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Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies 2013 13: 570 originally published online 16 October 2013

DOI: 10.1177/1532708613503784

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Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies
13(6) 570–574
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DOI: 10.1177/1532708613503784
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Cameron McCarthy¹

Abstract

Contemporary racial theorization in education still separates race from the dynamics of our late-modern society. This essay aims to redirect the topic of race and education to a place that is considered outside the field of education, to the margin where education now is drawn into the fast moving currents of change fueled by the amplification of meanings and images in electronic mediation in the digital economy, in the volatile world politics post 9/11, but most of all in the crescendo of movement, migration and the work of the imagination of the great masses of the people. In what follows, Cameron McCarthy shifts conceptual and practical focus on racial antagonism in education from the mainstream and multicultural emphasis on teaching and curriculum reform, to the coordination of racial identities, the organization of affect and the differential patterns of historical incorporation of different social groups into modern social institutions defined by the restlessness of late-modernity.

Keywords

Racial Identities, Information, North Atlantic Late-Modernity, Education Policy

In a brilliant detour from his central project at hand—an assessment of the significance of the life and work of the great German art collector, caricaturist and historian, Edward Fuchs—Walter Benjamin pointed to an inescapable contradiction that cuts through all modern forms of cultural assertion, affiliation, and intellectual paradigms. “There is no document of culture,” noted Benjamin (2008), “which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (p. 124). There is as he went on to argue no proper historical accounting of this kind of opposition. Each intellectual tradition struggles with this tension of bearing forth insight into the stratified world that it tries to apprehend and disclose and the weight of its own blind spots and narrowed parameters of vision. The stream of recuperative history of any intellectual tradition or movement—be it the Frankfurt School or Cultural Studies, Critical Curriculum Studies, or otherwise—when treated as a cultural artifact is not as the late Edward Said (1979) maintained, a palimpsest, but is instead a fractured parchment revealing tensions, contradictions, unmoored orientations, and lines of flight. This methodological stance is particularly useful when one considers any exemplar of the various traditions of revisionist intellectuals. It is from this fractured and fragmentary perspective that I take on what I see shaping up on the matter of ethnicity and education in the new age—the age of information, the age of globalization.

We are now entering a period in the nature of postindustrial societies like ours in which all knowledge, all information

processes—multiculturalism and all forms of subjugated knowledges included—are coming under the disciplinary grip of the neoliberalism and economism—barbarism with a resplendent face. This is a new economy of practices that is spun off from the universalization of the enterprise ethic that guides public and private institutions, government and multinational corporations, in our times. The whole set of processes of the organization of knowledge, curriculum making, and curriculum reform are assuming a new identity that is defined by the model of economism, privatization, and strategic planning thinking that guides the modern, weightless firm or corporation and is now being relentlessly applied to the university and the school. Welcome to the civic jungle as each department scrambles for itself and each professor in the language of T. S. Eliot turns the key on his own door! Education by this process has become what the Guyanese philosophical novelist Wilson Harris calls the site of “illiteracies of the imagination” (Harris, 1989, p. 15). This is to say, we are disengaging from relationality, community, sensibility, feeling, creativity, cultivation, and cosmopolitanism precisely at a time when these humanizing competencies are

¹Education Policy, Organization and Leadership, Champaign, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:

Cameron McCarthy, Education Policy, Organization and Leadership, 373 Education Building, 1310 S. 6th St., Champaign, IL 61820, USA.
Email: cmccart1@illinois.edu

most sorely needed. The formal space of schooling maybe, after Jürgen Habermas, now almost fully compromised and “refeudalized” (Habermas, 2001, p. 106).

I believe that the subject of diversity, the matter of curriculum reform to address difference and so forth, falls under this general tendency. That is to say that curriculum reform in the area of cultural diversity broadly defined within the mainstream discourses as “inclusion” is now saturated with the technical rational features of incremental adjustment, content addition, a model that radically insulates knowledges and disciplines from each other and isolates whole groups from the central organization and ethos of educational institutions.

