

# CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY AND STUDENTS IN YOUTH GANG

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THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

The representation of youth in gangs in the media has tended towards portraying these individuals in a negative light, especially regarding the theme of violence. Such representations have political consequences for how these individuals are perceived and treated. Too often what is missing from media representations of youth in gangs are counter narratives from youth in gangs themselves. This thesis addresses how youth in gangs can learn how to produce counter-narratives for public discourses. I argue that critical media literacy is a source of empowerment for youth in gangs given that it offers these individuals an appropriate pedagogy that embraces their social reality.

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## Introduction

“[The concept of subperson] arguably captures the defining feature of the African American experience under conditions of white supremacy (both slavery and its aftermath)”

– Charles W. Mills, 1998<sup>1</sup>

The topic of this thesis is the educational benefits of critical media literacy for youth in gangs. The guiding thought throughout this thesis is that critical media literacy can be empowering for this social group. Grounding my argument is the understanding that storytelling, agency, and personhood as Mills<sup>2</sup> writes about are fundamental educational principles. I believe this to be true when it comes to understanding the educational benefits of critical media literacy for youth in gangs. In one form or another, storytelling can happen through speech, through actions, and through literacy. Both speech and action are important forms of storytelling, but the focus of this thesis is on literacy as means towards storytelling.

Literacy is a foundational practice when it comes to peoples’ ability to convey ideas and desires. In particular, the ability to read and write impacts how people communicate with each other personally and publicly. Without the ability to read or write, it may be possible for one to live a personal life, but living a public life would be extremely difficult. For this reason, we should see literacy as linked to the public.

Literacy can take the form of what David Buckingham refers to as “media texts.” Media texts refer to the written, aural and visual messages that people convey to one another.<sup>3</sup> This includes the standard idea of magazines, newspapers, and government documents, but it also

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<sup>1</sup> Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca Cornell University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> David Buckingham, *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

includes videos, such as on YouTube, online articles, and music. Accordingly, when I use the term literacy, I am not referring to reading and writing simply in a traditional sense, but in a modern sense of reading, writing, interpreting and producing offline and online

One of the main reasons that literacy is important when it comes to engaging public discourses is because of the issue of representation. What people write and produce about others has a social affect. This entails that what is said, and not said, shown, and not shown, through media texts influences social relations. Some representations are considered positive, others not, and this happens for political and social reasons. There is much at stake when it comes to media texts given that how one is represented often offers a risk.

This risk includes political risk. Representations of people have implications in regards to government activity, notions of moral decency, and law/policy. It seems fair to say that people who have a more negative representation in public discourses through media are more likely than not to have a host of moral judgment and laws/policies that make their existence harder. On the other hand, people who have a more positive representation in public discourses are more likely to find a supportive government, clear moral conscious in the public, and laws that suit them. Representations in media texts can have a deep impact in how people live in a society.

From this perspective, this is why I studied youth in gangs. The representation of youth in general already tends towards negativity, as Chapter one will address. But youth in gangs in particular are often represented in a negative light in the media connected to a common theme of violence and ultimately their supposedly sub-personhood. Some of these negative representations capture accurate moments of the lives of youth in gangs, others not so much. It is this potential ambiguity that I do not want to overlook and believe serves as a guiding idea for this thesis; this is what I found so hopeful throughout this study as a black man reading about youth in gangs. In

particular, my question was not so much if the negative representations of youths in gangs in the media are accurate, but whose story is told and legitimized in the first place.

The most influential storytellers of youth in gangs when it comes to public discourses via media texts are not youth in gangs it seems. Perhaps on YouTube one can find some vlogs from youth who are in gangs, but the dominant discourses is from corporate controlled media networks. Accordingly, I questioned the possible reasons that youth in gangs are not engaged in this public discourse to tell counter-narrative regarding themselves. I contemplated reasons for this lack of engagement with questions about political apathy, naïve consciousness, and structural determinisms. But one reason that seemed fundamental and basic was that these particular youth simply do not have the literacy skills (especially critical media literacy skills) for public engagement. For this reason, I turned to the issue of how critical media literacy can be empowering for these youth.

