From *Manchild* to *Baby Boy*: Race and the Politics of Self-Help

Henry A. Giroux

If Reno was in a bad mood—if he didn’t have any money and he wasn’t high—he’d say, “Man, Sonny, they ain’t got no kids in Harlem. I ain’t never seen any. I’ve seen some real small people actin’ like kids. They were too small to be grown, and they might’ve looked like kids, but they don’t have any kids in Harlem, because nobody has time for a childhood. Man, do you ever remember bein’ a kid? Not me. Shit, kids are happy, kids laugh, kids are secure. They ain’t scared—a nothin’. You ever been a kid, Sonny? Damn, you lucky. I ain’t never been a kid, man. I don’t ever remember bein’ happy and not scared. I don’t know what happened, man, but I think I missed out on that childhood thing, because I don’t ever recall bein’ a kid.

-Claude Brown

When Claude Brown published *Manchild in the Promised Land* in 1965, he wrote about the doomed lives of his friends, families, and neighborhood acquaintances. The book is mostly remembered as a brilliantly devastating portrait of Harlem under siege, ravaged and broken from drugs, poverty, unemployment, crime, and police brutality. But what Brown really made visible was the raw violence and dead-end existence that plagued so many young people in Harlem, stealing not only their future but their childhood as well. In the midst of the social collapse and psychological violence wrought by the systemic marriage of racism and class exploitation, children in Harlem were held hostage to forces that not only robbed them of the innocence that comes with childhood, but also forced them to take on the burdens of daily survival that an older generation seemed unable to protect them from in the face of a hostile environment and social system. At the heart of Brown’s narrative,
written in the midst of the civil rights struggle in the 1960s, is a "manchild," a metaphor that indicts a society that is waging war on those children who are black and poor and who have been forced to grow up too quickly. The hybridized concept of manchild marked a space in which innocence was lost and childhood stolen. Harlem was a colony and its street life provided the condition and the very necessity for insurrection. But rebellion for young people came with a price, which Brown reveals near the end of the book: "It seemed as though most of the cats that we'd come up with just hadn't made it. Almost everybody was dead or in jail" (419).

Childhood stolen became less a plea for self-help than a clarion call for condemning a social order that denied children a future. While Brown approached everyday life in Harlem more as a poet than as a political revolutionary, politics was embedded in every sentence in the book—not a politics marked by demagoguery, hatred, and orthodoxy, but one that made visible the damage done by a social system characterized by massive inequalities and a rigid racial divide. *Manchild* created the image of a society without children in order to raise questions about the future of a country that turned its back on its most vulnerable population. Brown's lasting contribution was to reconfigure the boundaries between public issues and private sufferings. For Brown, racism was about power and oppression and could not be separated from broader social, economic, and political considerations. Rather than erasing the social within a discourse of individual pathology or self-help, Brown insisted that social forces had to be factored into any understanding of group suffering and individual despair. Brown explored the suffering of the young in Harlem, but he did so by refusing to privatize it, to elevate the private over the public, or to separate individual hopes, desires, and agency from the realm of politics and public life.

Since the 1980s, various conservatives and liberals have attempted to rework the language of racism and social responsibility in ways that eliminate those larger systemic and structural inequalities that give racism such persistence and moderate change. Theorists such as Shelby Steele, Thomas Sowell, Ward Connerly, Richard Herrnstein, Charles Murray, and Dinesh D'Souza among others have become prominent in spearheading a countermovement in which problems of race have been psychologized either as issues of character, individual pathology, or genetic inferiority. In these perspectives, the language of social analysis has given way to the discourse of self-help, the call for social provisions has been transformed into punitive assaults on the character of the poor,
and the struggle for enlarging social entitlements for those suffering under the weight of unemployment, hunger, homelessness, and inadequate healthcare have given way to policies of containment, control, and criminalization. Racism and poverty in the new millennium are now defined largely through the language of privatization and punishment, and they can be seen in two interrelated discourses. First, there is the discourse of self-help, which displaces responsibility for social welfare from government to individual citizens. Self-help is reinforced by representations that portray black men as utterly infantile, lacking moral values, and in need of character development so that they can pick themselves up and allegedly take responsibility for their lives. The doctrine of self-help is invariably bolstered by allusions to a few African Americans—Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan, for example—and is aimed at youth who allegedly can achieve the American dream if they quit whining and “just do it.” This highly individualized and privatized discourse has been very important as a rationale for dismantling the welfare state while simultaneously ignoring corporate policies that create downsizing, unemployment, toxic waste dumps in poor neighborhoods, and a lowering of urban tax revenues. The ideology of privatized agency underlying this discourse has been largely promoted by neoliberals, the Christian Right, and prominent black public intellectuals from various conservative think tanks. Historically, the rhetoric of self-help has been intertwined with racist representations of colonized subjects as children. Frantz Fanon, among others, makes this clear in his claim that for many white Europeans, “The Negro is just a child” (27).

Closely related to the discourse of self-help is a much more entrenched representational politics of demonization that portrays black men as dangerous, as “the prototype of violent hyper-masculinity” (Kelley, “Confessions” 15). In their depiction of gangsta rap artists such as Tupac Shakur and Snoop Doggy Dog as well as sports figures such as Mike Tyson, the popular media have seized upon this representation of black men as dangerous, misogynist, and threatening. Such representations are also pervasive in the culture industry and can be seen in numerous Hollywood films about African-American youth such as 187, Belly, and Black and White, as well as in an endless array of reality-based television shows such as Cops and Wildest Police Videos. This discourse plays a crucial role in criminalizing social policy and justifying repressive measures, especially those aimed at African-American youth. Like the language of self-help, the representational politics of pathology is utterly
psychologized, devoid of any social context within which to situate behavior, and it further mobilizes mainstream contempt for victims while securing the indifference of government.

The discourses of self-help and demonization, while appearing to serve different purposes, end up complementing each other. The discourse of self-help ignores those larger structural determinants that promote racism and poverty while simultaneously blaming African-American youth for their plight. With the global proliferation of singular black male "success" stories, the absence of any viable form of social analysis, and the dismantling of state provisions to eliminate racism and poverty, the problem of racism is viewed as being solved while its ongoing effects are addressed as a matter of criminal policy. Under such circumstances, the language of self-help makes it possible to ignore the deeper causes of racial inequality while both justifying and expanding the prison-industrial complex. If the discourse of demonization inspires moral panic among whites and blacks alike, the punitive policies of social containment ameliorate that fear. The consequences are as undemocratic as they are appalling: the incarceration of over a million African-American males, with the added result of rising crime rates in poor areas, leaving thousands of children without fathers and a significant proportion of the African-American community without jobs, voting rights, and decent healthcare. In addition, the endless spectacle of connecting black masculinity and criminality, on the one hand, and reform as deriving exclusively from an ethos of self-help, on the other, does more than mobilize racist contempt and fear in whites; it also has resulted in "the deaths of many innocent boys and men of darker hue" (Kelley, "Confessions" 13).

Although there can be little doubt that racial progress has been achieved in many areas in the last fifty years, it is also true that such progress has not been sustained. This is particularly evident in the dramatic increase in black prisoners and the growth of the prison-industrial complex, spiraling health crises such as AIDS, crumbling city infrastructures, segregated housing, soaring unemployment among youth of color, exorbitant school dropout rates among black and Latino youth coupled with the realities of savagely underfunded schools more generally, and deepening inequalities of income and wealth between blacks and whites. The legacy of racism along with its persistent presence in everyday lives, especially as it affects poor youth of color, is still, as Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg observes, "evident in our workplaces, markets and neighborhoods" (qtd. in
“Race”). It is also evident in child poverty rates for blacks and Hispanics, which is “an unconscionable 30 percent and 28 percent, respectively” (Madrick).

