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# Learning and Living Difference That Makes A Difference: Postmodern Theory & Multicultural Education

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# LEARNING & LIVING DIFFERENCE MAKES A DIFFERENCE THAT

BY

WALTER R. JACOBS

RECENTLY A COLLEAGUE and I discussed the apparently thorough-going “politically correct” racial discourse in her predominantly White lower-level university class. Her “Blues in Shifting Cultural Contexts” students, it seems, passionately argue that early 20th century American blues (performed almost exclusively by African-Americans) is the most “authentic” period, but are equally adamant that “the Blues” is not an African-American art form, that anyone can perform it, as all Americans have equal rights and a common non-discriminatory cultural core. The students, further, wondered why their White instructor thought it was so important to talk about the racial determinants of music production and reception, arguing that they should be allowed to just enjoy “music for everyone” produced in a multicultural society.

Multiculturalism—guidelines for life in a diverse pluralist democratic society—it seems, is the ability to freely appreciate and consume the cultures of Others, in the process erasing any trace of social stratification and inequality that is lived reality of those Others.

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Christopher Newfield and Avery F. Gordon (1996) argue that this is an example of multiculturalism as “assimilationist pluralism,” where multiple groups may have unique sub-cultures but are (and should be) unified by common core principles to which all should aspire. Difference is acknowledged, but only on a superficial, decorative level. In the case of my colleague, then, she should stress that music is the process of influences on a soon-to-be level playing field, that all should be allowed to access the cultures of Others regardless of background or experiences in the attempt to form a common American culture.

Newfield and Gordon argue that as America becomes an even more multicultural society difference must be theorized more completely to examine destructive as well as productive manifestations. Multiculturalism must be recast from a fusion of pluralism and assimilationism to one of pluralism and cultural nationalism (moving toward one people), where groups function significantly as both separate entities and as “Americans” in ever-shifting configurations. In this operationalization, multiculturalism

takes a *multicentered* national cultural as encompassing the intersectionality of race with the range of

the identities and forces in *addition* to race that comprise social life. It supports *race consciousness* along with *anti-essentialist* notions of identity and social structure, and refines our understanding of the way racial and other dimensions of culture influence even apparently neutral institutions. And it puts *political equity* at the center of any discussion of cultural interaction. (Newfield & Gordon 1996:107)

Such a project is a multiculturalism that not only informs Americans about inequalities in American society, but seeks to transform it. Multiculturalism that transforms as well as informs is the needed next stage in multiculturalism’s long history (Davis 1996). How, though, can we actualize this theoretical dictum?

In this article I offer a strategy, arguing that applying postmodern theory to Newfield and Gordon’s (and others in Gordon & Newfield 1996) transformative understanding of multiculturalism provides us with a “multiculturalism [that] would simply make real cultural pluralism do what it says it means. That in itself would make quite a difference” (Newfield & Gordon 1996: 109).

I will juxtapose each point in Newfield and Gordon’s transformative multicult-



POSTMODERN

THEORY

MULTICULTURAL

EDUCATION

turalism project—multicentered culture, anti-essentialist race consciousness, and political equity—with aspects of a postmodern theorization of American society as a consumer-driven economy saturated with multiple mediated fragmented, unstable, constantly-evolving discourses and cultural interaction (Bertens 1995; Harvey 1989; Kellner 1995; Lury 1996; Seidman 1998).

I will empirically illustrate this theoretical construct with data from my research project of college classrooms as “subaltern counterpublics,” which are spaces where students and instructor(s) “invent and explore counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1992: 123). Specifically, I will use an analysis of the TV show *The X-Files* to show how a discussion of “Whiteness” generates larger discussion of transformative multiculturalism in which difference really does make a difference. In order to live such a multiculturalism, we must adopt a perspective in which it is a means, not an ends, where we continually learn and re-learn what life in a diverse society is all about, and how it matters.

### MULTICENTERED CULTURE

#### STRANGE TEXTS

#### AND THE MATRIX OF DOMINATION

It is possible for students simultaneously to be very canny about the social forces that define their identity and still take their own subject position as the real itself, against which radical differences are dismissed as bizarre. Even though the day-to-day experiences of contemporary students includes complex negotiations with difference across lines of gender, race, class, religion, etc., these differences are often softened by an offhand, hip, MTVeejay style that can be adopted by almost anyone young. Encounters with truly strange texts and experiences are rare. (McLaughlin 1996: 157)

Although “postmodern theory” means different things in different contexts—and even different things in the same context! (see Bertens 1995 for comprehensive survey)—the ubiquity and power of media is a central component in many accounts of life in America as either governed by postmodern conditions, or rapidly falling into “the postmodern” (e.g., Balsamo 1997; Fiske 1994; Kellner 1995; Grossberg 1997a, 1997b; McRobbie 1994). These theorists

argue that subjects in late modern and/or post-modern societies are constantly bombarded with cultural representations of themselves and Others, and that these images, sounds, and words occlude undergirding social and material conditions of lived realities. In other words, difference is everywhere, but exists mainly to produce and reproduce the desire to consume, which may be the ultimate expression of American-ness. McLaughlin argues that college students are especially adept at reading and using the codes of a multiculturalism as such an assimilationist pluralism, where consumption stands as the great unifier.

