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From Emmett Till to the Rose Petal Cottage:

Critical Pedagogy and Popular Culture in Pre-Service Teacher Education

By Jamie Joanou & Erica Griffin

Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which popular media products serve as indispensible pedagogical tools in facilitating classroom discussion relating to issues of race, class, gender and sexuality. We present our experiences teaching pre-service teachers at a predominantly white, large university where the culture is relatively conservative, and where the majority of students come from middle to upper middle class families. The course, whose main objective is to critically analyze hegemonic structures of whiteness, heteronormativity, patriarchy, xenophobia and privilege and how such practices can lead to unequal educational outcomes in K-12 schools, is required for all education majors but includes students from various disciplines. We find using a critical, problem-posing pedagogy, which includes bringing popular media products like film, television and media outlets such as Youtube.com into the classroom environment to be essential in disarming students' resistance to the course's main objective.

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By Jamie Joanou & Erica Griffin

In a society increasingly mediated by 21st century technologies, it is essential that educators embrace the entertainment culture that currently dominates public discourse. Through cell phones, television, movies, and internet sites, adolescents in particular are bombarded with images and the often discriminatory messages they contain related to race, class, gender and sexuality. Once they enter college classrooms they bring with them preconceived notions about the various groups that comprise society. As young scholars and teacher educators we find that challenging our students to deconstruct and dissect popular imagery disarms their resistance to critical ways of regarding race, class, gender and sexuality. This critical media literacy can also provide students with the understanding of the ways in which their identities are informed by popular culture and can help students learn to evaluate messages they receive from media for their "social, political, economic and aesthetic contents" (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999, p. 4).

In the following section we describe the nature of the course, the students' collective culture of resistance, and select aspects of critical pedagogy that serve as the pedagogical frame for our own teaching philosophies. Later we explain why a course as important as this one still faces barriers preventing it from becoming an integral part of teacher education. Finally, reflecting on student response papers, evaluations, and teacher reflections, we reveal those

pedagogical techniques that were the most successful in garnering student engagement. In this reflection we found that popular texts like commercials and television shows when coupled with academic tools like theory enables students to better access the controversial material and to begin to understand teaching as a political act.

Course Background

This paper presents our reflections as instructors for an undergraduate level diversity course for teacher candidates at a Research I university that is both politically and socially conservative, and where the majority of students are white and middle class. The course is required for all education majors but each section typically includes students from various other disciplines. Each class section has a maximum of 40 students and in all cases white women, majoring in early childhood education or elementary education, were the overwhelming majority.

Each year a supervising professor chose a cohort of graduate students to teach the eight sections of the course. The division of Curriculum and Instruction, where the course was housed, viewed this class as a pedagogical project with dual benefits. On one hand it served as a forum for pre-service teachers to explore issues of diversity and possible strategies for social action in their classrooms in an increasingly heterogeneous society. On the other hand, graduate students were charged to design syllabi, locate course readings, and craft and present lectures to the class. As scholars training for the professoriate we viewed this course as the perfect opportunity to explore our teaching philosophies, develop our own pedagogical styles, and garner necessary classroom experience in dealing with difficult yet critically important topics. In meetings during the summer months the instructors often traded ideas on the best readings, lecture notes and guest speakers so that each section, while unique, meets and exceeds an

identical set of course objectives. Our cohort of teachers included instructors from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. We are no different. One of us, Jamie Patrice is a 33-year-old White woman who was raised in Phoenix, Arizona and attended predominantly White catholic schools. The other, Erica Nicole is a 27-year-old Black woman who was raised in Atlanta, Georgia and attended predominantly Black inner-city schools. Both of us are Ph.D. candidates studying social and philosophical foundations of education, but differ in our areas of focus. Jamie is currently studying identity performance among children and youth living on the streets, while Erica is studying urban schools and narrative. Our use of the visual in the classroom stems from Jamie's background in fine arts and her use of the visual in research, while our inclination towards the incorporation of popular culture stems from Erica's research on racist and sexist imagery in contemporary media products such as Hip Hop lyrics and music videos. Together we developed a syllabus that engaged students in a semester-long critique of visual images and how they promote hegemonic notions about race, class, gender and sexuality.