David Shipler argues powerfully that race and class are the two most powerful determinants shaping American society. After interviewing hundreds of people over a five-year period, Shipler wrote that he bore witness to a racism that is “a bit subtler in expression, more cleverly coded in public, but essentially unchanged as one of ‘the deep, abiding currents’ in everyday life, in both the simplest and the most complex interactions of whites and blacks” (qtd. in Geiger 27).² Pushing against the grain of civil rights reform and racial justice are reactionary and moderate positions ranging from the extremism of right-wing skinheads and Jesse Helms-like conservatism to the moderate “color-blind” positions of liberals such as Randall Kennedy to tepid forms of multiculturalism that serve to vacuously celebrate diversity while undermining and containing any critical discourse on difference.³ But beneath its changing veneers and expressions, racism, however ignored, is about the relationship between politics and power—a historical past and a living present where racist exclusions appear “calculated, brutally rational, and profitable” (Goldberg, Racial 105).

Crucial to the reemergence of this “new” racism is a cultural politics that plays a determining role in how race shapes the popular unconscious. This is evident in the widespread articles, reviews, and commentaries in the dominant media that give inordinate amounts of time and space to mainstream conservative authors, filmmakers, and critics who rail against affirmative action, black welfare mothers, and the alleged threats black youth and rap artists pose to middle-class existence. Rather than either dismiss such rampant conservatism as indifferent to the realities of racism or deconstruct its racialized codes to see where such language falls in on itself, concerned citizens, educators, and others can engage these commentaries more constructively by analyzing how they function as public discourses, how their privileged meanings work intertextually to resonate with ideologies produced in other sites, and how they serve largely to construct and legitimate racially exclusive practices, policies, and social relations. Central to such a project is the need to produce a representational politics of popular culture that offers educators and the wider public opportunities to critically engage how certain racialized meanings carried in cultural texts gain the force of common sense in light of how racialized discourses and images are articulated in other public spheres and institutionalized sites.
In order to deepen the cultural politics of democratic transformation, educators and others can address questions of culture, power, identity, and representation as part of a broader discourse about public pedagogy and social policy. In this pedagogical approach, power becomes central to the study of cultural texts and practices, and socially relevant problems can be explored through theoretical engagements with wider institutional contexts and public spaces in which racialized discourses gain their political and economic force. If interrogating, challenging, and transforming those cultural practices that sustain racism is a central objective of any critical politics and pedagogy, such a task must be addressed in ways that link cultural texts to the major social problems that animate public life. Texts in this instance would be analyzed as part of a "social vocabulary of culture" that constructs and disseminates what counts as knowledge, produces representations that provide the context for identity formation, and points to how power names, shapes, defines, and constrains relationships between the self and the other (Azoulay 91). Within this type of pedagogical approach, educators and other public intellectuals must find ways to acknowledge the political character of culture through strategies of understanding and engagement that link an antiracist and radically democratic rhetoric with strategies to transform racist institutions within and outside of the university.

At its best, a democratic cultural politics and public pedagogy should forge a connection between reading texts and reading public discourses in order to link the struggle for equality and social justice with relations of power in the broader society. It is precisely within the realm of a cultural politics that educators and engaged citizens within a diverse number of public spheres can attempt to develop pedagogical practices that close the gap between intellectual debate and public life, not simply as a matter of relevance but as a process through which students can learn the skills and knowledges to develop informed opinions, make critical choices, and function as citizen activists. Robin Kelley provides one direction that such a project might take. He insightfully argues that a democratic cultural politics cannot ignore "how segregation strips communities of resources and reproduces inequality." He writes, "The decline of decent-paying jobs and city services, erosion of public space, deterioration of housing stock and property values, and stark inequalities in education and healthcare are manifestations of investment strategies under de facto segregation." He goes on to say that educators must address "dismantling racism, bringing oppressed populations into power and moving beyond a black/white binary that renders invisible the
struggles of Latinos, Asian-Americans, Native Americans and other survivors of racist exclusion and exploitation” ("Integration" 18). Implicit in Kelley's call for action is the recognition that any viable pedagogy and politics of representation needs to address the realities of historical processes, the actuality of economic power, and the range of public spaces and institutions that constitute the embattled terrain of racial difference and struggle. This suggests developing a critical vocabulary for viewing diverse cultural texts not only in relation to other modes of discourse but also, in the words of Randall Johnson, "in relationship to contemporaneous social institutions and non-discursive practices" (19). Within this approach, cultural texts cannot be isolated from the social and political conditions of their production. Nor can the final explanation of such texts be found within the texts themselves. On the contrary, such texts become meaningful when viewed both in relation to other discursive practices and in terms of "the objective social field from which [they] derive" (Johnson 17). Pedagogically, this suggests addressing how cultural texts in the classroom and other spheres construct themselves in response to broader institutional arrangements, contexts of power, and the social relations that they both legitimate and help to sustain. Needless to say, while I will focus on how such texts can be taken up in the classroom, such analyses can go on in a variety of public spheres outside of public and higher education.

In what follows, I demonstrate the theoretical relevance of developing critical pedagogical practices in which issues of representation and democratic social transformation mutually inform each other. In doing so, I want to focus on that regime of representation that seeks both to individualize and to privatize the experiences of African Americans as it renders them either in a state of arrested development or as criminally pathological. I will engage a popular Hollywood film, Baby Boy, in order to demonstrate how this film might be used as both a social transcript and a form of public pedagogy—a visual technology that functions as a powerful teaching machine that intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning, subject positions, identities, and experiences—designed to integrate representations of black masculinity and individual agency with broader relations of power and regimes of racial difference. My argument is that film as a form of public pedagogy produces images, ideas, and ideologies that powerfully shape both individual and collective identities (see Giroux, "Breaking"). The growing popularity of film as a compelling mode of communication and form of public pedagogy suggests how important it has become as a site of cultural politics, particu-
larly as it contributes to a public discourse and policy about racial injustice. While films play an important role in promoting particular ideologies and values in the public sphere, they also provide a pedagogical space that opens up, as Homi Bhabha would say, the "possibility of interpretation as intervention" (Olson and Worsham 382). As public pedagogies, they make clear the need for new vocabularies and modes of analysis that address the profoundly political and pedagogical ways in which knowledge is constructed and enters our lives in what Susan Bordo calls "an image-saturated culture" (2). For educators and others, this suggests analyzing critically how films function as social practices that influence everyday lives and positioning them within existing social, cultural, and institutional machineries of power, as well as examining how the historical and contemporary meanings that films produce help to align, reproduce, and interrupt broader sets of ideas, discourses, and social configurations at work in the larger society. Films both shape and bear witness to the ethical and political dilemmas that animate the broader social landscape, and they often raise fundamental questions about how we can think about politics and political agency in light of such a recognition. Using Baby Boy as a form of public pedagogy, I want to explore how this text embodies a particular view of racial politics in American society, how it connects the discourses of infantilization and black pathology with broader considerations about public life, and how it simultaneously offers opportunities to read against its ideology of self-help in order to fight how antiblack racism plays itself out in contemporary American society.