How can we actualize a transformative multiculturalism in which students rethink America as more than a giant supermarket, examining the disparities in group access to its productive processes as well as rear-end commodities? How can teachers encourage “border crossings” (Giroux 1992; see also Anzaldúa 1987) between academic and everyday worlds, and across and among disparate cultures to encourage more democratic and humane understandings and interaction? How can teachers make sure that multiculturalism goes beyond a surface political correctness, and is part of a multiculturalism that “doesn’t see diversity itself as a goal but



rather argues that diversity must be affirmed within a politics of cultural criticism and a commitment to social justice" (McLaren 1995: 126; see also McLaren & Farahmandpur 2001)?

A "social postmodernism" (Nicholson & Seidman 1995) may address these questions, and offer us (at least) two guidelines. It is anchored in the cultures and politics of "the new social movements" (see also Omi 1996; Omi & Winant 1994), and attempts to transform America into a more just and democratic space. First, social postmodernism encourages us to explore a "radical democratic" approach to citizenship in late Capitalist society: articulations about "the common good" are viewed as "a vanishing point," something to which we must constantly refer when we are acting as citizens, but can never be reached" (Mouffe 1995: 326; see also Fraser 1995).

A critical component of this is learning and living the intricate and ubiquitous complexities introduced by our existence in expanding media (Kellner 1995) and consumer (Jameson 1983; Lury 1996) cultures. We should make our social worlds problematic, creating "problems [that] would be significant to the extent that they raised questions for individuals and groups in our society in ways that would not simply underwrite a purely presentist orientation or a projective inclination to rewrite the past in order to find mouthpieces or vehicles for currently affirmed values" (LaCapra 1997:62). In the college classroom, we teach our students—and remind ourselves—that particular articulations of perspectives and experiences have implications that go beyond our immediate interests, and that the "common good" is always under negotiation, and affects different groups in divergent ways.

Second, we must enter the "matrix of domination" (Collins 1991). In the new social movements social minorities form counter-hegemonic understandings of the common good. While it is necessary for marginalized peoples to form oppositional understandings, these efforts can lead to serious problems in both inter- and intra-group interaction. Internally, marginalized groups can generate essentialist discourse, policing boundaries in destructive battles with and/or to the exclusion of those who aren't "Black enough," or "Queer enough," or "real feminists," etc. Externally, such police action may lead to narrow identification with one axis of oppression, and squabbles over "whose oppression is greatest," and/or what combination of oppressions is more destructive. This is "identity politics" at its worst, and needs to be overcome (Haraway 1991; Nicholson & Seidman

1995). Collins offers us this invaluable lesson: no one is purely an "oppressor" or purely "privileged." We never reach a state in which we are not empowered vis-a-vis some Other group; we always exist in a cauldron in which sometimes we are oppressed and sometimes we are oppressors. We—like any- and every-one else—must maintain eternal vigilance, especially since media still portray some groups unequally in order to legitimate the status quo (Valdivia 1995; Wilson & Gutierrez 1995).

In essence, college instructors can teach a transformative multiculturalism by the critical use of its most common manifestation: popular media culture. Teachers can expose students to media products that have explicit social commentary, such as the HBO film *Space Traders* (Hudlin & Hudlin 1994), in which the citizens of the United States vote to trade all African-Americans in exchange for new technologies from extra-terrestrial aliens. When watching and discussing "strange texts" like these (those that are unusual, and challenge comfortable taken-for-granted assumptions), students start to take a much closer look at how priorities are set and articulated by the State, and to question their places within American and world societies and histories (Brooks & Jacobs 1996; Jacobs & Brooks 1999). Michel de Certeau (1997/1974:31) argues that "spectators are not the dupes of the media theater, but they refuse to say so." We must encourage students to say so.