I argue that conducting critical media literacy courses and programs for youth in gangs offers these individuals the possibility to engage media texts in an empowering manner. Chapter one addresses the misrepresentation of youth in gangs and why viewing these youth as *ambiguous* is appropriate. Chapter two begins a conversation around this potential ambiguity and how literacy practices, especially critical media literacy practices, can engage these youth in an educational manner. Lastly, Chapter three deals with theorizing about critical media literacy courses for youth in gangs – including possible benefits and limitations of critical media literacy in this context.

The contribution of this thesis is that it evaluates and begins to bridge the gap between critical media literacy theory and youth in gangs as a social group. This thesis is inspired by the idea that youth in gangs can operate as a politically positive force in communities given the right

educative initiatives. Thus, I acknowledge that youth in gangs can behave violently, but I also acknowledge that with the right motivations these youth can behave in more political empowering ways. With critical media literacy as one possible educative initiative, if youth in gangs are able to grapple with the external representation of themselves in public spaces guided by their own internal insights about life, perhaps politicizing youth gangs is more possible. Accordingly, in this thesis I do not doubt the authenticity of youth in gangs' own experiences and practices; rather, I seek to theorize how these youth can engage public spaces more politically.

## Chapter 1| Media Representations of Youth in Gangs

Youth are often portrayed as a burden to society in the media. In “Frame work: Helping Youth Counter Their Misrepresentations in Media,” Kelly argues that youth representation in the media is generally casted in a negative light. The negativity plays into an assumed dichotomy between adults and youth, where youth are presented in a manner that makes it easy for adults to talk about them negatively.<sup>4</sup> When youth are discussed in media texts, the discussion tends to be based on the beliefs, values, and interests of adults who have particular “ideological objectives.”<sup>5</sup> While there are some media outlets that allow for youth voices to be heard, such as on YouTube and Facebook, the dominant canons of media, such as corporate cable news networks, heavily influence public conversations about youth in society.

By influencing the image of youth, a particular story about youth can be controlled and disseminated. Storytelling is a main feature of cable news networks and youth are not exempt from this form of public socialization.<sup>6</sup> What is known and not known, said and not said, in the public regarding youth is partially shaped by the stories cable news networks tend to portray. When we hear stories about youth in the media, these stories come from a particular analysis of an event with a particular audience in mind. While the influence of these stories by the media may not be the deciding factor of how the public views youth, underestimating the dissemination of these stories is dangerous because they nudge and sway public perceptions of youth as if it is common sense. One of the implications of this exploitative stance is the diminishment of their

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<sup>4</sup> Deirdre M. Kelly, "Frame Work: Helping Youth Counter Their Misrepresentations in Media," *Canadian Journal of Education* 29, no. 1 (2006): 34.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 31.



humanity in public discourses. Constant negative representation of youth obstructs their voices and ability to be seen as persons. Thus, there is a tendency for them to end up having a “tarnished reputation” in part due to how media represents them.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, many youth are not only exploited by media networks that portrays youth negatively, but they are also exploited by becoming the “pawns of [an] ideology” of whoever benefits from a spin.<sup>8</sup> There are social interests at stake depending on the stories produced by media networks, and the beneficiaries of these stories includes state and private institutions, corporations, community organizations and other collective organization tied to a common political economy. Thus, rather than youth identities representing unique social group experiences, they become symbolic widgets that bolster particular political positions at the expense of their own voices. Granted, not all youth are treated as pawns in every ideological battle, but the structure of corporate media networks seems to enable any identifiable youth social group to be susceptible to the practices of an opportunist media complex.

