

**DANGEROUS DISCOURSES:  
DECONSTRUCTING 'DIVERSITY'  
IN THE FILM *DANGEROUS MINDS***

by

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Abstract

**Dangerous Discourses:  
Deconstructing 'Diversity'  
in the Film *Dangerous Minds***

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The aim of this thesis is to deconstruct and analyze the ways racial and ethnic diversity is represented as a problem for a white teacher in the popular film *Dangerous Minds* (1995). In this American-made film, the "problems" arise from interactions between the white teacher and her African American and Latino students, two groups that have historically been figured as dangerous in the American context. Much of the research in multicultural teacher education in the United States and Canada (although with different "problem" groups in Canada) similarly frames diversity as a problem for teachers. Where multicultural and antiracist research has struggled over the meaning and significance of *diversity* in the classroom, cultural studies offers a more critical and complex perspective, without polarizing multiculturalism and antiracism. In addition to analysing the meaning and significance of this film's representation of diversity, my cultural studies approach asks: what language, images, emotions, and sounds combine to make this film's representation of diversity acceptable and popular to a large, varied audience? What contradictions or complexities of this representation are simplified or normalized by the film's narrative, music, characters, and other various elements? My analysis attempts to show how the discourse of diversity is shaped, negotiated, and contested in one popular cultural form as an example of the larger hegemonic struggle that frames diversity as a problem for teachers. The notion of diversity as a discourse, which structures this thesis, is informed by Dorothy E. Smith's conception of discourse

as a set of historically-situated relations organized and determined by the economic and social relations in which it is embedded (Smith, 1988, p. 55).

I employ a semiotic analysis, which according to Leslie Roman (1988), recognises the socially and historically situated interpretant to be active in the process of making meaning of signs. My semiotic analysis examines the film's visual images, organization of shots, music, narrative, characters, emotional effects, and other elements that produce meaning (elements identified by Christine Gledhill (1997) and Richard Dyer (1993)), in an attempt to determine the societal codes the film privileges. Through three main codes – difference, authority and control, and white knight redemption – the film promotes an ideology of need fulfillment and cultural deficit, in which the teacher manages student behaviour and offers help in order to *save* them from their home lives. This redemption narrative assuages emotions of guilt over the very real structural inequalities and white privilege represented to various degrees throughout the film and magically resolves all the critical and sometimes disturbing questions that were raised and left unanswered throughout the film. These questions concern material and structural inequality, student voice and empowerment, and the power of individual, gendered teachers to affect significant change. My analysis attempts to bring these questions back to the surface for a more complex and critical consideration. By analysing the function of the film's three main codes, this thesis politicises the film's representation of diversity and shows how these codes advance notions of need fulfillment, cultural deficit, and meritocracy. By examining the elements of the film that are used to evoke a desired response, this thesis demystifies a representation of diversity that has become normative and taken-for-granted. By drawing out the complexities and contradictions in the text, this thesis complicates normative conceptions of diversity. The questions raised through this process of politicising, demystifying, and drawing out the complexities of this text offer direction in the struggle to define and understand diversity.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction and Overview

These are exciting times for proponents of multicultural education in the United States and Canada. Research in multicultural education, and multicultural teacher education, in particular, orchestrates a sense of great and rising need for increasing awareness of and sensitivity to diversity of all kinds – racial, ethnic, sexuality, ability, and gender – as demographics indicate that classrooms are becoming increasingly *diverse*. A growing body of research (since the early 1990s) addresses the ‘problem’<sup>1</sup> of meeting the educational demands of this increasingly diverse student body, a problem inherently linked in the minds of many Americans and Canadians, to more ‘problems,’ including illiteracy, limited English proficiency, bullying/violence, high drop-out rates, absenteeism, drug abuse and teen pregnancy. If social problems are created so that particular remedies can be proposed, as Murray Edelman (1988) suggests, then what are the subsequent solutions to this crisis? For many, as my literature review will show, the remedy to this ‘problem’ of diversity is purely or primarily affective with the onus primarily on the teaching profession: education departments need to recruit, ‘train’ or develop teachers who will be sensitive, understanding, and attentive to the needs of all

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<sup>1</sup> I use inverted commas around the word *problem* in order to recognise the political and social construction of these issues as contemporary moral panics.

students. Such a solution may satisfy many people, but, clearly, will fail to bring much change to the power structure that created the 'problems' in the first place.

The spotlight on diversity stretches into the realm of popular culture, just as the field of education increasingly extends its reach into the field of popular culture. This thesis is an attempt to traverse both fields in a deconstruction of a popular culture text, the 1995 film *Dangerous Minds*, in order to gain a better understanding of the hegemonic struggle over the representation and discourse of diversity in the classroom.

### Why a Popular Cultural Text?

*Popular culture* is a term often taken for granted; yet, Roman and Christian-Smith (1988) remind us "defining popular culture is no easy task" (p. 8). They further explain:

Popular culture is a concept prone to such slippages and is so easily saleable that it serves the purpose of those who wish to defend it as the authentic experiences of everyday people and those who see it as representing the ways in which the masses are duped into their own manipulation by the so-called cultural industries, or even those who simply celebrate its relation to the sensory, the immediate, or the visceral impulses of contemporary social life. This is testimony to the need for conceptual and political clarity when cultural Marxists and feminists use the term (Roman and Christian-Smith, 1988, p. 9).

Therefore, I follow the lead of Roman and Christian-Smith in reframing the question of what is popular culture to ask instead, 'when is culture popular?'. And like Roman and Christian-Smith, I concur with John Fiske's answer to this question. They explain:

Fiske recognizes that for any cultural form to be popular, that is, well-liked by diverse and conflicting subcultures, it must be polysemic or capable of generating many signs and meanings so that diverse subcultures may take understandings from it that meet their own needs. That a particular form is well-liked, however, does not mean that its production of signs and meanings



is endlessly or anarchically open so that any meaning can be derived from it.

...

Rather, as Fiske argues, diverse subcultures who are defined by their relations (possibly culturally or politically oppositional) to centers of dominating power relations (class, race, gender, age, and sexual orientation) may exploit existing unresolved contradictions within popular cultural forms in order to find within them structural affinities with their own social relations and identities, with parts of their own material positions and social locations. (Roman and Christian-Smith, 1988, p. 20).

This argument, as Roman and Christian-Smith point out, directs us to semiotic and reader-centered analyses of popular cultural texts. Semiotics is concerned with how language or *signs* produce meaning (Hall, 1997a). For the film text, *signs* include sounds, music, visual images, language, narrative structure and all other elements of the film that produce meaning. In the tradition of Charles S. Peirce, I would refine the above definition of semiotics to include how signs produce meaning *to historical, social, and gendered subjects* (de Lauretis, 1987). A semiotic reading, therefore, must allow for contradictory and multiple interpretations of the film's signs.

My analysis of *Dangerous Minds* will focus on exposing the fissures and contradictions in the text that leave room for multiple interpretations of the film's signs. These multiple interpretations signal a hegemonic struggle over dominant discourses and ideologies of diversity. By looking specifically at the fissures and contradictions in the text, my analysis points to the moments of possibility for competing discourses to gain power in a re-writing or re-construction of the text. As argued previously, contradictions are an inherent part of any popular cultural form. Contradictions must exist in order for differently situated audiences to find "understandings from it that meet their own needs" (Roman and Christian-Smith, 1988).

Dyer argues that these contradictions must be suppressed in order to appear “unified”. He contends:

It seems to me likely that the degree to which the suppression of contradictions in an art-work actually shows is a register of the hold of a particular hegemony at the moment of the film’s production. Where there is a sense of strain at holding down contradiction, I would posit either the ruling groups’ own lack of faith in their world-view (contradictions *within* dominant ideology) or the presence in other groups of a hard and disturbing challenge to the ruling groups’ hegemony (contradictions *to* dominant ideology). (Dyer, 1993, p. 93)

Therefore, not only will I look for contradictions in the film, I will also look for degrees of strain in suppressing them. My findings, therefore, are significant not only for exposing what has been done (successfully or unsuccessfully) to reinforce the power of certain ideologies in this particular cultural text but also for the possibilities of re-structuring hierarchies of power in future (re-) constructions of diversity discourses.

Furthermore, deconstructing a popular cultural text is important because how a group (white teachers and black and Latino/a students, in the case of *Dangerous Minds*) is represented matters. Dyer, reflecting on the representation of gay men and lesbians in film, writes:

How a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens. Equally re-presentation, representativeness, representing have to do also with how others see members of a group and their place and rights, others who have the power to affect that place and those rights. How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation (1993, p. 1).

Engaging in a critical analysis of a popular cultural text demands that we confront and analyze the various representations being contested and the process of negotiation, as argued by those scholars who see this as a pedagogical process with important ramifications, like those described above by Dyer. Similarly, Henry Giroux's conception and analysis of radical pedagogy focuses on its attempts to "illuminate how cultural texts can be understood as part of a complex and often contradictory set of ideological and material processes through which the transformation of knowledge, identities, and values takes place" (Giroux, 1993, p. 38).

#### Choosing to Read *Dangerous Minds*

I chose to analyze *Dangerous Minds*, a popular film released in 1995 by Hollywood Pictures, because it constructs its own representation of the 'problems of diversity', *particularly the problems diversity holds for white middle class women teachers*, which the field of education has been grappling with in recent years. The field of teacher education is beginning to question whether the increasingly white, middle class, and female teaching profession is a problem for diverse students (Lund, 1998; Zeichner, 1996). *Dangerous Minds* inverts the question and asks whether diverse students are a problem for white, middle class female teachers. This film is distinctive because it is one of only a few teaching-genre films to feature a white woman protagonist (Keroes, 1999) and I wanted to include in my deconstruction an analysis of how the teacher and students are gendered in the diversity discourse. In this film based on LouAnne Johnson's account of her own experiences recorded in the book *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, a white, middle-class ex-U.S. Marine (played by Michelle Pfeiffer)

with little experience and no official certification is hired to teach high school English to a class of working class, primarily black and Latino/a students, who appear unmotivated, hostile, and barely literate. How does this particular popular cultural text (re)present the 'problems' associated with racially and ethnically diverse classrooms? How does this representation both affirm and contest the inter-textual discourse of diversity underway in the field of education?

*Dangerous Minds* is also of particular interest as a text for analysis for the social problems it purports to resolve. One of these problems relates to the film's conception of classroom diversity as cultural deficiency. The film can be interpreted as suggesting that the students in the film are academically unsuccessful (when we initially meet them) because of a lack of cultural congruence between their home lives and school life. By bridging that gap, the teacher helps these students to succeed in school. This is an example of how this particular cultural text functions politically, not to solve social problems, but to reframe them in a way that is palatable to wide audiences and, hence, popular. In this case, significant issues of racial inequalities are reframed as cultural conflicts that can be overcome at the individual level. One aim of this thesis is to expose and demystify this process of reframing social problems into politically and socially acceptable conflicts.

I also believe that a deconstruction and critical analysis of the issues and discourses at play in *Dangerous Minds* will provide a clearer understanding of the dominant ideology and the ideological limits within which this film posits/constructs the ideal social justice/activist teacher for the diverse classroom, and its understandings of the ideological and material conditions that advanced capitalist schools must possess to make

such a teacher effective. In the film Ms. Johnson must address a myriad of social problems, including teen pregnancy, absenteeism, dropping-out, and violence.

Throughout the course of the film, Ms. Johnson transforms her class of trouble-makers into 'good' students using what the film jacket describes as "unconventional methods," which are not really methods at all but more like manifestations of her character: self-sacrifice, dedication, caring for the students, showing interest in them, and motivating them (with candy bars, toys, and trips with the teacher). While Ms. Johnson doesn't 'save' all her students, this is essentially a narrative of redemption that focuses on a white woman's personal sacrifices and assuages (and hides) white guilt related to the maintenance of structural inequalities. My analysis will show how this redemption discourse solves the superficial and interpersonal conflicts related to diversity in the classroom without disrupting the system that maintains material differences.

To what end is the classroom of a middle-class, white woman teacher and working class, primarily non-white students represented as a site of conflict? To what end is the class and racial conflict magically solved by the film's conclusion? How can the representation of these students and their teacher be interpreted? How and to what end are students represented as different? In what ways is the role of teacher romanticised? How are the concepts of effective teaching and academic achievement defined for these students? What structural inequalities are clearly grappled with in the film? What structural inequalities are hidden? The semiotic analysis that follows will attempt to answer these questions.

As pervasive as films and other popular media are, it is hard not to take them seriously as political processes for the formation of political ideologies and as legitimate

cultural artefacts, albeit artefacts with contested and never fixed meanings. Richard Dyer (1993) argues that virtually all art is the project of creating “a ‘unified’ or ‘organic’ artefact” (p. 93). He further explains:

This project represents a bid for hegemony, which I understand as the expression of the interests and world-views of a particular social group or class so expressed as to pass for the interest and world-view of the whole of society (93).

By fully engaging in the pedagogical process of meaning making in a project such as this, we become more active and perhaps better informed players in the negotiation of the values, appeals, needs, and interests that come to pass as the values, appeals, needs, and interests of the whole society. Through my analysis, I have a voice in accepting or rejecting the film’s notion of diversity and the political consequences of that notion.

### Role of the Researcher

The notion of a disinterested researcher is passé. Particularly in cultural studies work such as this, to suggest a sense of neutrality would be professional suicide. To merely describe my socially situated self falls far short of acknowledging the extent of my personal investment in this work, an investment that is present and active not only in my role of interpretant, but also in the formation of my research question, my choices in methodology, and the process of deconstruction and analysis.

As a child I had always wanted to be a teacher; like many prospective and current teachers, my affinity to teaching was fostered by my own success and comfort in the school environment as a student. But even as an undergraduate my lingering interest in teaching motivated me to enrol in the required introductory course to the university’s

teacher education program, *Exploring Teaching as a Profession*. Concurrently, in American history courses, I was exploring (and often discovering) my country's history of oppression and intolerance. As I learned more about structural forms of racism, sexism, homophobia and hetero-sexism, I became, at least theoretically, committed to fighting social injustice and inequity. That is when I began to consider the potential of education, and teaching more specifically, as an instrument in the fight for social justice.

I have yet to pursue a teacher education program to completion. In my scrutiny of the possibilities of fighting inequity and injustice through teaching, I have often been discouraged from joining the profession. For example, in interviews with prospective teachers, I have repeatedly, almost without exception, heard concerns about time restraints and classroom management take precedence over the desire to foster critical thinking and an awareness of equity issues in students. I have also been turned off by innumerable teacher educators' descriptions of their students as homogenous, conservative and resistant to change.

Why is it that I, a white, middle-class woman, aware of the privilege afforded by my racial background and class, yet committed to finding a career in which I can act toward the goal of social justice, have resisted a career in teaching? Why do I feel such ambivalence toward the teaching profession's role in the fight for social justice? These questions pervade my research. And while I have consistently resisted a career in teaching, the emotive draw of the teaching profession persists for me. So as I watch *Dangerous Minds*, and other teacher-genre films and television programs, I find myself wondering whether the profession represented on screen is the one I ultimately want to

pursue. Thus, as I deconstruct and analyze the film's representation of the profession and its role in social justice, I am careful to leave room for all kinds of possibilities.



## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

#### The Shared Terrain of Education and Popular Culture

The relationship between culture and education has been conceived of in various ways. An Althusserian conception sees education as an apparatus for reproducing the dominant social order. In this vein, schooling has been used as a method for assimilating immigrants and Native North American people into Euro-Canadian and -American societies. Cameron McCarthy (1990, p. 39) explains:

For over one hundred years and up until two decades ago, a basic assimilationist model formed the centerpiece of education and state policies towards ethnic differences in the United States. Schooling was looked upon as the institution par excellence through which American educational policy-makers and ruling elites consciously attempted to cultivate norms of citizenship, to fashion a conformist American identity and to bind together a population of diverse national origins.

Another type of relationship between education and popular culture has been gaining salience in the fields of cultural studies, feminist studies, and increasingly in education. Scholars in these fields have begun to recognise the complex process involved in negotiating representations as a public *pedagogical* process (Chow, 1996; Giroux, 1993; Giroux and Simon, 1989; Luke, 1996; McCarthy, *et al.*, 1997; Roman and Christian-Smith, 1988). Carmen Luke clearly describes the nature of the relationship:

[T]extuality and pedagogy, in Western contexts at least, are analogous. Thus, how law, media, (post)colonial policy, or educational theory conceptualize

and shape hierarchies of difference, the normative subject and social relations, is fundamentally an educative process in text-based power-knowledge regimes, enacted across a network of diffuse events of social and self-disciplining (1996, p. 25).

