Youth Media Productions:
Deconstructing "difference" or reifying norms?

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Abstract

The literature on the engagement of underrepresented youth in creating media productions is often framed as a way to appreciate an alternative definition of dominant norm and/or conceptualization of "other". This discourse largely relies on a definition of difference that should not be construed as difference per se, but as another equally valued way of being in the world. This paper explores the construction and deconstruction of marginalized youth media creations. More often than not, youth are asked to create digital artifacts in order to spotlight how individual and collective participation is mediated by and situated within historical, social, and cultural contexts. Examples of such engagements that work toward this vision include the creation of digital stories to foster agency in youths' social lives (Hull, 2007), or the use of radio journalism where young people develop and produce the stories that are relevant to their communities and their lives (Chavez & Soep, 2005). These youth engagements aim to celebrate and incorporate differences to both empower youth and foster a cosmopolitan worldview (Appiah, 2006). While the intention is to privilege and equalize "difference", such activity is at times interpreted as "damage centered" (Tuck, 2009) research. Drawing upon theoretical frames of cultural studies (Hammer & Kellner, 2009; Hall, 1996) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), we examine whether these categories liberate social constructions of difference or serve to reify conceptualization of it.

Situating the Rise of youth media productions

The educational engagement of underrepresented youth in the production of various forms of media is on the rise. Community organizations interested in educating youth draw on the fact that youth are increasingly participating in the creation of media content such as web pages, blogs, wikis, videos, and radio. Examples of organizations that employ these efforts include Youth Speaks, Listen UP!, Youth Radio, and BraveNew Voices, to name a few. Many of the efforts involve using technological tools to document, assess, analyze, and deconstruct the worlds in which they live (Goodman, 2003). Further, the organizations aim to assist youth in using the media creations to envision new possible futures and generate new forms of social action (Chavez & Soep, 2005). According to Chaves and Soep (2005) one of the inherent strengths in youth driven media production is that "it starts where the young people are" (p. 410). This is similar to the pedagogical perspectives put forth by Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2005) on the importance of "drawing on the sociocultural practices of students" (p. 284) and "building upon what is already present in students" (p. 290).

There are perhaps two significant overarching phenomena that bind and underlie these initiatives. One relates to providing youth with a venue and a means by which they can (re)image their culture (Riecken et. al., 2006) or the self and community (Hull & James, 2007). The focus on (re)imagining self, community, and culture is grounded in the historical trail of racialized representations of marginalized groups. The intent of historical representations of

minorities was to exasperate difference, privilege Western culture, and ostensibly westernize the "other". Conversely, youth created media efforts seek to forefront difference in order to appreciate and celebrate cultural difference. This effort aligns with a growing body of literature that aims to privilege difference not as difference per se, but as an acceptance and awareness of the simultaneous existence of valued cultural ways of being and knowing (Appiah, 2006). Media, whose etymological meaning is "intermediary" or "measure" (as in content, milieu, or culture), has the potential to not only communicate an individual or collective identity, but also to mediate the actor's consciousness of those representations (Davis & Gandy, 1999). In using media to document one's environment, youth have the opportunity to deconstruct the political, social, and institutional structures that intersect and yield an oppressive and racialized view of "other". Subsequently, these same tools that are used to create the representations can be used to analyze and (re)present/(re)construct that view.

The falling costs for media related equipment is the second significant event that has made participation in youth created media more viable. Until recently, the access to technological tools that support these efforts was cost prohibitive. Tools such as internal cameras on computers and Flipcams allow the user to take and download HD (High Definition) quality video respectively to a personal computer. Even through high end editing software remains extremely costly, personal computers come with preinstalled basic editing photo and video software that yields semi-professional products. The affordability and availability of tools has resulted in the increased propensity of researchers, educators, and youth organizations to put technological tools in the hands of youth in order to assist them in seeing and telling their (hi)stories and envisioning and enacting alternate social futures from their own vantage points. With school curriculum putting increased emphasis on standardized testing, out of school youth media environments provide a unique space for youth to engage in learning activities that facilitate youth development and result in products that have a sociocultural impact (Chavez & Soep, 2005).

While these efforts are laudable and essential, audiences will not necessarily accurately interpret the authors' projected messages in the ensuing (re)presentations. In other words, simply creating alternative images of the self, community, and culture does not ensure the transformation of deeply embedded perceptions of cultural groups. It is widely accepted that the ideological representations that the producer intends to portray are not passively consumed (Gramsci, 1971). Instead, audience interpretations of media productions are socially and culturally mediated according to one's context (Hall, 1973). As youth create new images of themselves and their worlds, the audiences who view them will interpret the productions through their own historical lenses. This calls to question whether the engagement of youth in media productions in fact helps to deconstruct difference and foster valued alternative ways of being or assist in reifying the historically consciousized notion of underrepresented cultures.