#### **ANTI-ESSENTIALIST RACE CONSCIOUSNESS THE TEACHER AS TEXT**

I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility. (hooks 1990:153)

When students' taken-for-granted understandings are displaced—when we make them say that they are not dupes—and when they are confronted with multiple complexities about societal haves and have-nots, students often become angry, blaming the teacher for making them "think" (hooks 1994; McLaughlin 1996). Some wrestle with the challenge constructively, but some yearn for simpler days in which they were comfortably oblivious to the operation of power at the level of the everyday, and resist complex analysis. According to Takata (1997:200), "Learning is messy.... There are often frustrating detours, temporary setbacks, and latent learning," but

teachers must tackle such resistance if we are to create anti-essentialist discourse (the second component of Newfield and Gordon's (1996) transformative multiculturalism) and an empowering sense of marginality, as voiced above by bell hooks. In order to help instill a sense of hope in students and encourage them to tackle tough questions, teachers must "emphasize the partiality of any approach to challenging oppression and the need to constantly rework these approaches" (Kumashiro 2001: 4), and demonstrate that we are as deeply immersed in the complex muck as are the students, yet somehow manage to survive and, indeed, thrive in chaotic and disorienting spaces. In other words, the teachers must also become texts: by presenting ourselves as real live individuals with a rich set of fears, vulnerabilities, hopes, dreams, and aspirations, we can help students examine their own complex realities and create powerful and optimistic identities and a sense of critical agency (Jacobs 1998).

For instance, I tell each of my classes the story of how I—a 6'5" male middle-class heterosexual African-American—was stopped by a police officer while riding my bicycle at midnight, because I "fit the description" of a known perpetrator (a Black man who rides a bicycle at night!). I disclose that during the stop I was initially excited to get lived experience of possible discrimination that I could share with the class, but then became concerned that I may be taken to the station on the officer's whim. We discussed how as a privileged academic I could enjoy parts of the experience, but as an African-American, I may be concerned about racist treatment. I usually then add other social locations to the discussion, analyzing (among other things) gendered harassment to which African-American men would be immune (e.g., I wouldn't think twice about wandering around a city street at midnight). Note that "not just any partial perspective will do; we must be hostile to easy relativisms and holisms built out of summing and subsuming parts" (Haraway 1991: 192). The standpoints of the subjugated are not "innocent," and must be examined, decoded, and interpreted, just like the standpoints of the privileged. This is Collins' (1991) matrix of domination: we must illustrate the operation of both privileged and dominated identities and resulting experiences, and be willing to explore their complex intersections instead of selecting the most convenient (justification of a simplistic right/wrong) understanding.

In multiculturalism as assimilationist pluralism we focus on race as an essence (identities are fixed and powerful), or as an illusion (identities are fluid and meaning-



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less). A transformative multiculturalism views it as a both/and dynamic (Omi & Winant 1994): "race" can be given many meanings, but these meanings are, indeed, very powerful, especially when linked to other discourses, such as "gender" and "class." To create anti-essentialist discourse, teachers must stress that articulations of how and why we are socially advantaged in some ways and socially disadvantaged in others may vary by context, both temporally and spatially. We must strive to "illuminat[e] the various ways in which representations are constructed as a means of comprehending the past through the present in order to legitimate and secure a particular view of the future" (Giroux 1994: 87).

I will provide a complete example of just how this process works in the discussion of students' reception of "The Post-Modern Prometheus" episode of *The X-Files*, below. Before closing this section, let me note that as cultural workers, college teachers can play a task in actualizing a more transformative multiculturalism outside of the classroom as well. Wahneema Lubiano (1996) reminds us that the State depends on knowledge produced by universities to discipline marginalized groups (in Foucault's (1978, 1980) sense of power/knowledge in the production of docile bodies). She argues that

radical multiculturalism offers the possibility of countering the state's use of the intellectual and cultural productions of and about marginalized groups and thus offers institutionally transformative possibilities for middle-class people of color affiliated with universities who, as I've suggested, are also themselves bound up with this state-sponsored knowledge. (p. 71)

Middle-class academics of color—as well as other academics—need to produce more scholarship that disrupts a multiculturalism of assimilationist pluralism and disseminate visions of a transformative multiculturalism in popular as well as academic circles (McLaren & Farahmandpur 2001). Lubiano (1996:75) concludes that "the water is being poisoned right here at the epistemological well. It is important to make a stand right here at that well [the university as political economic system]." Indeed, the project of transformative multiculturalism still needs to be engaged on many fronts.

