Chapter Two

Dangerous Minds: Constructing Urban Education Between Hope and Despair

Personal Background

I had heard much about the film Dangerous Minds (1995) before I ever decided to watch it in on video the first time in the Fall of 1996. I knew the music, had seen Michelle Pfeiffer’s publicity photos, had even seen Lou Anne Johnson speak on a morning talk show. Instead of being attracted by the story of another, young, white, middle class teacher of low-income urban high school students I had an odd repulsion to Johnson’s narrative. I just felt sure the story would be shallow. One of my colleagues who I respected a great deal attempted to persuade me otherwise. “Why you’ve got to see it,” she said. “Every teacher should see it. It’s a great movie. It will remind you what you’re here for.”

“What you’re here for.” The existential gloss still haunts me, a question never fully answered. Why are we here? And what in this film spoke so deeply to my colleague’s sense of self? These questions alternately posed in critical and empathetic voices accompanied me six months later as I first began my readings of Dangerous Minds.

Overview

The contemporary production of Dangerous Minds (1995) serves as a useful point of reference when thinking about the ideological and utopian possibilities of representations of urban education. As Fredric Jameson and others (see Shohat & Stam, 1994, 352) have argued,
To explain the public’s attraction to a text or medium one must look not only for
the “ideological effect” that manipulates people into complicity with existing
social relation, but also the kernel of utopian fantasy reaching beyond these
relations, whereby the medium constitutes itself as a projected fulfillment of what
is desired and absent within the status quo. (p. 352)

*Dangerous Minds* marks an endpoint in the mainstream genre of popularized modernistic
investment in the tender hope of urban public education. This genre began with the film

*Blackboard Jungle* (1955) which opened with the following lines,

> We in the U.S. are all fortunate to have a school system that is a tribute to our
> communities and our faith in American youth. Today we are concerned with
> juvenile delinquency – its causes – and its effects. We are especially concerned
> when it boils over into our schools. The scenes and incidents depicted here are
> fictional. However, we believe that public awareness is a first step for the remedy
> of any problem. It is in this spirit and in this faith that Blackboard Jungle was
> produced. (Berman, 1955)

As this prologue illustrates, the urban education film genre has, since its inception
marked itself as a contested space between fiction and reality. It is the drama that says,
this story is not real, but gee whiz, is it true. *Blackboard Jungle* feared the juvenile
delinquency spilling over into the schools, however, in all the future portrayals “juvenile
delinquency” and the “urban high school” became merged as one. Although urban
education has always been portrayed as a place of despair (*Blackboard Jungle, 1955;*
*Lean on Me, 1987; Stand and Deliver, 1988*) within the genre was a sense of hope. This
hope is not unproblematic, but contains severe limitations (which are taken up in the text
analysis that follows). However, in the spoof of the genre, *High School High* (1996) all
the cliched narrative elements of the drama are laid bare in hyperbolic fashion, for the
gaze of the ironic viewer. Mr. Clark (John Lovitz) caring and naïve, drives to his first
day of teaching at Marion Barry High School. As he enters a dirty, depressed, graffiti-
ridden neighborhood, loud rap music blares. A metal road sign simply reads “Inner
City.” Every scene, every character, every element craftily evinces prior films. Lovitz overthrows the evil drug lord, bat-wielding principal, and transforms the school’s appearance. The film ends on graduation day when Clark hands out diplomas to all 6 of the graduating class, and proudly announces the valedictorian who has a 2.35 G.P.A.

The hope that plays here is ironic, distanced, bemused. As parody, it isn’t meant to be taken seriously or inspire. It is merely a trope for viewers to hang their hats on – an artifact of the past and any sincere powers of investment would certainly be smirked upon. As the cover of the video relates,

With wicked aim, HIGH SCHOOL HIGH skewers feel-good movies like Dangerous Minds and Stand and Deliver to create a new brand of urban comedy that’s laced with slapstick and hilarious spoof of True Lies and The Deer Hunter… (Dave Kehr, NEW YORK DAILY NEWS)

High School High is the doorway to a new genre of urban education films, where drama has given away to action/adventure and tragedy. High School High illustrates that all the cliches have been combined and the audience is immune to their effects. The dominant metaphor now is crossover with the war film. This metaphor always existed within the genre itself. Even beginning with The Blackboard Jungle there was a sense that urban high schools required a certain militaristic initiative. Glenn Ford was a returning WWII veteran, and a character in the film states that “the most important war is now to be fought at home.” Although there will no doubt still be narratives about urban schools with messages of hope and redemption, in the current context of cynicism and questioning about what is public, it is unlikely that such a narrative will ever explode as wildly again as Dangerous Minds; it eulogizes the last hope of public education.

This chapter focuses on Dangerous Mind’s trajectory as a "hope-filled" popular commodity. Besides its standing as a film about urban schooling, the story of Dangerous
Minds can be viewed as a fairly typical cultural phenomenon of post-industrial capitalism and the dispersal of meaning. First published as a nonfiction book, Dangerous Minds grew much larger and in the process has spread and contextualized certain “common sense” understandings of urban education.