Our aim as instructors in this course is to, together with students; critically analyze hegemonic structures of whiteness, heteronormativity, patriarchy, xenophobia and privilege and how such practices can lead to unequal educational outcomes in K-12 schools. The course objectives, taken directly from our syllabus, include the following: 1) Explore the complexity and multiplicity of one's own cultural identity(ies) and the roles played within society of diverse cultural, linguistic, racial, gender, socioeconomic, etc. identities, 2) Examine power relations, privilege, and oppression in society in general, and schools particularly, 3) Examine constructions within society of "appropriate knowledge and education" and the effect these values have placed on children and people in general from diverse backgrounds, 4) Use knowledge of the history and foundations of education and the societal and social histories of

those typically underrepresented in schools to determine the appropriate use of content, methods, and technology in increasing educational opportunity for all children, and 5) Actively participate in challenges to the continuation of oppression.

A course with the above objectives is not unique to this university. Many schools around the country require that future teachers include multicultural or diversity education in their programs of study. This is because, and many scholars agree, that teaching in American schools requires expertise in at least three areas: content, teaching skills and disposition (Quinn, 2005). In other words, teachers must know what to teach, they must know how to teach (Darling-Hammond, Grossman, Rust & Shulman 2005) and they must understand how to transform their classrooms into culturally relevant, democratic learning environments (Beachum, Dentith, McCray & Boyle, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Moll, Gonzalez & Amanti, 2005). This last skill hinges on the idea "that to support democracy educators must eliminate disparities in educational opportunities among all students, especially those students who have been poorly supported by our current system" (Banks et al, 2005). The first step however is for educators to acknowledge that inequities exist and that schools often reinforce those inequities for the students (Apple, 1996). More specifically, the academic and hidden curricula of American schooling don't always recognize the cultures and backgrounds of all students. Instead students who are from minority groups often feel alienated and often have disproportionately higher failure and dropout rates as a result (Fine, 1991; Dei, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

Clearly researchers recognize the importance of creating equitable classroom environments. This can be particularly challenging in heterogeneous environments, like many of today's classrooms where children come to school from various social and cultural backgrounds (Lotan, 2006; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Classes like this diversity course, therefore, are essential

in preparing teachers to educate our children. In this case, the majority of our teacher candidates are white women from affluent families, who are training to enter schools in a state with students from diverse backgrounds, including immigrant students, refugees from central Africa and the Middle East, homeless children, and students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. In some districts the majority of students speak languages other than English in the home. Classes like this course, therefore, are essential in preparing teachers to educate all of our children.

Creating an inclusive learning environment, while increasingly difficult, is essential for the learning of all P-12 students. In their investigation of inclusive learning environments, Jordan, Schwartz and McGhie-Richmond (2009) found that teachers' epistemological beliefs greatly inform the ways in which they understand their responsibility for creating inclusive classroom environments. They further argue that teacher experiences in the first years of teaching do little to challenge or change these beliefs, and therefore the burden lands on teacher preparation to incorporate a multicultural and diversity focus. As Howard, McGee, Schwartz, and Purcell, (2000) argue, unstated beliefs can become explicit if teachers are provided the opportunity to reflect on these beliefs, discuss them and be challenged by feedback from both colleagues and peers. Once made explicit teachers can then begin to critically examine their own beliefs and how these beliefs influence their desire in creating an inclusive learning environment (Zeichner & Liston, 2006). Furthermore, the stereotypical opinions teachers hold about a students' ability to learn, undoubtedly expand or limit the students' possibilities for achievement (Hart, Dixon, Drummond, & McIntyre, 2004). "As these judgments are often directly informed by their professional preparation, it is important for teacher educators to articulate and reflect on the assumptions that inform beliefs about human abilities and diversity as well as how they are communicated in initial teacher education" (Florian, 2009, p.534).

While fully aware that they must know what to teach and how to teach, most of the future teachers who enroll in this course are unaware that their own ideas about gender, sexuality, American history, race and culture have a significant impact on their classrooms and the their students' learning. It is thus imperative that pre-service teachers critically assess the ways in which they view the world and understand others. We also acknowledge that, though we are the instructors in the classroom, we must also continuously reflect on our own biases, privilege and behavior as authority figures. We therefore chose readings, discussion topics and assignments based on aspects of critical pedagogy.

Our framework for using critical pedagogy has two influences. First we draw on the work of Paulo Freire and others as we establish a community-based learning atmosphere. A chief component of this community-learning environment is the use of co-teaching, where students take part in the dissemination and examination of information. Second we draw on the work of critical race scholars like Charles Lawrence as we strive to understand contemporary racism as an institutionalized phenomenon. In order to make institutionalized racism more visible we investigate the personal stories of people who are victimized by American institutions.

