberal spokesperson, reinforces the ongoing demonization of youth by claiming that the United States is in danger of losing “a generation of young people to a self-indulgent, self-destructive lifestyle” (qtd. in Males 341). This discourse provides a limited number of categories for examining what Henry Jenkins calls “the power relations between children and adults” (“Introduction” 3).

When adults invoke the idea of “childhood innocence” to describe the vulnerability of middle-class kids, they often mention as the central threats molestation, pedophilia, and the sexual dangers of the Internet (see Kincaid). This type of discussion assumes that the threat to the innocence of middle-class youth comes from outside of the social formations they inhabit, from forces outside of their control. I do not mean to suggest that pedophiles and abductors are not real menaces (though the danger they pose is ridiculously exaggerated); I merely want to suggest that the image of the pedophile becomes a convenient referent for ignoring the role that middle-class values and institutional forms actually play in threatening the health and welfare of all children.

This perceived threat to childhood innocence ignores the contradiction between adult concern for the safety of children and the reality of how adults treat children on a daily basis. Most of the violence against children is committed by adults. For example, in 1996 almost two thousand children were murdered by family members or friends (Federal Bureau).
Too little is said about both a corporate culture that makes a constant spectacle of children’s bodies and the motives of specific industries that have a major stake in promoting such exhibitions. Ann Higonnet touches on this issue in arguing that the sexualization of children is not “a fringe phenomenon inflicted by perverts on a protesting society, but a fundamental change furthered by legitimate industries and millions of satisfied consumers” (153). The point here is not that corporate culture is interested only in either commodifying or sexualizing children in the 1990s; instead, I want to underscore the influence corporate culture now wields pedagogically in redefining the terms through which children’s experiences and identities are named, understood, and negotiated. Of course, industries also have constituents to please, and corporate culture’s sexualization of children as an advertising gimmick to satisfy consumers and shareholders alike has eroded the lines between childhood and adulthood.

When the public recognizes that children can actually imitate adult behavior, images of working class, Latino, and black kids are often invoked as a media spectacle. Their aberrant behavior is invariably attributed to the irresponsibilities of working mothers, rampant drug abuse, and other alleged corruptions of morality circulating within working-class culture. But little mention is made of the violence that is perpetrated by middle-class values and social formations—such as conspicuous consumption, conformity, snobbery, and ostracism—which reproduces a number of racial, class, and gender exclusions. Nor is much said about how middle-class values legitimate and regulate cultural hierarchies that demean the cultures of marginalized groups and that reinforce racial and economic inequalities among the nation’s children. Rather than confront the limitations of middle-class values, conservatives battle against the welfare state, dismantle many important children’s services, and promote economic policies and mergers that facilitate corporate downsizing—without facing much resistance from the Democratic party. Moreover, the national media rarely acknowledge or criticize those forces within American culture that chip away at the notion of education as a public good or the disastrous effects such policies might have for working-class families and their children.

Similarly, dominant media represent popular culture as a threat to children’s purity while they ignore the corporations that produce and regulate popular culture. Consider the following contradictions: pornography on the Internet is held up as an imminent danger to childhood innocence, yet nothing is said about the corporations and their middle-class shareholders who relentlessly commodify and sexualize children’s
bodies, desires, and identities in the interest of turning a profit. Mainstream media critics who focus on the disappearance of childhood argue endlessly that the greatest threat to childhood innocence comes from rap music, while they ignore the threat from media conglomerates, such as Time-Warner (which produces many rap artists), General Electric, Westinghouse, or Disney (see Derber). Corporate culture's appropriation of childhood innocence and purity is rarely fodder for serious discussion, although corporations such as Calvin Klein trade on the appeal of childhood innocence by exploiting its sexual potential in order to sell cologne, underwear, and jeans. Slick, high-end fashion magazines offer up Lolita-like fourteen-year-olds as the newest supermodels and sex symbols, while in a 1992 photo spread for *Vanity Fair* Madonna appears as a blatantly "erotic baby-woman," wearing blond pigtails and sultry make-up (Higonnet 154-55). In a recent issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, Lynn Hirschberg writes about the boom in Hollywood teen films and casually reports that aspiring actors and actresses can't make it in the industry if they are over twenty years old. Rather than deal critically with the crass objectification and endless exploitation of young people by the Hollywood entertainment industry, Hirschberg treats the story as a straightforward narrative and thus becomes complicitous with the violence Hollywood wages on young teens. In these instances of corporate hustling, the emotional resonance of childhood innocence becomes erotically charged at the same moment that it is recontextualized within the commercial sphere. Many critics view erotic images as further proof that children are under assault. Yet they are less concerned about the ever-expanding reach of corporate culture into every facet of children's culture than they are alarmed by the growing sexualization of popular culture, with its celebration of the "smut" produced by gangsta rap, its seeming vindication of a sexually charged music/video industry, and its potential to incite the ever-looming presence of the pedophile.

