Socially Constructing Race and History: Exploring Black Identity and Popular Culture in Social Studies Classrooms through Cultural Studies Framework

by

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Abstract

American perceptions and ideas about race have stemmed from social constructs that have been shaped by various popular cultural artifacts as well as from racist historical discourses (Lemons, 1977; Balkaran, 1991; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2009; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Ruffner-Caesar, 2012). The article explores how middle and secondary social studies educators can develop a curriculum rooted in national council for the social studies (NCSS) and common core standards (CCS), as well as in a cultural studies theoretical framework that helps students understand how negative ideas about African Americans are often socially constructed through media and popular culture. The essay is grounded in cultural studies research to show how racial stereotypes and perceptions effects youth at school and in society (Johnson 1987; Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Koed Madsen, Mackay & Negus, 2013). Teachers can use popular media and history lessons to facilitate such a critical discourse and develop meaningful lesson plans (Childs, 2014). The goal is to help students become critically aware of popular stereotypes that affect them and society and how to challenge and overcome them. In this way social studies classrooms can be spaces that facilitate discussions about negative social constructs of Black culture, and how to combat those false notions of Blackness or Race in general.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Race, Stereotypes, Social Studies, Cultural Studies, Hip-hop, Media studies, African American History, Education, African Americans.

Introduction

With the rapid advance in modern technology people now have access to media and popular culture in much larger quantities and in ways that were not possible in previous generations. Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney and Wise (2005) state that "we live in a world of media communication where we can travel great distances and across centuries, all in the comfort of our own living rooms (p. 4)." Personal computers, the world wide web, LCD projectors, and other modern technology gives easy access to endless popular cultural artifacts that include music videos, and product advertisements that can be accessed via the graphically rich environment of the Internet (Sherry, 2002). Popular media also comes in the form of the ever evolving music industry, as well as in new films that push the bounds of technology. Television shows, cartoons, video games, news programs, e-literature, satellite radio and social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, all make up the elements of popular culture contemporary Americans are exposed to regularly (Comstock & Scharrer, 2007).

The abundance of media in people's daily lives has a great impact on their values, worldview, culture, decision making and even their self-perception. Often societal and individual views are shaped by media and popular culture. Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney and Wise (2005) state that it is becoming more and more difficult to tell the real world from the media and that it is crucial for people that live in a diverse society to know the difference. Research shows that children's lives are adversely affected when exposed to media of various sorts on a regular basis (Adler, Lesser, Meringoff, Robertson, Rossiter, & Ward, 1980; Allen, Alessio, & Brezgel, 1995; Field, Austin, Carmargo, Taylor, Striegel-Moore, Loud, & Colditz, 2005). Further Comstock and Scharrer (2007) point out that:

> either the amount of media exposure or exposure to particular types of content [can be linked to] …a range of important outcomes, including but not limited to performing poorly in school; learning aggression; behaving antisocially; developing unhealthy attitudes and behavior regarding such disparate topics as nutrition, alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking, and sexual behavior… (2).

In short, young people can receive negative messages about the world, as well as their own values and ideals from popular culture. These messages often manifest themselves in homes, public places or even at school via the actions of youth. Johnson (1987) and Gay, Hall, Janes, Koed, Madsen, Mackay and Negus (2013) developed a sociological model called the circuit of culture that graphically and theoretically shows the impact ideologies imbedded in popular culture can have on people.

Cultural studies scholars state that people perform or act out the messages they see in the media (Lewis, 2008; Youngbauer, 2013). Schools then become a sort of theatrical stage where youth often unknowingly *act out* or emulate popular culture and even carry out stereotypical roles of race, class and gender. However, conversely schools can also be sites to combat negative ideas about Race.