In his important text, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1979) explains that conventional schooling relies on the teacher transmitting information to students, including ideology, while the students passively receive that information as truth. During assessments such as standardized tests and papers, the students aren't asked to present their analysis or interpretation of the material. Rather they must demonstrate mastery of the information through regurgitation. This practice, known as "banking" education, creates an intellectual and authoritative polarity between the student and the teachers. In other words, the student knows nothing and the teacher knows all. In societies like the US, where there is a highly structured

social hierarchy, this banking system is particularly problematic because it reinforces the ideology of the dominant group. For example, in typical American history courses, the missions of the explorers, settlers and pioneers are presented as virtuous, patriotic and courageous. Students, whose ancestors were casualties of American colonization, are not expected to question these stories. They must remain passive and accept these myths as truth. Incidentally, this means that they must also accept that their second-class positions in contemporary society are, in fact, normal. Freire argues that the banking system should be replaced with a critical, problem-posing pedagogy. In this framework teachers and students work together to create a learning environment in which both are simultaneously teaching and learning. Furthermore, he argues that progressive educators must respect the knowledge their students bring to the conversation and understand that they know their situation better than anyone else. One result of critical, problem-posing education is that students eventually learn to question the ideologies of the privileged.

Over time, scholars have applied and extended Freire's ideas in research about the best ways to prepare teachers for service in the classroom (see for example Geneva Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Sleeter, 2001). Gay and Kirkland (2003) found that teacher candidates should engage critically reflective teaching (CRT) when working with diverse student populations. Their suggestions include reflecting on one's privilege and including the perspectives of people from various backgrounds in educational training. Although we, as instructors of this course, do not apply one singular branch of critical pedagogy we do highlight the importance of reflecting on, discussing and critically examining one's personal experiences, while simultaneously listening to and hearing the voices of those traditionally excluded, ignored, or marginalized by dominant culture.

This Course in Context

Unfortunately, a course like this one, that encourages teachers to investigate their own privileges and epistemologies about students and learning, does not always fit well into the changing cultures of teaching and teacher preparation. Even though there is consistent agreement among scholars that a culturally relevant pedagogy is an effective means of increasing the engagement and achievement of all students, there still exists an increasing desire for a movement towards reliable and proven methodologies (Banks et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Freire, 1979; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Sleeter, 2009). With this movement comes the expectation that this course will teach pre-service teachers what to teach and how to teach it, particularly to students who are not like them. This course, however, is not a methods course, and is not directly tied to a practicum or student teaching. We offer no formulas or strategies or even guidelines for teaching students who are "different" from us. Instead we ask our students to critically analyze the lens through which they view the world. Given the pressure to master their subject area, to learn behavior management, and learn how to develop lesson plans, the course, which is much more theoretical in its focus, is often viewed as peripheral, irrelevant, and an unnecessary distraction.

There are other barriers that we have encountered in a developing a course such as this one. In fact at our own university, we have seen this course deteriorate from an upper division theoretically-driven course, dissecting issues of race class and gender, to a lower division course that is moving towards a standardized syllabus across sections and that rejects the incorporation of theory. The current sentiment is that students are uninterested in theory and its implications. Furthermore, the standardization movement creeps into the university classroom as some faculty

argue for the use of one consistent textbook, less challenging theory, and fewer reading assignments across all sections.

The primary barriers to this course and other multicultural education courses are, however, the mandates of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. On its face NCLB proposes that teachers and schools are held accountable for closing the achievement gap that exists between the wealthy and poor student and between White and minority students. This is a relevant and seemingly progressive initiative. NCLB, does not however acknowledge, as we would, that the achievement gap is a partial result of generations of structural discrimination, institutionalized racism, classism and heterosexism (Meier & Wood, 2004). As mentioned above, scholars of culturally relevant and anti-racist pedagogies find that teaching is a political act and that classrooms can either be used to promote or hasten social justice. While NCLB does not deny that teacher candidates should learn and explore strategies to close the achievement gap, it does not mandate courses like this one, which propose that teachers deliberately address the social and political diversity between their students. This leaves the students wondering how a class like this one matters in their ultimate goal to close the achievement gap.

There has also been wide criticism of the one-size fits all doctrine of No Child Left Behind. In short, if schools cannot prove that their students are achieving based on standardized tests, they receive harsh sanctions from the federal government, including reduced funding and in the worst cases closure. This is regardless of the social and economic disparities that may affect student achievement in that community. As a result of the socially-blind application of the policy, many schools have resorted to reducing or eliminating activities, classes and even whole programs that don't review information that will be featured on the standardized test (NCLB requires that schools report achievement reading and math). Given the constraints of the NCLB

era, it may be an unfair expectation that teachers critically examine the social structures at play that contribute to the achievement gap. How can they justify spending instruction time on lessons that promote inclusion and equitable learning if No Child Left Behind won't concur that such lessons can promote improved achievement for all students?