In this paper we explore the rise of youth media productions as an educational activity to (re)present the notions and implications of imagining "other". We draw on theories of cultural studies and critical pedagogy to examine the historical and evolving media representations of as well as the learning approaches aimed at reshaping that history. The historical gaze assists us in understanding the potential for why this youth media production trend materialized. Further, the historical understanding of the racializations of minorities is a way to surface the socially constructed and unconscious ways of seeing "other". We apply the aforementioned theories to our analysis of the pedagogical ways of engaging youth in media productions and to inquire as how they either liberate or reinforce norms. We then elaborate on the value of education through and with media as well as project possible considerations of generating collective interpretations that may assist in a more authentic deconstruction, and which potentially yield new ways of seeing/imaging "other".

Historical Representations of Underrepresented Groups

Early Images

Historically, Westerns and colonials have represented marginalized groups as deficit, damaged and in need of being "fixed". Namely, these groups are touted as lacking the social and cultural capital to become successfully integrated into a particular worldview (Dodson, 1999). The implication is that these groups ought to be shown the way and mainstreamed into the "dominant society". Actions and rhetoric give way to situating this normative belief. For example, in the early 1900s the Australian government approved legislation that authorized the forcible extraction of Aboriginal youth from their homes. Children were confined and educated in rudimentary English and taught manners of the Caucasian society (Sydney Herald, 2002). What is more, these youth were taken from their homes not for educational purpose, but to breed them with Whites so as to eliminate the Aboriginal race. Similarly, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Native Americans in the United States were taken to reform schools in order to civilize this purportedly unsophisticated culture (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, Boulin Johnson, 1993). During the birth of the US, Blacks were also being socially constructed as deviant and in need of reform. Namely Black youth, according to educational officials, needed to be ''instruct[ed] [] mentally and morally" (Bacon, 1856, p. 7) and their education should advance their "knowledge and refinement" in order to obtain a "useful occupation with persons'' (Bacon, 1856, p. 3). Remnants of this continued as colonizers and slave owners created laws that prohibited Blacks from educational, social and political rights which contributed to their social alienation. The treatment and representation of these groups has not only historically been inscrutable, but relentlessly has set foundations of racial identities.

This racialization has further been fossilized through culturally produced and socialized mainstream media. Beginning with drawings and photographs from as early as the 1800s and 1900s pictorial depictions conveyed distorted identities of Africans (Qureshi, 2004). Further, Westerners' photographs of non-Westerners included the omission of elders and large families

and instead focused on the idealization of youth (Lutz & Collins, 1993). In the United States, perhaps the most notable form of Western representation was side-by-side images of Native youth in "savage" settings and clothing juxtaposed with these same youth in colonial attire. Such images have attempted to capture depictions of this group adapting to colonial domination (Churchill, 1995). However, these groups were not adapting, instead they were involuntarily forced into subservient roles and positions and were unable to circumvent the hierarchical political and institutional dominance of colonials. Artists also depicted slaves as either simplistic people enjoying their constricted lives or as lazy and defiant workers who were neglecting their imposed responsibilities. Such out of context representations denied or at the very least made difficult, the full participation of marginalized groups in how they are seen.

These few examples illustrate photographic strategies that heighten the manipulated interpretation of the viewer (Lutz & Collins, 1993). For example, non-Westerns were coached to look directly into the camera, suggesting a more vulnerable position, to evoke an equal or lesser than impression for the viewer. The manipulation of the subjects' gaze or position dictates the audience's authority on the subject. The images imply subjugated and disempowered existences. Largely produced by those in dominant cultural positions of the time, the semiotic inscriptions of subject purposefully included depersonalization (Goffman, 1969), distance (Hall, E.T., 1966) and dehumanization. The intention of the Westerner and/or colonizer is to enhance perceptions of the difference between "them" and "us" as well as foreground the superiority of one's own culture (Schroeder, 1998). Groups often created oppositional identities (Ogbu, 2004) as a resistance to this subjugation as they were unable to circumvent the hierarchical political and institutional dominance of colonials. It was not until the "mid-1920s that Blacks began to demand changes in their representation in the White minds or social image" (Ogbu, 2004, p. 13).

Modern Media

Despite marginalized groups' struggle for social justice related to such images, early radio and film continued to put forth similar representations that reinforced stereotypes. Perhaps the most famous of these is the situational comedy Amos n Andy. This sitcom, which transitioned from a radio to a TV show, is seen as the foundation for racially stereotyping the African American Community in modern media. Created by White men, the stories were noted as a benign beginning of racial mockery (Lawrence, 1987). Researchers also report that compared to Whites, Blacks and Latinos are more likely to be spotlighted in crime stories and portrayed as suspects or the perpetrators on TV (Bjornstrom, Kaufman, Peterson, & Slater, 2010). This adds to the stereotypes surrounding the criminalization of minority groups and the negative perceptions of them. Moreover, additional research that suggest these kinds of messages influence attitudes that play out in social contexts (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, Behm-Morawitz, 2009). A collective and shared history of experiencing other as mediated by these venues has contributed to unconscious development of cultural beliefs toward non-Whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

More recently, members of marginalized groups have taken position of authority in the creation and production of various forms of mass media. For example, movies such as "Boyz in the Hood" and "Menace II Society", produced by African American directors, characterize the plights and possibilities of African American experiences from the perspective of these groups. The directors use real and figurative symbolism to characterize the social structures within the "hood" and the institutional structures that impede movement out of or transformation of it (Massood, 1996). The symbolic references "define the hood as a ghetto by using surveillance from above and outside to take agency away from people in the community" (Diawara, 1993, p. 22). In music, Public Enemy's, *Fight the Power,* an influential Hip-Hop song called African Americans to mobilize against racism. This song spurred a fight against racist oppression by authorities and corporations in the United States. It encouraged education and awareness of oppression as a key strategy in fighting against the structures that limit the mobility of Black people.