American ideas about Race among youth in schools and in the conscious of larger society have stemmed from social constructs that have been shaped by various popular cultural artifacts as well as from racist historical discourses (Lemons, 1977; Balkaran, 1991; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2009; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Ruffner-Ceaser, 2012). The cultural studies model can offer insight into the impact the media has on perceptions of Race in the US. These findings can be used in classrooms to bring about more positive discussion about Race that challenge popular stereotypes and helps students become more critically aware of media influences. Social studies students can engage in a type of critical media literacy that can allow them to develop more sophisticated mental models of the African American community. Indeed the popular notion of what it means to be Black consists of negative and violent imagery that is damaging to the Black community. These stereotypes have come from messages present in media that US citizens have consumed for more than a century and a half. Middle and secondary students often get their ideas of Blackness from popular media sources and in turn act them out or internalize these behaviors of how African Americans "naturally" are (Gay, Hall, Janes, Koed Madsen, Mackay & Negus, 2013). Social studies classrooms can be spaces whereby students unpack negative notions of Black culture.

Middle and secondary social studies educators can develop a curriculum rooted in national council for the social studies (NCSS) and common core standards (CCS) that helps students understand how negative ideas about African Americans are often socially constructed through media and popular culture. Teachers can use popular media and history lessons to facilitate such a critical discourse and develop meaningful lesson plans (Childs, 2014). The goal is to help students become critically aware of popular stereotypes that affect them and society and how to challenge and overcome them. The theoretical framework for the article will be drawn from cultural studies scholars Johnson (1987) and Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Koed Madsen, Mackay and Negus's (2013) and their circuit of culture model, as well as their ideas about reading the world as text.

Literature Review:
Using Popular Culture and Media in Social Studies Classrooms

A primary aim of this article is to demonstrate how popular culture and media can be used as pedagogical tools to bring about meaningful and impactful lessons in social studies classrooms. Although there is not a large body of research that addresses this topic there are some scholars that explore how these resources can be effectively used by classroom teachers.

Turner (1979) was one of the early scholars to write about this topic. His book offers a number of exemplars for using popular cultural resources in secondary social studies classrooms. Furthermore he gives a solid definition of popular culture, describing it "as those elements in society which have the primary function of entertaining or selling and which are becoming a familiar, recognizable, and identifiable entity for a large number of people" (p. 5). He further points out that popular culture has always had a very large impact on American society throughout history, but has taken on a larger role with the advent of new technology and media. Turner's text is a very helpful resource as it points to various sources that teachers can use from which they can develop lessons; resources that include "popular music, television and movies, social gatherings, printed materials, fads and fashions, and careers" (p. 6).

Chilcoat's (1993) book also examines the role that popular culture can play in social studies education. He conducted action research in his secondary social studies classroom in reaction to the "predesigned" social studies curriculum that many teachers were encouraged to use in his district. He was critical of the kind of lessons that were overly teacher-centered, that lacked creativity and meaningful student engagement. In response, Chilcoat set out to create an atmosphere that made the classroom more democratic. This included giving students more voice and giving them more decision making power. The curriculum was also redeveloped to include social studies activities that were more inquiry based and emphasized problem solving, as opposed to the traditional teacher centeredness. One of the most helpful aspects of Chilcoat's monograph is that it outlined specific details in regard to how teachers can integrate popular culture and media into their social studies curriculum. Examples include student projects that allow them to create their own contemporary popular culture realia such as radio broadcasts and comic strips.

Hall's (2011) work also deviated from the teacher centered approach. She worked with her six grade social studies class using popular cultural texts to generate meaningful activities centered on discussion and debates. One of her primary goals was to teach students critical thinking skills and to support their arguments with valid, scholarly sources.

Although Mangram (2012) also explored the use of popular culture in social studies classroom his methodology differed from Chilcoat and Hall in that he conducted a quantitative research study. He observed a small group of social studies teachers at a secondary school and their views on popular culture and education.

His work focused on the teacher's views of popular culture and how this impacted their relationship with students. The study shed some light on how media influenced students. The author expressed the important role that parents and teachers play in helping youth process the messages they receive from media and popular culture. Mangram found that many students are not sophisticated enough to process and navigate the complicated terrain of popular media in the twenty first century, they need some guidance. This adult facilitation of discussion is often necessary because popular culture can shape youth identity and influence their decision making. Further, Mangram also found that music greatly impacts student's worldviews and values. With this in mind, and in keeping with the goal of this essay it is important to look at the research that has explored the role popular music can play in discussing Race in social studies classrooms.