### *Violence: Media Coverage of Gangs and Youth*

The media coverage of gangs has increased given the violent acts that have taken place in various cities related to gang activity. Converge of such violence includes stories about both youth and adults involved in gang activity. Regardless, coverage has been narrowed to the theme of violence. Most stories have been about those who supposedly committed the violent acts and the victim of the acts. Accordingly, I highlight some of the stories to demonstrate how violence has dominated the representation of gangs. I do not claim my account of the media

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 34.

stories to be exhaustive of every news story about youth in gangs. But my intention is to capture the sentiment of how violence frames public perceptions of youth in gangs.

Recently, there have been a number of news stories regarding reports of violence taken place in Chicago due to gang related activity. For example, in a news article titled “*3 dead, including 58-year-old woman, 11 injured in shootings on South, West Sides*,” Carlos Sadovi, Adam Sege and Jeremy Gorner<sup>9</sup> reported on the death of 3 bystanders of gang related violence. It was reported that one shooting took place due to rivaling street gangs. The article continues to describe the other shooting that took place during that period in reference to gang related concerns. This news story helps illuminate how violence is a common concern in news stories.

Another news story covered by NBC Chicago was about weekend shootings where 4 people died and a total of 33 people were wounded.<sup>10</sup> The anchor interviewed a local woman about gang violence and the woman replied with sentiments that people cannot go anywhere without worrying about dying. The story then covered two families that were victims of violence over that weekend. One mother lost her daughter and another family was seen praying for a little girl that was shot. As one can glean, the violence covered extends beyond what is potentially happening to gang members but also includes the bystanders of gang violence. Thus, it should be noted that violence has a connection to victimization.

Ultimately, there is a connection regarding gangs as portrayed as dangerous social groups that disrespect civility and law. Other online articles titled “Stemming the Tide of Youth Gangs”

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/chi-1-hurt-in-back-of-the-yards-shooting-20140529,0,5820899.story>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/4-Dead-33-Wounded-in-Weekend-Chicago-Violence-255075421.html>

from the Chicago Tribune<sup>11</sup> and “Frisking Tactic Yields to a Focus on Youth Gangs” from the New York Times<sup>12</sup> portray a sentiment that these gangs, particularly youth in gangs, are an undue burden on society. Such media articles speak to the sway that media networks frame public conversations about gangs.

*Beyond Representations: Conceptualizing the term Violence*

Given the media representations of gangs as violent, I believe the term violence should be conceptualized in order to understand youth in gangs more in depth. In particular, Scott Decker argues that the formation and socialization of gangs can be understood by how threats and violence play out in gangs.<sup>13</sup> Threats refer to the perceived or actual harm directed at individuals.<sup>14</sup> With threat, there is a fear of becoming a victim of some form of violence but there is also the positive freedom of inciting fear or actually being violent. When youth fear that they may become a victim or are actually victimized, then they unite to fend off this threat. When youth in gangs feel threatened they may respond with their on perceived or actual threat towards others. While this concept of threat as Decker describes does not fully take into account psychological reasons why individual gang members commit acts of violence separate from gang activity, it does help address collective violence heavily portrayed in the media.

Much of the violence from gangs is from perceived and actual threats that incite retaliatory actions. The logic goes that these threats trigger responses from gang members that enable them to feel justified in avoiding this continued threat by acting on it. Specifically,

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<sup>11</sup> [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1991-04-04/news/9101300906\\_1\\_female-gangs-gang-members-gang-related](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1991-04-04/news/9101300906_1_female-gangs-gang-members-gang-related)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/19/nyregion/frisking-tactic-yields-to-a-focus-on-adolescent-gangs.html>

<sup>13</sup> Scott Decker, "Collective and Normative Features of Gang Violence," *Justice Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1996).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 253.

Decker writes that a retaliatory act is “an attempt to enact private justice for wrongs committed against the gangs, one of its members, or a symbol of the gang.”<sup>15</sup> Whether the threat takes the form of gang graffiti, a gang member jumping another gang member, a drive-by, the actions invoke retaliatory responses towards some form of justice. It seems uncritical to assume that all acts of violence by youth in gangs are committed out of a passion for vigilante justice, but Decker’s study demonstrated that the act of retaliation was a salient theme among gang members as a reason for why they engaged in violent acts.