Critical Analysis of Popular Myth

We find beginning the course from a historical perspective that de-mythologizes American history is essential for several reasons. First, it introduces our intent to demystify celebrated eras in American history, namely settlement, westward expansion and civil rights. Secondly, it illustrates the ways in which racism, privilege and heteronormativity are institutionalized in the very foundations of American society. In order to present this more inclusive version of American history we rely on historians such as Joel Spring (1997, 2006) and James Loewen (1995). We also learn to look more critically at representations of history and historical texts and begin to question the reasons why the teaching of American history continues to be approached from a Eurocentric perspective within the context of K-12 education. We do this through the examination of editorials authored by Benjamin Franklin, children's books on the "discovering" of America and the first Thanksgiving, and by sharing with our students Confederate artifacts and images that glorify slavery. For example, *Beyond Face Value* is a visual historical project that catalogues and thematically characterizes confederate money depicting images of slaves and slavery. The project can be found at http://www.cwc.lsu.edu/BeyondFaceValue/images/index.htm. Through the work of visual scholars like Eric Margolis (2004), we also include typically under-represented perspectives on the Indian Education movement, for example, and the creation of Indian schools as a means of cultural extermination and assimilation.

Popular Culture and the Visual Image

Contemporary popular culture is steeped in visual images, the entertainment industry being one of the principal architects of these images. These images translate messages to their viewers, and whether we agree to it or not, they affect how we view and understand the world. Popular culture and the media serve as two of the chief educators of our students, therefore "as future classroom teachers, undergraduate students need opportunities to consider how the media influence their own lives before they can begin to appreciate the need to teach critical media literacy to their students" (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999, p. 119). In order to reach students, it is essential to engage them with "the texts of everyday life," with media and popular culture, so as to understand how these discourses structure the knowledge they bring to the classroom (Luke, 1997, p. 45). Therefore, we argue that it is not only ineffective to attempt to "resist the entertainment culture that dominates public discourse in contemporary society" (Teachers, Teaching and the Movies, 2009), but perhaps even detrimental to do so.

Furthermore, we maintain that popular culture educates us on the ways in which we should view one another and how we understand ourselves and our place within society. Popular culture helps us to determine what is normal, what is abnormal, what behaviors are acceptable, and what behaviors are not. Take for example recent reality shows like *Beauty and the Geek*, *A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila* and *The Man Show*. Each of these shows suggests that when distilled to their essential elements, women are objects without reason and men are hyper-sexualized and emotionless. These may seem like unimportant guilty pleasures that have no effect on how we view gender roles but, Michael Kimmel (2008), leading scholar of masculinity, argues that media, particularly recent movies targeted to young male audiences correctly depict the changing tide in gender roles and relations. The growing traditions of heterosexism, delaying

of marriage until one's late-twenties, and the general extension of adolescence over the last fifty years are all just as evident in television and movies as they are in social statistics.

Therefore, popular televisions shows, movies and magazine advertisements, when coupled with theoretical texts can be essential aids in discussions surrounding critical issues, like those taught in this course. For example, clips from Youtube.com of comedian Christopher Titus issuing a comedic apology for the many ways European settlers oppressed non-whites in the New World or of President Bush calling then presidential candidate Barack Obama "articulate" prove to be ideal in stimulating conversations about race and a means of concretely illustrating theories like unconscious racism. We examine mainstream television commercials for popular candy bars and clips from Hollywood blockbusters that are steeped in homophobic sentiments to augment lesson plans about heteronormativity. In the sections that follow, we outline three examples in-depth and discuss the ways in which they have proven effective in breaking down student defenses and opening up the classroom to provide for meaningful and necessary conversations about class, race, gender and sexuality.

It is important to note that we do not suggest that the introduction of media products to the curriculum should take the place of traditional pedagogical tools such as readings, lectures, discussions and papers. As young scholars we are often pressured to make our courses easier in terms of readings, assignments and even the ways in which students access the readings (e.g. magazine-like textbooks instead of texts, outlines instead of articles, movies instead of readings, etc). Many claim that because the students have become so dependent on media and technology (cell phones, television, social networking sites, and text messaging) that forcing them to engage in the rigors of theory at the undergraduate level is an unrealistic expectation. Some may also feel that because high schools are so narrowly focused on high-stakes test preparation that our

commitment to various traditional methods is foreign and unfair to the students in our classroom. During this reflective exercise we argue that there are ways to merge the strengths of innovative technologies and traditional pedagogies in the design of courses that are both current and relevant but also challenging and useful.