These more recent forms of media seek to position underrepresented groups as authority in bringing to light the complex interplay between oppression and possibility as a cultural production of the African American experience. Even though more recent efforts stir a shift in perceptions, they continue to compete with the negative light that mass media shines on minorities. *Fight the Power* and *Boyz in the Hood* use forms of dress, accents, vernacular, and lyrics to symbolize identity of African American culture and/or oppression. Yet in news, sitcoms, movie titles, and other media, Blacks, Hispanics, and Latinos continue to be pictured as ominous, dangerous, and different. Viewers take in images of these groups engaged in crime, drug use, gang violence, and other forms of anti-social behavior (Balkaran, 1999). Thus the symbols might inadvertently contribute to and unconsciously strengthen the already imagined perceptions put forth by dominant-created historical representations of minorities. Specifically, an oppositional reading of this might contain the notion that the characters in this movie are a group of angry Black youth. These images bring an historical lens for interpretation of a decontextualized audience to the surface. To further compound the issue of stereotypical images is the disproportionately low media representations of particular ethnic groups, specifically Latinos and Asians. Both the absence of groups and the negative portrayals of people of color combine to inherently increase the popular consciousization of the historical remnants of such historically created hegemonic images.

Engaging Marginalized Youth in Media (Re)Construction

Researchers and educators have generated various initiatives to these same media as a means of assisting youth in (re)imaging these seemingly unwavering, racialized individual and collective identities. These efforts, however, do not end with the goal of creating media; they also include pedagogical strategies to assist youth in uncovering the social and political structures that play a role in their current situations as well as how they are perceived. This critical approach works to

raise consciousness of the youth in the more often than not oppressed position. Further, the approach seeks to empower youth to use their context to construct his/her image of self and surroundings. Finally, the attempts intend to implore the youth to think of alternative realities and to potentially take initiative to participate in social action.

We examine two examples of youth created media engagements that aspire to connect youth with their identities, communities, and/or worlds. While there are numerous initiatives with this mission, we choose to examine one example from the following within the following mediums: digital storytelling and broadcast radio. For each of these media, we begin by applying critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) to the description and analyze the design of engagements with these mediums. Critical pedagogy asserts that education should always be a process by which we critically unearth structures that impede or facilitate social justice. This critical examination comes as a result of making connections between power, injustice, and societal norms. We employ this to consider how the structures facilitate or liberate youth agency in the educational process. Next we draw on cultural media studies to analyze the socially and culturally situated meaning and whether in what way the meaning might either liberate difference or reinforce norms. Specifically, we employ the encoding/decoding analytical model by Stuart Hall (1993) to consider possible dual meaning in created and interpreted in media texts. We assert the intentions of the author (encoder) and then consider an audience interpretation (decoder). We take the audience to be from outside the urban context in order to infer what oppositional reading might occur. We know from cultural studies that "meaning making is indivisibly linked to social structure" (Fiske, 1987, p. 254), thus we juxtapose contexts of underrepresented encoding with outsider decoding to imagine possible interpretations of youth-created media. In the closing section, we use the same literature to put forth future considerations in helping to bring about more negotiated meanings of youth media productions, in order to better ensure possible emergence of difference as an equally valued way of being in the world.

Digital Stories

Many organizations engage youth in various forms digital storytelling. These projects range from scripted programs to less structured programs. More scripted programs, such as SCMW (Silk City Media Workshop), take youth through a step by step process of creating a story and converting it to a storyboard, learning a video editing software, and then gathering pictures and music to use for their final productions (DeGennaro, 2008). DUSTY (Digital Underground StoryTelling Youth), a more open-ended program, affords youth opportunities to create various forms of digital narratives. These narratives might include verbal performances, photos, storyboards, musical compositions, animations, or digital stories. The organizers see that these forms of expression provide a means by which youth can exemplify and personify the self in direct relation to their peers and community members (Hull, 2007).