I want therefore to shift concern from the multiculturalist complaint over current modes of teaching and curriculum, per se, to the broader issue of the cultural reproduction of difference and the coordination of racial identities, the organization of affect in the light of what I wish to call the struggle over the iconography of the terms of North Atlantic late-modernity (the three pillars of this liberal rational model are of course the caring state, the self-sufficient worker, and the engaged Tocquevillian citizen). I want to look at the problem of diversity and difference in our time as a problem of social integration of modern individuals and groups into an increasingly destabilizing bureaucratic order, the world of flexible capitalism in which responsibility and risk are individualized and pushed further down in a new model defined by “concentration without centralization”—rule at a distance (Sennett, 1998, p. 47). We cannot, as some are apt to do, slice off racialization from this dynamic policy environment of liquid modernity. This is the logic that is colonizing our educational institutions more deeply than ever before. All of this raises the stakes for the practices of cultural reproduction and their role in the new patterns of identity formation in which, after Benjamin, we can announce that the auratic status of race has come to an end. That is to say, that the notion of racial identity as residing in “origins,” “ancestry,” “linguistic,” or “cultural unity” has been shattered, overwhelmed by the immense processes of hybridity, disjuncture, and renarration taking place in what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls the new techno, media, and ideoscapes now disseminated in ever-widening areas and spheres of contemporary life. The logics of migration, the movement of cultural and economic capital, electronic mediation, and biometric and information technologies have separated culture from place. And, difference has become an abstract value that can be dirempted from specific groups and settings and combined and recombined in ways that allow, for example, clothing designer magnates like Tommy Hilfiger, to appropriate elements of hip hop culture, to recombine semiotically these elements into new forms of clothing fashion, and then sell these new designs back into the inner city itself. These stylized elements of black culture are further marketed, with overwhelming success, to an ecumenical community of ethnic cross-dressers.

I want to conceptualize racial identity, then, as a contextual performance “produced within specific historical and institutional sites, within specific discursive formations and practices, and by specific enunciative strategies” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Researchers must pay attention, among other things, to the ways in which minority urban cultural forms, linked especially to music, sports such as basketball and football, and the video games (cultural forms that are a deeply important allure to school youth), are the vital carriers of the new messages of neoliberal imperatives now operating in U.S. education and society and elaborated on an expanded global scale (King, 2005, 2006, 2012). In looking at the field of sport for guidance on the matter of racial identity, I am also pointing to expanded terms of reference for understanding educational dynamics, pointing beyond the walls of the institution of schooling itself to the wider culture and society where I believe the practices of the entertainment media, cultural practices of fashion and style, the prosumerist practices of the Internet and the general circulation of popular images serve to instruct and educate the young in patterns of identity formation and forms of affiliation, forms of inclusion and exclusion, and so forth.

As cultural studies and critical pedagogy theorists such as Michelle Wallace, Stuart Hall, Len Masterman and others have argued, the pedagogical centrality of the school, that is, what the late Neil Postman called the “conserving activity” of the establishment curriculum (Postman, 1979) is being displaced, usurped by online streaming, television, film, digital gaming, and the media culture at large.

In critical ways, as C. L. R. James maintains in *American Civilization*, one can get a better insight into the tensions and contradictions of contemporary society by observing and interpreting popular culture than by analyzing canonical educational texts—the collection code of schooling. James made this argument in a radical way, in his essay, “The Popular Arts and Modern Society”:

It is in the serious study of, above all, Charles Chaplin, Dick Tracy, Gasoline Alley, James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Rita Hayworth, Humphrey Bogart, genuinely popular novels like those of Frank Yerby (*Foxes of Harrow*, *The Golden Hawk*, *The Vixen*, *Pride's Castle*) . . . that you find the clearest ideological expression of the sentiments and deepest feelings of the American people and a great window into the future of America and the modern world. This is not to be found in the works of T.S. Eliot, of Hemingway, of Joyce, of famous directors like Ford and Rene Clair (James, 1993, p. 119).