Based on the autobiographical teaching stories of ex-marine (which publicity would have viewers believe is an extension of her first name) Lou Anne Johnson, an English teacher who quits after four years of teaching at "Parkmont High School," Dangerous Minds is the site of multiple productions. In the film Johnson becomes Michelle Pfeiffer, and in the TV show she becomes Annie Potts. Johnson tells the tale, but it is not her tale after the telling; she is but a ghost haunting the main persona of the teacher. Hence forward "Lou Anne Johnson" refers not to Lou Anne Johnson, a human being, but the representation of Lou Anne Johnson, the teacher, the shimmer of white, middle class conscience that is the mobile immanence of all the Dangerous Minds' teachers. The film Dangerous Minds first arrived for the public as a written text: My Posse Don't Do Homework; however the emergence of Dangerous Minds simultaneously eclipsed and reinvented its own originary text. Through a mythic process Dangerous Minds(1995) ingested My Posse Don't Do Homework and regurgitated Dangerous Minds, a multi-tentacle creature capable of creating its text and context at the same time. Perhaps in an effort to save some posited essence, both Johnson and Pfeiffer fought a losing battle to keep the original title, but "Disney boss, Joe Roth…decreed…[it] is to reach the screen as Dangerous Minds "(Nathan, 1995, 22). As we now know, Dangerous Minds didn't just reach the screen but burst forth as a (not so) new non-fiction paperback, a soundtrack, a music video, and television show; within a year, the film even
spawned its own genre spoof: *High School High* (Hamilton, 1996). *Dangerous Minds*, as the object of cultural criticism is an elusive and effusive spectacle, pointing the same instance to a synchronic and diachronic understanding of culture. The film *Dangerous Minds* invented the phenomena *Dangerous Minds*. The image, the aesthetic constant of postmodernity injected itself as the code for the fearful allure of the "inner city" so effectively that choice to watch, to consume was never a complete option. Two illustrative examples of the tentacle unfurling are: the banding across several radio listening audiences of Coolio's rap *Gangsta's Paradise* and the image of Michelle Pfeiffer, standing in jeans and a leather jacket in front of representations of African American and Hispanic teenagers: both were burnished in many minds that never had to set foot near a bookstore or a movie theater. In an era where meanings and symbols are put forth instantaneously, then flashed into our minds through a blitzkrieg of publicity, the battle over a title definitely has incalculable stakes. The *Dangerous Minds* narratives are enveloped within the image of the title itself. In these times, the picture, the fragmented phrase, the song played at a high school dance that everyone sways knowingly to, the oversized jeans and "gangsta clothes" fashions, the multitudinous strains of the endless repetitions of the representation, in many ways becomes the story itself.

**Analysis**

*Dangerous Minds* invents itself under the presupposition of the city as a tourist proposition. It is the bad, the sin-laden detour constructing a gaze of attraction and repulsion. The city; the simultaneous signifier of death of the signified and birth of new
Inner cities, most concretely symbolized by the concept that is Los Angeles’ are coded as hotbeds of gangs, violence and racial and ethnic otherness. Nationally, racial tensions are played out around Los Angeles media events such as the beatings of Rodney King and Reginald Denney, the uprising subsequent to the trial (Fiske, 1993), and the murder trials of O.J. Simpson. In the now, the utterance "inner city" and even to a large extent its muted code, "urban" must be understood as pronouncements and negotiations presupposing the inner city as otherness, (Popkewitz, 1998) representing danger to body, to order, to established codes of power. "Inner city" is the allure and the credibility of the concept Dangerous Minds even as Dangerous Minds works to create the allure and credibility of the concept "inner city." A notion of transcendent, objective reality wholly outside a text is never a complete proposition in the age of mass cultural productions.

Using Dangerous Minds as a starting point it is not difficult to illustrate that "inner city" is not a social fact as much as a socially constructed representation of a social fact. All the productions of Dangerous Minds capitalize upon being tales of inner city experience. On the back cover of the paperback (released after the production of the film) Johnson's class is described:

They were called the class from Hell -- thirty four inner city sophomores she inherited from a teacher who'd been 'pushed over the edge'. She was told, “those kids' have tasted blood. They're dangerous.”

This epithet is used to describe the class that Johnson started out with as an intern. Her second year teaching she worked in a school-within-a-school called the Academy. The TV show Dangerous Minds centered around this program, whereas Dangerous Minds the
movie centers around the initial "class from Hell." All the productions blur through faux repetitions of characters with strangely reminiscent attributes and names.