These programs are similar in that their underlying aim is to bridge the digital divide and foster literacy skills, both old and new (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). The articulated goals of providing skills that are situated in the dominant cultural perspective are a reflection the historical view of the dominant class' oppression of "other". Digital divide initiatives, although well-intentioned, have often been designed contrary to a Freirian (1970) view of participation. The phenomenon is largely attributed to the division between minority and White access to digital technologies, such as the Internet and computers. The digital divide is arguably a resultant effect of the historically unequal opportunities and treatment of minorities. Technology learning initiatives such as SCMW and DUSTY emerged in an effort to bridge that divide. The notion, however, of "catching up" or "providing skills" is reflective of a banking model of learning and is similar to attempting to mainstream these marginalized groups into society. More often than not, outside experts come in to model "appropriate" uses that will translate into marketable skills. Without bringing the participants into the conversation about what they know and how they analyze the role of tools within their own world and future, efforts of empowerment become futile and potentially reproduce the very divisions that they attempt to close. According to Freire (1970), "Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building" (p. 10).

The ways in SCMW and DUSTY implement their programs are through the services of undergraduate mentors and expert teachers. In SCMW, mentors and teachers create a formal structure of learning that reflects a school-like feeling. These mentors stand in the front of the room and students sit in rows facing the teacher. Their role is to impart skills of literacy, both reading and technology based. In DUSTY, mentors participate in a service learning class. Undergraduates are asked to reflect on their experience as they move in and out of the after school space. They often work side by side with expert teachers. Researchers describe that these adults are careful to be knowledgeable of boundaries between the university and urban community worlds. Both organizations aim to afford youth the opportunity to be in positions of authority to not only create the digital products, but also to become active members of making and remaking their worlds through the creation of their narratives. Still, the designs have reverberations of the outsider as authority who seeks to release these populations from constraints either of gaining externally defined knowledge or of having voice. We are reminded that, "It would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education" (Freire, 1970, p. 5). The implication is that youth in these settings need to be a more integral part of the instruction and direction of these experiences. Thus the organizers need to pay more careful attention to how participation with the community, from the onset, is a mutually constitutive process of engagement that comes first from within the boundaries which they cross.

To reiterate, these organizations focus on youth agency by asking youth to tell stories from their points of view and contributing stories to a larger conversation of their worlds. This is a start to

moving toward beginning from within the context of the community and youth. SCMW asks youth to write personal stories and DUSTY asserts the "importance of positioning participants to tell their important stories about self and community, and to use those moments of narrative reconstruction to reflect on past events, present activities, and future goals" (Hull & James, 2007, p. 255). Starting from youth affords the opportunity for altering the power structure of dialogues between student and teacher. This dialogue is not only important to alter power structures, but also to raise awareness and connect with one's current situation. Freire writes, "The correct method lies in dialogue. The conviction of the oppressed that they must fight in their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership, but the result of their own *conscientização*" (Freire, 1970, p. 11). The *conscientização,* or "critical consciousness", is necessary for a liberating educational experience (Freire, 1973).

With elements of principles that lean toward a critical educational process, youth participation in programs such as SCMW and DUSTY has resulted in a number of successful stories created by youth. The products reflect the intended goals of 1) illustrating a connection to self and community and 2) providing a venue for asserting youth voice. What follows, is one digital story that was completed at SCMW. We examine the potential encoded modes used in this digital story and how alternative decoded messages either liberate voice or reinforce norms.

Example: "The City that Lost its Way"

The example used for this medium is a story by Valerie (pseudonym). Valerie is an 18 year old Latina high school senior. She is already accepted to college in the fall. Her story is set in Paterson, NJ where she lives. Entitled, "The City that Lost its Way", Valerie contextualizes her perspective of her hometown as well as her hopes for the future.

Digital Story Transcription:

> The title slide opens with an image of White Police Officers putting handcuffs on a young Black man.
>
> The transitions swipes across to reveal a sepia image of historical Paterson. Music from the 1920s plays in the background. The narration begins, "Paterson has changed over the years. The change that has come is not a good type of change."
>
> The next slide is an image of what appears to be a street fair. A young White boy and two White girls are playing under a colorful balloon-type textile. Adults stand near by. The narration continues, "When I was younger, this time used to shine."
>
> The image transitions again, this time to a cityscape. She continues, "The town's inhabitants would walk around carefully and felt safe."

The 1920s music fades away and a more somber fades in. An imaged of a White woman is shown on a chair in the park. "As I got older, things started to change little by little."

The image fades to black, and a black and white image of a facade with graffiti emerges. "People didn't walk around as much. And the town was less vibrant."

A cross over from the previous image exposes a night view of an empty street. It is raining. There is silence for a few seconds: no music, no words.

A transition brings forth a school classroom. As she speaks, the camera pans across students sitting in chairs and stops on a Black student attentive and looking toward the front of the room. "When I entered High School, the town had really taken a turn for the worse."

The image transitions again, this time to a group of men with bandannas on their faces or foreheads. "Known gang members walk the streets now."

There is a fade to black and then a disclosure of a black and white picture, a silhouette of two youth, a building and power lines behind them. "The shine had left and in came the clouds". She uses a cloud effect over the image as she closes with her last word.

"Drug dealers at every corner... robberies, even murders is what Paterson now is known for." In the background is very soft instrumental music and an image of a crime scene van and investigators.