Luke's conception of the relationship between culture and education is clear: the hegemonic struggle over cultural texts is a pedagogical process. While this argument sees all forms of popular culture as educational, my analysis actually engages with a text in which the subject is *formal education*, specifically a teacher in a traditional classroom setting. This conception of the relationship between popular culture and education follows in the tradition of others who examine the ways in which schooling and/or teaching are represented in popular culture (Biklen, 1995; Weber and Mitchell, 1995; and Keroes, 1999). This work attempts to identify and comprehend the multiple social constructions and representations of schooling and teaching in popular culture to better inform our personal understandings of schooling and teaching. Yet, even scholars working from this latter approach recognise that the line between what is considered *educational* and what is not is ambiguous. Weber and Mitchell note, "the images of schooling in everyday life outside of school are often neglected and treated as if they were on the other side of the line that divides school from 'non-school'" (1995, p. 5). Therefore, the relevance of this thesis to the field of education is as much in the pedagogical process of deconstruction as it is in the content and school setting of this particular popular cultural text.

## Diversity in Education

A central concern of this thesis is to deconstruct the discursive, textual, and inter-textual meanings of *diversity* in the context of the classroom. This literature review will outline how diversity discourses have been constructed generally in education and more specifically by three camps of educational research: multicultural education, antiracist education, and teacher education. As I broadly show how these three camps of educational researchers use diversity discourses, the need for a deconstruction of the intertextual discourse of diversity *through a cultural studies approach* becomes evident.

Today's emphasis on increasing diversity, particularly within education, has been developing over the past thirty years although other terms, such as pluralism, multiethnic, and multicultural have sometimes been used (Grant and Millar, 1992). The description *diverse* (as in *diverse students*) has grown in popularity over the past decade, as the categorization *minority* has become increasingly problematic, especially in cases of 'majority-minority' schools and communities.

This attention [on diversity] is a function of: the increasing number of students of color entering schools, many of whom have a primary language other than English; the demands of women who seek to have their history, culture, ideology and pedagogy fully accepted, appreciated and affirmed in every aspect of the policies and practices of the educational system; the accelerated movement of the United States population into a "have" and "have not" society; and the national fear that this country is losing its technological and economic eminence to other countries (Grant and Millar, 1992, p. 201).

Gay (1992) similarly proposes explanations for the emphasis on diversity. As a result of birth rates and increased immigration from non-white, non-Western, non-European countries, "the actual numbers and rations of people of color are growing exponentially to

whites" (Gay, 1992, p. 45). The political and historical context also helps to explain the growing attention to diversity in the early 1990s in the United States. Gay (1992) argues:

Political and economic changes occurring throughout the world are other catalysts for renewing interest in multicultural education. Democratization in Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, the threat of war in the Middle East, the growing economic might of Japan and Korea, the emerging receptivity of the USSR and China toward competitive market economies, unstable balance of powers and the catastrophic level of social problems in Africa, and the growing level of foreign investments in the United States are changing the dynamics of international diplomacy. The United States is becoming less of the dominant voice of influence in world affairs. The most crucial human rights and social concerns (war, peace, power, food production and distribution, health, national debts, self-determination, human dignity) are transcendent of national geopolitical boundaries, making global interdependence a force in the everyday lives of average American citizens in unprecedented ways. The major actors and arenas that are intimately involved in trying to solve these problems are increasingly ethnically, culturally, racially and regionally diverse (Gay, 1992, p. 61).

*Diversity* often can be read as *different than 'us'*, implying a false and hidden normative centre of whiteness. Furthermore, it is used uncritically to emphasize differences (and sometimes deficiencies) between cultures, genders, races, *et cetera* without acknowledging differences within cultures, genders, races, *et cetera*. Acknowledging or celebrating cultural difference also often fails to recognize the power relations, the system of domination and resistance, in which difference operates (Mohanty, 1990; Roman, 1993).

#### Diversity in multicultural education.

The terms *multiculturalism* and *antiracism* carry significant variance (and contentions) in meanings and implications between the American, Canadian, British and other contexts, but at the basis of both terms in all of these contexts are the ideals of equity and equality of opportunity and outcomes for all students, regardless of ethnicity,

'race', gender, language, or other categorizations (Nieto, 2000). Many people in the field of education attempt to demarcate fundamental differences between multicultural and antiracist education. Cole makes a distinction between the two based on antiracist education's more radical emphasis on institutional racism and its attempts to dismantle the complex structure of oppression; whereas, multiculturalism typically holds a more liberal emphasis on the awareness of and respect for individuals' ethnic and cultural diversity (Orlikow and Young, 1993). This distinction is more evident in the British and Canadian contexts than in the American context, where *critical multiculturalism* or *social reconstructionist education* is sometimes used equivalently to the British and Canadian use of *antiracism*. However, Darren Lund (1998) points out that these two camps, antiracism and multiculturalism, need not be dichotomous or oppositional: "Educators currently addressing diversity issues most often occupy shifting spaces between and across multicultural and antiracist perspectives" (p. 270). Nevertheless, I want to briefly describe how these two camps (over-simplified as they are) understand the concept of *diversity* in education, beginning here with multicultural education.

*Diversity* from a multicultural education perspective is often associated with *cultural pluralism* or difference based on languages, traditions, mores, values, etc. Multiculturalism attempts to celebrate *cultural diversity* and teach tolerance and understanding about cultural differences, in order to reduce prejudice (Rattansi, 1992, p. 25). Ali Rattansi (1992) points out two main limitations to multiculturalism's sometimes myopic focus on prejudice and attitudes. First, stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes are often contradictory, complex and ambivalent. Furthermore, stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes can be contradictory, or reveal complex and shifting alliances, from

one context to another. Rattansi's second argument against the focus on prejudice concerns the idea that prejudice is caused by ignorance of different cultures. The problem with this assumption is that it is not clearly understood how cultural understanding is facilitated or whether teaching about other cultures has any significant impact in reducing prejudice. Rattansi (1992, p. 28) argues:

There is a contradiction between the *rationalism* of the multiculturalist project, which recommends a reduction of prejudice by teaching a combination of facts and cultural empathy, and the insistence, also within the discourse of prejudice, that prejudice involves a strong element of *irrationalism* [original emphasis].

Rattansi's arguments indicate that multiculturalism's focus on *cultural diversity* in fighting prejudice is inadequate as a strategy for reducing racial inequality.

Multiculturalism, in its celebrations of traditions and customs, often also fails to articulate the historical context and power differentials of cultural/ethnic difference. As Chandra Mohanty argues, "Difference seen as benign variation (diversity), for instance, bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious empty pluralism" (1990, p. 181).

#### Diversity in antiracist education.

Many self-avowed antiracists have rejected multiculturalism, arguing that "in privileging prejudice and attitudes the multiculturalists have neglected racism as embedded in structures and institutions" (Rattansi, 1992, p. 25). Antiracists, instead, focus their attack on institutionalized acts of racism, as in educational policy or curriculum, or any routine procedures that end up discriminating against minorities (Rattansi, 1992). Unlike multiculturalism, antiracism does not emphasize *cultural diversity*. Rather, when it attends to the notion of *difference*, the focus of antiracism is

generally on *class* difference. Where multiculturalists aim to reduce prejudice by increasing individual's understanding of different cultures, antiracists have sometimes aimed to eliminate racism by providing working-class racists with arguments that are superior to racist ideologies projected by instruments of capitalism (the media, the state, etc.) designed to divide the working class along racial lines (Rattansi, 1992). Rattansi argues, however, that this perspective is limited "by an overly rationalist conception of state and dominant class racism" (1992, p. 30). Failure to attend to sexual identities and subjectivities, class reductionism, and the simplistic "racism-as-false-consciousness" are primary pitfalls of the antiracist perspective, according to Rattansi (1992).

What both the antiracism and multiculturalism camps fail to do, in this brief and over-simplified comparison of perspectives, is to recognize the complexity, contradictions, ambivalences and resistances of the popular cultures of youth (Rattansi, 1992). Cultural studies offers two advantages to either of these approaches. First, it recognizes the political significance and the complexity, contradictions, ambivalences, and resistances of cultural identity. Second, a cultural studies approach does not polarize the antiracism and multiculturalism camps; instead, it encourages a more thorough approach by crossing over both perspectives.

#### Diversity in teacher education.

The body of research on multicultural teacher education reveals better than the two previous categories academia's perception of and expectations for *the role of teachers* in our present 'crisis' of diversity in the United States and Canada. The problem is generally framed in this way. First, the literature presents the demographic changes

that are making student populations 'increasingly diverse' particularly in large, urban school districts. Sometimes the literature points out the gaps in 'achievement' levels between white students and non-white students. Finally, the literature describes the increasing percentage of white teachers. Framing *diversity* this way evokes questions about who or what makes an effective teacher for today's schools and for *diverse* (read non-white) students in particular. Larkin and Sleeter (1995) summarize the context in which references to *diversity* are made in the United States:

In recent years, both scholarly journals and the mass media have devoted considerable attention to the rapidly increasing cultural diversity and escalating poverty among the school-aged population in our country. These demographic profiles are commonly associated with predictions of tremendous growth in the social costs and taxes that can be expected unless the schools find ways to effectively provide educational success for far more students than they currently do. . . . there is little question that this scenario has created renewed interest among teacher education programs in developing new strategies to prepare teachers to work with culturally diverse students (p. vii).

In even the most cursory review of the literature this typical construction of the scenario as a problem for white teachers becomes obvious. There is extensive literature describing the disproportionately white, middle-class, rural/suburban, and female body of teacher candidates in the United States and Canada (see, for example, Zimpher and Ashburn, 1992; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Gomez, 1996; Zeichner, 1996; Melnick and Zeichner, 1997; Lund, 1998). From this apparent homogeneity researchers typically perceive the characteristics of parochialism and conservatism, as indicated by teacher candidates' general lack of geographic mobility, limited intercultural experiences, monolingualism, and cultural insularity (Zimpher and Ashburn, 1992).



This trend toward homogeneity, parochialism, and conservatism in the teaching profession and in teacher education programs is often explained by the premise that students who were happy and 'successful' in traditional schooling are more willing to remain in the school arena; these individuals seamlessly move from one side of the desk to the other. Unfortunately, a major implication of this trend is that the majority of teachers come to the profession with their culturally insular preconceptions about teaching and learning intact and unchallenged. According to some researchers (for example, Cabello and Burstein, 1995; Nieto, 2000a), these teachers' culturally- and experientially-informed beliefs about teaching and learning are often inadequate or inappropriate in meeting the needs of culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students. Given the portrait that is painted of teacher education students, it comes as no surprise to learn that these students view diversity as a problem rather than a resource (Zeichner, 1996). But *researchers* also frame white teachers as a problem for non-white students. In a typical example, Noordhoff and Kleinfeld (1993) write, "Increasingly, then, majority culture teachers will be called upon to teach groups of so-called minority-culture students. As a state, Alaska already *faces this problem*" [emphasis mine] (p. 27). Christine E. Sleeter explains: "The significance of teacher race is usually framed in terms of the degree to which a white teaching force is appropriate for students of color" (Sleeter, 1993, p. 157).

Not all of the research in multicultural teacher education frames student diversity as a *problem* for (white) teachers. But much of it does. Nieto tries to explain why:

Negative assumptions in teacher education programs about diversity are due to several reasons, including the nature of the population served by teacher education programs, the assimilationist ideology undergirding these

programs, the types of courses and practical experiences that prospective teachers receive, and the nature of the professoriate (Nieto, 2000b).

Thus, even when teacher educators take up issues of diversity, multiculturalism, or antiracism with critical social justice aims, they often must address these concerns within the context of a conservative program.

My emphasis on and critique of the research that *does* frame student diversity as a problem for (white) teachers does not mean to undermine the value of the research that aims to make curriculum more inclusive or to make teachers sensitive to and/or cognizant of the very real individual differences in learning styles (often culturally and socially shaped) that may impact students' academic achievement. This type of research is not a problem in and of itself; rather, it is only the propensity to frame student diversity *uncritically* as a problem for white teachers that exists within some of that research that I take issue with here.

Beyond the commonly articulated concern for "meeting the needs of *all* students," preparing white teachers to teach white students is rarely posed as a problem that fits into the category of multicultural teacher education. Therefore, it seems that when the research talks about preparing white teachers for *diverse* students, *diverse* functions as a codeword for black, Latino/Latina, Chicano, Native American, Asian and/or other-identifying, non-white students. Accordingly, one problem associated with diversity as it is currently framed seems to be, stated bluntly, *civilizing* non-white students. The research related to teaching in culturally diverse classrooms often reflects what Henry Giroux (1993) calls an ideology of "need fulfillment." This refers to the *absence* of "culturally specific experiences that school authorities believe students must acquire in

order to enrich the quality of their lives or the fundamental skills that they will 'need' in order to get jobs once they leave school (Giroux, 1993, p. 127). This ideology has roots in what Nieto (2000a) calls "deficit theories": "*Deficit theories* assume that some children, because of genetic, cultural, or experiential differences, are inferior to other children; that is, they have a deficit" (p. 10). This deficit is often made to seem tangible by reference to statistics that purport disparities in student achievement (variously defined and measured) by 'race'.

The general consensus in the literature, is that in order to meet the needs of all students, effective teachers must either come to the table with a more open-minded understanding (or perhaps even multiple understandings) of teaching, learning, and schooling or must critically examine their own beliefs, traditions, and practices. Both approaches (increasing the diversity of teacher candidates and challenging the dominant-culture preconceptions held by many teacher candidates) are increasingly advocated as potential ways for teacher educators and teacher education programs to better prepare teachers for diverse classrooms (for example, Noordhoff and Kleinfeld, 1993; Cabello and Burstein, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 1995). Although the body of research concerning issues of social justice and equality in teacher education remains relatively limited in the overall body of research on teacher education, teacher educators are beginning to identify the need to (and are occasionally taking action) to restructure or improve their programs in order to better prepare their teacher candidates to meet the needs of all students (for example, Brown, 1992; Garibaldi, 1992; Bernhard, 1992; Jordan, 1995; Phuntsog, 1995; Britzman, *et al.*, 1997; Lund, 1998). This developing field of multicultural teacher education generally emphasizes changing teacher attitudes and/or practices, which

suggests that *there are increasing expectations for teachers to play a greater and more active role in making education more socially just and equitable*. As Solomon points out (1995): "Teachers are ultimately responsible for the classroom implementation of these [local and state ...multicultural and antiracist education] policies."

As outlined above, the literature shows that teacher candidates currently fall dramatically short of some (i.e. proponents of multiculturalism or antiracism) teacher educators' expectations for them as agents of social justice, as critical players in the struggle for equitable education. Most researchers identify teachers' and teacher candidates' own experiences (and lack of experiences) as the greatest obstacle to their development as social justice activists. Nieto (2000a) explains:

Most teachers are sincerely concerned about their students and want very much to provide them with the best education. But because of their own limited experiences and knowledge, they may know very little about the students they teach. As a result, their beliefs about students of diverse backgrounds may be based on spurious assumptions and stereotypes.... Teachers are also the products of educational systems that have a history of racism, exclusion, and debilitating pedagogy. Hence their practices reflect their experiences and they may unwittingly perpetuate policies and approaches that are harmful to many of their students (p. 5).

It is evident from this rationale that unless teacher education programs are successful in engaging prospective teachers in a critical analysis of their own beliefs, values, and practices, as teachers these individuals will continue to perpetuate the status quo. As a result of teacher candidates' documented resistance to this practice of critical analysis (Ahlquist, 1991; Sleeter, 1993; McCall, 1995), some researchers and teacher educators suggest focusing teacher education reform on recruiting and selecting "those who are predisposed to multiculturalism at the outset" (Haberman, 1996, 130). While this may be the best solution, it is not the current state of teacher education programs and

does not appear to be imminent. Therefore, we must consider critically how student 'diversity' is framed as a problem for teachers and the larger society, and how white women teachers are framed in relation to racial inequalities.