If we look at media texts regarding gangs and violence the theme of *threat* is not highlighted as much as violence. Violence is a dominant theme more so than threat and the public representation of what a gang is in media outlets are constantly reshaped. For example music artists often portrayed as capturing the gang vibe include artists such as Tupac<sup>16</sup> to new school rappers such as Rick Ross.<sup>17</sup> Such figures, in public discourses, are known for their aggression and violent sentiments more so than the other values their music portrays, but they are glamorized and shunned on the basis of violence with threat being overlooked. Thus, a question that arises is what should be emphasized regarding gangs - particularly youth in gangs – is if violence, threat or both should be the framing context? Perhaps the dominant narrative about youth in gangs is more ambiguous than a simple story about violent people.

A movie that captured this ambiguity is the 1993 film *Menaces II Society*<sup>18</sup>, directed by The Hughes Brothers. The core of this movie is about a young man who just graduated high school whose name is Caine. Along with Caine was a group of high school friends and a few

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8p9jSRxguAA>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVO5WhIm4uI>

<sup>18</sup> Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, "Meanace Ii Society," (New Line Cinema, 1993).

local adults who lived in the community with him. Caine's best friend, "O-Dog," was the hardcore "thug." His two other friends, "Sharif" and "Stacy," were both street kids who grew up with Caine but had more educational pursuits than O-Dog.

These three characters, along with other sub-characters, reflected the youth gang culture that is often written about in newspapers, music and television. This movie is a good exemplar when thinking about ambiguity of youth in gangs because it does not try to simply paint a good or bad picture. Rather, after the movie one argues internally towards a conclusion. The reason is because there are so many familiar gang problems captured in this movie, from poverty stricken communities to teens with guns, that it is hard to determine who is absolutely evil and who is absolutely good.

For example, if one wanted to argue that both Caine and O-Dog were indeed menaces to society, they could point to the intro scene of the movie. During that scene, Caine and O-Dog walk into a family owned liquor store by a Korean husband and wife. Already, the issue of racial profiling is present in this scene. In particular, Caine and O-Dog go to the alcohol section of the store and start drinking the 40oz beers in the store before paying for them. The owners yell at them, in an angry and condescending tone, to pay for the alcohol. Caine and O-Dog comply and go to pay for the alcohol. As the two finished paying for their alcohol, the husband says to O-Dog, "I feel sorry for your mother," referring to the "thug" ethos that O-Dog radiates. This does not go over well with O-Dog and by the end of that scene, O-Dog has shot and killed both the husband and wife and took the surveillance footage to avoid being caught later. Here is a scene where racial profiling and condescending comments were portrayed as just given that O-Dog murders the owners while Caine is shocked at how fast the situation escalated. If one wants to argue that Caine and O-Dog are menaces to society, this is a scene one can point to in the film.

However, if one argued that these youth were not menaces to society, but a product of their society who are coping with their social reality, they could point to the scene where Caine and his friend Sharif are beaten by two white police officers. The scene starts with Caine and Sharif driving to a destination as they are pulled over by the police. At first this scene is portrayed as a legitimate, however, the police then begin to aggressively arrest them for no reason and without reading them their Miranda Rights. As the two are thrown in the back of the police car, the police officer on the passenger side of the car begins to beat both of them with his baton. The scene cuts away and then comes back to the police officers dumping the two off in a Mexican-American gang neighborhood with the presumption that these black youth will get beat further by the Mexican-American gangsters. As the police pull away and leave the young men wounded and hurt in an alley, one of the Mexican-American gang members spots them on the ground. Rather than the gangsters beating them up further, they take the two to the hospital. This is a scene where one can point to and argue that the wrongs that Caine and his group do and deal with is a product of their environment and strategy of surviving. As the father of Sharif character says in the movie, “the hunt is on, and you’re the prey.”<sup>19</sup>