But the images that create such uneasiness are not limited to the looming threat of pedophiles and rap artists—those deemed as "other" by middle-class culture. On the contrary, the threat to innocence and childhood takes many forms. Commercial culture has removed childhood from the civic discourse of rights, public responsibility, and equality and turned it into a commodity; as such, it currently is being renegotiated. For example, an endless array of mass media advertisements reduce innocence to an aesthetic or psychological trope that prompts adults to develop the child in themselves, adopt teen fashions, and buy a range of services designed to make them look younger. This type of infantilization enables
adults to identify with youth while it simultaneously empties adulthood of all political, economic, and social responsibilities and educative functions. Too many adults rely on the commercial language of self-help and character formation to further their own obsession with themselves, and they ignore the social problems that adults create for young people, especially those who are disadvantaged by virtue of their class, gender, and race. Such indifference allows adults to impose on young people the demands and responsibilities they themselves have abandoned.

At the turn of this century, childhood has not ended as a historical experience and social category; it has simply been transformed into another market strategy and fashion aesthetic to expand the consumer-based needs of privileged adults who live within a market culture that has little room for ethical considerations, non-commodified spaces, or public responsibilities, especially as they might apply to expanding the conditions and opportunities for young people to become critical citizens in a vibrant democratic society. As Jenkins so aptly observes, childhood innocence no longer inspires adults to fight for the rights of children, enact reforms that suggest an investment in their future, or provide them with "the tools to realize their own political agendas or to participate in the production of their own culture" ("Introduction" 30). On the contrary, as the terrain of culture becomes increasingly commodified, the only type of citizenship that adult society provides for children is that of the consumer.

At the same time, children are expected to act like adults, though different demands are made upon different groups of young people. Asked to shoulder enormous responsibilities, children are all too often more than willing to respond by mimicking and emulating adult behaviors that they are then condemned for appropriating. Of course, when privileged white kids mimic destructive adult behavior, such acts are generally treated as an aberration. Yet, when disadvantaged kids do so, their behavior becomes a social problem for which they are both the root cause and the victims. Conversely, the media and most adults largely ignore those young people who refuse to imitate the social and political indifference of adults and who actually take on a number of important social issues and responsibilities.13

Current commentaries on the condition of contemporary youth typically miss the fact that what is changing, if not disappearing, is the productive social bonds between adults and children. Today’s embattled concept of childhood magnifies how society addresses and mediates the
very notion of sociality itself. This becomes evident in the ways in which childhood is increasingly marketed (especially in the move away from making social investments in children) and in the stepped-up efforts to disempower and contain youth. One consequence is that the appeal to innocence now couples an insidious type of adult infantilization with a ruthless moral indifference to the needs of children, a consequence that promotes the conditions for an endless assault on young people in the media and from all manner of politicians.

Current representations of youth—ranging from representations of kids as a threat to society to images of defenseless teenagers corrupted by the all powerful influence of popular culture—often work to undermine any productive sense of agency among young people and offer few possibilities for analyzing how children experience and mediate relationships between themselves and other children as well as adult society. In the post-Littleton climate, moral panic and fear replace critical understanding and allow media pundits such as Barbara Kantrowitz and Pat Wingert to proclaim in a *Newsweek* article that white suburban youth have a dark side and that youth culture in general represents ""Lord of the Flies' on a vast scale" (39). Such representations not only diminish the complexity of children's lives, they also erase any understanding of how power relations between adults and young people actually work against many children. At the same time, such representations replace the discourse of hope with the rhetoric of cynicism and disdain.