On p. 130, Chapter 11, nearly half-way through the book, Johnson chooses to describe the specific context of the school for the first time (which is not really important since *Dangerous Minds* has been born and the context has already been created from the image):

The fifty sophomores who volunteered for the first year of the Academy program were evenly split into three groups – black, white, and Hispanic. I was surprised, and a little embarrassed, to realize that I had not expected to see as many pale faces in a dropout prevention program, although Parkmont High is located in an all-white high-income community. I was even more surprised to find that only half of the Academy class rode buses from the poverty-stricken East Side; the other half came from Buffy and Jody land where a quarter of a million dollars is considered a reasonable price for a three bedroom house and a Mercedes convertible is the standard birthday gift for the sweet sixteen. The common denominator in our program wasn’t money or ethnic origin – it was failure…Their scores on standardized reading and math tests ranged from average to excellent. (p. 130)

This description, inserted nearly in the middle of the book is wasted because a gloss of stereotypic inner cityness is already embedded in the reader’s perceptions. Johnson’s students have passed standardized reading and math tests and come from a complex range of backgrounds, but the productions of *Dangerous Minds* are careful not to use any “pale faces,” except for the character of Johnson, in its advertisements. Inner city schooling is not simply there, it is deliberately constructed. The opening scene of the film ensnares viewers in this deliberate framework, also. *Gangsta’s Paradise* plays as the camera flashes images of graffiti, a homeless person, housing projects, etc. A typography of the inner city as white middle class audiences want to see it, as it is “already known” it exists, is presented before viewers much in the manner of a well-set table; all the senses are attracted to come and dine, simply because that is what is done at
such a table. Suddenly, on the screen, a yellow school bus appears, a symbol of education and “normalcy,” but it is decayed and decrepit. Viewers are driven through a contemporary “hell,” outside one’s self and yet within a comfortable viewing distance; of course the viewer will stay and dine.

And viewers will come to this same table again when Coolio sings *Gangsta’s Paradise* re-enacting as story of ethnic, adult-looking teens while Michelle Pfeiffer looks on. And again when reading in an article that Coolio, a former gang-banger was excited to meet Michelle Pfeiffer because she was in *Scarface* (William, 1995, 53). And we’re back at the table for still more when on the TV show we see a slow, grainy camera shot of an anonymous arm spray painting graffiti on a locker, and just when viewers think it is time to untuck the napkins and be excused, along will come a young woman who in real life was inspired to teach by “Lou Anne Johnson,” and we will realize that consumption has nothing to do with being full.

When discussing or writing about *Dangerous Minds* (and many other “realist” tales) there is a strong compulsion inducing us to talk on the plane of “reality.” Critics find the story either very true or not true enough, in either case the truth hangs floating above, an absent signifier, waiting, but never fully able to descend. *Dangerous Minds* the non-fiction narrative resonates as a realist tale. Lou Anne Johnson lands her first gig as a teacher stemming from her internship with the “class from Hell.” She is the master inquisitor, a colonial agent exemplar, imploring students *tell me your culture*; and the audience comes along for the ride as students falteringly answer, or glare back at her.

“Why?” I probed. He shrugged and his face closed back up.  
“Do you feel mad a lot of time?” He nodded, but didn’t speak.  
“Why do you feel mad?”  
“I don’t know,” he said. “Things.” (p. 226)
After her fourth year she quits the field and publishes her account of hope: inner city students can learn. Because it functions as a study of culture as experienced by the researcher (Johnson), someone who is here and has been there (Van Maanen, 1995). *Dangerous Minds* is representative of what could be termed popular ethnography, the travel writing of our time. Travel writing is seeped in power relationships, but through a sense of subjectivity escapes the baggage of “realism” of a documentary, while managing to profit from the feeling that it is evoking something real. In “An End to Innocence: The Ethnography of Ethnography” Van Maanen (1995, 2) discusses many of the epistemological debates within the idea of ethnography, and explains how the “cultural representation business has become quite tricky.” He defines ethnography broadly as “a storytelling institution” (3). In the simplistic version “…an ethnographer is something of a Supertourist who visits a group of natives in their natural habitat and brings back the news of their way of life” (3). MacCannell (1992) outlines tourism as a modernistic invention, a manifestation of middle-class desire. The tourist consumes countries, following a prescribed path and returns to the comforts of home (4). Although there is a desire to see the “back room,” behind the scenes story, the symbols of the journey are defined before hand.

Realist tales, such as the Mafia film *Donnie Brasco* (1996), news programs*, movies of the week, and television talk shows increasingly point audiences toward observing culture as tourists. Examples are everywhere from MTV’s artificial culture lab, *The Real World* series about 7 strangers picked to live together in a house, to the Travel Channel as the ultimate getaway in voyeuristic tourism. The viewer knows what will be seen (much in the same way a movie-trailer or television commercial for a movie
encapsulates the essence of the entire story) and are rewarded by seeing it with an added sense that something extra was revealed. In essence through filmic images, the viewer feels privy to the “back room,” that the real story is being known. Examples such as MTV, the Travel Channel, and broadcast news are segmented moments of cultural study where “real” people become characters in a much larger story of voyeuristic fix. Within this scope it would seem naïve to focus on *Dangerous Minds* only because of its voyeuristic invitation to the “inner city,” of course it invites a voyeuristic journeyvi. What is pertinent about *Dangerous Minds* is the intensity with which the voyeur is directed toward a moral imperative which suggests caring about “others” in the same moment it works to construct a reified image of unbridgeable otherness: this points to the double bind, that in many ways is cultural representation.