### *Diversity in Dangerous Minds*

Cultural studies offers another way of looking at the concept of diversity in education, without polarizing the antiracist or multiculturalist points of view. Cultural studies encourages a critical deconstruction of the concept, recognizing contradictions, complexities, ambivalences, and resistances. Roman and Christian-Smith's (1988) conception of a feminist materialist politics of *deconstruction* informs my work. I understand that this conception of deconstruction, in the context of my project, entails a process of finding and exposing the contradictions between *representations* of classroom diversity in a particular popular cultural text (*Dangerous Minds*) and the *experiences* of classroom diversity *lived* by people who occupy various, conflicting social positions.

The term *diversity* is never actually used by the characters in *Dangerous Minds*. Despite the absence of the word *diversity* from the film, the concept of *diversity* as constructed in the multicultural, antiracist, and teacher education research, is clearly present in images, feelings, and the film's narrative structure – all elements of discourse. Therefore, I do not find it problematic to engage in a deconstruction of the discourse of *diversity* in a text that does not specifically employ the term. I conceive of classroom diversity as discourse in the way that Dorothy E. Smith (1988) understands femininity as discourse. In this sense, discourse goes beyond a particular text and is inter-textual, that is, understood in relation to and from prior experience with other texts and people's

everyday worlds, all of which are produced and understood within an economic, social, and political system. This conception of discourse shifts the viewing of 'femininity' (or 'diversity') from normative to constructed. Smith states:

The concept of discourse allows us to 'magnify' for examination the ideological work which produces 'femininity' as a set of relations arising in local historical settings without segregating it from the economic and social relations in which it is embedded and which it both organizes and is determined by. We explore at the same time that remarkable effect of our contemporary world, the distinctive relations of public, textually-mediated discourse and its special capacities to organize our everyday worlds (Smith, 1988, p. 55).

Smith's acknowledgement of the capacity of textually-mediated discourse to organize our everyday worlds, should not be read as to imply a process of indoctrination or subordination of individuals by the media and other producers of texts. Smith clarifies this point:

The relations between discourse and local practices are not ones of determination. Rather, women are active, skilled, make choices, consider, are not fooled or foolish. Within discourse there is play and interplay. There is discrimination. Though the fashion industry manages the market through the discourse of femininity, it does not control that discourse (Smith, 1988, p. 54).

An application of Antonio Gramsci's theory of *hegemony* to the production of popular culture elucidates the process of play and interplay within discourse and clarifies the process of cultural negotiations that are at play in the production and reception of a film. Henry Giroux and Roger Simon (1989) explain that, according to Gramsci's theory, dominant culture does not uniformly impose its knowledge, ideas, representations, and cultural leadership and authority on weak and powerless subordinate groups; rather, dominant culture must continuously struggle to win the consent of subordinate groups "through the elaboration of particular discourses, needs, appeals, values, and interests that

must address and transform the concerns of subordinate groups” (Giroux and Simon, 1989, p. 8). While my understanding of hegemony is based primarily on the work of Gramsci, I prefer Michel Foucault’s understanding of this power struggle working at the local level, rather than between *classes* alone, as Gramsci emphasized (Hall, 1997b, p. 261). While they may have envisioned the subjects of power-struggle differently, both Gramsci and Foucault had similar conceptions of that struggle. Hall offers a coherent conception of hegemony incorporating the notions of both Gramsci and Foucault:

[P]ower cannot be captured by thinking exclusively in terms of force or coercion: power also seduces, solicits, induces, wins consent. It cannot be thought of in terms of one group having a monopoly of power, simply radiating power *downwards* on a subordinate group by an exercise of a simple domination from above. It includes the dominant *and* the dominated within its circuits [original emphasis] (Hall, 1997b, p. 261).

Intimately related to power and hegemony, is the concept of *ideology*. According to Giroux (1993), “the linkage of ideology and struggle points to the inseparability of knowledge and power; it emphasizes that ideology refers not only to specific forms of discourses and social relations they structure but also to the interest they further” (p. 75). Thus, to get at an understanding of the ideology of classroom diversity in contemporary educational research, I must look at how *and to what end* classroom diversity is widely conceived of as a problem of white teachers meeting the ‘exceptional’ needs of ‘non-white’ students.

But what is *ideology* exactly? Giroux argues that “ideology refers to the production, consumption, and representation of ideas and behavior, all of which can either distort or illuminate the nature of reality” (Giroux, 1993, 75). Giroux further explains that ideology is closely, yet complexly, related to material culture:

On the one hand, ideology can be viewed as a set of representations produced and inscribed in human consciousness and behavior, in discourse, and in lived experiences. On the other hand, ideology is concretized in various "texts," material practices, and material forms. Hence, the character of ideology is mental, but its effects are both psychological and behavioral; they are not only felt in human action but are also inscribed in material culture (Giroux, 1993, p. 74).

Because ideology functions to construct and maintain the power of dominant social formations (Giroux, 1993), it is important to look critically at both the set of representations that form an ideology *and* the psychological and behavioral effects of it. The scope of my research is limited to an analysis of representations, but through such an analysis it might be possible to propose for further research hypotheses of psychological and behavioral consequences of these ideological representations.

One way to analyze representations is to determine whether responses are negative or positive. Often negative readings are expressed in terms of realism; a viewer may reject a film's representation of homosexuality, for instance, as 'unrealistic,' because it contradicts or does not leave room for the viewer's way of seeing/knowing homosexuality. Similarly, a viewer's resistance to racist ideologies embedded in a film is often expressed in 'realist' terms. One might critique a racist film as unrealistic, 'that is not the way it really is' (Diawara, 1999). Christine Gledhill relates this struggle for realism back to the theory of hegemony:

[M]edia forms and representations constitute major sites for conflict and negotiation, a central goal of which is the definition of what is to be taken as 'real', and the struggle to name and win support for certain kinds of cultural value and identity over others. 'Realism', then, is a crucial value claimed by different parties to the contest. (Gledhill, 1997, p. 348).

Thus, representations must be believable and acceptable to variously situated viewers.

Focusing a critical analysis on the contest for a realistic representation, functions to shift



our analysis away from a problematic inquiry into the authors' original intent and toward a more responsible inquiry into contested perceptions of reality for differently situated subjects. Chow suggests we ask:

"Under what circumstances would such an argument—no matter how preposterous—make sense? With what assumptions does it produce meanings? In what ways and to what extent does it legitimize certain kinds of cultures while subordinating or outlawing others?" Such are the questions of power and domination as they relate, ever asymmetrically, to the dissemination of knowledge. Old-fashioned questions of pedagogy as they are, they nonetheless demand frequent reiteration in order for cultural studies to retain its critical and political impetus in the current intellectual climate. (Chow, 1998, p. 13)

Questions about the realism of *Dangerous Minds*' representation of diversity and about the context in which such a representation makes sense will guide my analysis.

### The 'Object' of the Research

In the tradition of what Richard Dyer calls "'images of' studies," deconstructing the representation of groups is an important component of my analysis. Oppressed, marginal, or subordinate groups, according to Dyer, have been the focus of 'images of' studies in part because of the assumption that "how such groups are represented is part of the process of their oppression, marginalization, or subordination" (1993, p. 141). Yet, as feminist studies work has pointed out, such a myopic focus on these groups has perpetuated the sense of difference or exceptionality of these groups from the norm, which seems to remain natural (Dyer, 1993).

The representation of groups in a film like *Dangerous Minds*, in any film for that matter, is complex and contradictory. The social groups represented in the film, on the

surface, seem evident. The teacher is clearly gendered, the students racialized – as my analysis will show. Yet, Dyer (1993) points out:

Women, ethnic minorities, gay people and so on are not the only ones to be social groupings; everyone belongs to social groupings; indeed we all belong in many groupings, often antagonistic to one another or at the least implying very different accesses to power (p. 4).

The teacher, Ms. Johnson, for instance, is both a woman and a member of the white middle-class. Although a woman, it is hard to call Ms. Johnson subordinated in the context of this racially diverse population. As a teacher, Ms. Johnson has another claim to authority in the context of the classroom. It is hard not to speak in relational terms when speaking of systems of domination and yet, it is also important, as Dyer points out above, to make strange the 'normal,' against which groups are othered. Like Dyer, I aim to work from the premise that the dominant and the norm are culturally constructed categories. In the context of my work, that means recognising the whiteness of the teacher and not just in relation to her non-white students but in the way her whiteness is normative. Yet, it is not easy to analyze whiteness. Dyer writes: "The colourless multi-colouredness of whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to 'see' whiteness. This, of course, also makes it hard to analyse" (Dyer, 1993, p. 143). This point may explain why whiteness rarely becomes the main focus of analysis and also why I am reluctant to claim to make it so in my research. Nevertheless, I attempt to show how whiteness can be read, in part, as privilege and as normative. This reading of whiteness, as well as its constructed nature, will become evident in my forthcoming analysis.

Perhaps even more important than my resolution to make the norm strange is my resolution to recognise what Rey Chow calls “the exploitative, asymmetrical, relations inherent in the Western studies of non-Western cultures, relations that continue to be deemphasized if not altogether denied by many area studies specialists” (Chow, 1998, p. 6). I do not mean to make the black and Latino/a students in Ms. Johnson’s classroom the exotic/primitive “Other.” For this reason, my analysis will focus more on the culture of the classroom/school (and the structure of inequity in these contexts) than on the culture of the students or the teacher.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

As the literature review shows, the concept of *diversity* has become naturalized in educational research. Multiculturalism focuses on solving problems of diversity by increasing cultural literacy and cultural congruence and by celebrating students' home culture. Antiracism all but ignores culture and focuses on material and structural difference. Teacher education predominantly aims to increase teacher sensitivity, understandings, and knowledge of cultural differences. None of these approaches is sufficient independently. They all leave out what feminist writers have argued for a long time: "Racial antagonism and sexual oppression are mediated through ideology, culture, politics and social theories themselves" (McCarthy, 1990, p. 11). Semiotics, an emphasis on symbols, signs, and representation, is "particularly important for advancing our theoretical understanding of the ways in which racial and sexual antagonism operate within the cultural sphere and the ways in which racial and sexual differences are naturalized in everyday social practices" (McCarthy, 1990, p. 11).

### Film as Material Artefact / Film as Site of Hegemonic Struggle

As briefly stated previously, I see the film *Dangerous Minds*, made for mass consumption, as an artefact of the dominant society in which it was produced. Thus, my reading is a social activity, which in the method of Dyer, examines film as:

a particular characteristic organization of codes and conventions which gives warrant for certain kinds of reading on the part of its audience, that is, a particular set of encodings which make possible particular decodings. Encoding and decoding are social practices. I try to keep in mind throughout the Marxist formula: 'People (film-makers, audiences) make their own history (films), but not in circumstances of their own choosing' (Dyer, 1993, p. 93).

Paul Smith emphasizes the importance of recognising cultural texts as "*commodities* which will attempt to situate the subject in some preferred relation to them" [original emphasis] (Smith, 1989, p. 32). He further argues:

Even if we resist a text, we still consume it and thus enter into a given relation to it. The artifacts [*sic*] and objects produced for us by capital must then be seen simultaneously as sites of our interaction and as objects for which we are consumers: they are popular-cultural-commodity-texts (Smith, 1989, p. 32).

Comolli and Narboni (1999) explain the importance of analysing film as a product for consumption in order to understand its meanings:

Every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing). The cinema is all the more thoroughly and completely determined because unlike other arts or ideological systems its very manufacture mobilizes powerful economic forces ... (p. 758).

Comolli and Narboni suggest that given popular cultural forms' investment in dominant ideology the question left to be asked is whether or not popular cultural forms "allow the ideology a free, unhampered passage, transmit it with crystal clarity, serve as its chosen

language?" (1999, p. 753). However, I do not conceive of ideology as so static and fixed. While ideology may function to construct and maintain the power of dominant social formations (Giroux, 1993), it does not do so through overriding determination or subordination. Ideology is also subject to hegemonic struggle, must win consent, and is always contradictory and ambivalent. There must be unresolved contradictions in both the film's representation of an ideology and in the lived ideology in order for it to be widely accepted; for, as Fiske's argument points out, these fissures are where diverse subcultures can find their socially-located realities represented (Roman and Christian-Smith, 1988, p. 20). Therefore, I do not ask whether dominant ideology is transmitted freely and clearly through the text; instead, I look for the contradictions and fissures in the ideology represented that allow for multiple significations.

The conception of texts as polysemic, or having multiple significations, does not mean that there are infinite possible interpretations, nor that all things can be interpreted in multiple ways, as Roman and Christian-Smith (1988) and Dyer (1993) have noted. While spectators do make sense of images in multiple, complex and contradictory ways, Richard Dyer (1993) stresses that people cannot "make representations mean anything they want them to mean." He explains further how the limits of interpretations are structured by a system of power:

The prestige of high culture, the centralization of mass cultural production, the literal poverty of marginal cultural production: these are aspects of the power relations of representations that put the weight of control over representation on the side of the rich, the white, the male, the heterosexual. Acknowledging the complexity of viewing/reading practices in relation to representation does not entail the claim that there is equality and freedom in the regime of representation. (Dyer, 1993, p. 2)

Thus, while a film cannot have one fixed and indisputable meaning inscribed in it through production and consumption by dominant culture, the moral values and contested ideologies of dominant culture can be absent from neither its production nor consumption. Dyer argues, "representations are presentations, always and necessarily entailing the use of the codes and conventions of the available cultural forms of presentation. Such forms restrict and shape what can be said by and/or about any aspect of reality in a given place in a given society at a given time" (1993, p. 2).

Just as the production of a film uses only the codes and conventions available in a given time and place, people make sense of films using the codes they have access to in their given social situation. Therefore, we can conceptualize the various possible readings based on the social situation of readers *and how these readers inhabit their social situation*. Thus, a person's class, racial background, gender or sexuality may indicate what codes an individual has access to, but how this individual feels about living her/his social situation is equally important in determining how she or he will read a film (Dyer, 1993).

My semiotic deconstruction of this particular text will consider the codes of dominant society in which the film was produced, the possibility for multiple interpretations and the context in which these interpretations make sense, and finally, the contradictions and fissures within the text that make these variant interpretations possible. I believe this is a valid method for pursuing a better understanding of dominant ideological construction of problems of diversity in education in this particular film.

Stuart Hall (1997a) argues that the difference between semiotic and discursive approaches to analysis are that the semiotic approach is concerned with *how* language

produces meaning – the ‘poetics’, while the discursive approach is concerned with the *effects and consequences* of representation – the ‘politics’. I do not choose to make such a distinction between approaches because I believe that the ‘poetics’ and the ‘politics’ are too closely related to be segregated and both are too deeply situated in the film to be absent from my analysis.

### Semiotic Analysis

The semiotic approach I use is similar to that employed by Leslie Roman (1988) in her study of feminine sexuality within the subcultural ritual of punk slam-dancing. In the tradition of Charles S. Peirce, Roman understands the socially and historically situated interpretant to be active in the process of making meaning of signs. This approach looks for the codes or subcodes embedded in the film and makes meaning of them within a local system of signification (*i.e.* codes are not stable or fixed, but rather historically and contextually determined). Linda Christian-Smith also notes the significance of codes in a semiotic analysis. She writes:

Semiotic analysis proceeds by locating sets of codes through which meaning is produced. These codes constitute the grammar or rule systems which determine what elements are combined (Christian-Smith, 1988, p. 80).

While the meaning of these codes is not static and cannot be finally fixed, according to Stuart Hall, “Attempting to ‘fix’ it is the work of a representational practice, which intervenes in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one” (Hall, 1997b, p. 228). Therefore, my task is to look for potential codes and their meanings, and determine which of these codes and meanings are privileged.



Christine Gledhill (1997), in her study of soap operas, suggests several places where the privileging of codes and their meanings may be evident. Gledhill recommends an analysis of the form of the program (or film). This includes: the nature of the genre, the narrative structure (e.g. chronological), the organization of shots (through visual composition and editing), character types, and modes of expression (such as melodrama, comedy, and realism) (Gledhill, 1997). Dyer recommends that the film's iconography also be examined closely. Iconography includes images (objects, people, settings), sound, and music (Dyer, 1993). Hall reminds us:

These elements – sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes – are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they *are* but what they *do*, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it. They signify. [original emphasis] (Hall, 1997a, p. 5).