The circle open transition reveals what appears to be an empty box. "People had lost all hope in Paterson." The box pans out to reveal a moving truck as she continues, "and were fleeing to neighboring states."

The instrumental music intensifies with the appearance of a woman in a crowd. She is holding a check, arms raised in the air. "I for one refuse to lose hope! Paterson, definitely can change". The narrators voice changes. "Citizens of Paterson, rise up and take back our streets. Together we will exile those who have corrupted our city." As the voice is finishing, the image transitions to young men being handcuffed and placed in a police truck.

The next image is of workings building a foundation. The narrator, now back to the original voice, states, "I have decided what I must do to make things better. What this city needs is a great leader."

As she says, "And that leader is me!", the image changes to another young woman, arm raised and mouth open. "Valerie [States her full name]."

The final image opens to a city hall building. The narrator closes with, "Mayor! Coming soon." Her full name, followed by "Mayor of Paterson", appear across the screen.

The music intensifies again as the image fades to black. The words "The Beginning" appear on the screen. The dramatic music fades, "The Beginning" remains on the screen.

Encoding: Potential Contextualized Meaning

The encoding of this text is taken to be an assumption and within the context of its creation. It can only be an assumed encoded interpretation as the youth do not provide a detailed or reflective explanation of media strategies and elements that they chose or why they chose them. Instead of making assumption about the conscious or unconscious choice of images, we discuss how film elements (titles, transitions, narration, and music) assert the intended and contextual encoding.

The encoder, Valerie, an 18 year old in Paterson senior, provides a story that situates her everyday existence in Paterson NJ. This story begins with a recollection of childhood, moves through her current view, and finishes with a vision for her adulthood.

Valerie tells her story using non-diegetic sound elements. Non-diegetc sound is the use of sound that is not connected to the source of the story (Kerins, 2007). Its purpose is to evoke emotions, offer dramatic effect, and/or to provide narration and assists the viewer in interpreting what the author is thinking (Bordwell and Thompson, 2006). Valerie uses each of these, narration and music as both emotion evoking and dramatic effect, as she takes us through her story.

She opens her story with images of a once prosperous Paterson. The music is spirited and energetic, signifying good times. The accompanying narration begins to take us directly from these images of a clean and prosperous Paterson, into an identified unconstructive change. She recalls a different neighborhood in her youth; a neighborhood where people walked freely in public without concern for their safety.

The narration stays even as she takes us into a current Paterson. Along with this, the music changes to a more solemn tone. This music evokes an emotion of sadness or despair as images of solitude, graffiti, gangs, and crime appear across the screen.

She does not accept this reality as taken for granted however. Instead her use of intense dramatic music along with a change of narrator's voice contributes to implying her resistance to this condition. The music and images now put forth a message of possibility, hope, and personal action. It is at this moment that the narrator says, "Citizens of Paterson, rise up and take back our streets. Together we will exile those who have corrupted our city." The message implies that as a collective, the citizens can band together to galvanize change. This message is reinforced with the closing image, a simple black screen overlain with white words: "The Beginning". The final image indicates a need to start to take action, a need for a new beginning.

Valerie's use of non-digetic sound to tell her story is an effective way for her to voice her experience from within her social context. The music and voice evoke emotions of spirit, then despair, then hope. From her own inside perspective she offers us insights into the current situation of this urban community. Yet she does not portray a perception that all youth in this community engage in the deviant social behavior. Instead, she reveals a determined and intelligent young woman who sees an opportunity to create a promising alternative future. Her story seems to say that she does not feel bound what appears a deterministic existence. Rather, she portrays an understanding of her agentic possibilities. To her, this is a city that has lost its way, but in spite of the current conditions, she projects a resilience and an insistence optimism that Paterson can gain a new identity.

Decoding: Oppositional Reading

What one sees in a given media text is informed by one's social context since codes, whether encoded or decoded, are "culture-specific" (Hall, 1973, p. 132). Historically, cultural theorists have examined the "west to the rest" construct of the globalization of media commodities. They have shown individuals and groups do not simply adopt these commodities. Instead, the commodities are changed and adapted to take on more familiar cultural connotations (Van Maanen, 1992, p. 17). This interpretation takes a polarized view considering how a non-dominant cultural commodity might be interpreted by a "dominant" culture. The following inferred interpretation is offered as hypothetical to illustrate one possible oppositional read of Valerie's story. We draw on historical representations of minorities to consider this possible read.

The opening music and image of an historic and vibrant Paterson evokes images similar to other thriving cities before the national spur of riots in the 1960s. These images have become a collective memory of the violent nature of underrepresented groups. Beginning with this image

of urban communities could potentially trigger a negative emotional response toward minorities. This emotional reaction would not be against Valerie herself, but rather a reaction to groups that participated in acts that history has attributed to the destruction of the city and ultimately instigated White Flight.

When Valerie moves into describing the situation within the currently community, she uses images that are stereotypically ascribed to urban contexts. These include abandoned buildings covered in graffiti, young men in the process of being incarcerated, and a crime scene set in an impoverished urban setting. Such images, which have been and continue to be used to portray urban youth, might trigger and reinforce these typecast.