Each narrative strand of *Dangerous Minds* operates in a semi-autonomous fashion, stemming from and yet wholly re-creating the original concept. Each strand appears to be a repetition of the story, and it is, but it’s never exactly the same story; even *My Posse Don’t Do Homework* which essentially only had cosmetic surgery on its covers was never the same as the *Dangerous Minds* paperback which usurped its place on the bookshelf. Interestingly, all the narrative productions called *Dangerous Minds* were commercially successful, except the television show (Fall 1996) which lasted a mere 13 episodes; in TV-time it was quickly buried, a forgotten prodigal banished from her chance to deeply enhance the collective memory because she didn’t sell enough product. *Dangerous Minds*, however will continue to live on in the school saga trophy case – joined by other populars in the same line: *Goodbye Mr. Chips*(1939), *Blackboard Jungle*

As this list implies, the drama of the teacher as lone individual, fighting the good fight against evil has been well documented in history. In his essay, *A Teacher Ain’t Nothin but a Hero: Teachers Teaching in Film*, William Ayers (1994) states:

To begin with, the movies tell us that schools and teachers are in the business of saving children – saving them from families, saving them from the purveyors of drugs and violence who are taking over our cities, saving them from themselves, their own pursuits and purposes. The problem is that most teachers are simply not up to the challenge. They are slugs: cynical, inept, backward, naïve, hopeless. (p. 147)

Despite stating in her introduction that the “bonding” between students and faculty who remain together throughout the three year period is the “key to the success of the Academy model” (2), the rest of Johnson’s book and the film present her accomplishments as connected to her status as a strong, autonomous individual, intent on saving her students. Her story taps into a long understood notion of the hero. And the story of teaching tends to position the hero as the savior. Popkewitz discusses the “redemptive discourse” of schooling as part of the “deployment of psychological categories” in which psychology replaced moral philosophy as the secular “approach to saving the soul” (24). White student teachers who view themselves as “white knights” (McIntyre, 1997, 80) and Teach for America volunteers whose desire to enter into “urban” and rural schools, is spoken through “rescue” (Popkewitz, 1998, 9) are concrete examples of how practice is discursively produced. The concept of teacher as savior has been around since Jesus and Mohammed, and in spite of its many secular transformations the idea that within the good teacher is a light shining brighter than anywhere else is still retained.
Gangsta’s Paradise opens with a biblical allusion: “As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death…” and haunts the listener with the drawn out “aaahhhh” of a church choir (which incidentally was the commercial break tag of the short lived TV series), framing the vision of the transcendent good available in the notion of teacher. Part of this vision entails a vow of poverty, of turning against capitalistic gain. (Vividly illustrated in Stand and Deliver when “Escalante” is positioned in contrast to the shiny white flank of his businessman neighbor’s new boat). Also, an element of sacrifice is a large component of the image of the good teacher. Fictionally, it is accepted that a truly good teacher must be sacrificed for his or her students, as if implicitly it is known that anyone truly good cannot exist in school: she or he must be sent away. However, as in Dead Poet’s Society (1991) we know that even when the teacher must leave, disciples will live on to carry the teacher’s fire. And indeed, we the audience are instilled with it as well; in fact up until a recent apocalyptic turn(187, The Substitute) this transfer of fire, or as Ms. Johnson’s students called it ‘light’ was the heart of the teaching film.

The highly romanticist conception of teacher definitely hovers around in popular culture. A good teacher kindles human essences, bringing individualism to light. Sexuality is coded through a transcendent “charisma,” which renders the teacher capable of igniting our own passions, making us “be all we can be,” despite a cruel and oppressive outside world. Poetry, the true art, is the device for reaching souls. Charisma allows the teacher to inject students with an orgasmic rapture of the world, without transgressing any laws or “natural” boundaries. (Though Blanche Dubois and Miss Jean Brodie always remind us this it could be otherwise). In Dangerous Minds this
“charisma” is negotiated in various ways by the different mediums. The book Ms. Johnson draws upon a masculinist sense of power from her father:

“Go ahead and hit me,” I snarled, “but make it good, because you’re only going to get one hit. Then I’m going to kill you.” The merciless cold of my voice made the back of my own neck prickle. It was my father’s voice and my father’s words spoken so often to my teenage brothers as they strutted heir stuff and challenged their old man’s authority. I glared at Hakim with my father’s eyes, which turned black with anger and flashed with fire. (p. 88)

The Michelle Pfeiffer Ms. Johnson pretends to draw upon this masculinist power as well, hence the highlighting of the karate scene near the beginning of the film, but this is a decoy, an illusion, never to be fully believed. Her real draw is the sexuality sedimented within her by so many other roles positioning her exclusively as the focus of heterosexual desire; her sex appeal promotes her charisma with students. The Annie Potts Ms. Johnson from the television series earns her charisma with the love of a mother, speaking sharply because she cares, and looking soulfully at the camera – her signature look as yet another angry young person walks away or commits a futile, but nonetheless touching gesture. The role of Ms. Johnson demands “the compassion and cunning of a social worker and a nun, plus the survival skills of a navy Seal and a Zapatista…” (Leonard, 1998, 212).

