Chapter Six

Implications

As this study indicates popular culture representations of urban education are ideologically packed and play a strong role in teacher education. Our identities as educators are heavily shaped by the stories we can tell and imagine about ourselves. Therefore stories about education – the way they are relayed and interpreted – are an important site of interrogation and should be treated as serious subjects of study in teacher education. Popular representations exist as contradictory moments simultaneously testifying to the embedded nature of collective understanding as well as the ability of individuals to be active meaning makers.

This creates an interesting paradox within the process of text analysis. Audiences can not be perceived merely as “subjects” duped by the ideological content of media, nor purely as active, embodied viewers capable of eliciting counterhegemonic, individualized readings at will (Mayne, 1993). The concept of audience, exists on a continuum which intertwines the embodied viewer with the always already-pre-arranged subject positionalities available to him or her. In this dissertation, I interwove deconstructive textual readings with empirical information in order to better comprehend stories about urban education as arbitrations of power. By doing this I did not overcome the “inevitable blind spot” (Tester, 1994) of imagining audiences as both real human beings and ideologically assigned, but I did try to place further tension on the abstraction.

Four binary oppositions: hope and despair; innocence and guilt; good and bad stories; and care and resentment were elicited from this study. When talking about
polarities, what is important is not the intentions or truth of categories, but how these readings are ascribed and given meaning through broader power relationships in society (Shohat & Stam, 1994). These polarities help construct an understanding of how representations of urban education are both mapped out and operated upon in contemporary American society.

For example, hope undergirds dramas such as Dangerous Minds as much as despair. Secondary urban education is constructed as a dismal landscape, where worthwhile teachers must struggle for the souls of their students (Popkewitz, 1999). Ideologically the desire to “save” students is coded as part of an attempt to place them into a mainstream of code of ethics and behavior, where private property is respected, and keen intellects strive to be doctors and lawyers so they can live in a comfortable home and maintain the bodies and laws of the system. “Saving” in this context is not wholly extricated from a paternalistic desire to colonize a “foreign” land. But hope has a deeper ideological intonation than strict colonization. In the teaching film, the utopian hope is the desire for a common good, a reconciliation of deeply-held class, racial, ethnic and even gender antagonisms. Communication, love, understanding of difference, the transcendence implied in a totally sutured communal moment…these are the dreams of the urban education film from Blackboard Jungle to Dangerous Minds. But perhaps not beyond.

In the newest transmutations of the genre this tender hope is not lost, but more deeply coded as never-quite-beyond audience cynicism. The drama no longer inspires. When Shale the mercenary has an in-depth discussion with his class about gangs and the futility of violence, and Mr. Garfield is able to teach his class science after maiming
Cesar the class disrupter, there is a moment of that old hope, reminiscent of Mr. Dadier’s 1955 breakthrough discussion with his class about the moral implications of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Audiences are allowed to see a small slice that reminds them that teaching in an urban school is about making redemptive connections, about caring and “getting through.” However, this hope is not all that has been coded in the imaginary. Hope is taking a back seat and despair is driving. Students without a moral or spiritual connection to life, juvenile delinquents far beyond the knife wielding thieves of *Blackboard Jungle*, are deeply ingrained on the representational grid and it is hard, as the arrest of Crosby illustrates, to imagine “them” as innocent enough to incorporate into society.

Crosby’s arrest serves as a metaphor for the moral judgments which are routinely made about urban students. In order to make sense of urban students who occupy a space outside the “norms” of education, these students tend to be judged as innocent, passive objects in a system organized against them, or as guilty of all the moral approbation this system holds for them. A discourse which includes teenagers, particularly urban teenagers as active members of a democratic citizenry is an absent narrative.

It is easy to blame the media for construction of these narratives, because they thrive on sensationalism and the negativity of spectacle. Everyone knows that news only focuses on bad stories about urban education. However, it is important to look more deeply at how good and bad stories come into being. A shifting notion of citizens as consumers shapes both education and news media. Both news media and education are relational institutions, and it is unproductive for each to consider the other as the source of a citizenry composed of illiterate cretins. If public education is deemed a space worth
fighting for, then pre-service teachers definitely need a broad-based understanding of how media can and does operate in a variety of areas from identity construction to public policy. Education is owned by us all and none of us at the same time. Therefore all representations of urban education have the potential to speak at the policy level.

The student teachers who made sense of their experience in an urban setting with a language of both care and resentment, illustrate the strength that representation can have in constructing readings of “real places.” From mainstream media representations, they had read the inner city high school as “the place to be.” But once they were there, they were still, for the most part contained in these representations and reverted to negative attributions in describing their students. The guilt and innocence grid was mobilized, with heavy attributions on the guilt-side. In order to extend ideas about “culturally relevant teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 1994) pre-service teachers must be able to see urban students through new eyes, with new stories. Care must be situated as part of a larger political project.

This dissertation raises questions about moral attribution and spectatorship. Moral investments in mediated productions are a fertile ground of study. As Hall (1978) illustrated in Policing the Crisis, media images are utilized to convey a larger sense of societal panic, often along identity axes such as race, class and gender. However, besides otherizing there is also the possibility that the media can construct solidarity. Rorty suggests that solidarity persists through media communication. He posits the differences in culture can be transcended by seeing someone else as “one of us.” Rorty (1989) suggests that
This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially the novel (xvi; quoted in Tester, 1994, p. 92)

Tester (1994) suggests that although media has the possibility of connecting people through a moral thread, what it actually does is a different story. Because of institutional parameters, for example the abundance of visual assaults within even the same broadcast news show, all that results is a “moral boredom and dullness” (105).