The final segment, where Valerie asserts hope and change, she uses images of rebuilding and rising up. Media has historically represented underrepresented groups as not appreciating or sustaining efforts to rebuild or to change. Deep seeded belief systems about the nature and actions of this group may deter the viewer from seeing Valerie as outside the normalized image of urban minorities.

Although according to our assumed contextual analysis Valerie asserts one message in her digital story, it is plausible that the message can get lost or misread as indicted in our hypothesized oppositional reading. Signs and symbols used in the stories can potentially be taken out of context when experienced through one's own social and cultural milieu.

Broadcast Radio

Perhaps the most notable of radio initiatives is Youth Radio. Youth Radio is a nonprofit organization that teaches broadcasting skills to adolescents. Included in the program is knowledge of creating news stories, radio shows, and music for local and national radio outlets. Central to their mission is providing "intellectual, creative, and professional" development in the youth that participate in their programs. Young people are recruited from schools in poor urban districts and from schools that are heavily tracked (Chavez & Soep, 2005). After youth successfully complete the application process and are accepted they participate in a 12-week "training" program. Upon completion of initial learning activities, students can apply for internships that enable them to produce news stories. These stories are featured on National Public Radio and other "high impact media outlets". Young people work collectively with adults to choose topics, gather background information on their stories, conduct interviews, write scripts, and produce the pieces that are showcased on public national radio shows (Soep, 2005) as well as online outlets including NPR, PRI, and The Huffington Post.

The fact that Youth Radio asserts that transcends limiting school-based experiences for low-income youth who are confined by public school tracking systems indicates a response to the outcome of historical, social, and politically informed segregation of schooling. The message

implies that this learning opportunity is a response to the inequality of schooling and the results of an imposed hierarchy that results for youth begin victim of hierarchical power impositions related to race, class, and gender. In the image of Freire's problem posing education perspective, the leaders of Youth Radio see themselves in a partnership with their students. The initial design, however, uses language such as "training" programs. This term in and of itself reflects the notion of "banking" (Freire, 1970) in that these programs are intended to impart skills. The design itself is intended to create a community of learners, and when developed with youth can be more critically engaging. Educators must "accept that their students possess knowledge and solutions they can share with the teacher" (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 24) and when they do, students take a role in defining their own learning. Students additionally become social agents that matter in their educational process, their classrooms, their communities and their worlds (Duncan-Andrade& Morrell, 2008). Youth Radio employs this approach with students to generate content and produce their news stories. The young people work collaboratively with their adult instructors to examine topics and issues that are relevant to the youth and their communities. One of the goals is to tell and in some cases re-tell news stories from the perspectives of youth. This has a social justice/activism component in that the youth are able to address and become conscious of stereotypes, misrepresentations, myths about the life experiences of marginalized youth and their communities. They have voice and are given a sense of agency through their work at youth radio. Topics covered by youth radio interns address the areas of relationships, education, arts and entertainment, environmental issues, family and health. Within a critical pedagogy paradigm, Youth Radio attempts to provide youth with educational experiences and a space to be successful while keeping their identity as "urban youth" intact.

Critical educators consistently speak of an approach to educating youth that addresses the reality of urban life while helping youth see that they can do something about their social conditions (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Youth radio is structured in way that urban youth can examine the realities of their day to day existence and create media products that have relevance to them, all while serving as positive role models to other young people in the community. The students involved in Youth Radio demonstrate possibilities and alternative ways of conceptualizing the sometimes complex realities of life in urban communities. The media products have the ability to shift the ways that issues are traditionally looked at in their neighborhoods by both immediate and distal audiences. These youth actively and subtly engage in activities that confront stereotypes of urban youth of color.

Example: Legalize Truancy

"Instead of taking kids off the streets, compulsory attendance laws have merely served to extend the streets into this nation's public schools" is a news story written by a girl named Emily. In this story, she discusses her view on why students should be able to miss school. Her point of view stems from a personal contextualized world. The Grady High School student expresses the rational behind why she believes that truancy should

be made legal. She further explains why students should only have to attend classes when they want to.

Transcript of her commentary:

> I believe that truancy should be made legal for high school students. Students should attend classes only when they want to, but after too many absences they should be kicked out. This would have enormous benefits to taxpayers as well as to those teachers and students dedicated to education.
>
> It is unfair to make the education of those students the total responsibility of the teacher and the priority over the education of worthier students. Leading that horse to water does not work.
>
> I don't think anyone benefits from requiring uncommitted students to attend each day and create problems. Instead of taking kids off the streets, compulsory attendance laws have merely served to extend the streets into this nation's public schools.
>
> If students were allowed to leave school they would learn much more about life, responsibility, and the vocational skills not taught in many high schools. The remaining students would be able to learn from teachers who would be able to teach, and the entire system could be retooled to focus on effective and meaningful education.
>
> College diplomas and career advancements are earned through hard work and personal responsibility. These values must be learned in this nation's high schools. So let's give truants the choice to do what they please, and we may all get what we want.