What is ironic about the charisma of the Ms. Johnsons is that it instills anything in audiences at all since what is seen in each and every episode is a resolution of failure. Rarely does she seem to understand her students’ motives or find herself able to convert them into “disciplined” middle-classish bodies. When she begins to actually connect with her students and lose her status as outside inquisitor, she reminds them that she is not like them. She can quit. She can walk out of the room. Not only can she walk out of the room unproblematically, she can represent the room by telling the story. And even
though Ms. Johnson leaves, threatens to leave or is merely canceled, the audience manages to pool affective investment in her story. *My Posse Don’t Do Homework* was excerpted in *Reader’s Digest* (Johnson, 1992) suggesting that the story says something that conservative middle class audiences want to hear at the same time Coolio’s “Gangsta’s Paradise” and the clothing of hip hop is making its mark on youthful bodies. In the film, the culmination of the Michelle Pfeiffer Ms. Johnson’s Dylan Dylan contest, in which students find the Bob Dylan song most like a Dylan Thomas poem is used to illustrate “success.” Success is a montage of “urban” student bodies looking docile and disciplined as they pour through library books, grooving on learning. Poetry by white males is shown to symbolize universal values, which in themselves are transformative. However the winning students’ reward ends in a failed night out in a fancy restaurant, which only serves to heighten the economic and social class disparity between the students’ lives and the “reward”. Also the poetry lesson turns into the catalyst forcing a student to drop out of school. The student’s mother tells Pfeiffer Ms. Johnson that she is a “white bread bitch” and that “poetry is a waste of time. We ain’t raisin’ no doctors and lawyers here – find some other poor boys to save.” Only after realizing that all her white, middle class beneficence couldn’t save Emilio, leader of the film “class from Hell,” from being shot, does Pfeiffer Ms. Johnson quit. In the film, the “usual suspect” is lined up as the receptacle for audience judgment: an uncaring black administrator. There are no caring adults of color shown in the film. And in *Dangerous Minds* the television show, where a caring, growing-through-time Annie Potts Ms. Johnson is on the cusp of a bi-racial relationship with the school counselor, and has effectively ended a gang war by inviting rival gang member’s mothers to come into the negotiating room and make their
pleas; this Ms. Johnson, the diachronic Annie Potts Ms. Johnson gets canceled after only 13 episodes. Canceled before she ever has a chance to quit. Dangerous Minds is nothing but a story about failure, failure of the middle class ideology to seep into every pore, failure of a white woman to go in and change the world with her paternalistic love of the “other,” failure of education, failure of liberal ideology, and yet interestingly it continues to operate as a tale of hope and inspiration.

All this failure points toward the more utopian possibilities available within Dangerous Minds. The utopian elements of Dangerous Minds exist, not in its overt ideological reading, summed up nicely Giroux (1997) in this passage:

Dangerous Minds functions mythically to rewrite the decline of public schooling and the attack on poor black and Hispanic students as part of a broader project for rearticulating ‘whiteness’ as a model of authority, rationality and civilized behavior...In this context, Dangerous Minds reinforces the highly racialized, though reassuring, mainstream assumption that chaos reigns in inner-city public school and that white teachers alone are capable of bringing order, decency, and hope to those on the margins of society. (p. 49)

I believe Dangerous Minds works in the way described by Giroux, and also works to dismantle these very notions at the same time. The representative Ms. Johnsons negotiate a relationship with their students, but this relationship is dimmed in comparison to the economically bleak picture surrounding them. The Academy program Ms. Johnson worked within is aimed at helping students find jobs in a post-industrialist business economy that is really more interested in them as consumers.

Historically “the city” has always been a place peopled with bodies. In ancient Greece Socrates is lead by Phaedrus away from the polis, the rational, public sphere of men and into the realm of irrational nature. The concept of the polis has undergone many transformations before becoming the intersubjective understanding, “inner city” which is
an often taken for granted raw material in contemporary aesthetic productions such as

*Dangerous Minds.* The construction of “inner city” which is discussed for its dystopic function as uncongealing otherness is also not all that far from its older moment as the idea of public sphere and community.

For the Athenian, the polis was the state *and* the community. Members found virtues of personhood and citizenship …inherent in the community’s own conception of the good life (Knight Abowitz, 2000, p. 35)

In contemporary U.S.A, community is considered local (“close knit”) and “the state is a somewhat anonymous official governing body of the public realm” (Knight Abowitz, 2000, 35). (And it should not be ignored that community literally meant privileged men). In the invocation that is “inner city” the concept of public sphere is invoked through its impending absence. Tracing the history of “cities” Mumford (1961) writes:

> The final mission of the city is to further man’s [sic] conscious participation in the cosmic and the historic process. Through its own complex and enduring structure, the city vastly augments man’s [sic] ability to interpret these processes and take an active, formative part in them, so that every phase of the drama it stages shall have, to the highest degree possible, the illumination of consciousness, the stamp of purpose, the color of love. That magnification of all the dimensions of life, through emotional communion, rational communication, technological mastery, and above all, dramatic representation, has been the supreme office of the city in history. And it remains the chief reason for the city’s continued existence. (p. 576)

This is perhaps the same invocation which draws viewers/readers to the story of teacher, transmitter of the culture, perpetuator of the elusive “common good.” Despite their much publicized downfalls, schools are still one of the only remaining public places where people gather to make meaning (Wexler, 1992). The proliferation of charter schools, private schools and home schooling all are signals that the public sphere, which we never know until we are mourning it, is in jeopardy. In an article (*New York Times*, 1996) about the onslaught of television shows on education (during the premiere of *Dangerous
Minds, Fall 1996, there were five (Leonard, 1998, 210) Richard Kramer, who produced and wrote the TV series Thirtysomething, observed,