As the current assault on youth expands and extends beyond the inner city, it is accompanied by numerous films, books, and media representations that focus on youth culture in a way that would have appeared socially irresponsible twenty years ago. Films such as *Jawbreaker*, *Varsity Blues*, *Ten Things I Hate About You*, and *Cruel Intentions* relentlessly celebrate mindless, testosterone-driven, infantilized male athletes who are at the top of a repressive school pecking order; or they celebrate young high school girls who are vacuous as well as ruthless, arrogant, and sexually manipulative. Films such as *Election* and *Jawbreaker* resonate powerfully with the broader public view that a growing number of white suburban kids are inane, neurotically self-centered, or sexually deviant. These films reinforce the assumption that such kids are in need of medical treatment, strict controls, or disciplinary supervision. Moreover, these attacks complement and further legitimate the racist backlash against minority youth that has gained prominence in American society in the last decade of the twentieth century (see Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures* and *Channel Surfing*). In popular culture, this backlash can be
seen in Hollywood films such as *The Substitute*, *Kids*, and *187*, which are premised on the assumption that brown, black, and poor kids cannot be innocent children and, more seriously, that they are a threat to childhood innocence and society because they embody criminality, corruption, rampant sexuality, and moral degeneracy. In these films, young people are demonized and marked as disposable: they are literally murdered as part of a "cleaning up" operation to make the public schools and urban streets safe for a largely white, middle-class adult population whose well-being and security are allegedly under siege.

A contradiction at the heart of the public discourse about children points to a disturbing trend in how adults view their relationships to young people and to the obligations of citizenship, civic duty, and democracy. As the line between childhood and adulthood is renegotiated, the notion of childhood innocence serves as a historical and social referent for understanding that the current moral panic over youth is primarily about the crisis of democratic society itself and its waning interest in offering children the social, cultural, and economic opportunities and resources they need to both survive and prosper in this society. In such a perverse climate, innocence represents more than fertile ground for a media machine that increasingly regulates the cultural face of corporate power. The myth of innocence has become the rhetoric of choice of politicians and academics who rely on it to bash single mothers, gay and lesbian families, the legacy of the 1960s, popular culture, and kids themselves.

While public discourse about the loss of childhood innocence does at times consider youth as a valuable resource to be nurtured and protected, the rhetoric of innocence more frequently works to displace this important sense of adult responsibility and views innocence as quite exclusionary. In doing so, this rhetoric of innocence effectively draws a line between those kids worthy of adult protection and those who appear beyond the pale of adult compassion and concern. Yet, increasingly, those kids who fall under the mantle of adult protection suffer a loss of agency in the name of being protected by adult authority. The notion of innocence in this perspective has little to do with empowering youth, with prompting adults to be more self-critical about how they wield power over young people, or with offering young people supportive environments where they can produce their own cultural experiences, mediate diverse public cultures, and develop a wide range of social affiliations. Innocence has a politics, one defined less by the need for adults to invest in the welfare of young people or to recognize their remarkable achievements than by the widen-
ing gap between the public's professed concern about the fate of young people and the sadly deteriorating conditions under which too many live.

When viewed outside of the logic of the market, even the terms of the debate about children seem to rest on deception. From the perspective of the many commentators and politicians who loudly proclaim that innocence is under assault, the welfare of children is not really at stake. Rather, they mourn the loss of a mythical view of nationhood, citizenship, and community, where white middle-class values were protected from the evils of popular culture, the changing nature of the workforce, and the rise of immigration. This narrative provides nothing less than a Biblical account of childhood innocence and its fall in which youth appears as a universalized category, history seems removed from the taint of contradictory forces, and adult society takes on the nostalgic glow of an Andrew Wyeth painting.

This discourse of nostalgia often betrays the bad faith of adults who purportedly act in the interest of young people, as was amply displayed in the post-Littleton controversy over youth, school violence, and popular culture. For example, House majority leader Tom Delay shamelessly used the tragedy to further his own conservative political agenda in a recent television appearance. He argued that one response to the school massacre would be to put God back into the schools. Former Secretary of Education William Bennett used the Littleton tragedy as a platform to denigrate popular culture—specifically a popular youth fad known as Goth culture—and to reinforce the notion that young people who are "different" deserve to be scorned and ridiculed. He seemed to forget that many Littleton students felt that scorn and ridicule contributed to the hostile school environment that exacerbated the killers' pent-up rage. Neither Delay nor Bennett has had much to say about how such attacks further marginalize young people, nor did they acknowledge the ample evidence that suggests that adults in general have little interest in listening to kids' problems in school or in hearing how they construct their experiences outside of traditional societal values. Nor do most adults pay attention to how the culture of the Internet, video games, industrial rock, computerized gladiator matches, and androgynous fashions provide an important resource for young people to develop their own cultural identities and sense of social agency. And neither Delay nor Bennett has had much to say about supporting legislation that would eliminate widespread poverty among children, eradicate children's access to guns, and reverse the mounting expense of building more and more prisons. All three of these
troubling issues undermine attempts to increase educational and work opportunities for many young people, especially those from the underclasses. The problem is not merely that no dialogue occurs about how young people are being shaped within the current social order; commentators also refuse to discuss how the basic institutions of adult society increasingly participate in a culture of violence that cares more about profits than about human needs and the public good, whose first casualties are the poor, aged, and children who lack adequate medical care, health insurance, food, clothing, and shelter. While adult society is obsessed with youth, it refuses to deal with what it means to value young people, to invest in their well-being by providing the conditions necessary for them to become successful adults and critical social agents.