**Racial Coding in the Hollywood Text**

During the last ten years, Hollywood has cashed in on a number of young, talented black directors such as Spike Lee, Allen and Albert Hughes, Ernest Dickerson, and John Singleton. Films such as *New Jack City, Boyz N the Hood, New Jersey Drive, Clockers, Belly*, and *Baby Boy* have not only appealed to a lucrative black audience but have crossed over and become successful with white audiences as well. Many of these films in varying degrees have offered up homogeneous images of the inner city ghetto as largely inhabited by illiterate, unmotivated, and violent urban youth who are economically and racially marginalized. The increasingly familiar script suggests a correlation between urban public space and rampant drug use, daily assaults, welfare fraud, teenage mothers, and young black men caught in the ritual behavior of thug life, prison, and moral irresponsibility. Missing from these highly sensationalized and
exoticized celluloid ghetto neighborhoods is any sense of the complexity of life there. As Robin Kelley puts it in another context, what a film like *Baby Boy* avoids are representations of men and women who [go] to work every day in foundries, hospitals, nursing homes, private homes, police stations, sanitation departments, banks, garment factories, assembly plants, pawn shops, construction sites, loading docks, storefront churches, telephone companies, grocery and department stores, public transit, restaurants, welfare offices, recreation centers; or the street vendors, the cab drivers, the bus drivers, the ice cream truck drivers, the seamstresses, the numerologists and fortune tellers, the folks who protected or cleaned downtown buildings all night long. (Yo' 20–21)

*Baby Boy* is yet another controversial addition to this genre because it makes an attempt both to represent and to critically engage the arrested development of black, male youth in the south-central section of Los Angeles. Rather than address the economic, political, and social forces at work in the dehumanization, exploitation, and pathologization of poor, urban youth of color, *Baby Boy* focuses on the refusal of such youth to grow up and assume the responsibility of getting jobs, taking care of their families, and becoming productive members of the community. *Baby Boy* is less interested in the broader forces that produce racism than it is in the way in which the effects of racism are experienced by those who bear the burden of its consequences. This is not an unimportant project, but it is taken up through an ideological register that is all too characteristic of the 1990s and the new millennium. Social problems in this film become personal problems, and systemic issues are reduced to private considerations. Matters of personal commitment and character push aside broader considerations of how individual incapacities and misfortunes bear the burden of larger systemic forces. Private struggles replace social struggles, and collective solutions give way to individual responsibility. *Baby Boy* echoes the conservative call for black males to stop whining, pick themselves up, take personal responsibility for their behavior, and do themselves and the larger society a favor by exercising some self-criticism aimed at the infantile and irresponsible lives they lead.  

Black conservatives such as Stanley Crouch and white liberals such as Roger Ebert closed ranks in praising *Baby Boy* as both an honest and deeply serious film. Crouch claims it is one of the few black films ever made that has the courage to “look at those strutting young Los Angeles black men who father children by various women and make little or no effort to
support them" (8). Ebert, the film critic for the Chicago Sun-Times, exalts in Baby Boy’s “message to men like its hero: yes, racism has contributed to your situation, but do you have to give it so much help with your own attitude?”

Written and directed by John Singleton, Baby Boy is the followup to his 1991 hit Boyz N the Hood. Both films deal with the rite of passage that young black men face in south-central Los Angeles. Whereas Boyz N the Hood explores the connection between racism, violence, and the militarized masculinity associated with gang warfare, Baby Boy narrows its focus and addresses the theory that racism and macho fantasy infantalize African-American males, who cannot assume the responsibilities that come with being a mature adult. To prove his point, Singleton explains his theme in the first few minutes of the film through a mix of the spectacle and the alleged legitimacy of scientific rhetoric. The film opens with a surreal, dreamlike image of a fully grown, naked black man, the twenty-year old protagonist Jody (Tyrese Gibson), floating in his mother’s womb. Jody is curled up in a fetal position and imagines that he is about to be aborted. Jody’s imagined, infantile fears become the backdrop for a voice-over quoting a “lady psychiatrist,” Dr. Frances Cress Welding, author of The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors, who asserts that African-American men both baby themselves and believe that they deserve to be treated with the indulgences accorded an infant. To support the claim that racism has made black men think of themselves as babies, Welding offers the following: “What does a black man call his girlfriends? momma; his acquaintances? boyz; and his place of residence? crib.” Far from rupturing this absurd reductionism, Jody’s character seems to embody it to its fullest. Early on, we’re told that Jody has two young children, a boy and a girl, each of whom has a different mother; yet he lives at home with his own mother, who is constantly telling him to grow up while he watches cartoons on television and builds and plays with model cars. When he is not sponging off of his mother, he is taking advantage of his girlfriend, Yvette (Taraji Henson), constantly borrowing her car and fooling around with other women. When Yvette “steals” back her car, he ends up riding around the neighborhood on a ridiculously garish, childhood bicycle.

Next, we find him outside of an abortion clinic waiting for Yvette, one of the two women with whom he has fathered children. Jody drives Yvette home and puts her to bed, but because she is in pain, distraught, and slightly drugged from painkillers, she doesn’t want to talk to Jody, whose present irresponsibility appears as an uncomfortable reminder as to why
she got the abortion in the first place. Lacking the compassion or sensitivity to stick around and offer some comfort, Jody borrows Yvette’s car and takes off in order to visit his other girlfriend, Peanut (Tamara Lasagne Bass), the mother of his other baby. Compassion quickly turns to self-absorption, and Jody begins his journey from an unremitting display of narcissism, selfishness, and grossly infantile behavior to some semblance of adult responsibility. Jody’s rite of passage is marked by four significant events. First, Jody’s domestic life is shattered when his mother brings home a boyfriend, Melvin (Ving Rhames), whose presence Jody bitterly resents. Melvin is an old-style gangsta whose history of violence and ten years of imprisonment is boldly displayed in the words “Thug” and “187” tattooed on his huge, muscular arms. Melvin is a painful reminder that Jody’s mother, Juanita (A.J. Johnson), a youthful thirty-six years old, has her own desires and needs a life of her own. But more is at stake than his mother’s independent pleasures: there is also the possibility that Jody will be forced to leave the house and go out on his own once Melvin settles in. In fact, Melvin becomes a grim reminder of when Juanita allowed a former boyfriend to join the household and as a result Jody’s brother was asked to leave the house, eventually to be killed in the streets. In a scene combining stereotypes of rapacious sexuality and criminality, Melvin’s increasing presence around the house becomes more threatening to Jody (and presumably the wider public audience) when he wakes up one morning and finds his mother’s suitor stark-naked in the kitchen, scrambling eggs. Melvin now owns a landscaping business and has given up the thug life, but when dealing with Jody, whom he resents, he quickly resorts to both the reasoning and violence of his past. Melvin may no longer kill people, but his sense of agency is still firmly rooted in a macho ebullience that appears removed from any kind of critical understanding that might question the allure of violence for men and how it functions to numb them to the plight of others. Jody, on the other hand, fears that Melvin might eventually abuse his mother, a pattern he has seen in her relationship with other men. But while such a fear is legitimate, it becomes a self-serving rhetorical tool to try to convince his mother to get rid of Melvin. Jody’s insincerity is echoed in his imperviousness to his own treatment of women as objects, which not only reproduces a particularly repugnant form of moral insensitivity, but makes it all the more predictable that he will engage in the very abuse that he believes Melvin is capable of producing.