The large systems of information relieve the masses of the responsibility of having to know, to understand, to be informed, to be up on things (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 114 quoted in Tester, 1994, p. 123).

The Crosby arrest story illustrates this tension well. As a readily available spectacle, it mobilized, paralyzed, fragmented and solidarized different aspects of the community all at the same time. The story was undergirded by a moral narrative, but this narrative acted in a multitude of ways all simultaneously, suggesting that spectatorship is never a simple matter.

Within postmodern culture, the media not only set agendas and frame debates, but also inflect desire, memory, fantasy. By controlling popular memory, they can contain or simulate popular dynamism. (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 359)

Ultimately youth surveillance was increased through this spectacle, but it must also be acknowledged that a space was opened up in the community to discuss inequity in a public space. The media framed this debate, however, its memory and use for popular dynamism is still open and capable of being recalled for actions on the public sphere.

In the film Blackboard Jungle (1955) Glenn Ford rode on the public bus to work at an inner city boys high school. The boys were already there, in the neighborhood, waiting. Hegemony of the car among other factors make it, perhaps, less understandable that a teacher might travel to school on a public bus these days. There is increasingly less
public transit from the suburbs into the city (Kaniss, 1991, 28). Instead, buses are the terrain of students. Particularly in urban and rural school districts students might have a long bus ride, with several transfers in order to arrive at school. Contained yellow capsules, my students used to call them “the cheese,” ensuring students reach their destination. In Cincinnati, students must ride the city bus system in order to reach their schools. The “bus” itself is a metaphor for contestations over public space (Carlson, 2000) and the arrest of Pharon Crosby at the bus stop serves as an example of how certain bodies are more privileged than others to occupy public spaces such as the sidewalk in the downtown business district. An implication of this study is that, based on morally informed investments, (hope and despair; guilt and innocence; good and bad; care and resentment) the democratic, public space for urban high school students is continually narrowing. This, in turn, effects how urban high schools can be perceived by educators and community members.

The central tensions posed within a radical democratic framework are a simultaneous commitment to liberty and equality. Liberty, under the realization that no human is a completely autonomous agent, and equality, under the realization that any fixation of meaning or politics inevitably results in certain voices being left out. Politics within these auspices requires movement, flexibility. Mouffe suggests that new social movements offer spaces for these tensions to be played out.

The creation of political identities as radical democratic citizens depends therefore on a collective form of identification among the democratic demands found in a variety of movements: women, workers, black, gay, ecological, as well as in several other ‘new social movements’. This is a conception of citizenship which, through a common identification with a radical democratic interpretation of the principles of liberty and quality, aims at constructing a “we”, a chain of equivalence among their demands so as to articulate them through the principle of democratic equivalence. (Mouffe, 1992, p. 236)
It becomes necessary to articulate new identities that are multiple, fissured and capable of combining into new forms. Difference is both acknowledged and celebrated within this chain, which focuses on “a collective identification with a radical democratic interpretation of the principles of the liberal-democratic regime: liberty and equality” (Mouffe, 1992, 236). Within increasingly consumerist driven notions of citizenship the worth of public education is now being openly debated. Pluralism is constraining against the limits of the “common good.” Notions of equality must be re-articulated and re-asserted in this instance in order to maintain a sense of democratic purpose.

Teacher education can better address these new historical realities by engaging cultural studies as a foundational discourse. Popular culture representations of urban schooling, particularly of urban students, need to be analyzed through multiple registers as sites of heteroglossia, in order to link representations to expanded notions of liberty and equality and maximaize the democratic potential of institutional space. Shohat and Stam call for a polycentric multicultural pedagogy of the media, which could at the same time empower “minorities” and build on privileged students minimal experience of otherization to imagine alternative subject positions and divergent social desires. (p. 358)

A multicultural media practice would “move spectatorship from a space of self indulgence to an act of self confrontation” (Shohat and Stam, 1994, 357). Rather than helping students to own a particular reading, it is just as important to help students realize how a particular reading owns them.

While disempowered communities can decode dominant programming through resistant perspectives, they can do so only to the extent that their collective life and historical memory have provided an alternative framework of understanding. (p. 359)
Resistant readings require alternate grids of meaning making. They require solidarity and community. They require active confrontations with texts, and the creation of new stories within communal settings.

The stories reflected upon in this study, such as *Dangerous Minds* and the Crosby arrest video, are not simply “bad” or “good,” but operate as traces to broader understandings about the space accorded to urban schools and urban students. Within the contemporary context a counterhegemonic representation would be one that reconfigured the public space available for urban youth and aided in the visualization of them as something other than “problems” whom at best need to be saved. Such a move would require more than just a positive story about a student, or a unique curriculum reform, it would require collectivized desires to stand and identify with all youth as a public concern. (The Crosby story illustrates this possibility; however his representation was never deemed innocent enough for coalitions to rally around his youth for an extended period of time). The creation of more democratic public space for urban youth requires movement on more than one front. Visual images, architecture, school personnel, curriculum, employment opportunities, transportation patterns… New more inclusive forms of identity based on commitments to plurality and equality must be envisioned and lived out. Urban education has the possibility to mark itself as a space where radical democratic identities are imagined and continuously developed. This is the story cultural workers must strive to make available and real for future educators, despite ever-present limitations.