When you have a glut of show that are all about the same thing…it’s possible that it addresses a fear that Americans have, which is the collapse of the education system. There’s some unspoken cabal, to make people feel better about something they are uneasy about. (p. 25)

Perhaps this statement is true enough, except it could be argued that education in popular culture is always a symbolic representation tied to stakes higher than we know. Teacher stories often represent a desire for a common good within a framework of tension that acknowledges that the desires fulfillment, a holistic common good, might not ever be possible. In film, at their best, teachers can only save a handful of individuals, (even Glenn Ford with the full discourse of modernistic progress behind his actions, still had to get rid of two students, and admit not everyone could be saved). There is anxiety, but the notion of education is only symptomatic of perhaps never completely knowable concerns.

American audiences consume Dangerous Minds in the midst of it consuming us. As aesthetic cultural object it injects a sense of hopefulness while its depictions reify a sense of dread that what is needed most is hope. The story of teacher as saint is less about promoting individual freedom, than it is an acknowledgment of deeply held class antagonisms.

Therefore, what is it we look to when we turn our gaze toward “inner city schooling?” What is represented?

In a discussion of the film Jaws Fredric Jameson (1992) suggests that what is interesting about the shark is not what it represents—since there are a variety of readings which position the Shark as fear of the Other and then delve into what the Other is from
communism to the unreality of daily life – but that the shark represents anything at all.

He writes:

Now none of these readings can be said to be wrong or aberrant, but their very multiplicity suggest that the vocation of the symbol – killer shark – lies less in any single message or meaning that in its very capacity to absorb and organize all of these quite distinct anxieties together. As a symbolic vehicle, then, the shark must be understood in terms of its essentially polysemous function rather than any particular content attributable to it by this or that spectator. Yet it is precisely this polysemousness which is profoundly ideological, insofar as it allows essentially social and historical anxieties to be folded back into apparently “natural ones…” (pp. 26-27)

In the United States the construct “inner city schooling” and even its muted code, “urban education” are becoming, have become, natural. In art, in education, in our minds. Mainstream audiences are learning to observe the swirl of youth, low income, and color as disruptive forces, reminding us of the brutality of economic inequity, at the same moment telling viewers that “others” (mainly poor youths with ethnic identities) might be “saved” and thus contained. Foucault (1978) reminds us that “power is… a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (93). The representation of “inner city” is a strategic moment in American society. The image is codifiable, an arbitration of power relations, which mobilizes us even as we marshal ourselves to construct it.

**Conclusion**

As stated earlier, *Dangerous Minds* is the cusp of a genre. It feeds into a sense of hope about the possibilities of urban education at the same time it also mobilizes a sense of cynicism that the project of public schools actually can work. (Why else would a strong teacher like Johnson have to quit?) Two films which illustrate this new dystopic turn toward lack of possibilities for public education are *The Substitute* and *187*. 
In *The Substitute*, Shale, a mercenary (played by Tom Berenger) masquerades as a substitute teacher in a Miami public high school, after his girlfriend (a teacher in the school) has been knee-capped by a Native American gang member. It turns out that the principal of the school, played by Ernie Hudson, is not the positive black male role model he appears to be; instead he is a drug lord operating gangs within the school to market product. The film ends in an all out battle between Shale’s mercenary pals and the principal’s gang members and hired mercenaries. The good caring teacher (the shimmer of Lou Anne Johnson) is portrayed by both the knee capped girlfriend, and a young, African American male teacher. There is no time for him to quit the job, because in his attempt to save one of his female students, he is murdered under the gaze of the principal before the all out battle begins—the ultimate sacrifice. The end result is the school is completely torn apart by grenades, gunfire and shellfire. Only one of Shale’s compatriot’s walks out alive with him. They are seen walking down the street discussing the possibility of going to Los Angeles. Obviously, still intending to fight the most important war at home.

And *187* follows a narrative of good teacher pushed over the edge. Trevor Garfield (played by Samuel L. Jackson) represents the glow of “Lou Anne Johnson” being extinguished. A student with a nail stabs him repeatedly in the hall way, because Garfield does not give him a passing grade. Eleven months later, Garfield moves to Los Angeles, and begins a career as a substitute in a run down bungalow. In slow grained shots around the school, primarily low income Hispanic high school students are portrayed as violent animals. Gang members kills Garfield’s girlfriend’s dog, trash his classroom and stab his lab rat with scissors. Garfield does not have any legal rights, so
he turns into a murdering vigilante. Stealthily in the night, he kills one of the gang members and chops off the finger of another, his in-class nemesis, Cesar.