The second turning point in Jody’s life occurs while hanging out in a liquor store parking lot with Sweetpea (Omar Gooding), his unem-
ployed childhood friend. Observing various individuals engage in small-time boosting, he realizes that he will never make it out of south-central L.A. until he can become, as he puts it to Sweetpea, the master of his destiny. According to Jody, “Everybody moving is making money.” As far as Jody is concerned, the world is divided into “buyers” and “sellers.” Jody wants to be a seller. But Jody doesn’t want to sell drugs, the so-called trade of choice in his neighborhood. To become a seller, Jody begins boosting women’s clothes from the fashion district and peddles them in neighborhood beauty parlors. Jody has a vague sense that his own sense of manhood depends on getting a job and becoming more independent, but he has no sense of the political and economic forces in his neighborhood that construct the problem as a social issue and not merely as a problem of individual initiative or character. Manhood for Jody is about making money, hardly an oppositional stance toward the system that punishes young black men like himself. In other words, Jody’s newfound sense of agency is entirely entrepreneurial and privatized; it offers little understanding of how the racialized stratification of power and opportunity limits his own sense of possibility, not to mention the possibilities of the young men and women who populate his impoverished neighborhood. Jody recognizes that to be a consumer you have to be a producer, but he has little sense of the economic and political dynamics and inequities at work in shaping the relations of the marketplace.

While Jody is able to take in some extra cash, his life takes a third critical turn for the worse when he angrily confronts his mother and demands that she throw Melvin out of the house. At first Melvin lays back and says nothing, but he finally explodes and tells Jody to grow up and be a man, adding that he needs to stop blaming everyone else for his problems. To add insult to injury, Melvin suggests that Jody has an oedipal complex, that at the root of his problem is a repressed desire for his own mother. Melvin then decks Jody, and Jody leaves the house for good. Jody has no place to go, and to make matters worse he no longer has a car, which Yvette has taken back. Reduced to riding around the neighborhood on his childhood bike, Jody suffers another indignity when he is attacked by a group of neighborhood teens. Jody finds Sweetpea and they cruise the streets until they find the group of fourteen-year-old punks in a park. Sweetpea and Jody give all of them a beating that redeems Jody’s manhood, but the violence makes him uncomfortable and serves as a marker for him to rethink his own relationship to violence. Jody’s crisis of masculinity faces another challenge when Rodney (Snoop Dogg), a dope-smoking gangbanger and former lover of Yvette’s,
to town after being released from jail and wants to resume his place in her life. Rodney offers the flip side of Singleton’s altogether simplistic and reductive understanding of young black masculinity.

Rodney ends up in Yvette’s house and tries to pick up the relationship at the point it had been before Yvette got involved with Jody. Rodney is a menacing figure who settles in against Yvette’s desire to get him out of the apartment. Resentment soon turns to violence as Rodney tries to rape Yvette but gives up the attempt when her baby boy, JoJo, enters the room and pleads for Rodney to leave her alone. Rodney’s rage then turns on Jody as he gets some of his boyz together and drives over to Jody’s house in order to shoot him. Jody and Sweetpea get caught in the line of fire but manage to escape unhurt. Jody and Sweetpea now have to face the challenge to their manhood of both the failed rape attempt against Yvette and the attempt by Rodney and his boyz against their own lives. Their identities, if not masculinity, is now on trial and though they hesitate about committing a violent act, they hunt Rodney down and murder him.

Jody is completely shaken and learns about male responsibility through a street code that offers few rewards, except survival. He goes back to his mother’s house and sinks into a corner, trembling while holding the gun he had used to shoot Rodney. Melvin finds him in the room, takes the gun, wipes off the prints, and leaves the room. No words are exchanged between them. Melvin and Jody have now bonded through the ritual of excessive masculine violence, removed from either the sphere of moral responsibility or the necessity for argument. Violence is not renounced in this instance, but harnessed for the greater good of the family. Macho fantasy still feeds adult reality, but in the service of helping Jody overcome his immaturity and selfishness. The film ends with Jody leaving his mother and moving in with Yvette, the implication being that he is finally willing to try to live up to his responsibilities as a father and husband.

**Film as Public Pedagogy**

Pedagogically, films such as *Baby Boy* can be interrogated initially by analyzing the common sense assumptions that inform them, the affective investments they mobilize, as well as the absences and exclusions that limit the range of meanings and information available to audiences. Analyzing such films as public discourses also affords pedagogical opportunities to engage those complex institutional frameworks that are brought to bear in producing, circulating, and legitimating the range of meanings associated with such cultural texts. As public discourses, these
cultural texts can be addressed in terms of how they are constituted as objects that gain their relevance through their relationship to other social institutions, resources, and nondiscursive practices. In this instance, *Baby Boy* might be addressed as a mode of public pedagogy whose racialized representations gain legitimation because they resonate so powerfully with the "war on crime" and the generalized culture of fear it produced to legitimate punitive policies against black and brown youth since the 1980s, but especially so under the Clinton and Bush administrations (see Wacquant; Cole; Parenti). For example, when viewed within the dominant racial ideology of mainstream popular culture, *Baby Boy* registers the rightward shift in race relations, especially among social conservatives and mainstream media, in which black youth are both demonized and subject to mounting surveillance by the police and increased jurisdiction under the criminal justice system. As Craig Watkins observes, "Black youth seemingly have been in the eye of a public storm against crime, drugs, and the alleged erosion of traditional values. As a result, new punitive technologies and legislation have been initiated in order to exercise great control over black youth" (1). But Watkins understates the case. The vast majority of youth who are incarcerated are black or Hispanic kids of color, and, as Paul Street points out, "A young black man age sixteen . . . faces a 29 percent chance of spending time in prison during his life. The corresponding statistic for white men in the same age group is 4 percent" ("Color" 49). Youth culture has always incurred the wrath of adults, but they have never been persecuted with such methodical zeal as they are at the present moment. Catherine Campbell, a civil rights attorney in Fresno, California, argues,

The point is not that youth is criminalized, but that only certain kids are criminalized, and these are kids from bad neighborhoods . . . . They get them, and then if they're the right kind, if they're poor, of color, angry, and unsuccessful in school, they keep them. Through all means available, they keep them in the system. They search them, harass them, follow them, watch who they talk with, what they wear. The most minor infraction, they are back in jail, then they are sent away, or placed on probation, and then they are watched more." (qtd. in "Remember")

It is against this social and political backdrop that *Baby Boy* needs to be engaged as part of a broader politics of racial representation.

According to John Singleton, Jody, the main character in *Baby Boy*, is one of the most dangerous young men around because he is "hypersen-
sitive," a young man who is trying to negotiate what it means to be a man, while laboring under a social code that says "you’re not a man unless you’re a killer" (qtd. in Fuchs). Singleton rightly views this behavior as utterly dysfunctional, and he crafted the film to explore the relationship between the crisis of masculinity and violence on the one hand, and the politics of agency and responsibility on the other. But the film operates within a political register that almost completely ignores broader historical, economic, racial, and political contexts. Nor does it comment on the centrality of violence to either white masculinity or American culture more generally. As Michael Eric Dyson points out,

> It does no good to reprimand black youth for their addiction to violence. Our nation suffers the addiction in spades, as even a cursory read of pop culture suggests. But it is not just pop culture that is implicated. American society was built on violence, from the wholesale destruction of Native American culture to the enslavement of Africans. (125)

Moreover, the crisis of identity and masculinity that he constructs finds its resolution as a matter of integration into the existing social order rather than as a challenge that calls for its transformation. Singleton wants to capture what it means for some young black men to grow up in poverty without fathers, how they are raised by their mothers who do their best, and how both get by without the benefit of older role models. But against this seemingly severe deprivation is not only the presumption that women do not do enough to help these young men reach a state of maturity and independence, there is also the sense that the traditional nuclear family is the normalizing space where these problems can be resolved. This is a deeply flawed and conservative position because it never confronts the misogyny and inequalities that structure such families, especially amid an unproblematized legacy of machismo and severe social problems. Moreover, this position has no way of understanding how the family is connected to larger social forces that it alone cannot shape or control. All of these issues offer an opportunity for educators and students to take up this film as part of a broader understanding of the racial, economic, and political forces that both frame its major assumptions and connect it to those ideologies and public spheres that exist outside of the often isolated space of higher education.