Encoding: Potential Contextualized Meaning

Emily tells her contextualized perspective on the issue of truancy. From a social context perspective, we assume that Emily is drawing on the lived experience in her community. In the medium of radio we can only interpret her intended through the words that she uses. Unlike digital storytelling, radio is not a multimodal text.

Emily begins her story with the economic and political issue of taxes. By bringing taxes into the conversation, it is clear that Emily is beginning to consider the implications of various structures influencing this topic. She extends her examination of these contexts by addressing the social implications of truancy as well. For example, she points to the implications that forcing students to come to school has not only on the teacher, but also on students who truly want to learn. She addresses the student-teacher relations while bringing to the forefront the educational rights of students. Perspectives on truancy normally address factors that influence its prevalence and

strategies to decrease its occurrence. However, this Youth Radio reporter provides a novel way of looking at the issue of truancy.

Beyond the issue of truancy this commentary questions the overall structure of schools. Her words shed light on a suggested solution that both allows truant students to stay out of school and evokes particular assumptions on learning. Specifically, her solution takes into consideration the current structure of schooling. By stating, "they would learn much more from life", she is perhaps asserting that the current system might in fact be contributing to why students do not come to school. Further, this statement suggests that there is equal value in learning outside the classroom walls. Confronting the educational paradigm she puts forth in this news story a suggested restructuring of the power dynamics to allow students to assume more agency in their schooling.

Emily's story emerges from her contextualized experience. It can be inferred that her story is a vehicle through which she examines current approaches to education and challenges this approach by calling for a more situationally responsive solution for urban students. She seems to be grappling with the ever-present stereotype of the urban student who does not care about his/ her learning. In this critical learning design, she radicalizes "aspects of bourgeois culture"(Giroux in Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 34). The Youth Radio reporter does this by arguing that there is need to reclaim the schools as a place to learn for students who are serious about their education. From the perspective of critical theory, this student asserts her voice on the issue. Youth Radio's use of this pedagogical perspective recognizes that students have a great deal to offer to their education. This radio story demonstrates how students not only have a role in the content and process of education in their one-on-one interactions with teachers and other students, but their voice should be included in the structure learning designs, because they ultimately and directly affect their lives. The encoded meaning resulting from this structure, seems to tell a story about personal responsibility, valuing education, and agency in ones education

Decoding: Oppositional Reading

We situate this alternative reading within the context of our current educational structure and dominant philosophies about schooling and legalizing truancy. In both pop culture medium and the academic realm, discourse on the education of urban youth has painted a picture of apathy, disconnect from education, and academic failure. In particular the academic performance for students of color has been examined and evaluated from a deficit perspective focusing largely on the students who are failing to make the academic mark.

Outsiders may read this commentary as rebellious. For one, Emily's suggestion that students should be afforded their own choice whether or not to come to school might be taken as an attempt to justify truancy. Thus, this youth commentary might also be perceived as a cavalier

approaches to a serious societal ill, which instead condones irresponsibility. For example, an outside reader might see that urban youth as incredulously suggesting autonomy in young people who are not yet ready to make decisions for themselves. While Emily might be attempting to alter belief systems about youth responsibility, her message could potentially result in an increased belief that control for these youth is more necessary.

Finally, the act of engaging in a critique of institutional learning structures as well as a critique of her peers might undermine the "dominant" perspective of organized learning. Historically, there is the tendency to see oppressed societies as dependent and Black youth as needing to be schooled, reformed, and disciplined (DeGennaro & Brown, 2009). The overarching traditional belief that public education in the US should control students (Tobin, 2005), especially in urban schools (Herr & Brown, 2011), could influence the reading. This reading might also be informed by the inherent educational typecast of urban students which characterizes them as low achievers, delinquent, truant, and unable to learn. As a result, Emily's idea of extending learning beyond the classroom walls may also lost.

Although Emily in a unique position to shake up the stereotypes and present a critical alternative to addressing urban truancy, it may be difficult for this message to be read. First, readers are not accustomed to seeing urban youth occupying platforms where they have authoritative voice. For those outside of the experiences of urban students like Emily, interpreting youth media productions in culturally relevant ways can be difficult. The socio-demographic locale of the speaker influences how the message is interpreted and received by audiences. Our perception of what is said is based on our personal interpretation of the speaker. Interpreting this narrative outside of a critical theory lens, it is a challenge to see that not all urban youth perceive education the same. The "outgroup homogeneity effect" proposes that people are more likely to recognize diversity in the attitudes, behaviors, values, etc. when evaluating people of their own group (dominant group) than when they are evaluating those in other groups (minority groups) (Simon & Brown, 1987). In this youth radio artifact, the reporter shows us that there are students who do not think about education in the ways that larger society typically depicts that they do. There is diversity among urban students that can easily be overlooked by outside interpreters because they rely on stereotypical ways to characterize groups like urban youth. Consistent with dominant view of keeping urban youth in control, allowing "truants to do what they want" as Emily's suggests can conjure up all kinds of images that include delinquent urban youth running wild in the streets creating somewhat of a "moral panic". In order to arrive at the encoded meaning one must acknowledge the writer as someone who has legitimate voice.