Gender

One of the topics we focus on over the course of a semester is gender identity. We begin by helping students understand the difference between sex and gender. Beginning with this differentiation enables us to deepen and expand our discussions into topics of sexuality and heteronormativity. Next we present the theory that when it comes to wealth, status and power men are the dominant gender in our society. We also offer as evidence census data that prove women, on average, only make about 80 cents for every dollar a man makes, for the same job. Then it is our job as a class to theorize just how and why a gender binary exists and if it is genetics or environment that teaches us how to be boys or girls. As sociologists we explain to our students the theory that gender is socially and culturally constructed and argue how this construction begins as early as conception (e.g. parents choosing masculine and feminine names) and preparing an appropriate rearing environment (e.g. nursery colors and decorations, gender appropriate toys, etc). Once the students have completed the readings, engaged in lectures and classroom discussions, we provide two television commercials as evidence of artificially constructed gender identity and the problematics of the gender binary.

The *Rose Petal Cottage* created by Hasbro came to the market in the spring of 2008, and its commercial purported to deliver the dream of every young girl: a fold-up, life-size play house which comes with a variety accessories at additional costs including an oven and a washer and dryer. The commercial comes in two versions, both of which can be found on Youtube.com, one

geared for children and the other for mothers. In the version for mothers, Hasbro boasts the *Rose Petal Cottage*, as "a place of her (the child's) very own where she can decorate" (the viewer is presented with an image of a young girl rearranging the furniture in her cottage, saying "this goes here"), "contain her imagination" (pan to child saying "time to do laundry") maintaining "The rose petal cottage, it's her place where her dreams have room to grow." The version made for children appears far more confident in its assertion of what a young girl's dream is and should be. In the commercial a girl sings "Rose Petal Cottage, a place of my own," and "I love when my laundry gets so clean, clean, clean, taking care of my home is a dream, dream, dream!" We find that these short 30 second commercials are ideal tools to teach not only media literacy but to examine the ways in which society and culture construct for us what it means to be a "girl."

We then look to popular media including the examples mentioned above of *Beauty and the Geek*, *The Man Show*, as well as *Disney* feature films, particularly those highlighted by Henry Giroux (1995), including *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. In his discussion of these films, he argues that the storylines and the animation promote ideas about gender that reinforce harmful opinions about femininity and masculinity. He points out for instance that both Belle and Ariel were animated to satisfy exaggerated beauty standards about body size and weight. Giroux also illustrates the shift in attitude that both heroines experience. In both cases the princesses were initially characterized as rebellious, strong-willed teens that wanted nothing more than to leave the oppressive conditions of either home or community (Belle read about far away lands and claimed to "…want adventure in the great, wide somewhere." Meanwhile Ariel, the mermaid wanted to be with people. She assumed girls on land were "…bright young women, sick of swimming. Ready to stand."). At the end of both movies however, the girls find true

happiness in the arms and nearby homes of their princes. We find that pairing Giroux's discussion of *Disney* Princesses like Ariel and Belle translates quite well to modern day examples of gender expectations from popular culture. In the popular reality show *The Bachelor*, for example, twenty women compete to win the love of one man, and in the 2006 season, women competed for the affection of a real life prince charming. We argue that by presenting the students with clips from media products such as *The Bachelor* we are more easily able to introduce often difficult discussions on the pervasiveness of the gender binary, and provide students with the necessary tools to critically examine the problems introduced by this binary.

One of the ways in which we normalize images from the media can be seen as young person's become more gendered and sexualized than before. We do not use the term sexualized to mean the same as sexually liberated, but rather features are exaggerated: smaller waists, and larger lips, behinds, and breasts. This assertion can be supported by evidence of the creation of "tween" lingerie (Weiner, 2007). Tween is a term created to describe the age between childhood and adolescence, where young people are not quite teenagers and no longer children. (something about it being a marketing ploy). Steadily increasing rates of plastic surgery in the U.S., particularly breast augmentation, also supports this conclusion.