Singleton’s conservative ideology is most evident in his refusal to raise questions about the larger forces that bear down on Jody’s sense of agency and possibility. What does it mean to be a man in a neighborhood
marked by deep racial and economic inequalities? To what degree does self-responsibility become the marker of possibility when neighborhoods such as the one Jody lives in are burdened by concentrations of poverty, segregated housing, high unemployment, and (usually) a hostile police force, as well as by a lack of decent schools, healthcare, and neighborhood organizations? How does one talk about individual initiative in a system where the poverty rate for blacks is 28.3 percent, more than double what it is for whites (11.2 percent)? What role do biographical solutions play in dealing with systemic problems such as the ongoing discrimination against African-American youth in the workplace and schools? How does one theorize the concept of individual responsibility or character within a social order in which the national jobless rate is about six percent, but unemployment rates for young men of color in places such as south-central Los Angeles have topped thirty percent? How does one ignore the fact that while it is widely recognized that a high school diploma is essential to getting a job, it is increasingly difficult for large numbers of African-American youth even to stay in school, especially with the advent of zero-tolerance policies now driving school policy. In fact, as a result of such policies, the rate of expulsions and suspensions for such students is increasing at an alarming rate. For instance, Marilyn Elias reported in *USA Today* that “In 1998, the first year national expulsion figures were gathered, 31% of kids expelled were black, but blacks made up only 17% of the students in public schools.” Moreover, as many states invest more in prisons than in schools, more African Americans are dropping out of school and ending up under the control of some aspect of the criminal justice system. The figures on this are extraordinary. Of the two million people behind bars, seventy percent of the inmates are people of color with fifty percent being African Americans and seventeen percent being Latinos (Barsamian 35). Law professor David Cole points out in his book *No Equal Justice* that while “76 percent of illicit drug users were white, 14 percent black, and 8 percent Hispanic—figures which roughly match each group’s share of the general population”—African Americans constitute “35 percent of all drug arrests, 55 percent of all drug convictions, and 74 percent of all sentences for drug offenses” (144). A Justice Department report points out that on any given day in this country “more than a third of the young African-American men aged 18 to 34 in some of our major cities are either in prison or under some form of criminal justice supervision” (qtd. in Donsiger 101). The same department reported in April of 2000 that “black youth are forty-eight times more likely than whites to be sentenced to
juvenile prison for drug offenses" (qtd. in Press 55). Within such a context, the possibility of treating young people of color with respect, dignity, and support vanishes and with it the hope of overcoming a racial abyss that makes a mockery out of justice and a travesty of democracy.

Rather than point to the weakness of Jody's character in addressing what it would mean for him to be a man, students might question how Singleton might have addressed such conditions, as well as what resources Jody had to expand his capacities, knowledge, and skills to make informed choices. Singleton might have acknowledged the need for eliminating racism in the workplace, addressed the ongoing discrimination in the schools, or the growing violence and militarization waged against black youth by what David Theo Goldberg has called "the racial state." Yet, it appears that Singleton has no sense of how the historical burdens of racism work through the "technologies employed by the [modern racial state] to fashion, modify, and reify the terms of racial expression, as well as racist exclusions and subjugation" (Racial 4). Singleton could have acknowledged not only the practices, social conditions, and institutional structures that make up the racial state, he also could have brought attention to the need for the federal government to provide funds for a range of proven programs that improve the life of impoverished communities with limited jobs and institutional infrastructures. For example, he might have pointed to the need for Head Start and drug prevention programs, youth centers, urban school reform, the subsidizing of low-income housing, as well as childcare and healthcare programs. Clearly, these are far more important in establishing the conditions for giving young men and women in the urban cities an opportunity to lead their lives as responsible adults and critical citizens. Moreover, Singleton could have pointed to the myriad forms of inventive resistance that black youth have produced, particularly within the realm of media and popular culture, to redefine "alternative notions of their racial, gender, and generational identities in the face of an ascending conservative hegemony that was making its own set of distinctive claims about black youth" (Watkins 4). But apparently this is not the stuff of Hollywood entertainment. It doesn't titillate. It doesn't shock. It can't offer the same mechanisms for exotic escape that mainstream white audiences crave in the consumption of blackness.

Black youth are neither irresponsible nor passive victims of the racial apartheid so rampant in urban centers in this country. Black youth display a remarkable degree of agency and resistance, and in doing so they
provide a valuable set of diverse resources within black popular culture to challenge the conservative claim that blacks are responsible for urban poverty and violence and are "a drain on our national resources" (Kelley, "Neo-Cons" 142). This is not meant to suggest that such resistance should be over valorized in the face of massive inequalities, power, and modes of discrimination. But it should be mined as a way to rethink and repoliticize agency, collective movements, and "the central constituting factor of power in social relations" (Goldberg and Solomos 5–6).

Any attempt to address Baby Boy as a form of public pedagogy would have to analyze the largely privatized and individualized analysis that shapes this film and how it resonates with the ongoing privatization and depoliticization of the public sphere. As neoliberalism has gained momentum since the 1980s, one of its distinguishing features has been an assault on all those public spheres that are not regulated by the language of the market. Civil freedoms degenerate into market freedoms and the very idea of public goods and public service is increasingly viewed as either an unacceptable extravagance or as useless luxury, if not pathological "dependency." Under the onslaught of neoliberal ideology and its turn toward the free market as the basis for human interaction, there is an attempt to alter radically the very vocabulary we use to describe and appraise human interest, action, and behavior. Individuals are now defined largely as consumers, and self-interest appears to be the only factor capable of motivating people. Public spaces are increasingly displaced by commercial interests, and private utopias become the only way of understanding the meaning of the good life. As public life is emptied of its own separate concerns—the importance of public goods, civic virtue, public debate, collective agency, and social provisions for the marginalized—it becomes increasingly more difficult to translate private concerns into public matters. The Darwinian world of universal struggle pits individuals against each other while suggesting that the misfortunes and problems of others represent both a weakness of character and a social liability. Moreover, it holds that the needs of racialized others are an impossible drain on already scarce resources. Within such a system, the state gives up its obligation to provide collective safety nets for people, and the ideology of going it alone furthers the myth that all social problems are the result of individual choices (see Giroux, Public). As all levels of government move from social investment to racial containment, the state makes more visible its militarizing functions and, as Goldberg brilliantly argues, begins to function more
visibly as a racial state and through its control over modes of rule and representation employs

physical force, violence, coercion, manipulation, deceit, cajoling, incentives, law(s), taxes, penalties, surveillance, military force, repressive apparatuses, ideological mechanisms and media—in short, all the means at a state's disposal—ultimately to the ends of racial rule. Which is to say, to the ends of reproducing the racial order and so representing for the most part the interests of the racial ruling class. (Racial 112)

Unfortunately, Baby Boy acknowledges neither the state's implication in racial violence and social disintegration, nor its refusal to assume any responsibility for preventing it. One consequence is that Baby Boy leaves intact the myth of individual motivation and pathology as the source of unemployment, violence, welfare dependency, bad housing, inadequate schools, and crumbling infrastructures, as it reinforces this well-rehearsed staple of conservative ideology. It reproduces this myth by suggesting that collective problems can only be addressed as tales of individual survival, coming-of-age stories that chronicle either selfishness, laziness, and lack of maturity or individual perseverance.