## POLITICAL EQUITY

### CLASSROOMS AS SUBALTERN COUNTERPUBLICS

Historically, therefore, members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I have called these "subaltern counterpublics" in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses. Subaltern counterpublics permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. (Fraser 1995: 291)

There is much current scholarship on the natures, histories, and social implications of the theory and practice of the "public sphere," the body of "private persons" assembled to debate matters of "public interest" in efforts to shape the "public good" (e.g., Calhoun 1992;

A. Kumar 1997; Robbins 1993; Weintraub & K. Kumar 1997). Among other things, debate ranges around whether there was and should be one public sphere, or multiple spheres. Multiculturalism as assimilationist pluralism depends on the hegemony of one overarching public sphere, in which (1) participants attempt to bracket status differentials and interact as if they were social equals; (2) fragmentation into multiple public spheres is viewed as a move toward less democracy; (3) the appearance of private interests and issues is undesirable; and (4) there is a sharp division between civil society and the State (Fraser 1992:117-118). Fraser (1992:122) argues that this arrangement is counterproductive to a transformative multiculturalism, as "in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing public better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public." She offers the notion of "subaltern counterpublic" as essential to the creation of strong multicultural identities and practices.

We can very quickly discern the specific problems with the attempt to retain one public sphere as ideal. First, it is not possible to truly bracket social status designations and act as neutral, objective, and disembodied agents; even in cyberspace, discourse bears the trace of social location and experience, despite attempts to hide them (Miller 1995). Second, a focus on one public deflects scrutiny of the interactions of margins and centers, an awareness that centers shift and are won and lost through the struggles of formations of individuals, that "a center has no meaning apart from its dialogue with cast out and marginalized elements of a culture.... [M]ulticulturalism has demonstrated that there are always more stories than the dominant culture chooses to tell" (Nelson 1997:127). Third, feminist theory and practice has a long and powerful history of demonstrating that the private is intricately bound up in the public (Bartky 1990; Collins 1991; Faludi 1991; hooks 1990). Fourth, demonstrating critical links between civil society and the State was a central project of the Civil Rights movements and is continued in the work of the new social movements (Nicholson & Seidman 1995, Omi & Winant 1994).

Subaltern counterpublics are places where members of multiple groups do not attempt to find easy glosses of the complexities of multicultural life. They struggle with the disparate traditions and rules of the groups to which participants belong. To actualize a transformative multiculturalism in the university setting we must create classrooms as subaltern counterpublics, encouraging students to speak from their



experiences, but not necessarily for their groups. We encourage students to critically explore the perspectives of others:

It is important to document the harm done by uncomprehending appropriations of cultural creations, to face squarely the consequences of mistakes in the reception, representation, and reproduction of cultural images, sounds, and ideas. But the biggest mistake of all would be to underestimate how creatively people struggle, how hard they work, and how much they find out about things that people in power never intend for them to know. (Lipsitz 1996: 412)

In a classroom as subaltern counter-public, we simultaneously learn and live "the stories and tell the tales that will connect seemingly isolated moments of discourse—histories and effects—into a narrative that helps us make sense of transformation as they emerge" (Balsamo 1997: 161). Teachers and students both practice "teaching to transgress" (hooks 1994), practicing a multiculturalism that recognizes an America of multicentered culture, attempts to create anti-essentialist race consciousness, and places discussions of political equity at the center of debate. I now turn to an extended illustration of how such a project may be implemented.

### **DEBATING WHITENESS THROUGH RECEPTION OF THE X-FILES**

During the 1997-1998 academic year I conducted an ethnography of the introductory-level "media culture" sociology classes I taught at Indiana University-Bloomington. This ethnography attempts to (1) understand how students use the media and its products to form understandings about themselves and Others; and (2) build on the idea of a college classroom as a place of learning, to investigate strategies for developing critical thinking and action in order to help students actively use mediated understandings of social interaction in the classroom as well as other spaces. It is based on (1) observational data (collected by five undergraduate assistants and me); (2) analysis of assignments which were designed to encourage critical engagement with media and mediated information; and (3) analysis of meta-discursive data: comments on the course and classroom dynamics, such as in course evaluations, and the course electronic conferencing system (EC), where students post messages on a World Wide Web site to be read by classmates. I used multiple media texts to illustrate

theoretical concepts, and to stimulate personal reflection and sociological analysis.

During the spring semester the class encountered an episode of the Fox TV network's show *The X-Files*. *The X-Files* is about the adventures of two FBI agents—Fox Mulder and Dana Scully—who battle the paranormal, extraterrestrial aliens, and vast government conspiracies. On Monday, February 16, 1998 I showed the class the 60-minute episode "Post-Modern Prometheus" (Carter 1997), fast-forwarding through commercials. We had a brief discussion of the show afterwards, and more extensive analysis during the next class period, Wednesday the 18th.