While these commercials and movie and television clips are ideal teaching tools, it is essential that we couple media representations with theory and engage both theory and media in classroom discussions. Upon viewing the *Rose Petal Cottage* advertisement, students can begin to understand that the desire to keep house, bake muffins, and be caregivers is not an inherent desire encountered in all persons of the female sex, and that these desires are created, in part, through cultural models that teach us to assume that the gender binary is natural. That is, the *Rose Petal Cottage*, and commercial advertisements like the one presented here, reinforce the

cultural belief that male children are naturally and exclusively masculine and female children are naturally and exclusively feminine. We therefore use this example to introduce and understand the work of Judith Butler (1999) as she problematizes the assumption of a common woman identity, for example, and reminds us that gender is re-constituted daily through the adoption, performance and repetition of particular acts. From here, we are able to extend our discussion of gender into the damage that the gender binary can inflict on those of us who do not fit into our prescribed position. The use of media and Youtube.com in particular, brings texts and images that students are already familiar with into the classroom and provides them with a space to begin to view them critically.

Heterosexism

After our discussion of gender construction, we turn our visions to sexuality and the ways in which the problematics of the gender binary lead into further problems with regards to how we view and understand sexuality in our society. We explore the hegemonic structures of heteronormativity that permeate our culture and find that the use of contemporary film, commercials and print advertising is particularly helpful in engaging students in a critical discussion. One of the key media products that we use to stimulate our conversation of heteronormativity is the *2007 Snickers* commercial that aired during halftime of that year's Super Bowl, which can also be found on youtube.com. The commercial opens with two men in a mechanic's shop leaning over the engine of a car. One of the men pulls a Snickers Bar from his pocket unwraps it and places it in his mouth. The other man, so tempted by the chocolate covered caramel, peanuts and nougat, reaches over and begins to eat from the other end of the snickers bar hanging from his friend's mouth. Lost in the ecstasy of the moment (*Snickers* apparently induces this ecstasy), their lips meet. One man exclaims: "I think we just accidentally

kissed" and the other responds, "Quick, do something manly," and both men proceed to pull out large chunks of their chest hair, screaming and howling in the process.

After the laughter dies down, as many students find this particular scenario to be quite humorous, we begin to dissect the commercial to reveal the following: 1) homosexuality is something to fear, and 2) masculinity is synonymous with heterosexuality. As indicated previously, media help us to determine what is normal, what is abnormal, what behaviors are acceptable, and what behaviors are not. In this particular commercial, *Snickers* teaches us about what it means to be a man, what behaviors are acceptable for men, and what behaviors are unacceptable. Homosexuality is frequently portrayed as accidental, perverse and immoral on television, and while this commercial is no exception, it also presents homosexual behaviors as inherently negative and as something to fear. Disgusted that their lips have accidentally touched, the men immediately find it necessary to "do something manly" suggesting that "manliness" or masculinity is inherently synonymous with heterosexuality. Commercials such as this demonstrate and promote heteronormativity and this actualization transmits certain beliefs: There exist two sexes with two corresponding genders and heterosexuality is assumed to be the only normal sexual orientation. Because of these assumptions, we learn, maintain, and reproduce beliefs about those who are non-heterosexual. These beliefs tend to hold non-heterosexuality as perverted, disturbed, or as a disease which should be cured and further serve to maintain heterosexual persons in a dominant position.

We use commercials such as these to introduce students to often-difficult theories like symbolic violence as coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2000). Bourdieu argued that the symbolic aspects of social relationships and social interactions are important in the repression of certain people; non-heterosexual people, or women for example. He indicated that these

symbolic representations, which present people in ways which compromise their best interests, serve to oppress these groups of people and are therefore symbolically violent. In other words rather than using physical force, outlets such as media use symbolic violence to control certain groups. Therefore commercial advertisements, like the *Snickers* commercial, which convey messages suggesting the perverse nature of homosexuality, or that, portray homosexuality as the antithesis of masculinity are violent to the gay community. When we blend the *Snickers* commercial and others like it with a critical discussion on heteronormativity, it not only helps students begin to critically examine the hegemonic structures serving to oppress minority groups in our society, but also provides a means of accessing difficult to understand theories like symbolic violence.

Race

In this course we approach the discussion of race in two parts. In the beginning of the semester we review American history, particularly celebrated moments in colonization and expansion from a critical race standpoint. That is, we encourage the students to incorporate the oppression of non-whites into their understanding of American history for two reasons: First classes like this one offer students the chance to challenge the popular narrative of America as the democratic melting pot, where all of the world's outcasts sought and received refuge. That wasn't exactly true, for instance for the natives who lived in the west for centuries. James Loewen's (1995) work, *Lies my Teacher Told Me* explains the true(r) nature of European explorers' and settlers' experiences in the new world. According to Loewen his students were shocked to learn that what they had always known about "pilgrims and Indians" and "the first Thanksgiving" was mostly treasured American folklore.