Dependency in this film and in the broader society is a dirty word; charges of "dependency" resonate with right-wing attacks on the welfare state and the alleged perils of big government. Granted, Baby Boy is supposedly about the refusal of immature African-American youth to grow up, but the film's attack on dependency is so one-sided that it reinforces the comfortable illusion (to some) that social safety nets simply weaken character, and it supports this ideology, in part, by refusing to acknowledge how dependency on the welfare state has worked for those millions for whom it has "made all the difference between wretched poverty and a decent life" (Bauman, Individualized 73). Similarly, if Jody's dreams are limited to the demands of the traditional family structure and the successes associated with the market ideology, there is no room in Baby Boy to recognize that democracy, not the market, can be drawn upon as a force of dissent and a relentless critique of institutions. Democracy rather than the market provides a vocabulary for civic engagement as well as a discourse for expanding and deepening the possibilities of critical citizenship and social transformation. In the end, Baby Boy fails to offer a space for translating how the private and public mutually inform each other; consequently, it reinforces
rather than ruptures those racially oppressive trends in American society that discount the possibility of racial justice, democratic politics, and responsible citizenship. More importantly, the characterizations of black men and women offered up by Singleton, to quote film critic Armond White in another context, "are reactionary throwbacks, ... a sign of that national epidemic that deforms discourse on race: denial."

**Agency and Masculinity as the Politics of Pathology**

Questions of identity are central to *Baby Boy* and to Jody's development as a character. Identities are neither fixed nor unified but are about an ongoing process of becoming. Identities are constructed through the differences and exclusions, mediated within disparate and often unequal relations of power, that largely determine the range of resources—history, values, language, and experiences—available through which individuals and groups experience their relationship to themselves and others. While the link between agency and identity is a complex one, agency precisely registers the connection between the private and the social, the individual and the public sphere, both as a matter of politics and power. Agency, as Lawrence Grossberg observes,

> involve[s] the possibilities of action as interventions into the processes by which reality is continually being transformed and power enacted. That is, in Marx's terms, the problem of agency is the problem of understanding how people make history in conditions not of their own making. Who gets to make history? ... That is, agency involves relations of participation and access, the possibilities of moving into particular sites of activity and power, and of belonging to them in such a way as to be able to enact their powers. ("Identity" 99)

Identity in *Baby Boy* is shaped outside of the discourse of political power, and as a result it enacts a notion of agency for Jody that is defined primarily through the discourse of immaturity and self-inflicted injury. Identity in this instance does not become a site of social contestation, but collapses into a static notion of masculinity in which the body occupies a limited sense of agency defined primarily through discourses of violence, crime, dependency, pleasure, and social pathology. Within this common Hollywood stereotype, black male power is removed from the realm of critical thought and plays out in a display of excessive machismo, lurid sexuality, exoticized athleticism, and patriarchal masculinity. Trapped within a discourse of identity and agency mediated through a form of masculinity that is reduced to affirming and negotiating the
dynamics of violence, Jody has no tools for either negotiating how power actually works in society or discovering what it would mean to favor “negotiation over violence and the will to justice over the will to dominate” (Gilroy 230). Baby Boy presents a “flattened moral landscape bereft of difficult choices,” one in which limited visions are matched by a cynical politics that parades as part of a naturalized morality (231). Missing from this analysis of power and its collapse into a traditionally racist notion of black masculinity is the use of state violence and how it not only disciplines bodies of color through a range of practices extending from racial profiling to incarceration, but also, as Goldberg argues, how it is used to systematically close off institutional access on the part of individuals in virtue of group membership while hiding the very instrumentalities that reproduce that inaccessibility (Racial 131).

Violence in this film operates as both a constant threat and a medium for men to express their masculinity. Jody is haunted by the death of his brother and harbors fears in his dreams of being murdered in the streets. At one point, he tells Yvette that he wanted their child so something of him would be left behind once he is killed. Jody is also ambivalent about his relationship to street violence, and this is evident when he participates in beating up the young punks who robbed him and when he hunts Rodney down and murders him for attempting to rape Yvette and kill both him and Sweetpea. There is also the sense that Melvin, while still a tough guy, no longer resorts to the kind of brutalizing violence that defined his life in the past. But in all of these cases, violence is still the only terrain on which these men move, define themselves, and work out their problems. This is violence packaged as a critique of masculine crisis, but it is a decontextualized violence more intent on an aesthetics of posturing than on disrupting conventional stereotypes that portray black youth and men in the image of Bigger Thomas. In the end, Baby Boy falls prey, regardless of how it attempts to complicate masculinity, to constructing black men homogeneously through the performance of violence; in doing so, it both infantalizes them and numbs them to the plight of others. Similarly, by decontextualizing the violence in their lives, it mystifies the sources and real nature of violence that assaults the minds and bodies of black men throughout the United States in the form of poverty-ridden schools, low teacher expectations, racist profiling, housing discrimination, joblessness, the shrinking of public services, and police repression. Robbed of all concreteness and stripped of any historical and relational context, representations of violence in films such as Baby Boy are “flattened to caricatures of villains and victims [and] the radical demand
for equality in personal life is displaced onto a profoundly conservative appeal for law and order” (Willis, Don’t 74).

Masculinity in Baby Boy is not only defined through the posture of the tough menace, the high pleasure quotient of promiscuity, and the infantilization of the black male psyche, it also works to preserve male power while legitimating iniquitous power relations between men and women. Freedom in this film is about redeeming black masculinity, but the notion of manhood that is redeemed makes masculinity “synonymous with the ability to assert power-over through acts of violence and terrorism” particularly against women (hooks, Yearning 59). What is left unproblematic in this notion of masculinity is its intimate connection to a notion of patriarchy in which the power to act is equated with the power to control or abuse women. For example, all of the major women characters in this film are defined largely as props for men’s pleasures and as integral to maintaining some semblance of family values, and all their actions are devoid of contextualization. The framing of black women’s sexuality in this way apparently says nothing about the dominant culture women in general endure. As Dyson astutely observes,

Perhaps there’s no excuse for poor young black women believing that their bodies are their tickets to pleasure—besides, that is all the cues they get from pimps, playas, teachers, preachers, daddies, hustlers, and mentors. Apparently, there are no cultural influences—no magazines or television shows—that lead them to believe that their sexuality might suspend their misery, if even for a few gilded moments at the end of the night in the backseat of a car on the edge of town—and perhaps their sanity. (185)

Jody’s lovers and his mother, even when they display some insight about the difficult nature of their lives, never rise to the occasion of challenging the wider misogynist structures in which they live out their daily existence. All of these women are caught within a violence that carries an erotic charge, all of them experience the pain and suffering that comes with the submission to male power, but none of them can imagine themselves outside of its dominating influence. At most, they try to do the best they can to control its worst excesses. Singleton not only defines women as the binary opposite of masculinity in this film, he goes a step further and suggests that “African-American men are systematically prevented from assuming adult responsibilities by their mothers, who insist on smothering them with affection” (Kehr). For all of Singleton’s emphasis on critiquing black masculinity, it is ironic that his only
attempts to contextualize its most abrasive forms is at the expense of black women. As Dyson points out, representations of black women, it appears, enjoy even less complexity:

If social empathy for young black males is largely absent in public opinion and public policies, the lack of understanding and compassion for the difficulties faced by poor young black females is even more deplorable. There exists within quarters of black life a range of justifications for black male behavior. Even if they are not wholly accepted by other blacks or by the larger culture, such justifications have a history and possess social resonance. Young black males hustle because they are poor. They become pimps and playas because the only role models they had are pimps and playas. Black males rob because they are hungry. . . . Yet there are few comparable justifications for the black female’s beleaguered status. The lack of accepted social justifications for black women’s plight would lead one to assume that black women do not confront incest, father deprivation, economic misery, social dislocation, domestic abuse, maternal abandonment, and a host of other ills. (184–85)

Given the film’s view of the relationship between masculinity and women, this seems to be a predictable response to a dreadful form of misogynist logic. Through its representations of masculinity, violence, and women, Baby Boy dissolves politics into pathology and agency into narcissistic modes of self-absorption. By relying on a cheap moralism as a substitute for any viable notion of analysis, Baby Boy reduces the struggle to overcome racism and inequality to the lack of individual discipline, and in doing so it “discourage[s] rebellion in favor of guilty, resigned acquiescence” (Willis, Don’t 158). Under such circumstances, public politics becomes difficult to imagine as issues of agency, vision, and transformation collapse into the realm of the personal and the psychological as opposed to the collective and social. Commenting on representations of black masculinity in a different context, bell hooks provides an important insight into the ideological and political shortcomings at work in Baby Boy:

The portrait of black masculinity that emerges in this work perpetually constructs black men as “failures” who are psychologically “fucked up,” dangerous, violent, sex maniacs whose insanity is informed by their inability to fulfill their phallocentric masculine destiny in a racist context. . . . It does not interrogate the conventional construction of patriarchal masculinity or question the extent to which black men have historically
internalized this norm. It never assumes the existence of black men whose creative agency has enabled them to subvert norms and develop ways of thinking about masculinity that challenge patriarchy. (Black 89)

A Pedagogy of Engagement

*Baby Boy* is an important film that can be used to address the stereotypes and the conservative ideology that currently constructs specific notions of race, agency, masculinity, violence, and politics. But *Baby Boy* represents more than a text that portrays a particularly offensive image of black men and women. The film, like the advertising and culture industries, also functions as a form of public pedagogy in legitimizing those images and values that undermine a democratic language for defending vital social institutions that oppose racist values and practices. As a public text, *Baby Boy* resonates powerfully with those forces in American society that condemn minorities of color and class to the most debilitating and exploitative aspects of racism. Addressing *Baby Boy* as a representative, reactionary racialized text is particularly important at a time in American history when racism is once again on the rise as the war on terrorism—which reinforces policies of racial profiling, anti-immigrant legislation, and the suspension of basic civil liberties—combines with neoliberal policies that reinforce a rabid individualism and free market ideology that not only turns citizenship into the act of consuming, but that also leaves no room for understanding the effects of racist practices and policies as public concerns deeply threatening to a democratic social order.

Framed against a culture of commercialism and commodification, *Baby Boy* becomes not simply another text to be consumed but also a pedagogical force for legitimating a market-based notion of self-help and individualism, while at the same time reinforcing the presupposition that racism is a problem best understood as a lack of decent character or individual motivation—a problem that can only be understood and resolved within the privatized discourse of self-help or, if need be, through the disciplinary practices of punishment and containment. Zygmunt Bauman observes that as collective interests are reforged as private pursuits, “The new across-the-board consensus . . . is not about making the plight of the poor easier, but about getting rid of the poor; deleting them or making them vanish from the agenda of public concern” (Search 185). What is crucial to recognize here is that how different groups and individuals respond to a film such as *Baby Boy* is, in part, conditioned by the dominant ideologies that shape the public sphere.
and by what John Brenkman calls "a material, institutionalized space of expression and criticism," which is currently under assault by President Bush, John Ashcroft, and others waging a war against terrorism (and civil liberties) (119). Given the current assault on public life and dissent, it becomes all the more necessary to make the representational politics of films such as Baby Boy both visible and problematic.

There are no "manchildren" in Baby Boy because the film mirrors the increasing attempt in the larger society to remove the plight of poor black and Hispanic children from the inventory of public concerns. Hence, there is little consideration of what it might mean to address individual problems as public issues, to connect individual choices to resources mediated through the realms of power and politics. In this sense, Baby Boy reinforces rather than ruptures both the rise of "blame the victim" ideologies and those political forces that claim that persistent racism is not a white problem, that the welfare state must be dismantled in favor of market freedoms, and that the increasing criminalization of social problems is a legitimate response by the racial state to the racial intolerance, economic inequalities, and class antagonisms shaping American life. Certainly, such policies suggest dire consequences for those youth who are poor, black, and Hispanic.

Clearly, if the dominant codes at work in such a film are to be questioned, it is imperative for students to address how the absences in such a film become meaningful when understood within a broader struggle over issues of racial identity, power, representation, and everyday life. Depictions of urban youth as dangerous, pathological, and violent, in turn, must be addressed as part of a larger examination both of their use and effects in shaping the contexts of everyday life, and of how such depictions might register as sites of struggle for racial justice in spaces other than the university. For example, the depictions of youth in Baby Boy resonate powerfully with the growth of social policies and an ever-expanding, highly visible criminal justice system whose get-tough policies fall disproportionately on poor black and brown youth. Students might be asked to weigh what the potential effects of a film such as Baby Boy might be in addressing the political, racial, and economic conditions that threaten to wipe out a whole generation of young black and Hispanic males who are increasingly incarcerated in prisons and jails and whose populations are growing at the rate of about seven percent a year, institutions that cost more than thirty billion annually to operate (see Street, "Race"). What might it mean to shift the analysis and concern for
racial justice from the textual reading of a film to forms of intervention that not only rupture common sense assumptions about colorblindness and the alleged "end of racism" but that also address actual struggles being waged against racism in a variety of public spheres such as education, the prison-industrial complex, the dominant media, and the state? How might Baby Boy be taken up pedagogically to address the contradiction between the attempts on the part of both conservatives and liberals to insist on the irrelevance of a vocabulary of race with the reality of a racist imaginary that has real political effects? How might a cultural text such as Baby Boy be used to address the apparently indefatigable stereotype of black men as lazy, the ongoing attack on the welfare state, the dismantling of affirmative action policies in higher education, and the plight caused by industrial downsizing and rising unemployment among young black men across America's inner cities at the beginning of the new century? What might it mean for students to address their own responses to the moral panic concerning crime and race that has swept across the middle classes in the last decade, made manifest in strong electoral support for harsh crime laws and massive increases in prison growth? At the very least, educators can address Baby Boy not merely in terms of what such a text might mean but how it functions within a set of complex social reactions that create the conditions of which it is a part and from which it stems. Grossberg argues that such a pedagogy would

involve the broader exploration of the way in which discursive practices construct and participate in the machinery by which the ways people live their lives are themselves produced and controlled. Rather than looking for the "said" or trying to derive the saying from the said, rather than asking what texts mean or what people do with texts, [a critical pedagogy] would be concerned with what discursive practices do in the world. ("Victory" 27)

Films such as Baby Boy become important as part of a public pedagogy of difference because they play a powerful role in mobilizing racial ideologies, investments, and identifications. They produce and reflect important considerations of how race functions as a structuring principle in shaping and organizing diverse sets of relations in a wide variety of social spheres. Put differently, Hollywood films represent an important form of public pedagogy and play a crucial role in representing otherness, deploying power, and producing categories through which individuals fashion their identities and organize their ideologies and politics. As
Goldberg and John Solomos point out in a different context, film provides the pedagogical conditions through which race becomes a medium "by which difference is represented and otherness produced, so that contingent attributes such as skin color are transformed into supposedly essential bases for identities, group belonging and exclusions, social privileges and burdens, political rights and disfranchisements" (3). At the same time, if we are to read films such as Baby Boy as social and political allegories articulating deep-rooted fears, desires, and visions, they have to be understood, once again, within a broader network of cultural spheres and institutional formations rather than as isolated texts. The pedagogical and political character of such films resides in the ways in which they align with broader social, sexual, economic, class, and institutional configurations. Rather than being viewed as merely entertainment, films such as Baby Boy—as well as all cultural texts—must be understood as part of a larger battle over values, beliefs, and social relations and their possible manifestation in either expanding or closing down democratic public life.