These – the iconography, sound, music, words, gestures, expressions – are the elements that I considered in my interpretation. This, however, does not imply a process of taking elements, one by one, from the film and putting them under a microscope for analysis. These elements must be read in the way they come together to form a whole (unified or not). The images and representations in this film, must also be read in context, with and against representations from other texts. That is because the process of viewing and making sense of representations is always informed by our past experiences of viewing and making sense of representations, as well as our imagined futures. Hall writes:

[I]mages do not carry meaning or 'signify' on their own. They accumulate meanings, or play off their meanings against one another, across a variety of texts and media. Each image carries its own, specific meaning. But at the broader level of how 'difference' and 'otherness' is being represented in a particular culture at any one moment, we can see similar representational practices and figures being repeated, with variations, from one text or site of representation to another (Hall, 1997b, p. 232).

Thus, by examining these elements of *Dangerous Minds*, in terms of how they come together within the codes and conventions of the media and within the context of late capitalist society in which the film was produced and is being analyzed, the ideological limits which structure discourse of diversity for teachers should become clear. But it is not enough to “read off ideologies as they are produced within particular texts” (Giroux, 1993, p. 120). Giroux argues that a critical analysis must also attempt to explain, “how it [the cultural text] functions to secure specific forms of affective investments” (Giroux, 1993, p. 39). Gledhill similarly encourages an analysis that takes into account emotional effect:

My argument is that *if we want to know how fictions gain hold of our imaginations so that they effectively become a central part of our ‘real’ lives on a day-to-day basis we have to pay attention to these properties of aesthetic form and emotional affect.* For these effects produce or imply meanings which we may well find at odds with the ostensible ‘messages’ we might arrive at through counting stereotypes, themes or plot outcomes [original emphasis] (Gledhill, 1997, p. 343).

This attention to emotional effect, which emphasizes the role of the interpretant, again can be traced back to Charles S. Peirce, who wrote, “The first proper significate [*sic*] effect of a sign is a *feeling* produced by it” (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 40).

And so I watched the film *Dangerous Minds*, not incidentally from a video recording in the comfort of my home. Formatted to fit the television screen, the television version is somewhat different from the cinematic version. Because the frames are differently proportioned, images and characters may not appear on the television screen in the same position as on the movie screen (for instance, centre, left, or right) and may be sliced from the frame entirely. Watching the film, at home on video, also allowed me the opportunity to fast forward, rewind, play and re-play parts to pick apart elements.

But the first step in my analysis was watching the film and attending to the emotional effects of the film, the feelings produced by the signs – the music, the dialogue, the characters, the images, the narrative. At times I felt sorrow, other times excitement, other times discomfort, other times enjoyment, and still other times scepticism. I identified the cinematic elements that produced these emotions and considered whether my emotional response corresponded with my intellectual response. All these emotional responses were clues to determining the *privileged* meaning of each of the film's many signs. Finally, I asked, what social code is affirmed by the privileged meanings and perhaps challenged by alternative meanings? In this way, I came up with a list of codes and subcodes, which I confirmed were at play, through subsequent viewings of the film.

### Reflexivity

Reading a cultural text (a film) in a pedagogical way about a teacher who chooses to introduce a cultural text (popular music lyrics) as curriculum demands a great amount of reflexivity. While I intend to critique the way the teacher 'reads' her selected cultural text, I must also turn the same critical eye on my own 'reading' of the film. Giroux calls for modes of criticism in text analysis that are based on assumptions drawn from the works of Bakhtin and Freire. These modes of criticism include:

[T]reating the text as a social construct that is produced out of a number of available discourses; locating the contradictions and gaps within an educational text and situating them historically in terms of the interests they sustain and legitimate; recognizing in the text its internal politics of style and how this both opens up and constrains particular representations of the social world; understanding how the text actively works to silence certain voices; and, finally, discovering how to release possibilities from the text that provide new insights and critical readings regarding human understanding and social practices. (Giroux, 1993, p. 139).

These assumptions can both inform my analysis and be used to critique the approach taken by Ms. Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*. While it will require a careful deconstruction of the film to see how Ms. Johnson does or does not get at these modes of criticism with her class, these modes of criticism will be considerably more evident in my work.

## CHAPTER 4

### Analysis

We<sup>2</sup> first see LouAnne Johnson's classroom full of 'diverse' students from the teacher's perspective, as she stands outside the room and peers through the small window. Five black students, four male and one female, are crowded around the podium and the table it's sitting on at the front of the classroom. They are rapping. "Noisy bunch, aren't they?" Ms. Johnson asks her colleague, Hal, in a mousy voice and with a tentative laugh. The students standing at the front of the classroom, at what convention tells us is the teacher's position, are a challenge to Ms. Johnson's authority. Her task appears to be getting these students settled down and orderly so she can *teach*. We know this not only from the way stereotypes are used to represent the conflict between disorderly black students and a prim white teacher, but also because this is a common convention and familiar narrative structure found in most teaching genre films. *Music of the Heart* (1999), *Stand and Deliver* (1987), *Conrack* (1974), *To Sir, With Love* (1967), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) – these films all are structured chronologically usually in the space of one year (but not always), in which the fresh (i.e. novice/inexperienced) and determined teacher struggles and sacrifices to win respect and control of authority from her or his unruly but good-at-heart students.

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<sup>2</sup> In my analysis I use 'we' to refer to myself and loosely to other viewers.

The film establishes various codes and subcodes through stereotyping, genre conventions, and iconography (objects, settings, gestures, expressions, clothes, sounds, and music). I have identified and focused my analysis on three codes which are evident in this brief initial glimpse of the classroom and which structure the larger discourse of teaching diverse students in the film. These codes are: *difference*, *authority/control* and *white knight redemption*.

### Code of Difference

The code of difference plays out in the relationships between the teacher, the school, and the students in Ms. Johnson's class. The code operates in a variety of ways, predominantly through visual images (particularly in distinct settings), the students' talk, and character stereotypes. The students in Ms. Johnson's class, variously as individuals and as a whole unit, are represented almost always as different than the teacher or the norm. Sometimes this difference is expressed as danger and other times as deficiency. The students' ethnic and racial backgrounds are different than that of the white, middle class teacher, but difference plays out in other visible ways, as well. The code of difference contains the following dominant elements:

1. The *behaviour* of these students is different than the white teacher's behaviour.
2. The students' *everyday experience* is different than school life.
3. The students' have a cultural deficit that needs to be filled by the teacher.
4. These male students are *physically* different than the female teacher and students.
5. Difference is polarized and essentialist.

The differences in students' behaviour and home lives are predominantly represented as deficiencies. The male students' physical differences are dangers.

### Difference in student behaviour.

The representation of the students as different is constructed (and interpreted) in great part through stereotypes. The use of stereotypes is evident in the image of black students (primarily male) rapping, described above. This stereotype visually (in the students' movements) and audibly (through the rap music) establishes behavioural and cultural differences between the students and their teacher. Stereotypes are used in society and in representations to order and categorize people. According to Dyer (1993), this helps society and individuals "make sense of that society through generalities, patternings and 'typifications'" (p. 12). Stereotypes are also used in representation to condense "a great deal of complex information and a host of connotations" into a simple, striking form (Dyer, 1993, p. 12). The use of stereotypes is an "immediate and economical" method of conveying a character's social role and/or subculture in a narrative. Dyer explains, "Small details of an image can quickly and assuredly summon up such a breadth of social implication, can condense such a wealth of meaning and knowledge" (Dyer, 1993, p. 23). Stuart Hall comments on Dyer's understanding of stereotypes. He writes:

*[S]tereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference'. . . . [S]tereotyping deploys a strategy of 'splitting'. It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and unacceptable. It then excludes or expels everything which does not fit, which is different. . . . So, another feature of stereotyping is its practice of 'closure' and exclusion. It symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong. Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order [original emphasis] (Hall, 1997c, p. 258).*

Stereotypes always have an implicit plot function in the narrative. In this case, the rapping black students moving passionately and occupying a large space may signify a challenge to (the white teacher's) authority and a disruption to normative order. We can

draw conclusions from the stereotypes about these students' social world and we can guess what the prim and proper Ms. Johnson (also stereotyped in her lacy suit, softly curled and pinned back hair, pearl earrings, and her restrained and reserved demeanour) is thinking about her students.

#### Difference in everyday experience.

We already know more about these students than Ms. Johnson knows from her first impression of their *different behaviour*. We saw these students in their own neighborhood in the opening sequence, which is a montage of images of urban decay shot in black and white: A dark staircase with graffitied walls, a corner filled with flowers and photos assembled in what appears to be a memorial, more graffiti, a building with blacked-out windows, a dishevelled black man wearing two different shoes pushing a shopping cart and collecting aluminium cans off the street, over a shot of rundown apartment buildings and beat up cars the title appears in white letters with *dangerous* underlined in red, three young women chatting on the corner. A school bus appears, which picks up the young women and will carry the sequence out of this neighbourhood, but not before we see a drug deal and a black young man screaming and running to catch the bus. With all the students finally aboard, the bus pulls away, and the film cuts to a tree-lined street with a couple of newer looking cars. The bus appears in the background and as it approaches the color of the scene increases until the bus moves out of the frame in full yellow. The camera lingers a moment on this more affluent neighbourhood before it cuts to a shot of Parkmont High School, where the bus pulls up in front to unload.



The visual images of this sequence, which include two prominent stereotypes (the homeless black man walking the streets with a shopping cart, the criminal black man selling drugs), show the students' home lives as different than school life, a difference that is clearly represented as deficient. If the images and stereotypes alone do not convince the viewer of the poverty of these kids' home lives, the lack of colour further hints at it. If that does not drive home the point, the words of Gangsta's Paradise, the song playing throughout this sequence, surely will. Particularly at moments of still or non-descript images the lyrics jump out:

As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death  
I take a look at my life and realize there's not much left  
.....  
Keep spending most our lives living in the gangsta's paradise  
.....  
I'm twenty-three now, but will I live to see twenty-four?  
The way that things are going I don't know.  
.....  
Tell me why are we so blind to see that the ones we hurt are you and me?  
.....  
They say I got to learn but no one's here to teach me.  
If they can't understand how can they reach me?  
I guess they can't, I guess they won't. I guess they front.  
That's why I know my life is outta luck, fool.

The film's iconography, organization of shots, use of colour, and music – as we see in the quotation above – all work to establish difference in the everyday experience of these students as a deficiency. The gradual change from black and white to colour as the students are bussed from their own inner-city neighbourhoods to their Palo Alto high school clearly expresses the notion of difference, in this case difference as deficiency, that the film advances. The images, the lack of colour, the music – these work together in one interpretation to show that these kids bring nothing good, nothing of value with them

from home on their bus ride to school, where there is colour, there is hope, there is the possibility of surviving to twenty-four. Yet, the ideological reading is challenged here by the music, "Gangsta's Paradise," performed by Grammy Award-winning and multi-platinum selling artist Coolio (and written by a team led by Stevie Wonder), where lines like "too much television watching got me chasing dreams" and the last verse quoted above leave plenty of room for various interpretations by differently situated audiences. This music leaves enough room for contradictory readings of the ideology and for a contradictory affective response, in order to appeal to a wider audience than the normative one that would perceive this binary representation of home/school life as 'realistic'.

#### Students' cultural deficit.

As described above, degrees of difference are clearly evident in the relationship between the students' home lives and school life. But the students are also represented as different than the teacher. Generally, this is a dichotomous relationship, where the students are culturally deficient and the teacher is well educated and refined. However, to the extent that she lacks the customary credentials for teaching, Ms. Johnson is also represented as deficient. We learn in her interview with the assistant principal that she has had no classroom teaching experience. This representation might suggest that the suitable teacher for the diverse classroom needs neither classroom experience nor official certification. But the teacher's deficiency is limited to these professional qualifications. Ms. Johnson is able to compensate for her lack of teaching experience by referring to books for guidance. The students, apparently, lack this ability to compensate for their deficiencies, until they meet Ms. Johnson who is positioned to meet the students' needs.

The students' visible needs (or deficiencies) include various social graces. Dinner with the teacher at "the best restaurant in town" is the prize for winning an academic contest, but it also serves as an opportunity to make student deficiency and class difference evident. The first piece of evidence of *class difference* occurs in the narrative, when two of the three winners have to decline the dinner because they have night jobs and are not able to get out of their work commitment. But class difference is visually established at the restaurant. Raul is a Mexican student with dark skin and dark hair slicked back in a ponytail. He wears a black leather jacket, in contrast to the considerably more conservative attire of other patrons. His interactions with the elderly white waiter are abrasive and he appears clearly out of place in this classy restaurant. After the waiter has recited the evening's specials, he gives Ms. Johnson and Raul a moment to themselves. Ms. Johnson instructs Raul to talk to the waiter, "It will be good practice for your summer job interviews." Raul responds, "I can't talk to that guy. He probably thinks I'm weird or something." Ms. Johnson unfolds her cloth napkin and places it neatly in her lap, while Raul fumbles with his, tucking it into his shirt, pulling it out, and finally folding it into his lap. Ms. Johnson explains how to get the waiter's attention with a little nod and Raul clumsily orders "the chicken – a whole one," which elicits an alarmed look from the waiter. Raul is congratulated by Ms. Johnson, the noise softens to light music, and the camera cuts to a shot of a table of white patrons, whose hands are the only things visible initially. A knife and fork are in a woman's manicured hands cutting a piece of food, while a masculine hand rests a glass of white wine on the table in the foreground of the shot. The camera pans up as the woman raises her fork delicately to her mouth and then to the man as he raises a water glass to his face, which is profiled in the foreground

of the shot. There is laughter and soft music in the background. The images of these white patrons are a vivid contrast to the shots of Raul fumbling with his napkin.

Moments later, Raul's voice raises with emotion as he explains to Ms. Johnson that he had nothing to wear for this evening out so he bought the leather jacket he was wearing from a man off the street who "stole it, probably." When the waiter interrupts their conversation to offer dessert, Raul barks out, "hey man, we're talking." Raul's auditory response – his rude bark – interrupts the smooth, elegant visual elements (as well as the soft, harmonious music) established by the white patrons (including Ms. Johnson) and indicates his lack of social grace and cultural capital.

#### Male students as physically dangerous.

Not only are the students represented as different and deficient, they are also represented as dangerous. In the first classroom scene briefly described earlier in this analysis, Ms. Johnson enters the room of rapping, talking, and hostile students. When she approaches a black female student wearing headphones and asks what happened to the previous teacher, one student calls out, "We killed the bitch." There is a shot of Ms. Johnson smiling, but moving slightly, nervously from one foot to the other. Another student, Raul, says, "Emilio ate her." There is a shot of Emilio, a Latino student who looks much older and stronger than the average high school student. There is a quick cut to a shot of Ms. Johnson, no longer smiling. She lowers her head and her eyes, visibly swallows, and we hear Emilio say "Bullshit," off screen. The camera cuts back to Emilio as he rises from his chair suavely. The class is cheering and encouraging him all along. "That bitch was too ugly to eat," he says as he walks deliberately to the front of the

classroom, encroaching on Ms. Johnson's space. "Fed her to my dogs." Back to Ms. Johnson, laughing this time. Then Emilio crosses the boundary, enters her physical space, his eyes move up and down her body. Nearly touching her, he says, "But I'll eat you." No more laughter, Ms. Johnson looks deadly serious and scared. This scene is a prime example of the disturbing, historical practice of representing the racialized and excessively sexualized male (student) as a threat to the white woman (teacher) (Hall, 1997b).

Emilio is also a threat to other students. After stopping a scuffle between Emilio and two other boys, Ms. Johnson sends them all back to their classes. Emilio's girlfriend, Angela, attempts to take his hand as they walk away from the confrontation, but Emilio aggressively pulls his arm away from her. Angela turns back to Ms. Johnson and says:

You shouldn't have done that. . . . You just shouldn't mess with Emilio.  
Raul knows that if you make a deal with Emilio and you fuck up on him you  
get your locker smashed in with your head. Everybody knows that.

They continue their fight later, punching, kicking, and beating each other against walls, until policemen break up the fight finally. In these few moments, Emilio shows aggression towards his girlfriend and bullies two smaller students.

Emilio is not only dangerous to his white female teacher, his girlfriend, and other young men; he is also dangerous to himself. Late in the narrative, we see Emilio and Angela together outside the school. Again Angela is physically struggling with Emilio, as she calls out to Ms. Johnson. Angela excitedly explains to Ms. Johnson that "this crackhead named Shorty" who just came out of jail wants to kill Emilio.

Angela: What are you superman? Is your ass bullet proof? Is that what you think. Tell her [Ms. Johnson]. Tell her what you're going to do.

Ms. Johnson: What is it?