Popular Music, African American Culture and Social Studies Education

A few authors have explored the benefits of popular music in social studies classrooms. Further, some researchers, such as Palmer and Burrough (2002), have explored the use of African American cultural artifacts to enliven social studies lessons and units. Palmer and Burrough discuss how social studies teachers can use African American spirituals to enhance curriculum. Their primary work surrounds the use of various types of songs as well as children's books to develop meaningful and engaging social studies lessons. As an exemplar for teachers, Palmer and Burrough developed a sample civil war unit that incorporates literature as well as popular music and songs from the nineteenth century.

Harris' (2004) work also explores the use of African American popular cultural artifacts in social studies classrooms. Harris explores how teachers can use *The Blues* to explore various themes in African American history. In outlining the history of *The Blues* he is able to highlight the hardships and struggles of African Americans throughout history. In this same way the author points out that there are clear themes such as triumph over adversity and universal human struggles that are clearly present in the blues. These themes are easily applicable to the complex life and development of middle school aged youth, as they are often faced with instability as they go through the hormonal changes of puberty. Harris' work is very useful to educators as he provides lesson plans in his appendix that clearly demonstrates how social studies teachers can integrate the blues into their curriculum.

While White and McCormack (2006) do not address Race in a significant way, they do point out how teachers can use music to combat racism. Their work primarily examines how contemporary popular music can be an effective tool in making social studies classrooms more engaging. They argue that it is critical that teachers understand that "popular music can be a powerful tool for instruction and learning in social studies education" (p. 123). Regardless of the teacher's feelings for a certain genre of music, part of good effective teaching in the twenty first century is to be aware of the popular culture and music that students are being exposed to and influenced by.

The authors also explore how popular music of both the present and the past can be linked to various events and ideas throughout history. Music "can evoke deep personal meanings" in people, therefore "social studies educators" can easily "use songs to emphasize larger historical moments". Further, the authors also point out how music can be used to address social issues in the world such as poverty, abuse, war and current events. Like Harris, they also point out that popular music can be used to explore cultural identity and even racism (as was stated previously) in social studies classrooms.

The authors mentioned previously, explored how music and cultural forms can be used to teach about Race -and more specifically- African American culture and history in social studies classrooms. Childs' (2014) work goes beyond simply the use of music *only* to teach about various African American cultural themes; but he explores the use of a variety of popular cultural artifacts in social studies classrooms to address issues surrounding racial stereotypes and identity in society. Childs argues that "Based on the work of many popular musicians, African American identity is associated with violence, misogyny, materialism, and deviancy" (p. 1). It is important that teachers create classroom environments whereby students can learn to unpack and challenge these negative notions of Blackness portrayed in the media. In this way, the author points out that students can develop more healthy and realistic views of African Americans, in ways that would even improve the self-image of young Black students. Like Harris, Childs provides exemplars in the form of unit plans so that teachers can see how one can effectively use popular cultural artifacts to address themes of racism and racial stereotypes in their classrooms.

This article expands upon the work of the authors mentioned above concerning using popular culture in social studies classrooms to facilitate lessons and activities that explore racial identity and history in a meaningful way. Building on this work, this article will specifically focus on African American culture and identity both in history and contemporary times. The work will address a void in the scholarship by exploring how popular culture and media has often socially constructed Blackness in a negative way. It will further demonstrate how social studies classrooms are the ideal spaces to help students combat these notions and develop a more positive self-image and identity.

Negative Black Stereotypes Socially Constructed in History

Early southern enslavement laws beginning in the late seventeenth century systematically dehumanized Black people. Laws known as Black codes (Childs, 2013) in the south greatly infringed upon the freedom of African Americans. Some laws forbade them from peaceful assembly and/or reading and writing, and others made their offspring automatically slaves upon birth. This laid the foundation for racial stereotypes that would plague African Americans throughout history, even shaping contemporary negative perceptions seen today in the media and in society (Blasingame, 1972; Gutman, 1977; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2009).