The episode originally aired on November 30, 1997, so it was still in the memories of a few of the students. The undergraduate assistant for the semester, Jennifer Richie, and I enjoyed it as well, as Jennifer noted that "Oh, how much I do love seeing this episode again! It is my favorite!" First-time viewers also enjoyed it, even though it could (and did) disturb some, due to elements that hit very close to (a literal) home. The following summary of the episode is taken from the official *X-Files* web site (<http://www.thexfiles.com/>), and has the header "Townpeople in rural Indiana believe a Frankenstein-like creature roams the countryside."

In a rural Indiana neighborhood, Shaineh Berkowitz watches a daytime talk show on television. So entranced is she by the interview, that she fails to notice someone covering the home with termite tenting. A dark figure enters the kitchen and drops a white cake into a skillet, triggering a chemical reaction that produces a gaseous white cloud. Sensing a presence in the house, Shaineh investigates. Suddenly, a horribly disfigured, Frankenstein-like face emerges from the misty darkness. Shaineh gasps in horror.

Later, as the agents drive through the Indiana farmland, Scully reads aloud a letter addressed to Mulder. In it, Shaineh describes how, 18-years earlier, a presence entered her smoke-filled bedroom as, strangely, the voice of singer Cher filled the air. Three days later she woke up pregnant with her son, Izzy. Shaineh explains that she saw Mulder on *The Jerry Springer Show*, and hopes he will investigate her case. The agents do, indeed, drive to Shaineh's home. There they discover a comic book bearing the exact likeness of the creature Shaineh claims attacked her. Shaineh explains the monster is called The Great Mutato,

a creation of Izzy's fertile imagination. Izzy claims he, and many others in the community, have seen the creature—who apparently has a penchant for peanut butter sandwiches. Izzy and his friends lead the detectives to a wooded area, and using sandwiches for bait, lure the creature from its hiding place. The group gives chase, but the creature disappears into the darkness. Mulder then encounters an Old Man, who claims the real monster is his own son, renowned scientist Dr. Francis Pollidori. The agents visit Pollidori, who describes his experiments in genetic manipulation. He displays a photo of a fruit fly head...with legs growing out of its mouth. Later, Pollidori bids good-bye his wife, Elizabeth, as he embarks on a trip out of town. Moments later, termite tenting falls past Elizabeth's window.

When the agents stop by a country diner in downtown Bloomington, they are feted with heaping plates of food. It turns out that the entire town believes Jerry Springer will do a story on the creature...the result of a newspaper article in which Mulder is quoted as verifying the monster's existence. The agents realize Izzy secretly tape recorded their conversations.

As the agents drive along a country road, Mulder spots Pollidori's tented house. The pair race inside, where they discover Elizabeth's unconscious body. Shortly thereafter, the agents also lose consciousness. The Old Man, Professor Pollidori's father, steps from the smoke, a gas mask covering his face. When the agents regain consciousness, Elizabeth describes her attacker as a hideously deformed man with two mouths.

The Old Man brings the Creature a peanut butter sandwich as it watches the movie *Mask*, starring Cher, on television. Pollidori confronts his father, and in a rage, strangles him. A mob of townspeople forms around the local post office as a mail clerk proclaims he's found the monster. He pulls someone wearing a rubber Mutato mask from the back room, then yanks off the mask, exposing Izzy. The postal worker then displays a box he intercepted, which is filled with identical masks.

Records indicate that the residue from the white cakes is a substance used to anesthetize herds of animals. Its use is monitored by the FDA, leading the agents back to the Old Man's farm. When the agents arrive at the scene, a diligent newspaper girl, who had been recording



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notes about the case, describes how she witnessed the creature burying the Old Man. Shortly thereafter, an angry mob makes its way towards the farm. The agents realize Pollidori killed his father. They befriend the frightened Mutato and attempt to escape, but they are spotted by the mob and retreat into a cellar. Pollidori and the townspeople burst into the basement. There, Pollidori claims the Creature was brought to life by his father. The Creature claims he never harmed another soul. He explains how, 25 years earlier, the Old Man realized his son was conducting secret experiments—of which he (Mutato) was an unfortunate product. The Old Man grew to love the Creature, and then set out to create it a mate. As the Creature continues his tale, the agents, putting together two and two, look around the cellar at the townspeople...one of whom resembles a horse, another a Billy goat and so on. The mob concludes Mutato is not a monster after all. A police cruiser transports Pollidori from the scene. The agents take the Creature into custody, but instead of transporting him to jail, they head for a Memphis nightclub, where Cher sings to Mutato, her biggest fan.