What James was pointing toward through this revisionary strategy was the fact that what we call popular culture was our modern art; a modern art deeply informed by and informative of the crises and tensions of cultural reproduction in our time. One of the principal, perhaps “the” principal crisis, of social integration in modern life is the crisis of the management of the enormous plurality or diversity that is pouring into all sinews of late-modern society—into all

social institutions as a consequence of globalization. This is a crisis that cannot be summarized along one axis alone, such as race, or class or gender or sexuality, as we have done in the old, worn-out paradigms that we have applied to education—be it the Marxism of Samuel Bowles and Gintis or the structural functionalism that Talcott Parsons sparked. It requires us to think these dynamics in relation to each other or we are left with models that undermine theodicy and ghettoize subaltern or minoritarian knowledges. I believe that the great challenge of managing heterogeneity in educational institutions in this new era is articulated to the intense competition for scarce material and symbolic resources that define our institutions in the light of a paradoxical government retreat from investment in the welfare of the people and its willingness to initiate, through policy agendas such as Renaissance 2010 in Chicago or the post-Katrina handing over of the Orleans Parish Schools to the charter system in New Orleans—a transfer of public schooling resources to private enterprise, whether it is race to the top or to the bottom.

This crisis over heterogeneity must be seen within the historical context of the contradictions of modern society and the rapid changes taking place in the material reality and fortunes of the people, their environments, the institutional apparatuses that govern and affect their daily lives, their relations with each other, and their sense of location in the present and in the future. Rapid changes of this kind have meant rapid movement and collision of peoples. And above all, as Arjun Appadurai (1996) has argued, there has been a diremption of the central site of the work of the imagination from the ecclesiastic arena of high art and aesthetics to the new political theater of the banality of everyday practices and the wish fulfillment of the great masses of the people. What Appadurai and others are talking about is the need for schooling to come to terms with the reorganization of the modern division of labor requiring the production of flexible, cosmopolitan human subjects.

The Establishment Education Response

At the heart of what I am arguing here then is the dominant responses to this proliferation of difference—this multiplicity, which exceeds class, exceeds race, exceeds gender, exceeds sexuality, exceeds nation, and so on but has do with all of these dynamics operating in tandem. This dominant response has been one of attempting to draw down a bright line of distinction between the school culture, school curriculum content, and the teeming world of popular culture outside—lines of distinction between the canon and the vernacular, between the first world and the third, between racial majorities and minorities, between Anglos and non-Anglos, between males and females, and between heterosexuality and homosexual variance. In all this, we are attempting to produce in schools a well-trained, technically competent and

compliant citizen who is likely to use resentment as the strategy of survival or negotiation of the disjunctures and radical pluralities that are being opened up in the world in which he or she lives. We are familiar with this resentment as it is articulated in popular culture and the material policy of “English Only” legislation in many states around the country, the prohibition of ethnic studies in Arizona, in the hostility toward immigration and immigrant rights, in the debate over origins and popular memory, gentrification, and respatialization, which is played out on our school boards as it is in the social world outside the school. The maintenance of a core Westernness at the heart of the curriculum while adding slices of the culture of minority groups as a supplement is a resentment model institutionalized. We are profoundly aware for instance of the widespread panic and hostility toward the discussion of sexuality in schooling.

What this all suggests is that we need a new methodology for addressing the issue of difference and diversity, that will shift us away from the content addition model that now informs the schools’ disposition toward multiculturalism. Given the finite nature of school and university resources, no learning institution can address adequately all the demands for cultural content specificity that can be raised by school agents from the plurality of minoritarian backgrounds that are now present on all our campuses. The content addition model is clearly untenable.

What I want to suggest in place of current approaches is that we be more systematically thoughtful about the type of human subjects, the type of modern citizens that we want to inhabit the late-modern world in which we live—a world changed irrevocably since 9/11, a world transforming with globalization, and the new convergence systems of telecommunications, networks, laptops and handheld machines, and the like. We will need to rethink our separation of the world of schooling from the teeming diversity of popular cultural realities outside.