Discussion

Engaging youth in the creation of various forms of media expression is a unique way for them (re)image self and community. In the process of constructing narrative, youth participate

actively and overtly in activities that confront stereotypes of how urban youth of color are represented and then work to create counter stories. The progression is one that can possibly help to transform the ways in which they and the issues in their neighborhoods are traditionally seen. Through distributing their media productions, youth voice can potentially influence the ways in which a larger audience views and conceptualizes urban youth. However, the creation of new images alone will not necessarily result in fostering alternative readings of these groups. We have attempted to illustrate this fact by offering different contextual readings of the same select artifacts created by youth. We have also put forth the notion that historical representations have developed a collective consciousness, which mediates "dominant" interpretations of "other".

In spite of the pervasiveness of how media infiltrates our consciousness, images are only one part of this complex system that helps us to conceptualize self and other. Interpreted and internalized media productions are mediated through various social and political structures such as culture, family, education, and language. These contribute to an expectation of "acceptable" behaviors and of social thought. Images of "other" intersect with these forms of societal institutions, which are largely shaped by people in power. The people in power instill particular language and discourse that helps to inform perceptions. Ongoing cultural discourse reinforces or assists in the development of these views. Through discursive practices, meaning is created. In fact, the language (symbolic and actual) that has been used to describe the "truth" about marginalized groups often materialized into a perceived truth. "Truth" often becomes accepted as fact, and subsequently develops as ideology. The language used to describe the image of "other' is not neutral, rather it is associated with power. When those in power work to create the discourse around "other" then they create a "regime of truth" (Foucoult, 1980). While language is never inherently true or untrue, the descriptions assigned to underrepresented groups make it difficult to decide what is actually "true" (Foucoult, 1980). Images and "truths" are constantly forming and reforming, but in fact take effect when articulated in practice (Hall, date, p. 129).

Thus social practices also assist in the unconscious solidification of socially constructs as truth. Through social practices we embrace a normalized senses of not only the world, but also and ideology about self, identity, and our relations to others and to society (Althusser, 1971). "Ideology is not a static set of ideas through which we view the world, but a dynamic social practice, constantly in process, constantly reproducing itself..." (Fiske, 1987, p. 258). Yet practices with each other, not solely distant interpretations of them, are what are necessary for fostering an ability for simultaneity of difference to exist. For example, producers and creaters from different social contexts need to engage in dialogue around the meaning of their texts. As different schema and practices intersect, there is a greater potential to form and reform our thoughts and eventually our actions with others in the world (Sewell, 1992). The breakdowns of stereotypes come through raising consciousness of our own views of self and other. To reshape

the image then becomes grounded not only in new creations, but also in discursive and enacted practices across boundaries of participation to mediate interpretation.

What does this mean for youth media productions?

Our moderately polarized interpretations of youth media productions are intended to highlight the difference between youth meaning and "dominant" readings. We overemphasize the interpretations and situate them within cultural sociological theory in order to bring forth potential additions within these learning contexts. To inform critical pedagogical engagement, we suggest that youth media productions and readings might be best served when combined with a cross-cultural participation. These mediated cross-cultural engagements could contribute to fostering negotiated and collectively constructed conversations that facilitate new readings. Additionally, they can provide opportunities to see encoded and decoded meanings in a new light.

The increased availability of both Internet and social media changes create platforms for this negotiation. The potential arises for these social spaces to become public spheres (Habermas, 1962/1995) of cultural intersections where multiple perspectives, points of view, and conversations come together to transcend local, social, and cultural positions and subvert projected stereotypes. Specifically, Web 2.0 architectures allow for democratic discussions that can alter hegemonic power structures. In these spaces learning designs can be create to foster the co-construction of knowledge, and in this case, the co-construction of encoding and decoding. Evidence of youth participation in these spaces illustrates this possibility. For example, Byrnes describes that online community spaces become "vital public spaces for (re)thinking and (re)producing social knowledge" (p. 19). These sites can be "useful vehicles for strengthening their cultural identities, for teaching them how to navigate both public and private dimensions of their racial lives, and for providing them access to a more globalized yet unfixed conversation about their community histories" (Byrne, 2008, p. 33). This shift from highly central to more distributed forms of participation bring about a possible modification in how images of marginalized groups are socially constructed.

To take advantage of the platform's architecture, practices in these social spaces practice need to be organized in a way where critical consciousness is generated and driven from within and conversations and interactions much happen across boundaries. Critical discourse analysis assumes that discourse practices mediate the connection between texts and society or culture (Fairclough, 1995). Within these analysis, both the creator and the interpreter can employ a critical approach to encoding and decoding. Without direct experiences, we more often than not embrace, encode, and interpret socially constructed reality in a way that mirrors our own mental image.

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