Stemming from systemic racial discrimination and segregation, modern notions of Blackness have been constructed by media such as early twentieth century popular cartoons and advertisements. This racially charged media was undergirded by historical discourses that systematically created negative caricatures (i.e., Sambo, Mammie and Uncle Tom Tropes) of the "Negro" as sub-human, unintelligent, lazy, irresponsible, unattractive, untrustworthy, violent and immoral (Bosking, 1986; Goings, 1994; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2009; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). These racial stereotypes were often played out in popular culture, and can still be detected today in contemporary music videos, films, television shows, advertising and news media. To counter the negative perceptions social studies classrooms can be spaces where students can learn to appreciate and understand the positive legacy of African Americans through a curriculum centered on historical studies, critical media literacy and cultural studies (Ott & Mack, 2009).

While there has been a socio-historical narrative in the US that has been largely negative in its portrayal of African Americans, historical realities point to the many great accomplishments and positive contributions the Black community has made to society. The legacy of educational institutions developed in the African American community (i.e. emergence of historically black colleges), and the rich religious heritage (i.e. the afro-Baptist involvement in civil rights) point to the ingenuity and inventiveness of the black community. Other great examples include the invention of jazz, the unprecedented art and literature that came out of the Harlem Renaissance movement, as well as the many contributions African Americans have made to every war in US history (Childs, 2009; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2009; Davidson, Delay, Heyrman, Lytle, Stoff, 2013). These positive aspects of African American history can be taught to counter false ideas about Race. These concepts can be integrated into the social studies curriculum as a way for instructors to present counter-narratives to the historic racist discourse. Along with understanding historical trends and patterns, helping history teachers understand the cultural studies model can assist students in recognizing the negative effects popular culture and the media has on their conceptions and perceptions of Race.

Cultural Studies Research

Stuart Hall's work in the cultural studies approach gives us much insight into the extent that popular culture and media influence society. Cultural studies scholars highlight the phenomenon whereby the actions and behavior of youth are shaped by cultural forces in the sense that the messages from television, film and the music industry tend to play out in the lives of young people (Hall, 1997; Gay, 1997). In Stuart Hall's circuit of culture model, signifying practices (advertising, the Internet, popular music, movies, and television) are produced and pushed out into society through technology and the media. In turn, people respond to these signifiers that were produced, as they have shaped their values and actions. Young people model behaviors, attitudes and actions they learn from popular culture.

Cultural Studies and Circuit of Culture

Background and definition

The academic discipline of cultural studies has its roots in the fields of critical theory and literary criticism. Cultural studies scholars draw from a variety of disciplines such as social theory, philosophy, history, art criticism, critical media studies and feminist theory to explore the ways people make meaning of their lives and are influenced by a variety of societal forces (During, 2007; Lewis, 2008; Longhurst, Smith, Bagnall, Crawford & Ogborn, 2008). Their research often focuses on the effects the media and popular culture has on notions of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and even cultural norms. This wide range of tools and disciplines from which cultural studies scholars draw can allow meaningful dialogue in social studies classrooms centered on racial stereotypes and help students develop a more positive self-image.

Circuit of Culture

When studying the twentieth century version of Black youth culture "one must at least explore how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use." The cultural studies approach is concerned with a "process and a set of practices" that shape identity and perception. So in this article one must ask questions such as what identities and practices are associated with what it means to be an African American? Are those often negative or positive attributes?

Cultural studies is also focused on "the importance of meaning to the definition of culture" (p. 2). The discipline emphasizes that meaning is produced and exchanged between individuals of a particular group or society. If one states that two individuals are a part of the same culture, this simply means that they share the same interpretations and meanings of particular circumstances and ultimately the world (Hall, 1997). If two African American youngsters identify as Black, what does that mean in a twenty-first century urban setting?