Angela: He's strapped [he's got a gun].

Emilio: Shut the fuck up. She don't need to know my business.

Angela: Is you're business dying? No. [To Ms. Johnson:] There's this crackhead named Shorty, he just came out of jail and he says that I'm his girl and Emilio took me from him. And now he wants to kill Emilio.

Ms. Johnson: Emilio, if this boy is threatening you, we can go to the police.

Emilio: Look, this is nothing you can do anything about. This guy is looking for me to kill me and the only thing for me to stop him is to kill him first. That's just the way it is.

Ms. Johnson convinces Emilio to "hide" at her house and while he's there she convinces him to tell the principal about the boy who has been threatening him. We should clearly see Emilio's irrationality, as Ms. Johnson does. Emilio resists going to the police or the principal, because he can't rat on the boy. Ms. Johnson responds, "Right, kill him, that's better." It is Emilio's irrationality that could get him killed; it is his lack of sense that is dangerous to him.

Female students can be dangerous as well. Callie, a well-behaved, female student who participates in class, becomes a threat to herself and other female students when she gets pregnant. The assistant principal articulates her fear to Ms. Johnson that Callie's condition is going to spread like wildfire. She tells Ms. Johnson:

I do what I have to do, because it is dangerous to have a pregnant girl in a classroom. It is not a warning, LouAnne. It is prestigious, it is stardom, it is attention. You know not all these girls become pregnant by accident. Pregnancy is contagious.

Yet, the extent to which Callie or any female students is a threat is slight compared to that of Emilio and other male students. Furthermore, Callie is granted little agency in posing a threat to others, whereas Emilio, in most cases, seems to purvey danger deliberately.

The representation of black (and Latino) *men* as particularly threatening is not an anomaly. Neither do black (and Latino) men always resist this stereotype. Hall points out that this representation in some ways serves the interests of black (and Latino) men who have been historically belittled by patronizing whites, who, for example, refer to blacks as *boy* or by their first names. Hall notes:

[A]s Staples, Mercer and Julien remind us, black men sometimes responded to this infantilization by adopting a sort of caricature-in-reverse of the hyper-masculinity and super-sexuality with which they had been stereotyped. Treated as 'childish', some blacks in reaction adopted a 'macho', aggressive-masculine style. But this only served to confirm the fantasy amongst whites of their ungovernable and excessive sexual nature (see Wallace, 1979) (Hall, 1997b, p.263).

Ms. Johnson also engages in the practice of infantilization, perhaps to make the students less threatening. Ms. Johnson's repeated acts of infantilization function to challenge the code of danger. She refers to students variously as *honey* and *darling*. She captures their attention with candy and toys (for example, a rubber snake). She takes them to an amusement park, where they win stuffed animal prizes and drive bumper cars. Raul gets so dizzied by one of the rides he falls to the ground laughing, as he attempts to get out of the seat. And we are reminded that even Emilio is still a child, when Ms. Johnson visits his home to meet with his parents.

The code of difference as deficiency also has limits. Throughout the film, the subcode of deficiency is made to apply to *individual* differences as described in detail in the examples above, but it stops there. By about forty minutes into the film, Ms. Johnson

has made a lot of 'progress' with her students. They remain seated. They rarely speak out of turn. They are reading poetry. But a moment of conflict arises after Ms. Johnson breaks up a fight between three classmates, resulting in the suspension of two students and detention of the third. The students are once again hostile, but now it is demonstrated by withdrawing and refraining from participating. There is a confrontation in the classroom and a black female student speaks out into the tense, silent air:

First Student: Man, you don't understand nothing. I mean you don't come from where we live. You're not bussed here.

Ms. Johnson: Do you have a choice to get on that bus?

First Student: Man, you come and live in my neighborhood for one week and then you tell me if you've got a choice.

Ms. Johnson: There are a lot of people who live in your neighborhood who choose not to get on that bus. What do they choose to do? They choose to go out and sell drugs, they choose to go out and kill people, they choose to do a lot of other things. But they choose not to get on that bus. The people who choose to get on that bus, which are you, are the people who are saying, "I will not carry myself down to die, when I go to my grave my head will be high." That is a choice. There are no victims in this classroom [extremely charged emotionally].

Second Student: Why do you care anyway? You're just here for the money.

Ms. Johnson: Because I make a choice to care, and honey, the money ain't that good.

Student (off-screen): Whatever...

Emilio (off-screen): Read it again, Ms. Johnson.

Ms. Johnson: What?

Emilio: Read those lines you just read again.



The students attempt to draw attention to material conditions and *material differences* of their home lives, but that discourse is silenced when Ms. Johnson emphasizes the *individual* differences of people in the students' neighbourhoods. According to this line of reasoning selling drugs, killing people, and staying in school/succeeding in school are individual choices of the students and are not related to the material conditions of the students' neighbourhoods. It is emotionally moving to hear the teacher empower her students by asserting that they are not victims and argue so with such passion and sincerity. But in the emotion, it is easy to get swept away entirely from the very real, valid concerns the students raise. By the time Emilio speaks, asks Ms. Johnson to "read those lines you just read again," the conflict is over, (the swell of music tells us so), and the Horatio Alger myths of determination, hard work, and meritocracy are firmly re-established. Look, if Emilio can choose to learn and like poetry, anyone can.

Difference is polarized and essentialist.

Stuart Hall argues:

People who are in any way significantly different from the majority – 'them' rather than 'us' – are frequently exposed to this *binary* form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic. And they are often required to be *both things at the same time!* [original emphasis] (Hall, 1997b, p. 229).

I suggest that this argument works conversely as well. Therefore, when we see people represented in a binary way, we can conclude that they are considered *significantly different from dominant groups* – 'them' rather than 'us'. The students in this film, working class and primarily black and Latino/Latina are repeatedly represented in

polarized extremes. Many of the schooldays in the film begin with a scene outside the school consisting of a montage of shots of students smiling, laughing, talking, kissing, singing, dancing, jumping rope – essentially images of young adults actively enjoying life. At different moments of the film we see these same students fighting, swearing, screaming, and withdrawing from life in other ways. These images juxtaposed against each other emphasize their polarity, but even within a single shot, for example a shot of a black male student rapping and dancing, it is possible to sense the conflicting presence of opposing connotations, such as repelling-because-different and compelling-because-strange-and-exotic. The point is that this kind of binary representation, like that of the opening sequence, functions to signify these students' difference from the norm. Similarly, the representation of these students is essentialist, in that Ms. Johnson's students seem to have identical subjectivities, with little or no differentiations by gender, income-level, English proficiency, or other factors.

#### Code of Authority and Control

The main elements of the code of authority and control in this text are:

1. The proper authority in the classroom is the teacher.
2. Student resistance to authority can be controlled and overcome.
3. Control can be gained through cordial relations.
4. The teacher has authority to legitimate voice.
5. The teacher uses authority to uphold dominant norms of schooling.
6. The teacher lacks control to change school structure.
7. Authority in the school system is gendered.

This code, like the code of difference, relies heavily on visual images, such as the way the teacher's and students' bodies use space. To a greater extent than the code of difference, the code of authority and control operates through the narrative and student and teacher

talk. Much evidence for this code comes from dialogues between the teacher and her colleague, the teacher and administrators, and the teacher and students. Finally, this code is evident in structuring absences in the narrative – those awkward moments when a question or issue has been raised by the narrative but is clumsily skirted around. Often in these moments, music becomes an important element in promoting an affective response in order to smooth over the awkward absence. Therefore, this code operates through many elements of the film.

The proper authority in the classroom is the teacher.

Convention, beyond this particular text, tells us that the teacher is the rightful authority in the classroom. In the hallways or offices of the school, that authority often gives way to the authority of the administration, but *within the classroom* the teacher is supposed to be in control. The teacher often tries to exert and maintain authority visually through the control of space. From the moment she enters the classroom, Ms. Johnson takes her place at the front of the classroom (although there occurs more than once a *physical* challenge by students to appropriate this space). On the second day, when the students enter the classroom, Ms. Johnson is already seated, lounging with legs stretched out, in the chair at the front of the room. Not only is this a change in behaviour, it is also a claim for space, and thereby a claim for authority. Lounging with her feet up on the desk, she occupies more space than she would standing or seated straight. Later, she exerts authority by walking between the rows of seated students. Her movement controls the students' attention and exerts power.

Student resistance can be controlled and overcome.

The students' resistance to the teacher's authority is a plot function. It is the main external conflict that drives the narrative. The teacher's challenge is to gain rightful control over the classroom. When LouAnne Johnson first enters her classroom, most of the students ignore her. Those few who actually acknowledge her presence do so with a shout – "white bread." The majority continue to rap, dance, and talk with no regard to the teacher, even as she calls out, "May I have your attention please." The students' noise is a clear sign of resistance. But the students also do not allow the teacher to control space. The five black students rapping in front of the classroom, at the teacher's desk, do not move from that space, even as Ms. Johnson enters and stands just feet away from them. Moments later, after the tense encounter with Emilio ("I'll eat you") described previously, Ms. Johnson writes the boy's name on the board, only to incite cheers and chants from the classroom of students, who pound their fists on their desks. Ms. Johnson finally leaves the room as students throw paper at her. In the hallway, she learns from her colleague, Hal, that the class's prior two teachers had had breakdowns. Hal explains, "That's how they weed them out."

The students demonstrate numerous ways of resisting the teacher's authority. When Ms. Johnson turns her back to the class and writes on the blackboard, a girl stands at the front of the class, facing the other students and raises her middle finger. Students continue to chatter, sit on their desks, two girls pose as another takes a photo across the room. The students also show resistance, later in the film, by not responding to the teacher's questions or efforts to engage them in a reading.

Viewers may interpret student resistance demonstrated by disruptive behaviour as a refusal to accept the dictates of dominant school culture. But the students' disruptive behaviour can also be interpreted as defiance, lack of self-control, lack of etiquette, or various other possibilities. Some viewers may interpret the students' resistance as empowerment. Others may see it as scepticism. It is hard to argue that one view is privileged over the others, at least initially. But the students' behaviour changes radically by the end of the film: they participate in the teaching-learning process, they remain seated, they rarely use disruptive language. This seems to confirm for me that student resistance never was represented as a form of empowerment, but rather as lack of self-control or etiquette. The students' bad behaviour was just something *to be managed* by the teacher.

By the end of the film, the students are literally giving Ms. Johnson authority and control over themselves. On one particular day, Ms. Johnson clearly appears to be in no mood to fight for control over the class. She is ready to submit to them and relinquish authority completely. But the students don't let her. Initially the students complain when Ms. Johnson tells them to take out their worksheets and do the vocabulary, but the students surrender to Ms. Johnson without a fight at all:

Student: I don't wanna do no damn vocabulary.

Ms. Johnson: Then don't.

Student: What do you mean? You mean I have a choice? You're not gonna let me get away with not learning my vocabulary. Right?

Ms. Johnson: That's right. You have to do your vocabulary. Words are thoughts, and we can't think without them. So, please.

Raul: So let's just do it man, she's gonna be down our back in a minute.

This surrender of control has various possible interpretations. It could mean that Ms. Johnson taught the students etiquette and self-control, where they had neither before. It could mean that they now know *and accept* that Ms. Johnson is the rightful authority in the classroom. It could mean that the students realize and accept they have lost the struggle for power/authority to the teacher. It could mean that the students have become empowered differently and no longer seek empowerment through disruptive behaviour. Like everything else, Ms. Johnson's gain of authority over her students is not fixed or unambiguous. Although they have conceded control over their behaviour at the end of the film, they are responsible for convincing Ms. Johnson to continue on as their teacher, despite her intentions to quit. In this way, the students are empowered despite Ms. Johnson's control over their behaviour. Yet, this empowerment is extremely limited; the students are only empowered in so far as they participate in the reframing of the white teacher as redeemer. I would argue that the students have conceded authority/control to the teacher in terms of behaviour, as part of a larger process of negotiation, a process the students resisted with past teachers and initially with Ms. Johnson but finally consented to when Ms. Johnson adopted a pedagogy of cordial relations<sup>3</sup>.

Control can be gained through cordial relations.

After walking out on her class on that first day, Ms. Johnson complains to her colleague Hal: "I can't teach *them*." Hal responds, "Yes, you can. All you got to do is get their attention." He clues her in on how to do that by humming the tune of "The

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow this term from Giroux (1997).

Marine Hymn” as he walks off down the hallway. The next day she tries a new approach to gain control of her class: karate lessons. She tells the class she was a U.S. Marine and she teaches two students to do a “throw”. Furthermore, she has changed her clothes and her demeanour. In contrast to her neutral-coloured, conservative suit of the previous day, Ms. Johnson wears jeans, a plaid button-down shirt, a leather jacket, and boots. Her hair is no longer clipped back with soft curls framing her face; it is now loose, straight and somewhat mussed. She is even sitting casually with her feet up on the desk when the students enter the classroom. She is no longer restrained and timid. She is tough, like her students.

On a later day, we see a warm, amiable teacher, tossing out candy bars and excessive praise for correctly identifying the verbs and nouns of sentences. “Fantastic. . . You guys are sharp. . . .Boy, poetry will be a piece of cake for this crowd.” Ms. Johnson attempts to win control over her class through a pedagogy of cordial relations – by relating to the students (through her clothes and demeanour) and by developing good rapport with the students (giving out candy, prizes, excessive compliments).

The teacher has authority to legitimate voice.

The back cover to the *Dangerous Minds* videocassette reads, “When conventional methods fail to reach them, the feisty Ms. Johnson tries the *unconventional* – defying the rules and creating her own curriculum!” To introduce her students to poetry, Ms. Johnson uses the lyrics to songs of the white, 1960s singer and songwriter, Bob Dylan. With a little cajoling, this proves to be an effective way to engage the students. The kids are interested and participate actively, and relatively orderly, in the discussion of the

lyrics. While the use of popular cultural texts in the classroom is not unheard of, as the videocassette cover points out, it is also not exactly common practice. Yet, it might be nothing more than a teaching aid, or a bribe like the candy and prizes. In a dialogue with Hal, Ms. Johnson discusses her plan to introduce poetry to her students:

Hal: Poetry?

Ms. Johnson: Poetry, yeah.

Hal: These kids?

Ms. Johnson: Why not these kids?

Hal: Well, hey, go for it.

Ms. Johnson: But *I've got to find a gimmick first*. You know. Something that will grab their attention. Who's your favourite poet, Griffith? [emphasis added].

This dialogue foremost reflects a typical concern about whether poetry is appropriate for these students, a concern which reappears later in the film and will be looked at more carefully later in this analysis. Bob Dylan's words do seem to be just a gimmick, at first, but Ms. Johnson does relate (although that relationship may be tentative) the context to the students' lives as can be seen in the following speech quoted previously in this analysis:

There are a lot of people who live in your neighbourhood who choose not to get on that bus. What do they choose to do? They choose to go out and sell drugs, they choose to go out and kill people, they choose to do a lot of other things. But they choose not to get on that bus. The people who choose to get on that bus, which are you, are the people who are saying, "I will not carry myself down to die, when I go to my grave my head will be high." That is a choice. There are no victims in this classroom.

Whether or not this is an effective way of relating the Dylan lyrics to the students' lives, the choice of Dylan lyrics is by no means radical. Using Dylan lyrics, rather than



rap, does not legitimate the students' own voice as defined by the film. The film repeatedly establishes that rap is a significant part of these students' lives. We see shots of the kids singing and dancing to rap music in the schoolyard and even in the classroom. Ms. Johnson is often a witness to these demonstrations. Yet, Ms. Johnson chooses to use the lyrics of the white singer Bob Dylan to introduce 'poetry' to her class rather than rap. In this sense, the students' apparent 'voice' is not legitimated, while the white voice is legitimated. By choosing to disregard rap, the music through which the students define themselves according to the film, Ms. Johnson renders the students' cultural experiences illegitimate.

The question of whether or not poetry is appropriate *for these students* is raised repeatedly in the film. As quoted above, Hal asks LouAnne: "Poetry? . . . These kids?" LouAnne's brushes the question aside with her response: "Why not these kids?" The question resurfaces again when Ms. Johnson visits the home of two boys (brothers) who have not been in class lately. "Gangsta's Paradise" is playing again as we return to the students' neighbourhood. But this house is not like the houses we saw in the opening sequence. It is well cared for, with many beautiful rose bushes in the front. The boys are sitting idle on the porch as Ms. Johnson's car pulls up. The music fades out as Ms. Johnson gets out of the car and calls to the boys: "I haven't seen you guys in a week. I thought maybe you got lost on your way to class. I wanted to help you find your way back." The music changes, the volume is low and there are no lyrics. The boys' mother comes out of the house to confront Ms. Johnson. She yells at the boys.