Second, it is important for students to know that racism wasn't the work of a few, unique and now extinct private citizens. Rather American policies depended on hierarchical rankings within society, and this was especially true of the relationship between Europeans and Africans. Most of our students are unaware that the federal government deliberately endorsed slavery, that the United States Supreme Court deliberately sanctioned segregation, and that the states outlawed marriages between Whites and Blacks. In order to illustrate the pervasiveness of racism and discrimination in American culture we provide the students with historical and contemporary illustrations of oppression against non-whites. We chose photos of lynchings from withoutsanctuary.com, samples of confederate money featuring slaves from the *Beyond Face Value* project and even examples of national and collegiate sports teams that use stereotypical images of Native Americans as mascots.

In our experiences as instructors for this course, we have learned that one set of pictures, in particular not only sparks discussion, but helps students to see how the American government was often complicit in hierarchical ranking of the races. Very few students know the story of Emmett Till before our class discussion. Emmett Till was a fourteen year-old African American boy lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman. His murderers, who later admitted to the crime, were acquitted. In fact, many of our students can define lynching but few have any real understanding of the depths of its reaches within American history. Using three photographs we walk our students through his story: his childhood photo, the front page of the newspaper with the headline "Nation Shocked, Vow Action in Lynching of Chicago Youth," and a final image showing his mangled corpse at his funeral - his mother insisted on an open casket so the world could bear witness to the atrocities done to her son.

Students often engage the lessons on historical racism (most are shocked and saddened by Till's story) but begin to resist its relevance when we discuss why a teacher would need to know such facts today. They ask questions like: Doesn't the continued resurgence of discussions of race only reinforce the problem? Shouldn't we learn to leave the past in the past? They also use statements such as: My parents never used the N-word so I know that this doesn't apply to me. Critical race scholar Charles Lawrence (1995) explains that anyone born and raised in a society that was founded on racist principles and governed by racist laws is inherently, albeit unconsciously, racist. He goes on to explain that almost all of us have racist thoughts that can and will eventually "slip" out. When famous actor, turned comedian, Michael Richards responded to hecklers in 2007 by repeatedly calling them 'niggers' during his stand up comedy show he let his own racist thoughts about Blacks "slip" out, for example. Although Lawrence does not mention ideas about sexuality and religion we find his argument is just as useful when attempting to understand Isaiah Washington's use of heterosexist slurs against fellow actor T.R. Knight and Mel Gibson's use of anti-Semitic and sexist slurs against arresting police officers.

In order to supplement this discussion and to critique student resistance against the notion of unconscious racism we provide for discussion a power-point presentation containing photos from theme parties hosted on well-known college campuses around the country. In each case the party-goers were members of fraternities or sororities and dressed in accordance to the theme of the parties. For instance, at a prominent Texas university the theme was "South of the Border." Students in the photographs dressed as landscapers and maids and had to 'cross a border' at the front door to enter the party. Their handwritten nametags read "Pedro" and "Juan Carlos" and the name of their cleaning company was "Spic and Span" (see figures 1 and 2). We also show the students photos from a Halloween party at a prominent school in Alabama. In some cases the

Figures 1& 2

students wore more traditional costumes. But many chose to dress in blackface, either as slaves or lynch victims. Others dressed as riot cops or Klansmen (see figures 3 and 4). We find these photos useful because they directly address the notion that the latest generation of Americans, college students who are educated to shame our past racist deeds, are free from racist thoughts or practices. The responses to the photos vary but usually introduce to the class discussion one or more of three common arguments. First, many ask, what is so wrong with the parties? It was supposed to be funny. Second, many are disgusted that students in their age group would dress in blackface or write racist slurs about Mexicans on their costumes. Third, some become reflective. They admit to enjoying theme parties and wonder if they are as removed from the mistaken beliefs of past generations as they thought.

Later in the semester we introduce students to the notion of privilege and what it means to exist within American society with an indelible yet indiscernible assurance of comfort or accommodation. Peggy McIntosh's (1990) article on white privilege provides useful theoretical

Figures 3 & 4

background on what privilege feels like (e.g. carrying an invisible knapsack of tools useful for full participation in a society) and who has it. Her list of privileges however, encourages the students to reflect on their own position in society. As she admits that she can be late to a meeting and not have people blame it on her race, the students consider similar privileges in their own lives.