Cultural studies argue that the field is not to serve as a "finished abstraction or theory" but it is meant to serve more as a "heuristic or illustrative tool. Each box *[in the diagram below]* represents a moment" in the circuit of culture. "Each moment or aspect depends upon the others and is indispensable to the whole…It follows that if we are placed at one point of the circuit, we do not necessarily see what is happening at the others…Process disappears in results". In an analysis of Johnson's work one can begin by analyzing the circuit of culture.

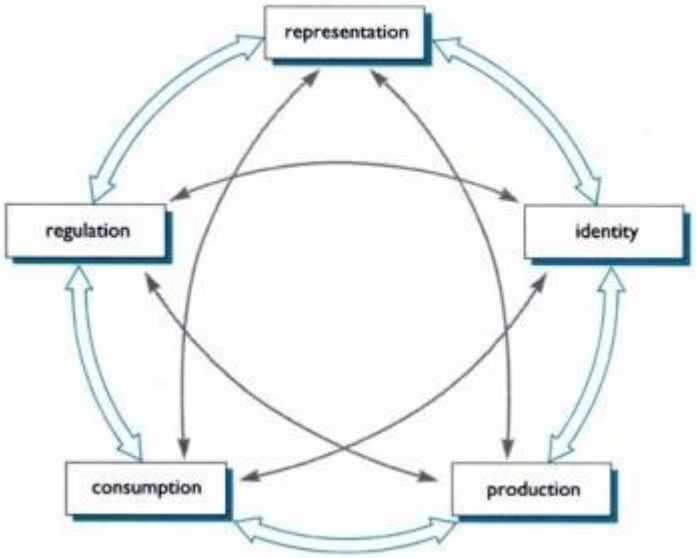
One can start by looking at the domain of "lived culture". In the circuit of culture, lived culture is "synonymous with social relations". It offers an explanation as to "how society shapes and socially constructs a particular type of meaning that manifests itself into a certain idea" (p. 46). This idea then goes from the domain of the private to the public into the process of production. The production manifests into concretion in the form of the "text". In other words, lived culture is the term Johnson uses to describe certain environmental factors that shape the way certain texts are read. The text is not what one thinks of in the traditional sense, but is any object (person, place, thing or idea) that can be read. Reading in this context involves the meaning that an individual or society places upon the text. There are three different types of texts -also known as "cultural texts or artifacts"; they are visual, written and social texts (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus, 1997, p. 10). Visual texts consist of text that one can physically see. This can involve people, buildings, movies, children at play, classrooms and so forth. Greg Dimitriadis (2001) in his book *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy and Lived Practice* discusses how young people interpret and respond to hip-hop as text in many unpredictable ways. This is helpful in this discussion as hip-hop culture is often read as Black culture. Thus visual text can range from the body language of hip-hop in general to the actual clothes that hip-hop youth wear. Written text involves written works that one can actually *read* in the traditional phonetic sense. This can include song lyrics, novels, social media text, magazines, hand written letters or any item that is made up of written words. In the hip-hop culture this can consist of rap lyrics, poems, movie scripts, magazine articles and so forth. Lastly, social text involves any sociocultural interactions of humans as individuals or groups. Social text in the hip-hop world could be individual and group dances, handshakes, body language, parties and many other activities (Foreman & Neal, 2011). One can say many of the same things about how Black identity is socially constructed. By understanding the above discourse about cultural studies it can be understood how this framework can be used in social studies classrooms. For example, students can study various popular cultural artifacts as texts in order to engage in social studies activities. This may include popular imagery, music, film or television shows.

Once the lived culture has produced the text, both individuals and society read the meaning onto the text. In other words, there is no set meaning of the text or how it is defined (Johnson, 1987). The definition and interpretation depends on how the viewer interprets it. In the cultural studies tradition this process is known as "articulation" (Slack, 1996, p. 112).
Articulation is the idea of connecting and associating unrelated items and linking them together with a specific and shared meaning. Hall defines articulation as:

> ...the form of connection that can make a unity of two elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage that is not necessarily determined, absolute and essential for all time. The so-called 'unity of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'. You have to ask under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made (Hall as cited in Slack, 1997, p. 115).