Mother: Get on inside and clean up that pigsty of a room.

Ms. Johnson: Hi. I'm LouAnne Johnson, I'm the boys' teacher [extending her hand, which is refused].

Mother: I know who you are. You're that white bread bitch messing with my babies' mind.

Ms. Johnson: I beg your pardon?

Mother: My boys don't go to your school no more and that's gonna be it.

Ms. Johnson: You took them out of school?

Mother: You're damn right I did. I saw what they were bringing home. Poetry and shit. A waste of time. They got more important things to worry about.

Ms. Johnson: Don't you think that finishing high school will be valuable to their future?

Mother: That's not in their future. I ain't raising no doctors and lawyers here. They got bills to pay. Why don't you just get on out of here. Go find yourself some other poor boys to save.

The scene cuts to a shot of Ms. Johnson at her desk in class, looking defeated.

Narratively and affectively, we see the situation from Ms. Johnson's point of view. With the best intentions, she tried to raise the levels of academic achievement by introducing poetry to students who were previously thought to be nearly illiterate. And now she has "lost" two of her students. Given the momentum of the narrative and the strength of the affective response, it is difficult to look at the situation ideologically. Doing so would raise difficult questions about the relationship between schooling and work.

In this moment appears one of the film's major "structuring absences." By structuring absence, I am not referring to things we would expect to see that are left out of the text, like computers, for instance. The absence of all signs of technology at a time when American schools were subject to an increasing push toward technologization is a

significant and telling absence (evidence of the digital divide predicted by some critics); however, by *structuring absence* I am referring to those issues that are present in the film, but avoided. Dyer (1997) writes:

The notion of a text's 'structuring absence' is a suggestive, even beguiling one, which is also much open to abuse. It does not mean things which are simply not in the text, or which the critic thinks ought to be in the text. ... A structuring absence ... refers to an issue, or even a set of facts or an argument, that a text cannot ignore, but which it deliberately skirts round or otherwise avoids, thus creating the biggest 'holes' in the text, fatally, revealingly misshaping the organic whole assembled with such craft (p. 105).

The mother's argument about the relevance of poetry to her sons' lives is one such structuring absence. The film awkwardly avoids the questions this argument raises: How will learning poetry help these students find employment? What happens to students who leave school before graduating? What is the true value of a high school diploma for these students who are not adequately prepared for postsecondary education?

The film attempts to validate poetry at a point in the film when the students have moved on to the more respectable work of a 'real' poet, Dylan Thomas. Ms. Johnson tells her students:

The mind is like a muscle. And if you want to be really powerful, you got to work it out. Okay? Each new fact, gives you another choice. Each new idea, builds another muscle. Okay? And it's those muscles that are going to make you really strong. Those are your weapons. In this unsafe world, I want to arm you.

"And that's what these poems are supposed to do?" replies one student. That is the only argument for learning poetry the film offers; it is an argument that is premised on the assumption that these students only need the skills and strengths of the dominant society in order to fully participate in that society. We have seen the students actually participating in 'mainstream' school culture earlier in the film in a scene that takes place

in the school library. The students are quiet, inquisitive, and well-behaved. The white librarian's eyes narrow and follow, perhaps in awe or disbelief, the dreadlocked black male student in oversized clothes, as he walks quietly from the library stacks to a table with a book in his hand. Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" is playing in the background. From the look, sound, and feel of this scene, these kids have both the motivation and the capability to participate in "mainstream" society, thanks, surely, to Ms. Johnson's efforts.

But what about the questions raised by the mother of the boys withdrawn from school? Is poetry a waste of time for them? What other things are more important to them? What is the value of a high school diploma for these boys? How do these students negotiate the material conditions of their lives and the ideological expectations of school? To what extent do immediate financial concerns take precedence over long-term (perceived) benefits?

These questions are all suppressed by the advancement of white norms. Rarely do we need to explain the relevance and value of poetry and high school graduation to white, middle-class, college-bound students; thus, it seems the film need not explain it for these students either. Working on the assumption that the normative values (of high school graduation, exposure to literary works) are and should be *no different* for poor, black and Latino/Latina students, the film once again ignores the reality of material differences that may, in reality, shape those values and beliefs differently for differently-situated people.

The teacher uses authority to uphold dominant norms of schooling.

Ms. Johnson acts with emancipatory authority to some degree, in that she challenges the dominant view of teacher as technician when she subverts the administration and approved curriculum and introduces the lyrics of Bob Dylan. But she rarely does more than ask, "What does that mean?" She does not ask her students to consider the author's purpose, basic assumptions, or perspective, as Banks (1992) suggests is necessary for effectively using transformative curriculum to teach students to think critically. Ms. Johnson is not a transformative intellectual, because she upholds many of the dominant norms of schooling, particularly the promotion of individual academic success, as defined by dominant society. Furthermore, she fails to help her students "acquire critical knowledge about basic societal structures, such as the economy, the state, the work place, and mass culture, so that such institutions can be open to potential transformation" (Giroux, 1993, p. 104).

On the second day of class, Ms. Johnson tells her students that everyone is starting with a clean slate. She says, "At this point, everyone has an A." There is a vocal response of disbelief and close-up shots of several students, clearly interested. Music begins, increasing in volume, creating a sense of excitement. A student calls out, "Bullshit." Another student leans forward in his desk to respond to the other: "Yo, why don't you shut up man? What if it ain't bullshit? I ain't never had no fucking A before." The music accelerates as the scene changes. The students are outside, dancing and having fun. The momentum of the scene indicates that the students are excited by the possibility of having and keeping an A. The film takes for granted the notion that the students place as much value in grades as their teacher does.

Similarly, the film assumes that the students value competition, as can be seen by their interest and involvement in Ms. Johnson's Dylan-Dylan Contest. This is the scene in which the students eagerly, but quietly, scour the library to find a Dylan Thomas poem that is similar to the Bob Dylan lyrics they have been reading in class. Yet, Brandau and Collins argue (1994), "In poor communities, competition and achievement do not play the same role that they do in middle-class communities, and so achievement cannot simply be assumed to be a high priority in school, except of course, in the view of the teachers" (p. 131).

The film also leaves unchallenged the value of a high school diploma. At the restaurant scene described in detail above, Ms. Johnson offers to loan Raul the \$200 he owes for the leather jacket he bought on the street, on the provision that he returns the money on the day he graduates. Raul agrees, but says: "I don't get it. Why do you care so much if I graduate?" Ms Johnson simply replies, "Weird, isn't it?" Once again, questions about the value of a high school graduation for these students are skirted around. Yes, high school graduates have more opportunities for financial growth *relative to those without a high school diploma*. But what is the value of a high school diploma without adequate preparation and resources for continuing on to higher education?

#### The teacher lacks control to change school structure.

Tracking is yet another convention that goes completely unchallenged by Ms. Johnson and the film. Ms. Johnson's class is called an "academy class". The assistant principal explains, "It's sort of a school within a school. Special kids – passionate, energetic . . ." Hal further elaborates: "They're bright kids with little or no educational

skills and what we politely call a lot of social problems.” Ms. Johnson not only accepts the practice of tracking, but also promotes it when she tells one of her students, Callie, “With your scores I think you should consider going into advanced English.” Tracking is a structural issue derived from school policies, of which Ms. Johnson appears to have little control. But emancipatory authority and agency in social justice issues, in reality, cannot occur exclusively in the cocoon of the classroom as the film often suggests it does through its narrative. Teacher control over work conditions is limited, as can be seen in the following dialogue between Ms. Johnson and Hal Griffith. Ms. Johnson tells Hal, “I’m about to challenge the entire curriculum, if I could just find the paper in the Xerox room.” Hal explains that the school is out of paper and is short on other essential supplies like pencils as well. These are critical concerns, particularly to urban schools, which *Dangerous Minds* flirts with but mostly avoids.

#### Authority is gendered.

Ms. Johnson’s preference in working alone behind closed doors may be a result of the patriarchal structure of the school system. It is evident that male teachers manifest authority over the students differently than Ms. Johnson does. Hal, walking out of his classroom to speak with Ms. Johnson in the hallway, shouts back to his students, “Shut up,” an example of authoritative command toward students we never see from Ms. Johnson. The film represents Hal’s authority over his students, but *also authority over his female colleague*. On her first day of school, he tells Ms. Johnson in an air of paternal concern: “LouAnne, I’m right next door.” He is also the one who has the insight to

subtly suggest that Ms. Johnson use her Marine Corps experience and pop music as gimmicks to get the students' attention.

While the majority of teachers are women, the gap is smaller in secondary education. In fact, it is an anomaly to have a woman protagonist in a teaching-genre film that takes place at the secondary level (Keroes, 1999). The casting of Michelle Pfeiffer is significant, as three years prior to the release of *Dangerous Minds*, she was featured as the seductive and dangerous Catwoman in *Batman Returns* (1992) and just one year before she starred as Jack Nicholson's love interest in *Wolf* (1994). Michelle Pfeiffer's sensuality and femininity becomes an element of contradiction for a teaching-genre film. Accordingly, Pfeiffer's character, Ms. Johnson, must sacrifice some of her femininity for authority in the classroom. After the first day, she abandons the soft, pastel-coloured knee-length skirt and frilly blouse for jeans and later long, dark skirts. Recently divorced, she has no love interest and tells Hal she's just not ready for that.

Ms. Johnson's authority within the school structure is repeatedly contested by members of the administration. The administration is represented as insensitive, distant, and excessively bureaucratic. In her initial interview, Ms. Johnson's repeated jokes are consistently received with something akin to impatience or disregard from the assistant principal (a white woman). Later, Ms. Johnson is reprimanded by the black, male principal, because she failed to knock before entering his office. In the conversation that follows the principal seems removed from the realities of the classroom:

Principal: Ms. Johnson, I'm taking into consideration the fact that you are new; and therefore, don't know that teaching karate is against school policy and could lead to a lawsuit in case of an injury. But you can avoid this kind of error if you simply follow the curriculum dictated by the board of education.



Ms. Johnson: Well, um, sir, that's almost impossible. Um. Most of my students don't even know what a verb is.

Assistant Principal: If you are going to teach them I'm sure there is a better sentence than "we choose to die."

Ms. Johnson: I'm sure there are, but I needed a sentence that would get their attention and well, it had to be better than this [holding up a copy of the paperback book My Darling, My Hamburger].

Principal: Ms. Johnson, that is the approved curriculum for second period, your class. Now, I know that you're the teacher as smart as she is [cut to a shot of the female assistant principal, then to a shot of Ms. Johnson, and back to the male principal], but I'm afraid you're just going to have to go along with our policies even if you don't agree with them.

Again, we see here the attempt to limit teachers' control over the curriculum, despite the teachers' apparent first-hand understanding of her students' abilities and interests.

### White Knight Redemption Code

The white knight redemption code, like all others, is ambiguous, as when the mother of the boys pulled out of school, tells Ms. Johnson, "Go find yourself some other poor boys to save." Here the code is contested and challenged. Still, three components of this code can be identified:

1. The teacher is *Lone Ranger*.
2. The teacher identifies with student experience.
3. The teacher is a white knight.

Like the other codes, many elements control how this code operates, but the most prominent two elements are the narrative (dialogue and structure) and music.

### Teacher as *Lone Ranger*.

The teacher as lone ranger is a typical convention of teaching-genre films. Often in films of this genre, we see teachers making extreme sacrifices in their personal lives, in order to dedicate their efforts to teaching. Mr. Escalante's marriage is strained by his long hours of work with his AP Calculus class in *Stand and Deliver*. Mr. Holland's son is alienated by the music teacher's devotion to his work in *Mr. Holland's Opus*. Ms. Roberta Guaspari, goes without a single date for many years, finding personal satisfaction from working with students in her violin program in *Music of the Heart*. Thus, it comes as no surprise to hear Ms. Johnson renounce all thoughts of dating during a conversation with Hal Griffith in *Dangerous Minds*.

But not only does Ms. Johnson devote her personal self entirely to her students and teaching, she also *works* completely alone. Aside from the regular interactions with her colleague, Hal, which are generally limited to brief moments of dialogue as they enter or leave the school building, Ms. Johnson interacts with no other teachers. In fact, not a single teacher other than Hal or Ms. Johnson even appears in the film.

When Ms. Johnson goes home after her disastrous first day, in which she left her classroom to a barrage of paper and insults, where does she turn for support and guidance? She reads books. Being several years out of her teacher education program (we learn in her interview that she left before finishing her practicum in order to work for her husband's company), perhaps she has no mentor or former professor she can turn to for guidance. But should not a new teacher, with no practicum experience, have a mentor in the school to work with? Perhaps in reality, she would. But collaboration with and support from colleagues was not included in the film representation.

The subcode of teacher as lone ranger is contested by the narrative. At the end of the film, when Ms. Johnson is contemplating leaving the school, Raul worries that he will not graduate without Ms. Johnson. "Ain't no other teacher gonna give me no A." Ms. Johnson assures Raul that he will earn an A from other teachers if he works as hard for them as he did for her. But if Ms. Johnson overestimates others' respect for these students when she tells Raul that he will earn As from other teachers, it would not be the first time. When she took Emilio back to her house after he was threatened by another student, Ms. Johnson told Emilio to tell the principal about the other boy's threats. She assured him that the principal would handle the problem. She tells Emilio, "You asked me once, how I was going to save you from your life. This is how. This moment. Right now. This will make the difference in your life forever." But it turns out that Ms. Johnson cannot save Emilio all by herself. Emilio did what she advised; he went to the principal's office to get help. The principal sent Emilio away because he did not knock before entering the office. He did not follow the rules.

Ms. Johnson: Did you talk to him?

Principal: No, I sent him away.

Ms. Johnson: What do you mean?

Principal: I mean I sent him away.

Ms. Johnson: Why?

Principal: Because he didn't knock.

Ms. Johnson: Because he didn't knock?

Principal: Yes, Ms. Johnson I'm trying to teach these children how to live in the world. And in the world you don't just burst into someone's office.

Ms. Johnson: Because he didn't knock?

Ms. Johnson did all she could to save Emilio. She did what seemed to be the right thing. But Emilio was lost anyway because he did not get the support he needed from the school administration. In this way, the film contests the notion that the teacher can save the students all by herself through caring, sacrifice, dedication, and effort.

After Ms. Johnson exits the principal's office with a "Damn it!", the film cuts to a shot of an empty desk, Emilio's desk. The rest of the classroom is full, but it is silent. There is a montage of students' faces. The assistant principal knocks on the classroom door. Ms. Johnson joins her in the hallway and learns Emilio was shot and killed three blocks from the school after being sent away from the principal's office that morning. We see their conversation through the classroom door, from the side of the students.

Assistant Principal: Are you going to tell them now?

Ms. Johnson: [Nods]

Assistant Principal: Do you think that's wise?

Ms. Johnson: [Nods]

Assistant Principal: Well, perhaps if you talk to them a little about death and what it means.

Ms. Johnson: What would you like me to say that if you don't want to die, remember to knock?

Assistant Principal: That's not fair.

Ms. Johnson: What is?

Ms. Johnson enters the room and tells the student that Emilio is dead. We see Emilio's girlfriend Angela crying and shots of other kids crying as well. Ms. Johnson is also

crying. She is completely identifying with the students' pain and loss. It is the culmination of a series of efforts to identify with the students.

Teacher identifies with student experience.

This analysis has already described how Ms. Johnson changed her clothes and her demeanour in an effort to relate to and identify with her students. But she identifies with the students at other moments in the film in more subtle ways as well. We learn immediately, from her interview, that Ms. Johnson is divorcing her husband, who had kept her from finishing her teaching preparation in the first place. "I met my husband and started working for his company. We're divorcing." From the start, we are made to dislike her ex-husband. He prohibited her from pursuing a teaching career. Later, LouAnne confesses she is still hurting from the wound her ex-husband left. Hal confirms that the ex-husband is the bad guy: "He was my best friend, LouAnne. *Was* is the operative word. He isn't worth your spit." We finally learn that Ms. Johnson was physically abused by her ex-husband. She confesses this to Callie: "I was married. And I was pregnant. . . . We got a divorce and I got an abortion. He beat me. Sometimes you start out wrong and just keep going." It is not insignificant that she had been pregnant but decided to have an abortion, and she shared this with her pregnant student. The film sets up Ms. Johnson's personal life as tragic, in a way, in order to build a sense of identification with her students, a feeling that culminates when she makes her confessions to Callie. Ms. Johnson shares a kind of oppression (by her husband) with her students. Ms. Johnson was able to overcome her oppression, as should the students.