As several recent critical commentaries and ethnographies have demonstrated, we should not understand popular culture and young people’s identities in predictable ways (Dimitriadis, 2012; Dolby, 2012). More and more, as this work makes clear, we must ask ourselves what kinds of lived and commodified curricula—broadly defined—young people draw on to understand, explain, and render intelligible the world around them.

This is a messy terrain, one that exceeds a priori notions about identity often privileged by educators. As I have tried to make clear elsewhere, the multiple uses to which popular culture is put challenge and belie easy notions of “cultural identification” (the cultural heterogeneity that the school now denies). Young people in the United States and around the world are elaborating complex kinds of social and cultural identifications through popular music, digital gaming, texting, Facebook, and other social networks in ways that challenge predictive notions of affiliation, association, and belonging.

Ultimately, the enormous social, cultural, and material dislocations of the last decade have destabilized any certainty around the traditional twin roles of schools—preparing young people for work and for citizenship. This new landscape, I argue, demands a different set of understandings as to what role the school is playing in the new century. How we contextualize and understand what we envision as education and how we think about students, particularly, minority students, has implications for who gets what type of educational experience and who gets what type of access to schooling. This seems to me to be at the heart of any discussion of youth culture today—the idea that we no longer can claim fullness of knowledge over young people's lives, and that we need to renegotiate, in a very fundamental way, what counts as "meaningful" education for our youth.

Correlatively, as educators, we struggle as Richard Sennett (2008) argues with the problem of the loss of control over craft as systems imperatives degrade our intellectual autonomy. William Whyte (1956/2002) in the *Organization Man*, C. Wright Mills (1951/2002) in *White Collar Society*, and most recently, Melissa Gregg (2011) in a marvelous book called *Work's Intimacy* have told us that we as intellectual laborers are especially susceptible to overidentification with work. All of the convergence affordances of the Castellian Information Order now abet a process of the intensification of labor and hyperexploitation of our labor power. We like Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, now hear the ticking, ticking, ticking of the clock. The metronome of neoliberal time extends obligation from the classroom to the most intimate private spaces as we labor in masks of leisure. I ask ultimately, then, for sober reflection on all of these things, as we think about difference and identity in a time of what Zygmunt Bauman (1997) calls the "second secular reformation"¹ (p. 157) and its subversion of the North Atlantic model of modernity. We are living in a time when those things that really matter to us as critical and socially sentient beings—forms of affiliation, forms of feeling and forms of community—are being ripped up by neoliberal imperatives and instrumentalist systems commitments in education institutions. It is time we answer with a sturdy reply.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. This idea of a "second secular reformation" as prosecuted by the American Right across a wide swath of society is further developed by Paul Kraugman: Ever since the election of Ronald Reagan, right-wing radicals have insisted that they

started a revolution in America. They are half right. If by a revolution, we mean a change in politics, economics, and society that is so large as to transform the character of the nation, then there is indeed a revolution in progress. The radical right did not make this revolution, although it has done its best to help it along. If anything, we might say the revolution created the new right. But whatever the cause, it has become urgent that we appreciate the depth and significance of this new American revolution and try to stop it before it becomes irreversible. (Kraugman quoted in Grossberg, 2005, p. 358)

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Author Biography

Cameron McCarthy is Communication Scholar and University Scholar in the Department of Educational Policy, Organization

and Leadership and in the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois. He is the author or co-author of several books including: *Reading and Teaching the Postcolonial* (Columbia University, 2001), *Foucault, Cultural Studies and Governmentality* (SUNY Press, 2003), *Globalizing Cultural Studies* (Peter Lang, 2007), and *Transnational Perspectives on Culture, Policy, and Education*. (Peter Lang, 2008), *New Times: Making Sense of Critical/Cultural Theory in a Digital Age* (Peter Lang, 2011), *Mobilized Identities, Mobilized Subjects: Knowledge and Cultural Transformations in the New Millennium* (Common Ground Publishers forthcoming)