For example, when the news and media portray Black males as violent, many people in society view all Black males as violent. The media articulated a certain image of African Americans that seems believable to the public. In public schools administrators may read the text of youth hip-hop attire (e.g. gold teeth, baggy clothes, new name-brand tennis shoes and braided hair) as representing misbehavior and criminality. However, the teens may articulate the hip-hop appearance as conveying that they are original individuals. The students also see dressing in this manner as a way to express their identity. When analyzing a complex subculture such as hip-hop, other factors such as group identity, representation, consumption and regulation seem to factor into the construction of culture.

As was previously stated, in contemporary times, hip-hop culture is read as Blackness or Black culture. In other words, many people in mainstream society are defining what it means to be Black in terms of hip-hop language and culture. In this way, to be Black means to wear baggy clothes and a lot of jewelry and even engage in deviant behavior that is often associated with hip-hop. Many African Americans may even define themselves in these terms. In light of these factors, Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus (1997) expanded upon Johnson's cultural studies diagram and formed their own circuit of culture.



New Circuit of Culture

The new circuit of culture model was expanded to five domains as opposed to four in Johnson's model. It includes "representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation" (3). The next section will explore their model of cultural studies.

Representation

Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus define representation as "the practice of meaning through the use of signs and language" (p. 25). Hall (1997) points out that representation is one of the key components in producing culture. Since it has been pointed out that representation involves language, then it can be understood that "language is the privileged medium in which we make sense of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged". In this way language is critical to "meaning and culture" and has long been viewed as the "key repository of cultural values and meanings". It is also important to note that language builds meaning and causes people in the world to interpret something in virtually the same way and thereby have a "shared understanding." Hall argues that language can create this scenario by operating as a "representational system", which uses various types of symbols and signs in language. These symbols and signs may include a wide variety of sources including music, written text, electronic imagery and inanimate objects- which communicates to the masses certain meanings assigned to it. Hall goes on to state that "language is one of the media" through which thoughts and ideas are represented in culture (p. 1). In short, representation has to do with language and signs and how things are assigned meaning.

One can look again at the social construction of Race in America to further understand representations in this context. Movies such as *Boys in the Hood, Menace 2 Society, Colors* and more recently the HBO original series *The Wire* purport to depict a realistic narrative of inner city life in the Black community. These films primarily give a detailed account of the drug trade and the violent street and gang life of young Black males. However, the problematic aspect of these films is that they simply add to a long historical legacy in popular culture and in film of Black males being portrayed as violent and deviant. To be fair new contemporary shows like *Black-ish, Law and Order* and *Grey's Anatomy* offer a much more complex and positive portrayal of African American life. However, other shows such as *Preacher's of LA*, *Empire* and *Scandal* portray all too familiar stereotypical narratives. The television shows and films mentioned above are accessible by all for public consumption. Thus, when Black youth consume this type of media on a regular basis and all of the characters in the film that look like them are violent criminals with little value for life then that is how they come to define what it means to be an African American.

In the context of American public schools, the students come to understand the attire, language and behaviors that define Blackness by listening to the music and watching videos and movies that portrays so called Black culture in a limited way. The media is instrumental in communicating the *representations* of the discourse to the youth. A combination of different media and texts help shape their perception of Blackness in such a way that everyone within this particular subculture understands it. With this information it can be understood how teens come to be identified with this definition of what it means to be Black. One can look at how representation through language and symbols help shape *identity* within a culture, which is the next stage on the circuit of culture.

Identity

Identity primarily refers to identity politics (i.e. Race, class, gender, and religion), which adds a dynamic to the circuit of culture that Johnson did not specifically deal with in his model (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus, 1997). Through a combination of a historical narrative and popular media, Black identity has come to be socially constructed as negative. It is not necessarily always being defined by African American people as negative. But socially constructed unfavorable representations of Black people have lingered for centuries, and unfortunately through popular culture some youth have accepted these narrow, harmful definitions of Blackness.