Teacher as white knight.

Ms. Johnson clearly attempts to *save* her students from the “Gangsta’s Paradise” they come from. The film tells us this in the narrative. Even the mother of the two boys pulled out of school points it out (although she does so in a challenging way): “Go find yourself some other poor boys to save.” But this mother’s critique of white patronage is undermined by the powerful affective response, which is strengthened by Ms. Johnson’s great sacrifices for her students. Ms. Johnson promises her students as a reward for finishing a poetry assignment, “I’m going to take all of you to a place that has the highest parachute jumps, the biggest roller coaster, the best rides, the most delicious hot dogs, the hardest games, and the best prizes in the world.” While we know she is going to sacrifice her own savings from her measly \$24,000 salary, she tells her students the board of education is footing the bill. Later she takes the fall from the principal for taking the students to the amusement park without obtaining the proper authorization.

But like other codes, the code of white knight is contested within the narrative. After a fight between Emilio and two other boys was broken up, Emilio was sent to detention. In a detention room that looks like a police station, with an armed guard standing in the back, Ms. Johnson approaches Emilio. She sits down at a table with him to talk:

Ms. Johnson: You mind telling me what the fight was about in the first place?

Emilio: Yeah.

Ms. Johnson: I really would like to know what happened. I’m not going to make any trouble for you. I just want to know. Was it worth it?

Emilio: Yeah, it was worth it.

Ms. Johnson: Why?

Emilio: Because it felt good hitting them in the face. [pound] I got 'em good man.

Ms. Johnson: Yeah? You like to hit people?

Emilio: Yeah, I like to hit people.

Ms. Johnson: Why? [pause] You feel angry a lot of the time?

Emilio: So now you going to try to psychologize [sic] me? You gonna try to figure me out? I'll help you. I come from a broken home and we're poor, okay? I see the same fucking movies you do, man.

Ms. Johnson: I would like to help you.

Emilio: Thank you very much [sarcastic]. And how would you like to do that? You gonna give me some good advice? Just say no? You gonna get me off the streets? Well, forget it. How the fuck are you gonna save me from my life, huh?

There is no mystery here about what is going on and no one tries to disguise Ms. Johnson's charity work. Emilio knows (from the movies) that he is in a bad situation that's not getting any better. Ms. Johnson wants to help. But, as we have already seen, in the end Ms. Johnson cannot save Emilio by herself. The fact that she failed to save him challenges the white knight code. But the code is challenged even before Emilio's death. In this dialogue, Emilio contest's the assumption that Ms. Johnson can make any real changes in his life.

Can Ms. Johnson, the female teacher who has sacrificed much of her 'femininity' to teach, be a white *knight*? Perhaps it is a poor choice of words. Not only because she is a woman, but also because a knight is supposed to be aggressive and forceful. Ms. Johnson's does nothing with force. Her patronage is more like charity work offered to the needy: "*I would like to help.*" "*In this unsafe world, I want to arm you.*" The

students are the ones who are going to have to fight, but she'll help their cause behind the lines.

Despite the loss of Emilio, the film is still redemptive. What makes this film a redemption narrative, more than anything else, is the uplifting feeling that viewers get at the end of the film. On Ms. Johnson's last day of the term, after she has decided to quit and has already broken the news to her students, she finds Callie back in class after a long absence, presumably to attend a mothers-to-be program in another school. Callie explains why she came back:

Callie: I thought you'd always be here for me. . . . *whenever* I came back. But then Raul tells me that you're leaving, just like that. And I realized that this is my last chance. And I decided . . . we decided . . . we're not just gonna let you leave like that.

Raul: We realized like the poem said, you can't give in, you can't go gentle. You gotta rage against the dying of the light.

[Several students interject with comments of support.]

Ms. Johnson: Wait a minute . . . I'm not giving in. I'm . . . this is my choice. I have no reason to rage against the dying of the light.

Callie: You're not the one who's raging, we're the ones who are raging. Cause we see you as being our light.

This is the climax of the film and it is highly charged emotionally. The students variously speak out, "We ain't giving you up." "You know we want you to stay." "What you need to stay girl, you want a candy bar?" The music picks up in tempo and volume and we see shots of the students smiling, laughing, and signing yearbooks. This is a fun, light and uplifting scene.

The film concludes with a shot of Hal and LouAnne Johnson walking away from the camera, down the deserted hallway. We hear their conversation:



Hal: How'd they get you to come back?

Ms. Johnson: They gave me candy and called me the light.

Hal: That'll do it.

This is a feel-good moment. Unfortunately, the uplifting ending brushes off the disruptions and the contradictions previously raised in the text. The ending functions to assuage emotions of guilt over the very real structural inequalities and white privilege represented to various degrees throughout the film. All the critical and sometimes disturbing questions that were raised and left unanswered throughout the film get swept under this mat of good feelings, perhaps to be forgotten forever.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusions and Implications

#### How the Code of Difference Functions

I argued that student difference was established in large part through stereotypes. Dyer cautions us not to interpret stereotypes always as images of stasis, as my analysis may seem to do occasionally, as in the case of representing the black pregnant teen as threatening. As Dyer points out, it is important to remember that “stereotypes can also represent a state of impermanence or transience, and all age-based stereotypes must implicitly do so, since no one remains the same age for ever (Dyer, 1993, p. 87). Even in this example of the pregnant teen, viewers must acknowledge Callie will not remain perpetually pregnant, although once her pregnancy is disclosed we never see her not pregnant in the film. In fact, I would argue that this film tries particularly hard to make these stereotypes appear transient, for when emotional or cultural ‘evolution’ is perceived in the students it is a credit to the efforts of Ms. Johnson. The film does show these particular students growing to various degrees out of the stereotypes ascribed to them (with the help of Ms. Johnson). But because the stereotypes are familiar to us beyond this particular text we can expect that the stereotypes implying deficiency and danger will be

permanently inscribed in the larger group to which they belong and will thus appear in the next group of incoming students, should the narrative continue.

The term *group* is somewhat problematic and therefore, it deserves my attention here, before I continue on any further. Iris Young (1990) defines a social group as “a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life” (p. 43). Yet, as Young (1990) later clarifies, “A social group is defined not primarily by a set of shared attributes, but by a sense of identity” (p. 44). Therefore, because they are tracked into an “academy” class for “special” students, Ms. Johnson’s students constitute a group in that they are identified as different than normative, non-academy students and also different than the teacher. As the student quoted above put it, “Man, you don’t understand nothing. I mean you don’t come from where we live.” The students, relative to the teacher, share a sense of identity based on their experiences in the neighbourhoods where they live and in the classroom. We also see this sense of identity in the numerous shots of students singing and playing together in the courtyard outside of their school.

It is critical, too, to reiterate the point that “stereotypes mean differently for different groups, and especially for those who are members of the stereotyped group” (Dyer, 1993, p. 89). Therefore, the stereotypes described here might not be interpreted always as I have interpreted them, nor must connotations of danger and deficiency always be perceived as negative, as in the case of the macho, sexualized Latino male.

The emphasis on stereotypes in my analysis is not merely meant to critique these stereotypes as wrong, but rather to ask what interests they serve (Dyer, 1993). So what is the function of these stereotypes within the narrative and within society? At the most

basic level, the code of danger may lead viewers to ask whether these students are worth the effort of Ms. Johnson, the school, and society. As described previously, Ms. Johnson challenges this code (to the extreme) when she infantilizes the students. Through her motherly language, candy and prizes, Ms. Johnson renders these students harmless. While this infantilization may be perceived as awkward and degrading, it also positions the viewer, both affectively and narratively to care for the students as Ms. Johnson does, maternally. Through Ms. Johnson's acts of infantilization, we should no longer see the students as dangerous, but rather as children worth caring about. Emilio is just someone's son, not a highly sexed beast or a violent thug. Callie is a smart young woman, no longer a racialized harbinger of contagious reproduction.

The code of deficiency in home life sustains the notion of a *need* for the school to fill that deficiency. Unfortunately, caring for these particular students amounts to filling the deficiencies of their home lives – making them more like 'us', like Ms. Johnson, so they can enter and participate in the normative society.

In the ideology of "need fulfillment," the category of need represents an *absence* of a particular set of experiences. In most cases, what educators determine as missing are either the culturally specific experiences that school authorities believe students must acquire in order to enrich the quality of their lives or the fundamental skills that they will "need" in order to get jobs once they leave school. . . .

In this version of liberal pedagogy, there is little recognition that what is legitimated as privileged school experience often represents the endorsement of a particular way of life, signified as superior by the "revenge" that befalls those who do not share its attributes (Giroux, 1993, p. 127).

In *Dangerous Minds* we do not really get to see the "revenge" that befalls those who fail to assimilate to the school culture, but we can imagine what happens to those students who fail to continue in school. They will return to the dismal, colourless "Gangsta's

Paradise” of the opening sequence. Ms. Johnson’s role is to save as many students as she can from that outcome, by enriching the students’ culturally deficient lives.

Even those viewers on the conservative end of the field, those who might feel threatened by the notion of teachers preparing these ‘diverse’ students to participate in the larger society, may be comforted by the moments in the film that suggest ‘we’ don’t have to worry too much about ‘them’ competing too successfully. Just look at Raul’s behaviour at the restaurant. The representation of Raul’s behaviour and appearance *as different and deficient* reifies class difference. Dyer argues:

The role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and *to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit*. ... The degree of rigidity and shrillness of a stereotype indicates the degree to which it is an enforced representation that points to a reality whose invisibility and/or fluidity threatens the received definitions of society promoted by those with the biggest sticks [emphasis added] (Dyer, 1993, p. 16).

The stereotypes of class difference work to fix and make stable societal class differences. And while the film focuses on helping students enter ‘white’ society, it suppresses the idea that these class differences are constructed and not natural. We do not decode the possibility of eliminating class difference, only of helping those who can help themselves to rise out of the lower classes.

Framing the students (and their home lives) as different and deficient also serves to explain away the students’ lack of (normatively defined) academic success. The mismatch argument claims that the disjunction between the language, culture, knowledge, and social relations of the home and those of the school is the primary cause for minority and working-class students’ poor educational achievement (Brandau and Collins, 1994).

This argument seems to further the notion of deficit theory. Yet, Brandau and Collins argue that *misunderstanding* resulting from this disjuncture is not the cause for lack of achievement; rather, “teachers and students often understand each other’s agendas but do not accept them” (p. 120). The film’s conception of the diverse classroom leaves little room for this possibility.

Furthermore, the use of these stereotypes that contribute to the code of difference allows viewers to imagine that the problems of teaching in a diverse classroom lie only in student differences and deficiencies, not in differences and deficiencies *in conditions* of the classroom and schools in which we predominantly find non-white students. At moments when the students try to draw attention to material differences in living conditions, as when the student cries out, “man, you don’t come from where we live,” the focus on *individual* differences (the differences among kids from their neighbourhood) is reinforced, as is the myth of a meritocracy. Viewers can believe that these kids can lift themselves out of poverty through their own determination and hard work, with merely a hand from a caring teacher. But this *is* a moment of contradiction. While the music and emotional influence of seeing Emilio begin to care push the affective response toward the affirmation of individual difference, suppression of material difference, and belief in meritocracy, the issues and concerns that the students raise about material difference are still present in the film and can be affirmed by those who read Emilio’s line and the swell of music as too schmaltzy. Thus, through moments of contradiction such as this, limits to the code of difference, deficiency, and danger are cast and contested.

### How the Code of Authority and Control Functions

The way the code of authority and control operates in this film seems to indicate that students' behaviour and voices are to be controlled by the teacher; the teacher (particularly the female teacher) is to be controlled by the school system; and the school system and its norms are never to be changed or challenged. In a text that sees teachers winning control over students through a pedagogy of cordial relations, there is little room for a vision or understanding of teacher as critical educator. Is this an acceptable construction of effective teaching for the diverse classroom? Is this an acceptable construction of an effective school for diverse students and teachers?

My analysis showed how the students' resistance was simply managed by the teacher's pedagogy of cordial relations. Given the ease with which Ms. Johnson curtailed the acts of defiance, student resistance in this film seems to be little more than lack of etiquette or self-control. Educators need a much more complex understanding of student resistance than this film allows. Giroux (1993) explains that student resistance often emerges as a refusal "to accept the dictates of dominant school culture" (p. 131). The film does not allow this interpretation because the students' resistance subsides *but the dominant school culture does not change*. Throughout the course of the film, the dominant school culture – grades, competition, high school graduation, tracking – remains the same. This interpretation of student resistance as a refusal to accept the dominant school culture is unlikely, because we never see any logical sequence of events that show the students gradually accepting the very thing they had resisted in the past.

Brandau and Collins (1994) suggest an alternate way to interpret student resistance. They write:

The challenge to resistance theory is to separate out “resistance”—which seems to require a cognitive base of a particular kind—from a much larger category of “misbehavior,” that is, behavior that goes against official wishes. Although we analyze Somerville students’ rejection of social norms for literacy and educational attainment as part of a socially grounded insight into the limits of schooling as currently constituted, we do not analyze this as resistance, aimed at transforming school (or society). Rather, we analyze it as a *skepticism*, [sic] rooted in a particular class culture, and a choosing of local life over education-based social mobility (p. 120).

Again the film dismisses this possibility and reduces student resistance to a simplistic demonstration of bad behaviour. The students give in to the teacher’s authority, without any evidence of the value of education that would reduce their scepticism. We see these very questions about the value of the education they are getting completely skirted around. How then can we interpret resistance as scepticism, when the scepticism remains but the resistance disappears throughout the course of the film? Unfortunately, the film does not make sense when we try to interpret resistance in any intelligent, sophisticated way. The only reading that makes sense is that the students’ are defiant (perhaps by nature, perhaps by experience), but give in when they get what they want – praise, candy, prizes, attention. But it takes more than candy bars and compliments to teach students. I believe this is an entirely unacceptable construction of student resistance.

Ms. Johnson’s adoption of a pedagogy of cordial relations is demeaning to both her students and herself. Within this form of pedagogical practice, which emphasizes maintaining order and control:

Student voice is reduced to the immediacy of its performance, existing as something to be measured, administered, registered, and controlled. Its



distinctiveness, its disjunctions, its lived quality are all dissolved under an ideology of control and management (Giroux, 1993, p. 124).

Not only is student voice reduced by a pedagogy of cordial relations, but teacher intellectualism is reduced as well. Ms. Johnson cannot act as a critical educator when she is primarily acting to maintain order. This emphasis on control and classroom management is pervasive in education and, as we see here, in our popular construction of teaching. Educators must make an active effort to challenge this conception of teaching as classroom management. Giroux (1993) offers an alternate conception of teachers as emancipatory authority, a conception completely absent from the film:

Emancipatory authority . . . provides the theoretical scaffolding for educators to define themselves not simply as intellectuals, but in a more committed fashion as transformative intellectuals. This means that such educators are not merely concerned with forms of empowerment that promote individual achievement and traditional forms of academic success. Instead, they are also concerned in their teaching with linking empowerment—the ability to think and act critically—to the concept of social transformation. That is, teaching for social transformation means educating students to take risks and to struggle within ongoing relations of power in order to be able to alter the grounds on which life is lived. Acting as a transformative intellectual means helping students acquire critical knowledge about basic societal structures, such as the economy, the state, the work place, and mass culture, so that such institutions can be open to potential transformation (p. 103-104).

Ms. Johnson verges on being progressive when she introduces Bob Dylan lyrics in the classroom. Yet, this use of a popular cultural text can also be interpreted in many contradictory ways. Paul Smith (1989) explains:

The relatively conspicuous absence of PCCTs [popular-cultural-commodity-texts] from classrooms here might be taken as symptomatic of widely accepted pedagogical practices (and sometimes theories) which assume that culture is a mostly static entity, containable in its most essential and fixed forms in anthologies and in the works of a few privileged writers). Even when such texts are used it is not inevitable that their use should be for progressive purposes. Often PCCTs function in classrooms as lures and come-ons offered by teachers to students reluctant or unwilling to appreciate the virtues of the canonical curriculum. It would seem quite common, for

instance, for the lyrics of rock music to be used in the poetry section of an English course or for film versions of particular fictions to be used to animate discussion of the literary. In such cases, the PCCT is evidently only a teaching aid; its own specificity is rarely addressed, and its interest resides in the light that it can shed on more routine concerns (p. 33).