While this is a movie, there is something about how this movie captures gang activity. In particular, in his review of the *Menaces II Society*, Robert Ebert states:

It’s impressive, the way the filmmakers tell Caine’s story without making him seem either the hero or victim; he is presented more as a typical example. We are not asked to sympathize with him, but to a degree we do, in the sense of the empathetic prayer,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

“There, but for the grace of God, go I.” It is clear that, given the realities of the society in which he is raised, Caine’s fate is a likely one.”<sup>20</sup>

What Ebert is pointing out is that the character of Caine as a representation of the youth gang member, the thug, is not a clear dichotomy between good and evil. The film forces us to think about how we justify our moral judgments of these youth. Depending on one’s perspective, one can arrive at some conclusion, but it may not be *the* conclusion. And even the conclusion that one arrives at is contingent on what they want to focus on as the most significant phenomenon.

### *Understanding Youth in Gangs beyond Media Representations*

Towards developing a more ambiguous understanding of youth in gangs, I articulate some of the current social, economic, and psychological conditions that underlie some of the misrepresentations of them by the media. In particular, I focus on three themes: family structure, street socialization, and schooling. By engaging these three themes, a more complex understanding of youth in gangs can be sensed. It is from a deeper analysis into the lives of youth in gangs that one can reexamine representations about this social group. The intention is not to capture all that can be said about the social, economic, and psychological factors of youth in gangs, but that each theme is complex and worth considering.

### *Family Structure*

Many youth in gangs are what some criminologist would refer to as high-risk youth and likely to join gangs because of problematic family structures that given sociological, economic, political and environmental reasons that exceed the scope of this paper. Still, the

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Ebert, "Reviews: Menace II Society " <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/menace-ii-society-1993>.

development of many youth in gangs can begin with their family structure. Depending on this structure, youth may be more susceptible to join gangs. In particular, James Vigil argues that the nature of family structures, whether extremely stressed or not, has a lasting effect on how youth connect with society.<sup>21</sup> Family structures heavily influence the trajectory of youth' mental, emotional, physical, and intellectual health. And they are one of the bases from which youth develop their discourse and preferred ways of sustaining beliefs, values and interests. That said, I want to make it clear that my description of family structures is not meant to blame families as the sole reason why youth join gangs, but to understand one complex issue that contributes to their willingness to join. I do not accept the conservative argument that families are the reason why youth join gangs given that there are simply too many other factors. Such a conservative claim contradicts what I am arguing, that youth gangs are more complex than given credit. Yet, family structures still play an important role and needs to be considered towards understanding youth in gangs as a complex issue.

Looking at family structures, there are two types of structures pointed out by some criminologist that I address. To be clear, I am not fond of the names given to these family structures, but for simplicity I will use them as they are presented. The first group is called “underclass” families and the second is “unconventional/controlled” families. These categories come from Joan Moore and James Vigil’s (1989) description of how some youth gang members emerge due to family structures in impoverished environments, which both family structures are.<sup>22</sup> Depending on the family structure, the structure can work as an enabler.

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<sup>21</sup> James Vigil, "Young People Join Gangs Because of Social Marginalization," in *Opposing Viewpoints: Gangs*, ed. Bruce Glassman, Bonnie Szumski, and Helen Cothran (New York: Thomson, 2005), 83.

<sup>22</sup> Joan Moore and James Vigil, "Chicago Gangs: Group Norms and Individual Factors Related to Adult Criminality," *Aztlan* 18, no. 2 (1989).



The underclass family structure is where family cannot or does not teach youth the values that Moore and Vigil call “conventional society.”<sup>23</sup> The underclass family is one where the development of youth gang members is most likely to occur. This family is in poverty, lacks connection with employment that largely depends on “conventional” values and, as result, develops tendencies for family members to engage in unlawful behavior. Thus, in these families, there is a higher chance youth joining gangs because the family structure is reactive to conventional values through acts of deviancy- such as drug dealing, stealing, and joining gangs. The way I understood this strive towards “deviancy” is the establishment of an underground economy.