Recently, most likely due to our election of an African-American president, many students have claimed that America is finally, a truly post-racial society. With the readings from Joel Spring, Charles Lawrence and Peggy McIntosh, students feel free to dismiss racism and even discrimination as artifacts of the past. That is why we work hard to demonstrate to the students that these scholars' observations are not outdated or based on personal experiences. The pictures from theme parties where students demean and stereotype Mexican immigrants are a good start. We then show the students an advertisement by Sony for its PlayStation Personal (PSP). In this ad a beautifully feminine, but over-sexualized white woman is physically

dominating an androgynously costumed Black woman, who is hidden in the shadows of the image. The caption for the ad reads "White is Coming." This ad promoted the new PlayStation as unique because it was white. Most consoles on the market, at that time, were Black. The advertisements were not released in the United States and when civil rights leaders learned of the ads they requested that Sony remove them. Sony complied.

We also engage the class in an in depth discussion of Disney movies, like Aladdin, which hyperbolize the differences between light and dark skin as representative of the eternal fight between good and evil (Giroux, 1995). In order to demonstrate how systemic racism affects the schools we share episodes from the Oprah Winfrey Show, which illustrate apartheid education, as Jonathon Kozol (2005) describes it over fifty years after the passing of Brown v. the Board of Education. In order to show how racism is gendered we show the critically acclaimed film *A Girl Like Me*, a short film created by Kiri Davis and presented at the *Media that Matters Film Festival*. This film relates the experiences shared by young black girls in a society dominated by hegemonic structures of whiteness and white beauty standards. The film can be viewed at: http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/films/a_girl_like_me/

Presented with these contemporary texts, students can begin to question the notion that racism is a thing of the past. The theme parties, commercial advertisements, and the slippages of Hollywood superstars provide concrete examples to theory that would most likely otherwise remain inaccessible or perceived as irrelevant to their professional goals.

Discussion and Implications

For all intents and purposes education in the US is at an impasse. With No Child Left Behind in its eighth year, many of its promises are left unfulfilled. The achievement gap between white and minority students has not closed. The dropout rate has not decreased and

many still disagree on which skills define a highly qualified teacher. This may be because much of what (currently) occurs in the classroom is focused towards transmissionist knowledge acquisition with the intention of preparing students for standardized tests (Nelson, n.d.; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Nelson therefore argues for the use of critical pedagogy, noting that "a critical pedagogy is a liberating pedagogy and critical thinking becomes the method by which a powerful education is enacted" (p. 6). Fostering critical thinking is essential to a teacher preparation curriculum. Teacher candidates can begin to critically engage their world and the everyday texts that surround them in order to foster these critical thinking skills in their future students. Furthermore, teacher beliefs can become more sophisticated through a critical reflection about their own and their peers' teaching practices (Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). As mentioned earlier we align ourselves with those scholars who define the highly qualified teacher as one who knows what to teach, how to teach, and can act as an agent of social change for their students. Helping future teachers to understand teaching as a political act is essential in their transformation into agents of social change. Critical pedagogy and a genuine engagement with theory serve as necessary tools in this transformation. It is not our goal to usher students toward any one way of viewing the world. While we make no secret of the fact that we support democratic, problem-posing pedagogies in K-12 classrooms, we maintain that it is important that our students have access to various lenses with which they can view the world. A critical pedagogy does just this.

We argue that bringing the everyday texts students are continually exposed to into the classroom is an essential part of a critical pedagogy. Media products such as film, commercial advertisements, music videos, and outlets like Youtube.com are indispensible in fostering student engagement and in helping students to access difficult and controversial material. For example, students respond in teacher evaluations that, "the use of media was particularly helpful," or "the

instructor made the class interesting especially with the media sources. Overall difficult, but a good class to take." In response to a question about what aspects of the course they liked, students respond, "the outside sources the professor used to facilitate discussion" and "the content was difficult but the teacher made it easier and interesting." Comments such as this last one were not uncommon on teacher evaluations and we attribute this frequent response to our instruction to the combined use of visual media and critical pedagogy. One student wrote, "At first I was overwhelmed and so apprehensive about what to expect throughout the whole semester. I definitely felt at times that the readings were daunting and challenging; however, I now feel they all had great significance." We do not believe that higher education classrooms should forego traditional pedagogical methods such as readings, quizzes, lectures and even tests. Rather, we argue that those educators who rely on traditional methods alone may not only lose the interest of their students – who are constantly influenced by popular culture – but they may also have difficulty proving the relevance of the course content. In our case we challenged our students to read rigorous controversial texts that some may consider inaccessible even at the college level. What we have found is that students, when challenged, rise to the occasion and find that theory when coupled with media, is not only more accessible but can be quite relevant.

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