Although this web site description identifies the location of the episode as being in Bloomington, Indiana, that is not at all clear in the episode itself. In fact, one must deduce the location from three clues, each only briefly shown in passing: (1) license plates on cars are Indiana plates, (2) the agents show Pollidori a "University of Indiana Press" news release, and (3) Mulder reads a "Bloomington World" newspaper in the coffee shop. On Wednesday I asked the class if anyone thought about where the episode may be set, and one student identified Bloomington, and cited clues (2) and (3). This set off a spirited debate about stereotypes in class, as well as in the EC:

"I think that the show was taking a shot at Indiana as a whole. It was inferring that rural people (or white trash) think shows like *Jerry Springer* are the watchdogs of America. That talk shows are responsible news reporting agencies. This of course makes a statement about the intelligence of said rurals. It also offered some insight into the compassion country folk are capable of. Although that is definitely a secondary point of the authors!"

"The *X-Files* episode viewed in class this week is one that stuck with me for quite a while after the first time that it aired. I do agree with many of the other comments made that it portrays small towns in a very negative way, but there are some people that exist just as shown on this episode. I believe that they were trying to show the extremes/rednecks to make people more aware that this mentality is still alive. This episode was extremely moving, and it showed that so-called "freaks" have hearts, emotions, and should be loved not feared, hated, or treated like nothing."

"After sitting and listening to our discussion in class about white trash individuals I felt other races were left out of this stereotyping. I happen to come across an episode of the *Simpsons* and Milhouse said to Bart, 'Well, you're nothing but yellow trash!' That made me question why white trash is confined to whites only. Is there such a thing as Black trash or Asian Trash? In reality there is, we just don't label it. Since many portrayals of minorities in the media are not the most positive of sorts networks may deem it necessary to poke the fun stick at someone else—the shrinking majority."

"I am a big fan of *The X-Files* because I think it is a smart show that has very interesting stories and just weird stuff

that's pretty cool, it gives things a new perspective. I thought the modern day Prometheus episode was cool, and a good commentary on society. When large groups of people get together, they seem to exaggerate things and jump to conclusions, not to mention following a leader who's intentions are a little questionable and could be self-serving... just take a look at Hitler. True the episode was supposed to take place in Bloomington, and the town was small minded, but that was the beauty of it. It was supposed to be *Pulp Fiction*, and I'm not talking about the Quentin Tarantino movie either. I mean, in the one of the final scenes when they have the Great Mutato cornered and it flashes from the townspeople to the barnyard animals they resemble, that is saying that we all really live in a great big barnyard and *we are the animals*. Nature plays a part in the world of humankind and society, with everyone playing their little role in the environment so it can come together and be a functional whole. When you mess with nature and something foreign is introduced into your environment, something you can't understand, you naturally are scared of it and want to remove or destroy it. It was also supposed to have a comical twist, with quick wit but a plot that still makes you think. I think that's what we need more of, shows that actually make you think instead of turning your brain into a virtual jello mold because you stare at a television screen for countless hours a day and absorb what amounts in reality to, well, crap."

In these and other EC messages the students explored "Whiteness," the racial identities and practices of Whites in America. Specifically, we explored the "second wave" of Whiteness. The "first wave" focused on making Whiteness visible, marking it as a social construction that is impermanent and situated; these studies demonstrated that Whiteness matters, that Whites have privileges due solely to their racial categorization (e.g., see Frankenberg 1993; Morrison 1992). "Second wave" writings (see Jacobs 1997) move on to examine how Whiteness operates in conjunction with other social categories, issues, and powers: what are the ways it matters, and what are the consequences of particular articulations? In the introduction to *Whiteness*, Mike Hill (1997:12) adds that the second wave must not be surfed in such a way that re-centers Whiteness in "an attempt to 'lactify' ethnic differences and stay relevant in these lean, mean times of liquid cultural capital." Whiteness must be critically interro-



gated in order to create strategies for reducing its power to terrorize its Others (and Whites too, according to some), in multiple contexts (Frankenberg 1997; Hill 1997; Wray & Newitz 1997).

In class I explicitly called Whiteness to the floor, by asking "What does this episode say about White people?" After a minute of blank stares, one of the students from a rural background raised his hand and made points that he expanded in the EC, the first of the above citations. Other students then joined in, both from urban and rural backgrounds. They explored intersections of the standard race-class-gender triangle, as well as other concerns such as social segregation and aesthetics, as illustrated in these two EC postings, of which the main themes were initially voiced in class discussion:

"Some aspects I found interesting about the show was the fact that it was in black and white and that it played off of old horror movie ideas.... I think that they try to create as much atmosphere in each episode to make the show more interesting and keep their viewers guessing as to what they are going to do next. This is also a quality that I admire most about the show, they pay so much attention to small details to which makes you pay more attention to what is happening so you can pick up on small aspects such as the fact that it was in Indiana."