Additionally, in underclass families, youth are largely left without supervision from an authority figure that embodies conventional values. According to this explanation – which is favorite conservative assertion - a lack of such supervision on the part of the family has a lasting effect on the type of values that are developed by youth.<sup>24</sup> It is stated that youth are more likely to engage in deviant acts (such as stealing and violence) on their own accord without supervision that instructs these conventional values. Underclass families’ lack of recognition of conventional (hegemonic) values is one enabler in the forming of youth gangs.

Also in underclass families some older members of such families directly encourage deviancy. Moore and Vigil point out that some members of older underclass families are already a part of gang or engaged in extensive deviant activities and they share these values with younger

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

relatives.<sup>25</sup> Thus, some youth are more likely to value deviancy and continue their interest in gang cultures as a space of likeminded people.

On the other hand, a unconventional/controlled family structure is where there is a division between the deviancy that is understood in the streets and what happens in the family home.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while members of this family structure may be engaging in deviant activity, these activities do not explicitly show in the family home – the value of deviancy is not necessarily encouraged or discouraged. The home functions as a free zone, where family hierarchy, respect and responsibility takes precedent more so than what happens on the streets. Thus, youth who come from unconventional/controlled homes have a lower chance of forming or joining an youth gang given the attempt to separate valuing associated with family cohesion from the valuing associated with deviancy, but there still a high possibility given that the family is still struggling with repressive conditions that overall make the value of deviancy compelling.

When deviant acts do take place by youth within unconventional/controlled families, there is a greater chance that the youth participating in such activities might hide their acts away from other family members.<sup>27</sup> The logic goes that as long as the older relatives of the family are unaware of the extent of the deviant behavior that one is engaged in, then the family will not become worried by the repercussions that could come from segments of society, which threatens the value associated with family cohesion. In unconventional/controlled families, there is recognition of deviance connected with gang culture as a form of obtaining capital even for youth, but not necessarily a full embracing of the gang culture due to the reality of social

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

repercussions on behalf of various segments of society. Still, controlled families are living in an impoverished environment and this environment encourages gravitation towards deviancy.

### *Street Socialization*

Understanding street socialization begins with understanding a period of youth development called “psychosocial moratorium.”<sup>28</sup> Psychosocial moratorium is what some criminologists use to understand why some youth form and join gangs in addition to the influences of family structure. This is a period where youth are searching for their ego, their ability to recognize themselves and feel valued as a person. This entails willingness to develop a sense of self and building self-identity, which is considered scarce in an impoverished environment and thus coveted. Being from impoverished environments, in terms of social, cultural and political capital in an increasingly neoliberal society, forming and joining gangs offers the possibility to develop other type of social, cultural, economic and potentially political capital.<sup>29</sup> Going through a psychological moratorium happens to youth as they transition into adulthood. What is different from youth who are seen as rational and legitimate by segments of society and youth from impoverished environments is that the latter have fewer opportunities in deciding how to develop their sense of belonging and self.

The impoverished environment of youth gang members encourages them to further *disconnect* from conventional society as they form their identity. This means conventional institutions along with the access to their forms of capital do not become a reliable place where

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<sup>28</sup> Gilberto Conchas and James Vigil, "Multiple Marginality and Urban Education: Community and School Socialization among Low-Income Mexican-Descent Youth," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 15, no. 1-2 (2010): 51-53.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

youth can form their sense of self because of their marginalized social reality. Rather, they turn to “street socialization,” as an “unconventional path” in searching to form self-identity.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, street socialization is a process towards forming or joining gangs for the development of self-identity.