Commentators such as Mike Males argue that the late 1990s represent the most anti-youth period in American history. James Wagoner, the president of the social-service organization Advocates for Youth, claims that "young people have been portrayed almost universally as a set of problems to be managed by society: juvenile crime, teen-age pregnancy, drug use" (qtd. in Powers G8). Both men suggest that in the last two decades American society has undergone a profound change in the way that it views young people and in how it treats them. Underlying this shift are a number of social problems—such as racism, poverty, unemployment, and the dismantling of childcare services—that are rarely discussed or critically analyzed. While many adults appear obsessed with young people, they are not concerned with listening to their needs or addressing their problems. How a society treats its young people is reflected in how it balances the tensions between corporate needs and democratic values, on the one hand, and, on the other, the rhetoric of childhood innocence—a rhetoric that often overshadows the reality of despair and suffering that many children face daily.

In what follows, I want to highlight the relationship between the current assault on youth and the responsibility of educators to address this crisis. In doing so, I emphasize the necessity for educators to connect their work to the political task of making research, teaching, and learning part of the dynamic of democratic change itself.
Public Intellectuals and the Challenge of Children’s Culture

What do we represent? Whom do we represent? Are we responsible? For what and to whom? If there is a university responsibility, it at least begins with the moment when a need to hear these questions, to take them upon oneself and respond, is imposed. This imperative for responding is the initial form and minimal requirement of responsibility.

—Jacques Derrida

The last few decades have been a time of general crisis in university life. Issues regarding the meaning and purpose of higher education, the changing nature of what counts as knowledge in a multicultural society, growing dissent among underpaid adjunct faculty and graduate assistants, the increasing vocationalization of university life (with an emphasis on learning corporate skills), battles over affirmative action, and intensifying struggles over the place of politics in teaching—these issues have exacerbated the traditional tensions both within the university community and between the university and society. In the above quotation, Jacques Derrida raises timely and fundamental questions not only for university teachers but for all educators and cultural workers. In response to the ongoing crisis in the university and to the crisis of university responsibility, I have been concerned with considering the fundamental link between knowledge and power, pedagogical practices and effects, authority and civic responsibility. I have argued elsewhere that the question of what educators teach is inseparable from what it means to invest in public life and to locate oneself in a public discourse (Border). Implicit in this argument is the assumption that the responsibility of educators cannot be separated from the consequences of the knowledge they produce, the social relations they legitimate, and the ideologies they disseminate in society. Educational work at its best represents a response to questions and issues posed by the tensions and contradictions of public life and attempts to understand and intervene in specific problems that emanate from the material contexts of everyday existence.

Educators and others must recognize that the political, economic, and social forces that demonize young people in the cultural sphere and reduce funding to public services for youth also affect public schools and universities. The increasing influence of corporate power in commercializing youth culture and in eliminating the noncommercial spheres where youth develop a sense of agency and autonomy is not unrelated to corporate culture’s attempts to turn institutions of public and higher
Henry A. Giroux

education over to the imperatives of the market, a move which devalues notions of social improvement and radically reduces the skills of academic labor. Schools have become a crucial battleground for disciplining and regulating youth, particularly poor urban youth of color. Moreover, the continued devaluation of education as a public good points to the need for educators, students, and other cultural workers to struggle collectively to reclaim such sites as democratic public spheres. Crucial to such a struggle, however, is the recognition that such reclamation cannot be removed from broader economic, cultural, and social struggles that affect the lives of many young people. I am not suggesting that educators should separate the academic and the political, the performance of institutional politics from cultural politics; rather, they must find ways to connect the politics of schooling with political struggles that take place across multiple social spheres and institutions. In this situation, cultural politics must construct itself in response to the demands of the institutional contexts of schooling—in all of their differences—and the broader demands and practical commitments that point to change and resistance in ideological and institutional structures that daily oppress young people.