Needless to say, Baby Boy as well as any other cultural text can be read differently by different audiences, and this suggests the necessity to take up such texts in the specificity of the contexts in which they are received. But at the same time, educators, social critics, and others have an obligation to expose not simply the flux of meaning but also the politics of its fixing. They can shed critical light on how such texts work pedagogically to legitimate some meanings, invite particular desires, and exclude others. Acknowledging the educational role of such films requires that educators and others find ways to make the political more pedagogical. One approach would be to develop a pedagogy of disruption. Such a pedagogy would raise questions regarding how certain meanings under particular historical conditions become more legitimate as representations of the real than others, or how certain meanings take on the force of common-sense assumptions and go relatively unchallenged in shaping a broader set of discourses and social configurations. Such a pedagogy would raise questions about how Baby Boy, for instance, resonates with the ongoing social locations and conditions of racial fear that are mobilized through a wide variety of representations in the media and popular culture, as well as in a number of other institutional sites. More specifically, a pedagogy of disruption would engage a film’s attempts to shift the discourse of politics away from issues of justice and equality to a focus on violence and individual freedom as part of a broader neoliberal backlash against equity, social citizenship, and human rights.
Such an approach would not only critically address the dominant ideolo-
gies of black masculinity, violence, and dependency that give Baby Boy
so much power in the public imagination, but would also work to expose
the ideological contradictions and political absences that characterize the
film by challenging it as symptomatic of the growing reaction against
civil rights, the right-wing assault on the welfare state, and the increasing
use of violence to keep in check marginalized groups such as young black
males and other youths of color (especially Arabs and Muslims) who are
now viewed as a threat to order and national security.

Engaging the potential discursive effects of films such as Baby Boy
might mean discussing why this Hollywood film received such popular
praise in a largely white-owned, dominant press—or, equally important,
why it did not receive much criticism given its extremely conservative
message. Such a film also raises questions about how it functions as a
public text that rationalizes both the demonization of minority youth and
the defunding of public and higher education, job training, and healthcare
at a time when black youth are in desperate need of jobs, education, and
resources to be able to participate in shaping public life. Pedagogically,
this suggests raising questions about a public text that enables students to
move from understanding it as a form of public pedagogy to using it as a
resource to intervene in public life so as to address and transform social
injustices. Analyzing any cultural text always runs the risk of elevating
the cultural over the social, the textual over a publicly informed politics.
By viewing film as a public pedagogy, it becomes possible, as Arif Dirlik
points out, to develop a “language that is more cognizant of the historicity
of the cultural, which in turn is premised on a politics driven not by
questions of cultural identity but questions of social and public
responsibility” (20). What Dirlik is rightly suggesting is that ques-
tions of identity and race can neither be transformed into static
categories nor detached from the modalities of history, power, and
politics.

The popularity of such films as Baby Boy in the heyday of the growing
backlash against civil rights points to the need, in light of such represen-
tations, for educators and others to expand their understanding of racial
politics and the politics of racial representation as part of a broader project
designed to expand the interrelated notions of racial justice and economic
democracy. Such a pedagogical and political project refuses to seal off
issues of identity, power, and cultural difference from their dialectical
relationship to the historically constructed world of public politics.
Moreover, such a project must be understood within a broader critical
tradition of defending the role of the intellectual as a citizen/scholar while recognizing, as Toni Morrison observes, that “If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us” (278). In part, this offers the challenge of redefining the university’s subversive role by providing opportunities for teachers, students, and others to engage in dialogue as the basis for challenging the underlying conditions that reproduce symbolic and institutional racism, especially as they bear down on youth of color. But the task of eliminating racism and human suffering as part of a larger project of deepening the practices of a radical democracy demands that the spaces for dissent and social activism both include and expand far beyond the reach of public and higher education. Critical scholarship at all levels of schooling is crucial to such a task, but it is not enough. Such a task, given the way in which race is structured around entrenched forms of power, ownership of resources, and privilege demands a new understanding of how race works symbolically and institutionally to shape everyday life. The basis for this understanding resides in a politics that offers new forms of collective resistance, new visions, countervailing institutions, and new social movements. Collective resistance becomes meaningful and effective to the degree that it takes place across a variety of public spaces and spheres.

For power to be generative as a way of exciting and enabling citizens to shape the conditions that govern their lives, it must be able to confront the reality of racial injustice and subordination in both those spaces and spheres traditionally marked by an imposed silence and in counterpublic spheres where power becomes a visible resource for collective intervention. At the same time, it must be remembered that rebelling against injustice is crucial, but inadequate. Racial and economic justice in the service of a vibrant democracy also demands rebelling against the impoverishment of vision and imagination that seems so prevalent in the current climate of fear, racial profiling, and antiterrorist hysteria. As Edward Said points out in a different context, resistance against racial and economic injustice can never be reconciled with the society that produced it. There is no comfort in the struggle against racism and the struggle for a fully realizable democracy except to recognize that such a struggle “will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep” (36). When Claude Brown wrote *Manchild in the Promised Land* in 1965, he recognized clearly that the future and morality of any society is intimately connected
to how it treats its children, and he recognized that such an insight becomes relevant to the degree that it generates a politics that is informed by the courage of conviction and that is moved by a public consciousness of compassion and justice.

Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

Notes

1. Willis argues that the two major upheavals affecting America’s racial hierarchy have been the destruction of the Southern caste system and the subversion of whiteness as an unquestioned norm. She also argues rightly that to dismiss these achievements as having done little to change racist power relations insults people who have engaged in these struggles (see “Up”).

2. See Shipler for an extensive treatment of attitudes of racism in America.

3. For a devastating critique of Kennedy’s move to the right, see Bell.

4. What is strange about this discourse is that in the name of emancipation it reproduces the very kind of infantilization that postcolonial theorists such as Fanon identified as central to antiblack racism. See Fanon, especially chapter one, “The Negro and Language,” and chapter six, “The Negro and Psychopathology.” For a brilliant analysis of Fanon’s refusal to see blacks as “being locked in the zone of nonbeing,” see Gordon.

5. It would be interesting to compare Baby Boy with Boaz Yakin’s brilliant coming-of-age film, Fresh. Fresh is a twelve-year-old who is also caught in the throes of a culture of violence and money and ends up facing a series of moral and ethical dilemmas that no child should have to face. He navigates a complex adult world without the institutional or family structures that should be in place to protect children. Fresh is truly a manchild in a world in which young black boys are seen as utterly dispensable. Fresh highlights a drug culture, unemployment, and violence, but it doesn’t punish or romanticize or indict an entire culture, as does Baby Boy.

Works Cited