Identity also has to do with how certain texts come to be associated with certain meanings or identities. Negative aspects of hip-hop culture have come to be how many in society (both African Americans and their white counterparts) have come to define what it means to be Black. In the hip-hop culture representation creates the meaning and causes certain individuals to identify with arbitrary customs, words and language, music, and behaviors within hip-hop. In this way, male students in high schools wearing their pants well below their waistline can be articulated as one who embraces a commercialized Black culture. Those corporations who market hip-hop (such as record companies and television stations) hope to establish "an identification between object [in this case object could refer to specific music, clothing lines, cell phones and other electronic devices, or a certain lifestyle] and particular groups of consumers" (Hall, 1997, p. 5). One example includes certain slang catch phrases that are articulated by rappers and picked up by corporate sponsors for marketing purposes. Another example is when young people on MTV and BET are seen constantly wearing certain name brand clothing that have come to represent Blackness. As a result of what they observe on television, students at middle and high schools collectively give specific hip-hop meaning and identity to otherwise arbitrary objects, which is then read as Black authenticity. This is dangerous when used to shape and define racial and ethnic identity. For example, if youth consume movies like *The Wire* on a regular basis, being a successful African American male would include riding around in fancy cars and clothes obtained through drug money, objects that the media uses to portray Blackness. Further, violence is portrayed as a necessary part of that lifestyle, thus perpetuating the negative stereotype of the violent Black male (Ruffner-Ceaser, 2012). Once a collective identity is created, and specific meaning is assigned to text, one can progress to the next stage on the circuit of culture, which is *production* –like that on Johnson's circuit-.

Production

This is the process whereby the representation and identity are brought into fruition. In other words they become concrete manifestations, which may come in the form of actual tangible objects or in the form of a particular lifestyle, as in Black youth culture. In this stage it is also important to note the various environmental factors that help make up the "culture of production" (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, 1997, p. 43).

Society and various media outlets place meaning on otherwise arbitrary texts, thereby producing them in the world. In the domain of production one can observe "how the [text] is produced culturally and how it is made meaningful during" this process (p. 4). In the case of contemporary African American culture, one can observe factors such as music videos, youth interaction and fads, societal influences and clothing brands to ostensibly learn how Blackness should be acted out. Unfortunately school administrators and educators often read all of these social activities as a part of deviant Black culture. Further, when young people frequently watch music videos produced by record studios in collaboration with corporate giants, they subconsciously are told what it means to be Black. Young Black women are portrayed as sexually promiscuous and young black males are often portrayed as violent drugs dealers. Consequently when their peers in a reverse direction on the circuit, view their fellow students acting out these behaviors they view them as "Black." They too encountered these representations through media and their inner city environment. When the youth arrive at the school they have a shared meaning of what Blackness is and they all collectively produce the subculture.

Further, both Black and White youth read Blackness in light of historically negative stereotypes. Racial discrimination and systematic racism can be perpetuated in society when white America reads African American-ness in terms of the sensationalized hyper-violent, hyper-sexual popular cultural representations and Black youth internalize and become these stereotypes. However, it is important to note that the producers of culture (i.e. corporations, media, parents and administrators) do not establish the sole meaning of a cultural product. Teens articulate the meaning to fit their own reading of the text and engage in a process of continual *consumption.*

Consumption

In terms of cultural consumption meaning making is an ongoing process. Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus submit that:

> It does not just end at a pre-ordained point. While producers attempt to encode products with particular meanings and associations, this is not the end of the story or biography of a product, because it tells us nothing about what those products may come to mean for those using them. In other words, meanings are not just sent by producers and received, passively, by consumers; rather meanings are made actively through consumption, through the use to which people put these products in their everyday life (p. 5).

In other words the average middle or high school student does not just passively accept the articulation of the musical culture and genre that the producers sell to them. While they are consuming the representations, they are forming their own identities and the production comes about through their articulations, ultimately becoming what they collectively call Black culture. Often, this narrow view of African American-ness is generational. When one speaks to individuals in the Black community of older generations they often do not recognize young people's understanding of what it means to be Black. Quite frankly, they are often disappointed that teens would adopt such negative stereotypes that have carried over from darker times in African American history (Lemons, 1977; Balkaran, 1991; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2009; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Ruffner-Caesar, 2012). Because youth often create their own meaning of products apart from meanings assigned by the adult world, those in authority often try to regulate or control the production of the product. *Regulation* has to do with institutions that attempt to regulate everyday life, such as churches, states, corporations or schools.