This quote hints at the ambiguous nature of incorporating PCCTs into the curriculum, an ambiguity evident in *Dangerous Minds*. Using the lyrics to Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" Ms. Johnson gets the students to read out loud (apparently a feat in and of itself) and to deconstruct the meaning. As Smith points out, on the one hand, the use of pop lyrics challenges the conservative devotion to the canon, at a time when the call for back-to-basics was strong, particularly for "low-achieving students". Geneva Gay (1992) explains that the "back to the basics" rallying cry of the 1980s "meant perpetuating a status quo orientation that was highly selective with respect to advocating academically able students, less freedom for students in academic choices, and training for the job market." These aims were articulated further in the campaign for national standards, which culminated in 1994 when U.S. President Bill Clinton signed the GOALS 2000: Educate America Act into law. The primary aim of GOALS 2000 was to encourage each state to develop academic standards for all students. A flood of debate followed the release of proposed history standards, with a vehement reaffirmation of Eurocentrism and Western culture in the curriculum. The film's challenge to the "back-to-the basics" is made evident in a scene in which the principal reproaches Ms. Johnson for deviating from the approved curriculum. The film also challenges the call for standards by using Bob Dylan lyrics. It also attempts to challenge the popular assumption that poetry is not appropriate for *these* students, (Hal: "Poetry? These kids?") although its arguments are strong only affectively, not narratively or ideologically in this film. And ultimately, it is

likely that the pop lyrics are introduced only as a lure or come-on, as a teaching aid. Ms. Johnson actually calls it a *gimmick* in her discussion with Hal, as I noted earlier.

Whether or not Ms. Johnson uses popular song lyrics in a truly progressive, critical way, she does not make appropriate curriculum choices that legitimate the voice of her students. Legitimizing the voice of students must be essential to critical pedagogy. Giroux (1993) writes:

It is essential that radical educators understand how student experience is both constructed and engaged, because it is through such experiences that students produce accounts of who they are and constitute themselves as particular individuals. Student experience is the stuff of culture, agency, and self-production and must play a definitive role in any emancipatory curriculum. It is therefore imperative that radical educators learn how to understand, legitimate, and interrogate such experience. This means not only understanding the cultural and social forms through which students learn how to define themselves, but also learning how to critically engage such experiences in a way that refuses to disconfirm them or render them illegitimate. Knowledge has first of all to be made meaningful to students before it can be made critical. It never speaks for itself, but rather is constantly mediated through the ideological and cultural experiences that students bring to the classroom. To ignore such experiences is to deny the grounds on which students learn, speak, and imagine (p. 110).

As my analysis shows, Ms. Johnson chose to use Dylan lyrics, despite the fact that the film repeatedly establishes rap as a significant part of these students' lives. By ignoring rap, she does not legitimate the students' voices. I am not arguing that rap is the answer for all urban classrooms. I argue that teachers, through their curriculum choices, must critically engage in a meaningful way the voices students claim as their own through their experiences, their culture, their language.

The film fails to challenge any of the dominant norms of schooling or the racist structure of the system itself. In fact, it actually *advances* several of these norms. These need to be critically deconstructed. First, the film promotes competition as a normal virtue of education (as seen in the students' efforts to win the Dylan-Dylan contest). Yet, Brandau and

Collins (1994) point out that students from poor communities do not necessarily value competition and achievement in the same way they are valued by teachers. The film also affectively argues the virtues of a high school diploma, while skirting around real questions about the value of a high school diploma for students who are inadequately prepared (academically and financially) for post-secondary education.

At the close of the twentieth century, higher education appears to be more important than ever – both to our economy and our competitive position in the world, and to an individual's chances of sharing in U.S. prosperity. In an era of increasing income inequality, strengthening and broadening educational opportunity is key not only to economic growth but also to narrowing the gaps between rich and poor.

There are no guarantees in life with or without a college diploma, but the odds are increasingly stacked against those with the least education and training. The more education one has, the more – on average – one earns. And this relationship has become conventional wisdom. People understand: who goes to college – and often which college – determines more than ever who has entrée to the best jobs and the best life chances (Gladieux and Swail, 1998, p. 3).

Whether or not these notions are, in fact, conventional wisdom, they are notions completely ignored in *Dangerous Minds*. While the relevancy of poetry is questioned (but not answered) in the film, academic rigour and expectations for college attendance and college completion are not considered at all.

The film also promotes the practice of tracking, as described in my analysis. The academy fits Sonia Nieto's definition of tracking adequately: "*Tracking* is the placement of students into groups that are perceived to be of similar ability (*homogeneous groups*), within classes (e.g. reading groups in self-contained classes), or by subject areas (e.g., a low level math group in seventh grade), or by specific programs of study at the high school level (e.g., academic or vocational)" (Nieto, 2000a, p. 89). Nieto argues that tracking has frequently been linked with racial, ethnic, and social-class differences and

often has serious consequences, such as limiting academic or career opportunities, developing enduring classroom personalities or attitudes, and subjecting lowest level students to rote memorization and worn methods. Furthermore, much research, particularly since Jeannie Oakes's study in 1985, has shown that the results of tracking are almost exclusively negative for most students (Nieto, 2000a). So why does tracking persist and generally go unquestioned, as it does in *Dangerous Minds*? Nieto (2000a) suggests:

[P]owerful vested interests are crucial in explaining why tracking persists. Although tracking affects most students negatively, it may actually help a few. The evidence is mixed, but there is some indication that high-achieving students benefit from being tracked in honors and high-level classes. It is not surprising, then, that it is frequently the parents of high-achieving students who are most reluctant to challenge it because they perceive tracking to be beneficial to their children. In addition, as mentioned previously, tracking decisions and race are often linked. . . .

As we have seen, tracking is propped up and sustained by class interests. Because it sorts and classifies students, it helps prepare them for their place in the larger society. Students in the top tracks generally end up attending college and becoming professionals; those in the bottom tracks frequently drop out or, if they do finish high school, become unskilled workers. Without falling into a mechanistic explanation for a complex process, it is nevertheless true that some students benefit and others lose because of tracking (p. 91).

These norms – tracking, the value of high school graduation, competition, grades – need to be critically analyzed and demystified. They are not simply the way things are – they are constructed and they are politically advantageous to some and harmful to others. But they persist because parents, students, teachers, researchers, filmmakers, politicians, and others continue to perceive them as normal.

The teacher's ability to control, even impact, the school system and her work environment is severely limited in *Dangerous Minds*. Ms. Johnson's primary goal

appears to be gaining control of the students, maintaining order, and teaching the students in the classroom; however:

For teachers, the relationship between authority and power is manifested not only in the degree to which they legitimate and exercise control over students (a central concern of conservatives), but equally important through the capacity they possess to influence the conditions under which they work. . . . The central issue that needs to be explored by educators is identifying the kinds of material and ideological preconditions that need to exist for schools to become effective. This issue covers a wide range of concerns such as active parent involvement in the schools, adequate health care and nutrition for students, high student morale, and adequate financial resources. All of these factors represent resources through which power is exercised and made manifest. Power in this sense refers to the means of getting things done, and as Foucault claims, "consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome to govern, in this sense, to structure the possible field of action of others" (Giroux, 1993, p. 107).

Ms. Johnson reaches out to parents (notably in their home language of Spanish which, according to Nieto (2000a) does legitimize the students' home language and culture, to some extent) on occasion, but other than that whole school reform issues are rarely addressed. In fact, Ms. Johnson seems to prefer to subvert the school bureaucracy and do things her own way, behind closed doors.

Authority in the school system is clearly gendered. By abandoning her frilly clothes and soft curly hair, renouncing all romantic relationships with men, and acting tough (*e.g.* teaching karate) yet maternal (*e.g.* calling her students *honey* and *darling*), Ms. Johnson is made to fit the historical expectations for women teachers: "There were prohibitions about being seen with men, about clothes, about makeup, about politics, about money, about nearly all of one's public and (private) life" (Apple, 1986, p. 72).

Apple further comments:

The above-mentioned array of controls of women's physicality, dress, living arrangements, and morals shows the importance of these concerns. Ideologies of patriarchy, with the teacher being shrouded in a domestic and maternal

cloak – possibly combined with a more deep-seated male suspicion of female sexuality – are reproduced here. It is the very combination of patriarchal relations and economic pressures that continue to work their way through teaching to this day (Apple, 1986, p. 72-73).

Until our popular conception of teaching and teachers changes, the profession is going to have a hard time attracting women and men who fail to see themselves fitting into this system of patriarchal relations. Can a woman teacher be sexual, without being sexually threatening or threatened? Must sexuality enter the classroom? Are male teachers expected to be domestic and maternal? Do male teachers somehow subvert the question of sexuality in a way that female teachers cannot? These questions beg to be answered.

#### How the Code of White Knight Redemption Functions

Ms. Johnson's lack of private life, collaboration and mentor relationships contribute to typical, yet inaccurate, images of the teacher as independent and as lonely:

While a great deal of the teacher's time is, in fact, spent in classrooms, she or he is also a member of a school community, an employee of a school board, a member of numerous communities, a citizen, a union member, and a representative of a profession in the process of historic changes. . . . Clearly, at the end of this century, for teachers to be effective, they must be prepared to interact with a range of educational agencies and do this in a way that sustains a proactive rather than reactive stance to change and innovation (Britzman *et al.*, 1997, p. 20).

This representation also reflects the myth that everything depends on the teacher.

Britzman argues, "Everything—student learning, the presentation of curriculum and social control—is held to be within the teacher's domain, while the teacher's isolated classroom existence is accepted as the norm" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 125). This representation overemphasizes the role and capacity for individual teachers to affect change and lets the school, community, businesses, universities, and schools of education

off the hook. Unfortunately, in reality, no teacher can affect lasting structural change working completely in isolation. This conception of teaching as non-cooperative needs to be reconstructed; yet, in consideration of teachers' lack of control and power within the school system (also evident in the film), it becomes understandable why many teachers vehemently hold on to the tenets of individualism and power behind closed doors. Cooperation is likely to be limited until teachers become more respected and active participants in the school administration.

My analysis describes how Ms. Johnson attempts to identify with her students through experiences of oppression. It is not unusual for white people to attempt to distance themselves from being the recipients of white privilege by identifying as 'outsiders' in other ways, for instance, as lesbians or survivors of abuse. But this kind of identification "runs the risk of romanticizing outsider status . . . [and] underestimates the possibility that people can raise their racial consciousness without having experienced oppression themselves" (Thompson *et al.*, 1997, p. 359). Furthermore, highlighting Ms. Johnson's oppression from domestic violence helps to hide the benefits she gains as a white person living and working in a system of white privilege. To see Ms. Johnson as a survivor of abuse, successfully employed and living independently despite all her hardships, affirms the Horatio Alger myth or the bootstraps theory that says people can surmount all obstacles through hard work and determination. This sense of shared experience of oppression must be challenged, so that the significance of racial oppression is not undermined.

In my discussion of the code of difference, I described how the students in Ms. Johnson's class are represented as both different and deficient from the norm and a threat



to others and to themselves. My literature review has similarly described how multicultural education research often frames 'diverse' students as a group at risk (particularly in the hands of white teachers). Roman (1996) argues that when youths are created as subjects at risk in this way:

They also become subjects of blame and pathology and, thus, *are constructed as deserving particular paternalistic* state interventions. Such constructions not only trivialize or silence altogether the voices of youth, they also distract from the larger structural realities of late capitalism and long-standing inequalities of distributive and social justice that are the real and complex culprits with respect to many of the problems young people face today [emphasis added] (p. 2).

Accordingly, the students in the film are the deserving recipients of Ms. Johnson's paternalistic interventions. Furthermore, this charity work, offered by the film as a viable solution, is an inadequate substitute for significant structural reform.

Ms. Johnson, intervening to save her students, functions as the film's white redeemer. Hazel Carby (1993) describes how a text may attempt to demonstrate (to a white middle class audience) why becoming a patron of the underprivileged is in the self-interest of the white middle class. She writes, "Acts of patronage are appealing, I would argue, because the power of the patron is secured at the same moment that those subjected to patronage are confirmed in their powerlessness" (Carby, 1993, p. 237). This seems particularly clear when we see the students participate in the process of securing Ms. Johnson's authority in the classroom.

### Participating in the Struggle for Hegemony

In order for radical educators to demystify the dominant culture and to make it an object of political analysis, they will need to master the "language of critical understanding." If they are to understand the dominant ideology at work in schools, they will need to attend to the voices that emerge from three

different ideological spheres and settings: these include *the school voice*, *the student voice*, and *the teacher voice*. The interests that these different voices represent have to be analyzed, not so much as oppositional in the sense that they work to counter and disable each other, but as an interplay of dominant and subordinate practices that shape each other in an ongoing struggle over power, meaning, and authorship (Giroux, 1993, p. 141).

I have attempted in this paper to “demystify” a dominant cultural conception of a *diverse* classroom by attending to one film’s representation of the three voices identified by Giroux above and to turn a critical eye on what is normative and taken-for-granted. Critically analyzing popular cultural representations of education means participating in the struggle for hegemony, as well as demystifying dominant culture and ideology. It is critical that my intentions in deconstructing, in particular, the framing of *diversity* as a problem for teachers are not misconstrued. I am not advocating a color-blind position that sees all students as the same, as an alternative to the position that sees *diverse* students as a problem. I am asking whether *diverse* implies deficit and promotes an ideology of need fulfillment. I am asking whether *diverse* can be made to apply to material conditions as well as to individuals.

Leslie Roman (1996) reminds us, “Deconstruction is not an end in and of itself. Critical researchers will have to offer alternative accounts that have explanatory power” (p. 22). By critiquing the research that aims to affect social justice through teacher education, I hope to divert its gaze away from student difference and focus on the structural things within teachers’ control (to different degrees), which contribute to the oppression of non-white students. This means turning a critical eye on, among other things, tracking (within the classroom and the school), curriculum choices, assessment, and norms of academic achievement. It also means making pedagogy responsive to

individual students, but that demands sensitivity to differences within groups (ethnic, gender, etc.) as well as across groups.

### Engaging in Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Studies

Teacher educators must consider how popular cultural representations of classroom diversity inform their students' (teacher candidates') understandings of what diversity means for them as teachers. Teachers and teacher candidates are taught to think in terms of students' needs, but teachers and teacher candidates who come from white backgrounds with limited intercultural experiences are forced to imagine the needs, voices, and circumstances of non-white students, who they may 'know of' only through representations in television, news media, and film (Rosenberg, 1997). When teacher candidates are 'taught' or told that they need to be prepared for teaching diverse students, do they imagine a classroom similar to the one in *Dangerous Minds*, where they will confront potential drop-outs, pregnant teens, illiterate youths, and gang-members? Do they imagine that all these disadvantaged students really need is their care and a little motivation (in the form of candy and class trips to the amusement park) to achieve academic success? How do they understand academic success?

Furthermore, a text like *Dangerous Minds* can be engaged with by teacher educators and teacher candidates in order to analyze whiteness as a social construction. For white teacher candidates, an analysis of *Dangerous Minds* may illuminate what their own whiteness (and gendered position) means for themselves as teachers, particularly when teaching in a diverse school or classroom.

Why have I resisted teaching as a profession? Perhaps, as an advocate of social justice I am afraid of becoming part of the problem, another white teacher placed in a position of authority in a class of non-white students. In practice, I know there are ways to approach such a situation critically and justly. But affectively, maybe I am not so sure. Maybe I am not able to *imagine* a classroom where the teacher's place is not at the front of the room and in control. Maybe I resist teaching because my conception of teaching exists solely within the confines of that (normative) classroom, whereas social justice reform efforts, to be effective must permeate the entire educational system. Until I can better imagine the teacher to exist beyond the classroom as a proactive participant in the school community, a researcher, a transformative intellectual, and "a representative of a profession in the process of historic changes" (Britzman *et al.*, 1997, p. 20), I will remain unable to imagine myself as a teacher. If we truly want to prepare teachers to meet the needs of *all* students we all (academe, politicians, media, the masses, etc.) must start to *re-imagine* the concept of teaching.

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