A progressive cultural politics must challenge the priority of corporate culture's exclusive emphasis on the private good and reconnect educational theory and criticism to a notion of the public good that links democracy in the sphere of culture with democracy in the wider domain of public history and ordinary life. Broadly defined, cultural politics in this perspective must break down the divide between high and low culture and extend the reach of what counts as a serious object of learning from the library and the museum to the mass media and popular culture. Similarly, cultural politics not only must reconstitute and map how meaning is produced, it also must investigate the connections between discourses and structures of material power, the production of knowledge and the effects it has when translated into daily life. But before educators can retheorize what it means to make connections to popular formations outside of the walls of formal educational institutions, they will have to analyze the force of those institutional and ideological structures that shape their own lives.

Critical educators must address what it means to exercise authority from their own academic locations and experiences while assuming the challenge of putting knowledge to work in shaping a more fully realized democracy. Doing this requires redefining the relationship between theory and practice in order to challenge theory's formalist legacy, a legacy that often abstracts it from concrete problems and the dynamics of
power. Theory in this sense is reduced to a form of theoreticism and an indulgence in which the production of theoretical discourse becomes an end in itself, a mere expression of language removed from the possibility of challenging strategies of domination. Rather than bridging the gap between public practices and intellectual debates or implementing political projects that merge strategies of understanding and social engagement, theory often becomes merely an avenue to professional advancement. Cut off from concrete struggles and broader public debates, theory often emphasizes rhetorical mastery and cleverness rather than the politically responsible task of challenging the inertia of common-sense understandings of the world, opening up possibilities for new approaches to social reform, or addressing the most pressing social problems that people have to face.

Similarly, in many liberal and critical approaches to education, the politics of meaning is relevant only to the degree that it is separated from a broader politics of engagement. Reading texts is removed from larger social and political contexts and engages questions of power exclusively within a politics of representation. Such readings largely function to celebrate a textuality that has been reduced to a bloodless formalism and a nonthreatening, or merely accommodating, affirmation of indeterminacy as a transgressive aesthetic. Lost here is any semblance of what George Lipsitz has called a radical political project that "grounds itself in the study of concrete cultural practices" and that understands that "struggles over meaning are inevitably struggles over resources" (621). By failing to connect the study of texts to the interests of expanding the goals of economic justice, children's rights campaigns, radical democratic visions, and opposition to anti-welfare and immigration policies, many educators conceive of politics as largely representational or as abstractly theoretical. They also miss the crucial opportunity to develop connections between analyses of representations and strategies of political engagement—that is, the use of critical readings of texts as "routes to a larger analysis of historical cultural formations" (Johnson 465).

To address the problems of youth, rigorous educational work must respond to the dilemmas of the outside world by focusing on how young people make sense of their possibilities for agency within the power-regulated relations of everyday life. The motivation for scholarly work cannot be narrowly academic; such work must connect with what Tony Bennett sees as "'real life' social and political issues in the wider society" (538). This requires, in part, that educators and other cultural workers address the practical social consequences of their work while simulta-
neously making connections to the often ignored institutional forms and
cultural spheres that position and influence young people within unequal
relations of power. Moreover, critical educators must begin to recognize
that the forms of domination that bear down on young people are both
institutional and cultural and that one cannot be separated from the other.
Within this approach to cultural politics, the effects of domination cannot
be removed from the educational conditions in which such behavior is
learned, appropriated, or challenged. Analyzing the relationship between
culture and politics in addressing the problems of youth requires that
critical educators and cultural workers engage both the symbolic and the
material conditions that construct the various social formations in which
young people experience themselves and their relations to others. That is,
any viable form of cultural politics must address the institutional machin­
eries of power that promote child poverty, violence, unemployment,
police brutality, rape, sexual abuse, and racism.