Regulation

Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay an Negus (1997) discuss the notion of "cultural regulation" which can help finalize this discussion on the social construction of race in America, focusing on Black youth (p. 112). Violence and misogyny today characterize many music videos. As parents and authorities view this media in conjunction with news, television and movie portrayals of inner city life, they attempt to regulate the socially constructed culture. The media censures videos and lyrics, schools censure the dress code, all in an effort to regulate the representation of Blackness. Those in authority try to regulate Black culture because of the narrowly defined iteration of it through the media, thus causing tension with youth, resulting in stereotypes being perpetuated.

Conclusion

Using the Cultural Studies Framework in the Classroom

Now that the fundamentals of the cultural studies model has been outlined -focusing on both Johnson's (1987) circuit of culture and the updated model by Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus (1997), this essay can be concluded by discussing more specifically how one can use the cultural studies model in social studies classrooms to have lessons and discussions about Race in America.

Meaningful discussions about Race are often taboo in contemporary classrooms. White teachers are often uncomfortable or feel guilty about the racist legacy of America and avoid the subject altogether. Indeed it takes a certain amount of courage to have the conversations with teens.

Others argue that racism is an issue of the past and should just be relegated to the history books (Singleton & Linton, 2005). Cultural studies research allows teachers to take students through a process of seeing how negative ideas about Race have been socially constructed from popular media and history. These tools can help students understand how popular culture has shaped societal ideas about Race in America. When students can critically examine themselves and society's definitions of Blackness they can have more healthy conceptions of the self.

African American Identity: Challenging Negative Constructions of Race

I have been engaged in critical media studies for some time now and have used popular culture and media to teach social studies lessons in elementary grades through the university level. Popular culture and media can act as a text, as Johnson (1987) mentions in his cultural studies work. Many students can identify with popular media because it is integrated into their everyday life. It is often how they shape their own identity and define who they are. I have used popular cultural artifacts and media such as music videos, historical films, song lyrics, situation comedy, early twentieth century cartoons, news clips and television commercials to teach social studies. Thus, media is a good starting point in understanding text in the cultural studies sense. Through reading media and popular culture as texts that shape their racial identity, African American students as well as their White counterparts can have a more healthy view of Race.

Lessons that explore the social construction of the Black Race in America can be interwoven throughout a larger unit on Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction as they relate to racism and injustice. However, the unit can go beyond just a series of history lectures. Teachers can design it to get students thinking critically about Race and their own prejudices and stereotypes, and even their own racial identity. Franklin and Higginbotham (2005) offered a historical analysis of African Americans between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pointing out how they "became systematically dehumanized and criminalized through various laws, education, religion and social mores in order to perpetuate the chattel slave system" (8). Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus (1997) and Johnson's (1987) circuit of culture gives students a graphic representation of how popular culture and media has indeed shaped their perception of their racial selves. When social studies teachers situate socio-cultural discussions about Race within the proper historical context teens can have the tools to unpack false ideas about what it means to be Black. Through a combination of differentiated instruction including formative assessments, meaningful and effective cooperative learning, analyzing primary and secondary texts, lectures, and reflection, students can develop historical thinking skills that would help them understand where they fit in society and in history. Part of the task would be to discuss the media's social construction of race within a historical context.

Creative assignments can stem from this work including: students creating their own documentaries about their racial selves, well developed skits or plays that address the issues, a series of writing prompts and reflections that emphasize themes centered on racial identity and even a fish bowl style debate that would allow students to research multiple sides of issues to gain a better understanding. No matter the approach the cultural studies model seems to be an untapped resource in regard to the study of popular media and the social construction of Race in middle grades and secondary social studies classroom.

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