There is no motivation, no structural understanding, no humanity to the students. As youth without meaning, they become objects of public fear. The audience is focalized to deeply understand and feel pathos toward Garfield’s actions. After the murder his class runs smoothly, students begin to learn. But this success is short-lived. Reminiscent of the Deerhunter, Garfield finally meets his death in a game of Russian Roulette that he is forced to play with Cesar. Before fatally shooting himself, he tells Cesar that he has been robbed of something worse than his life a year ago, he’d been robbed of his “passion” his “spark” his “unguarded self.” The last scene of the film is the pretty blond, LouAnn Johnsonish teacher, who almost started a relationship with Garfield, throwing her framed license in the waste basket as she packs up to leave. Her actions are interspersed with the graduation speech of a young woman who Garfield tried to save. She introduces her essay “My Way Out” by talking about Garfield, and how “Teachers don’t get no respect.” She explains the meaning of pyrrhic victory in which a battle is won at too great a cost. The vision advanced of public education is dystopic. In this film urban high schools are portrayed as a nightmarish reality of a Freddy Kreuger dream. They are beyond understanding and outside of structures of logic. The film lays claim to truth by somberly portraying these lines before the final credits role:

One in 9 teachers has been attacked in school. Ninety-five percent of those attacks were committed by students. (Metropolitan Life Survey)

A teacher wrote this movie.
These words illustrate the tension between schools as imaged and real places.

Representations of schools are never just entertainment. They are always defining knowledge about urban youth.

The “teaching film” genre is now undergoing a new transformation; the feminized do-gooder missionary is being kicked out for ineffectiveness and instead the masculinized commando is taking “her” place to regain control (or at least punish the guilty). In the scene before he shoots the fatal bullet, Garfield yells at Cesar, “I was a teacher. I wanted to help you. You can’t kill me,” It is perhaps the futile cry of the modernist project of public schools as progress and public good attempting to live on through dire circumstances.

Chapter Three continues this examination about how space for public urban education is encoded in the imaginary in increasingly narrow and dystopic ways. The focus is a text analysis of a controversial arrest of a male, African American high school student, Pharon Crosby in downtown Cincinnati that was broadcast on the local news in the Spring of 1995. The arrest did not occur on school grounds and is not primarily known as a school story. However, I argue that a conceptual grid of meaning-making about “urban students” is central to the way the narrative was constructed and understood in the community. Though central, this understanding is also silent; it never fully pronounces itself. As the student’s case and the “story” moved toward its denouement, policy decisions were made which both evoked and further reified understandings of urban schools as linked to police supervision and outside the bounds of a democratic project.
This story, in which schooling is on the periphery, sheds light about ways in which meanings are circulated and attached to urban students and schools. Certainly it can be argued that every city exhibits its own actual, unique character and location.

Cities have a habitus, certain relatively enduring (pre)dispositions to respond to current social, economic, political or even physical circumstances in very particular ways, ways in which other cities, with different habitus formations, may respond to very differently. (Lee, 1997)

Since Dangerous Minds as a media event appeared across the country it is a reading which obviously appears to have a much broader scope than a local television news media event. However, despite the uniqueness of place, it is important to emphasize the “national character” of any media event. The arrest story in Cincinnati, while having its own tenor also primarily became known and understood through linkage among other narratives about race and gender and crime and youth which were already located in the popular imaginary. In contemporary society “local” and “national” do not dissolve as categories of meaning making, but much like fiction and nonfiction, they blur considerably.

Notes

i This genre is marked by the following films: Blackboard Jungle (1955); Lean on Me(1987); Stand and Deliver (1988); The Principal (1989); Dangerous Minds 1995).

ii Richard Quantz brought up the film Fame (1980) as a counter example to this tendency (Fieldnote, 5-22-00). I have not thought through the ramifications of his suggestion sufficiently. However based upon my memory, the fact that the school was based upon performing arts and required students to have talent, separates it from the traditional comprehensive high school setting of the genre I am referring to. Still, the narratives of Fame (both the film and the ensuing series) and their relationship to the general urban education genre would be an interesting area of study.

iii The relationship of "the city" as a site of production for new signifiers and meaning is well articulated by Henry Giroux (1996) in the following passage: "… youth in urban centers produce a bricolage of style fashioned from a combination of sneakers, baseball caps, and oversized clothing that integrates forms of resistance and style later to be appropriated by suburban kids whose desires and identities resonate with the energy and vibrancy of the new urban funk" (228). The Dangerous Minds productions are important aspects of this process. They collate, crystallize, legitimize and disseminate a notion of "urban chic" which layers itself self-consciously throughout diverse socioeconomic strata.
By negating the word "fact" I am pointing to the discursive production of "inner city" as part of the construction of a "cognitive perceptual grid" (Shohat & Stam, 1994, 205) or in Popkewitz's terminology part of a "scaffolding" or "amalgamation of discourses" (9). Popkewitz argues that "urban…does not signify a geographical place but it gives reference to certain unspoken qualities of the child and the community who belongs in that space" (10). Whereas, much like Popkewitz I want to recognize this discursive production of "urbaness" as an "effect of power," I do not want to ignore that this power operates on actual bodies who are framed as the referent for "urbaness." Poverty, racism, and sexism are material conditions, not merely perceptions.