"I think the term White trash was created by other whites who felt intellectually and socially above people within their same race. I'm from New York and inside the city limits that term is used to stereotype homeless, poor people, and drug addicts."

Additionally, in the EC students explored intersections of Whiteness with Queer Theory, the study of the political and social poetics and problematics involved in the social construction of complex sexuality (see Hennessy 1995; Phelan 1995; Seidman 1995; Warner 1993 for general discussion of queer theory; see Anzaldúa 1987; Berube & Berube 1997; Chabram-Dernersesian 1997; Davy 1997; Sandell 1997 for intersections of queer sexuality and Whiteness). This started when a student concluded an EC post with "[White trash] is not a concrete concept with an exact definition. It is not like being gay." I posted a response that "[Student] raises a very interesting point in the last post: 'White Trash' is not concrete like being gay. Let me turn that into two questions for us to think about. One, is being a gay man or lesbian concrete, that is, does everyone know and agree about what those things 'are'? Two, while using 'White trash' may be a stretch because of the pejorative

'trash,' can the somewhat similar terms 'hillbilly' and 'redneck' be used in positive ways? And to connect the two questions, what's the role of media in this reappropriation, the process of giving a term a different meaning and use?" Several students joined the discussion, with very insightful observations:

"I agree with what [student] said about the difference between self-labeling yourself as 'queer' and 'white trash.' They are two completely different things. First of all, there's not clear definition of what white trash is. I don't think someone would want to label themselves as 'trash.' I realize that neither label (queer or white trash) says anything about their morality. By homosexuals embracing this name, it just let other people know they were not bothered by being called queer—that that is not something they are ashamed of. I don't see how this could be applied to white trash—how people could turn the term around to mean something positive, something they are proud of. People are not trash!!!!"

"One may claim to be proud of being a hillbilly, or even a redneck because the term isn't seen as negative to everyone. Remember *The Beverly Hillbillies*? They were portrayed as a good old fashioned, wholesome family. Society didn't look down on them despite their 'hillbilly' status. But, the term 'White trash' is different. All of society connects it with being lazy, dirty, poor, and immoral. That is why no one categorizes themselves as 'White trash.' But, many think of hillbillies as just people living on a small farm raising pigs to keep from the rich lifestyle, not necessarily as immoral bums."

"I don't think there is anything concrete. I have known men and women that 'like' their own sex, but wouldn't date one. Some of them thought themselves as gay, others bi, others straight. I don't think those terms have a concrete meaning at all. Back in high school we did a story on rednecks. The people we wrote about called themselves rednecks, without the writers first labeling them. Everyone got a kick out of the story. Anyway, it is the context I think that determines if one is using redneck or hillbilly as a put-down. If you are calling yourself one, you might be proud of your background. If someone is calling someone else a redneck, it probably isn't exactly to place blessings on them! Media is part of the problem with multiple meanings.

Some movie, article, or song will put a new spin on the word, possibly make it the opposite of what it was (derogatory to 'compliment' and vice versa) and cause the questioning of its future use."

"I think the term White trash is just classism at work. It's not good enough to stop at minorities, you've got to find a way to make yourself better against other whites. I think there's already enough negative stereotypes for minorities, so there needs to be some for whites now. I couldn't believe how people were laughing when someone said something about living in a trailer, much less someone being homeless. The term White trash is horrible—because someone enjoys trapping animals and lives in a trailer does not mean they are just throw-aways. Like the guy in class said, his cousin may not be the most productive member of society, but I think his honesty is much more of a contribution to society."

As demonstrated, by the end of the week students were thinking very seriously and critically about the complexities of second-wave Whiteness. This is an important component of a transformative multiculturalism, as noted by Wray & Newitz (1997: 6): "[A] great deal of work still needs to be done before multiculturalism—and whites' participation in it—is associated with a progressive, interracial political strategy rather than a victim chic and racial divisiveness." Many students reported that they felt empowered by the discussion, as they gained better understandings of aspects of their identities, such as one student who said he liked being called a "hick." These students came to "voice": they learned that "to hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no student remains invisible" (hooks 1994: 41). I wanted all of my students to become visible, to engage in the tough but rewarding work of making articulations of personal experience and societal operation.

hooks (1994: 148), however, notes that "coming to voice is not just the act of telling one's experience. It is using that telling strategically—to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects." The students learned how they personally take part in the hegemony of Whiteness in America, wherein articulations about who and what our society was, is, and should be are subject to continual debate...on an uneven playing field. Whites and non-Whites both contribute to Whiteness (though, of course, in different ways). I reminded the



students about the matrix of domination, illustrating the point with a story about my own stereotypes about Whites learned in my all-Black high school, and how I struggled to overcome them.