But this is not enough. Educators also must question those cultural
pedagogies that produce specific meanings, affective investments, and
desires that legitimate and secure acts of domination aimed at young
people (see Worsham). Educators must do more than simply interview
youth using qualitative research methods. They must become border
crossers (without passports), willing to examine the multiple sites and
cultural forms that young people produce in order to make their voices
heard within the larger society. Ann Powers, a writer for the New York
Times, has pointed out that as young people have been shut out of the
larger society, they have created their own web sites and alternative radio
programs, “published their own manifestoes in photocopied fanzines,
made their own music and shared it on cassette, designed their own
fashions and arranged to have them sold in boutiques” (G8). Moreover,
Powers has argued that many young women have not watched passively
as they are misrepresented in the American cultural landscape as vacuous,
sexually predatory, dangerous, and pathological. In response, they have
produced a “far-ranging girls’ culture” that includes bold young athletes,
musicians, filmmakers and writers; and they are invigorating the dis­
course of women’s liberation. In addition, she points out that activist
groups like YELL, a youth division of ACT UP, have devised new
approaches to safe-sex education (G8). Today’s diverse youth culture
suggests that educators and others must become attentive to the cultural
formations that young people inhabit, while making a serious effort to
read, listen, and learn from the languages, social relations, and diverse
types of symbolic expression that young people produce.
Jon Katz convincingly argues that "children are at the epicenter of the information revolution, ground zero of the digital world. They helped build it, they understand it as well as, or better than anyone else." Thus, as Katz concludes, "they occupy a new kind of cultural space" (173). This is a particularly important insight in light of the attacks on the media and the call for censoring the Internet that arose after the Littleton massacre. These sites engage the public pedagogically and must be considered seriously as knowledge-producing technologies and spheres that demand new types of learning and critical skills from both young people and adults. Many educators, parents, and adults must redefine their own understanding of the new technologies and the new literacies these technologies have produced. The new media, including the Internet and computer culture, must become serious objects of educational analysis and learning, especially in the elementary and public schools. The social affiliations, groups, and cultural experiences these media produce among young people require legitimation and incorporation into the school curricula as seriously as the study of history, English, and language arts. Students must have opportunities, as Jenkins points out, to form supportive communities around their interest in and use of digital media, just as the schools must make media literacy and media production central to the learning process for young people ("Introduction").

If educators, adults, and others are to take seriously what it means to link academic criticism to public knowledge and strategies of intervention, they will have to reevaluate the relationship between culture and power as a starting point for bearing witness to the ethical and political dilemmas that connect the university to other spheres within the broader social landscape. At issue is the need for critical educators to act on the belief that academic work matters in its relationship to broader public practices and policies. In part, this means that educators must address what Cornel West has called the crisis of vision and meaning that currently characterizes all levels of schooling and culture in the United States. The crisis of vision registers the political, social, and cultural demise of democratic relations and values in American institutions and culture. Due to the pervasive despair among young people as well as the possibility of their resistance, educators and others must link educational work, both within and outside of schools, to "what it means to expand the scope of democracy and democratic institutions," and they must address how the very conditions for democracy are being undermined (West 41-42). Such work may lead to an understanding not just of how power operates in particular contexts, but also of how such knowledge "will
better enable people to change the contexts and hence the relations of power" that inform the inequalities undermining any viable notion of democratic participation in a wide variety of cultural spheres, including those that play a powerful role in shaping children's culture (Grossberg, "Cultural Studies" 253).

As we move into the new millennium, educators, parents, and others must reevaluate what it means for children to grow up in a world that has been radically altered by corporate culture and new electronic technologies. At the very least, we must assess how new modes of symbolic and social practice affect the way we think about power, social agency, and youth, and what such changes mean for expanding and deepening the process of democratic education, social relations, and public life. In part, such a challenge requires educators to develop a reinvigorated notion of cultural politics in order to reassess the relationship between texts and contexts, meaning and institutional power, critical reflection and informed action. Progressives need new theoretical tools for addressing how knowledge and power can be analyzed within particular spaces and places, especially as such contexts frame the intersection of language and bodies as they become part of the "process of forming and disrupting power relations" (Patton 183). At the same time, critical educators and cultural workers must develop notions of cultural politics that provide an opportunity for parents, educators, and others to better understand how public discourses about youth have become discourses of control, surveillance, and demonization. If progressives interrogate how power works through such discourses to construct particular social formations, they will discover opportunities to challenge the endless stereotypes and myths that provide a rationale for the kinds of regressive legislative policies that contain young people and undermine much needed social investments in their future.