Shohat and Stam (1994) write about this at length: "Many liberal Hollywood films about the 3rd World or about minoritarian cultures in the 1st World deploy a European or Euro-American character as a mediating 'bridge' to other cultures portrayed more or less sympathetically…[This character] inherit[s] the 'in-between' role traditionally assigned to the colonial traveler and later to the anthropologist: the role of the one who 'reports back.' The mediating character initiates the spectator into otherized communities; Third World and minoritarian people, it is implied, are incapable of speaking for themselves. Unworthy of stardom either in the movies or in political life, they need a go-between in the struggle for emancipation" (p. 205). The figure of "Lou Anne Johnson" in all the Dangerous Minds productions is definitely the "one who reports back.”

According to Maeroff (1998) since the investigative coverage of incidents surrounding Watergate "[c]omity and decorum have fallen victim to a take-no-victims sort of journalism that illuminates the recesses that had remained unobserved when the media was less zealous about its mission…For education, the new style of journalism has meant the piercing of institutional armor. The words of superintendents and school board members, once virtually unchallenged by the press, have become fair game for skeptics, if not outright cynicism. The sanctity of public education has been stripped away by journalists who report on alternatives to traditional approaches and raise questions about how well consumers are served by the status quo” (p. 3). In other words there is an imperative for the “wall” of the backroom to collapse, and for the audience to see what had been consensually unreported about in the past.

This trend continues as illustrated by an excerpt from the New York Time article, “Television’ New voyeurism Pictures Real-Life Intimacy ” (Carter,1-30-2000, 1,17):”…a new wave of television formats…all based on real-life experience voyeuristically captured on camera, is posed to invade prime-time network schedules…The shows range from on-camera examinations of people trying to survive on a desert island off Borneo to people trying to get along while locked together in various settings of forced intimacy(p.1)…The shows, many of which will have ambitious Internet components, have been described as various combinations of MTV’s cinema verite show "The Real World," the syndicated talk show "Jerry Springer" and the influential game show from England, “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.” Mr. Moonves, president of CBS referred to these shows as “reality shows”. “Robert Thompson, founder of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, called the trend toward voyeurism shows an inevitable confluence of advances in technology and basic human interest. ‘Popular culture is beginning to catch up with our real behavior,’ Mr. Thompson said. ‘We all talk about family values, but that’s not how most of us operate as human beings. In some ways, this is the programmers discovering what TV was always so great at in the first place. This is Peeping Tom to the max”” (p. 17).

As Rousmaniere (1999) points out, “[I]n educational media there are few written or visual images of teachers working collaboratively in meetings, sharing duties in the play yard or lunchroom, talking in the teachers’ lounge, or exchanging resources…In popular culture the teacher appears as a friendless, isolated being, alone in a crowd of children, lacking any need for interaction with other adults” (p. 38).

In Tennessee Williams play and film A Streetcar Named Desire Blanche Dubois is a high school teacher who has had an affair with a student. Miss Jean Brodie is the central character in the novel by Muriel Spark also adapted as a film The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (Fryer, 1969). Miss Brodie has an affair with a
married teacher. Eventually both must leave their positions. Blanche Dubois and Jean Brodie represent the societal sanctions and discomfort associated with thinking about female teachers and sexuality.

Leonard (1998) describes the television Ms. Johnson thusly, ‘Annie Potts was in fact far more persuasive in the TV version of Dangerous Minds than Pfeiffer had been as a black-belt biker chick in the movie. Dressed as if in a hurry at night in a burning building, oddly vagrant like a rock-band roadie, fiercely inward, with memories of guns in Texas, Potts had some cool and edgy street in her. From previous duty in sitcoms such as Designing Women and Love and War, she brought not only her usual smart mouth but also a “been-there” credibility to this inner-city “academy” program for grown-up-too-quickly problem children, with their high IQs and low self-esteem and gaudy self-sabotaging behaviors, their gang colors and their babies. She was her own subtext, teaching Of Mice and Men as if with a rodent in her pocket, teaching Look Homeward, Angel as though she’d run away with a circus. She was lots more hands-on than is strictly permissible in today’s supersensitive public school system, where an incautious hug can get you suspended for child molestation, and not above bribing kids to perform, and one began to wonder if all her students would wind up living in her house, like in an R.D. Laing therapeutic commune. But good educators always break the rules to save a child. Dangerous Minds was at least nostalgic [sic] for the bygone era when all of us had cherished teachers – instead of border guards – who sought to engage us in classrooms that weren’t impossibly overcrowded, in buildings that weren’t falling down, in neighborhoods that didn’t resemble Belfast or Beirut; back when public schools were trampolines from which we bounced into our futures, instead of warehouses with metal detectors or detention camps for refugees (p. 212).

According to Maeroff (1998, 8) “[F]ictional images of education on the big or little screen tend to be more powerful and enduring than what appears in print. But what appears tends to be stereotypical and in short supply. Education as subject matter for prime-time series has all the appeal of mumps to producers. They seldom give shows that are built around student or school themes the time to build an audience, yanking them off the air so fast that hardly anyone can remember having seen an episode. The visual media shy away from education, whether the issue is news or entertainment”. For a more complete discussion of this phenomenon read John Leonard’s (1998) “Educating Television”.

This is illustrated in the film High School High by weekly career days which include options such as airport security, military militia, Burger Hut, and a banner suggesting, “Have you considered begging?”

Two other films were made in the series. Treat Williams stars in The Substitute 2 and the Substitute 3.