Since the class was on "media and society," I devoted special attention to the mediated operation of hegemony:

In the postmodern, hegemony is won not simply through the transmission of ideas and the control of the population through centralization and homogenization; it operates also through the abundance of choice and the resulting fragmentation of the populace. (Sholle & Denski 1993: 300)

The students and I explored the operation of difference in media, how we understand ourselves through ubiquitous construction of the Other, that these understandings are the result of struggle within unevenly occupied terrain in which some groups have more power to construct favorable representations of themselves and unfavorable accounts of others, and that these social constructions have very real material and cultural effects (Bobo 1995; Fiske 1994; Gillespie 1995; Kellner 1995).

hooks (1994: 39) argues that "the unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained.... Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy." A transformative multiculturalism must be willing to invoke the personal as well as the public, calling explicit attention to the interactive forces of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Teachers must put their own passionate understandings and experiences on the table to help other students more critically explore their own. In the process, students and teachers can truly learn and live multiculturalism that makes a difference.

## CONCLUSION

### POSTMODERN MULTICULTURALISM AS POLITICAL EDUCATION

Simply stated, schools are not neutral institutions designed for providing students with work skills or with the privileged tools of culture. Instead, they are deeply implicated in forms of inclusion and exclusion that produce particular moral truths and values. In effect, they both produce and legitimate cultural differences as part of their broader project of constructing particular knowledge/

power relations and producing specific notions of citizenship. (Giroux 1993: 373)

A transformative multiculturalism that is informed by postmodern theory calls attention to universities as ideological sites in the production and reproduction of hegemony, as detailed above by Giroux. Instructors, then, not only interrogate the world outside of the classroom, they continually question what and how knowledge is produced therein. This does not, however, mean that it is the job of instructors to police politically correct thought in a classroom as subaltern counterpublic, and manipulate ideas of desirable social and spatial utopias.

This is what Giroux (1996: 127) calls "politicizing education," which "silences in the name of a specious universalism and denounces all transformative practices through an appeal to a timeless notion of truth and beauty." No, we must adopt "political education," which de-centers power, calls attention to and critiques efforts to unjustly stratify groups and reify inequality: "Politicizing education perpetuates pedagogical violence, while a political education expands the pedagogical conditions for students to understand how power works on them, through them, and for them in the service of constructing and deepening their roles as engaged thinkers and critical citizens" (Giroux 1996: 53). We must, in other words, teach to transgress (hooks 1994), but we can not proscribe the results of those transgressions.

In a postmodern transformative multiculturalism such political education contests dominant social issues and ideals and attempts to empower subordinated groups. Keeping the matrix of domination in mind, this is the process of negotiation of privileges and disadvantages; under postmodern conditions the manifestations and understandings of "privileges" and "disadvantages" are not only partial, fragmented, and fluid, the rules of articulation and disarticulation are under continual negotiation. Teachers and students alike learn the framework of this process and engage in such negotiation, with an eye towards applying lessons to other spaces:

[W]e grasp these processes not because we want to expose them or to understand them in the abstract but because we want to use them effectively to contest that authority and leadership by offering arguments and alternatives that are not only "correct" ("right on") but convincing and convincingly presented, arguments that capture the popular imagination, that engage directly with the

issues, problems, anxieties, dreams and hopes of real (actually existing) men and women: arguments, in other words, that take the popular (and hence the populace) seriously on its own terms. (Hebdige 1996: 195)

In a postmodern transformative multiculturalism teachers and students learn to continually analyze "how the conditions of democratic life have been eroded through a market culture and bureaucratic state in which access to power and pleasure is limited to few groups wielding massive amounts of economic and political power while being relatively unaccountable to those groups below them" (Giroux 1996: 134). Teachers and students learn to continually construct alternative representations as a means toward changing social and cultural conditions; they learn to organize new ways of thinking into new ways of doing.

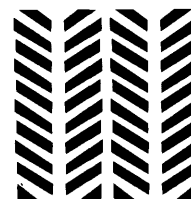
Some of my former students report being inspired to conduct activities such as making new friends with Others, talking old friends out of joining an extremist group (the Ku Klux Klan), joining or forming activist groups, and writing articles for newspapers and magazines. As America becomes increasingly multicultural, we need more citizens to both embrace difference and to try to actualize positive manifestations. Constructing models of postmodern transformative multiculturalism is an integral part of this on-going project and, indeed, provides a difference that really makes a difference.

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