In the post-Littleton climate, rhetoric and composition educators as well as other academics, public school teachers, students, and parents must organize and address the crisis of vision and meaning that permeates late capitalist societies. This crisis is embodied in the growing ascendancy of corporate power; in the shrinking of non-commodified public spaces; and in the spread of market values that has undermined those elements of care, respect, and compassion for others that must be central to any decent democratic society. West correctly argues that the usurpation of democratic values by market values has resulted in a "creeping zeitgeist of cold-heartedness and mean spiritedness" that he terms the "gangsterization of American culture" (43). Any viable form of pedagogy and cultural
politics must recognize how the process of gangsterization reproduces and reinforces the crisis of vision and meaning for many Americans—especially young people, who are struggling to redefine their identities within a set of relations based on notions of solidarity, justice, and equality. Such an approach cannot proceed through a series of empty appeals to innocence or through the ritualistic condemnation of young people. It must take shape as a critical attentiveness to the historical, social, and institutional conditions that produce those structures of power and ideologies that bear down on young people at the level of their everyday existence. At stake here is the recognition that the challenge of youth culture must be addressed with the same theoretical rigor and political awareness that have been accorded to the related issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. I do not mean to suggest, though, that youth should simply be added to the mantra of race, class, and gender. On the contrary, youth must be viewed as an essential category of understanding for all social movements, both within and outside of the university, that struggle to implement a broad vision of social justice.

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Notes

1. This effort is evident in the work that has been published over the years in JAC. Also see Berlin; Bizzell; Brodkey; Olson; Olson and Gale; and Crowley.

2. For a brilliant analysis of the history and the struggle over youth since the 1970s, see Grossberg, We Gotta.

3. Many of the ideas in this paper draw from my "Public Intellectuals and the Challenge of Children's Culture."

4. The universalized notion of childhood and innocence is dismantled in a range of historical work on childhood. See, Ariès; Jenks; Higonnet. For a history of contemporary youth cultures and history, see Austin and Willard.

5. See, for example, Bloom. For a critique of this position, see Aronowitz and Giroux; Levine.

6. I want to emphasize that in using the general term "adults," I am not suggesting that the relationship between children and adults is defined generationally. On the contrary, while all adults are capable of abusing young people, the central issue of adult power cannot be abstracted from larger class, racial, and gender formations, nor can it be removed from the dynamics of American capitalism itself, which, in my estimation, should be at the forefront of any analysis of the devastating effects many young people have to endure in the United States at the present time.
7. This national tragedy is captured by the national Commission on the Role of the Schools when it acknowledges, “Never before has one generation of American children been less healthy, less cared for, or less prepared for life than their parents were at the same age” (3).

8. See Cole. For a passionate and moving commentary on the plight of children who have been incarcerated with adults, see Lewis.

9. For a brilliant commentary on the plight of children in the Reagan-Clinton era, see Finnegian.

10. Stephens ask a similar question: “What are the implications for society as a whole, if there are no longer social spaces conceived as at least partially autonomous from the market and market-driven politics? Where are we to find the sites of difference, the terrain of social witness, critical leverage, and utopian vision, insofar as the domain of childhood—or of everyday life or of a semiautonomous realm of culture—is increasingly shot through with the values of the marketplace and the discursive politics of postmodern global culture? And what happens to the bodies and minds of children in the process?” (10-11)

11. Leland offers one almost hysterical tirade against student use of Internet video games.

12. For an important commentary on the recent public attack on the new electronic media and its effect on youth, especially in light of the Littleton tragedy, see Jenkins, “Testimony.”

13. For an excellent commentary on how adults construct a number of myths to suggest kids need to be contained for emulating the worst behaviors of adults, see Males; also see Powers’ insightful commentary on the various ways in which young people defy such stereotypes and make an enormous number of diverse contributions to society, exhibiting both their own sense of individual and collective agency and social contributions to the larger world. For a complex rendering of youth that completely undermines many of the stereotypes circulated about youth, see Jenkins, “Introduction.”

14. The Index of Social Health claims that the social health of children is at its lowest point in twenty-five years (6). See also Hewlett and West.

15. Here I am arguing against those educators who focus on questions of difference almost entirely in terms of identity and subjectivity while ignoring the related issues of materialism and power. See Giroux, Impure.

Works Cited


——. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture.* New York: Routledge, 1992.


Nominations Solicited

The W. Ross Winterowd Award is given for the most outstanding scholarly book published in composition theory each year. The award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd, who has presented it to each year's recipient at the annual CCCC Convention since 1989. JAC readers are invited to nominate books for this award by sending a letter of nomination to Gary A. Olson; ATAC President; Department of English; University of South Florida; Tampa, FL 33620-5550.