Street socialization refers to the values that youth develop among peers. These values shape and are shaped by engaging in a marginalized socio-political environment. In particular, Vigil contends that street socialization includes youth’s behaviors and attitude and youth interacts within their social environment given their upbringing and associations of impoverished environments.<sup>31</sup> Their ways of viewing their environment is in part seen through this lens of street socialization.

While the values of youth in part emerge with increased street socialization due to an impoverished environment, these values take on different forms depending on the subjective positions of individuals within the discourse. Street socialization reflects a range of. For example, Vigil refers to some of the most extreme expressions of valuing self-identity and resulting practices as “craziness.” For example, when some youth gang members are assessing the presence of self-identity among their peers in a particular situation, this assessment focuses on bodies and aggression because bodies and aggression are important means towards gaining the capital of self-identity in an impoverished environment. After assessing the presence of self-identity among peers, these youth evaluate the body and aggression of other youth gang members who proclaim to be tough because toughness is a valued expression of self-identity for surviving in an impoverished environment. The greater the risk and aggression of a person’s

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<sup>30</sup> Conchas and Vigil, "Multiple Marginality and Urban Education: Community and School Socialization among Low-Income Mexican-Descent Youth," 51-53, 56, 62; James Vigil, "Urban Violence and Street Gangs," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (2003): 227, 31-32, 35.

<sup>31</sup> "Urban Violence and Street Gangs."

body, the easier it is for one to proclaim a sense of self-identity, which ultimately can lead to acting crazed during this pursuit for self-identity.<sup>32</sup> What makes these acts what Vigil calls “crazy” is that they go against some beliefs that most humans, including themselves, would adhere to.

However, due to the pressure of the marginalizing environment where the capital of self-identity enables other forms of capital in impoverished environments, these youth have to go against their own beliefs and thus perform gratuitous acts. This “craziness” can come in the form of violence among other things. Vigil gives an example of some youth gang members jumping off a building to prove their *realness*.

### *Schooling*

Regarding to the relation between schooling and youth in gangs, some argue for schools officials to reject the legitimacy of youth in gangs due to their deviancy and gratuitous acts. From this perspective, there is little discussion about understanding youth gangs’ deviancy and gratuitous acts as tied to a social problem of marginalization. Rather, these acts are judged based on a belief of a meritocratic society,<sup>33</sup> where the worth of students as individuals is seen based on the acts of individuals alone and not the history of acts. For example, Decker and Janet Lauritsen advocate for a position where school officials should discourage the presence of youth gangs because they do not hold legitimacy due to the trouble that youth gangs *bring* to schools.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, their focus is on getting individuals out of youth gangs and to prepare them for

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 230, 36-37.

<sup>33</sup> Clarence Karier, *Shaping the American Educational State: 1900 to the Present* (New York: The Fress Press, 1975), 138-39.

<sup>34</sup> Scott Decker and Janet Lauritsen, "Leaving the Gang," in *Gangs in America* ed. C. Ronald Huff (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002).

roles within conventional society, a society that already marginalizes them. This is an approach that views youth gangs as inherently illegitimate as opposed to viewing them as a social group formed by agents concerned about the social reality they find themselves in.

With the notion of illegitimacy is the belief that schools are not spaces for youth in gangs and thus youth in gangs are portrayed as a community problem, not a schooling problem.<sup>35</sup> This attitude is one where the school as an institution attempts to separate itself from the issues of their students even though schools, as public spaces, represent one of the last possible non-suppressive spaces for these youth.

While conventional values are heavily influencing public schooling, from a marginalized perspective schooling still plays an important role in how youth in gangs continue to engage society as a whole; and thus, there is still something at stake if schooling neglects these students even from a hegemonic perspective.<sup>36</sup> Without schooling that equips youth with the ability to engage various segments of society in some way, they are left in a further position of idleness. Therefore, compulsory schooling, from the perspective of hegemonic society and marginalized youth, still serves these particular youth towards some desired end that suits hegemonic society.

If these youth's values do not align with hegemonic society, such as cultural values that delegitimize their own, then the usefulness of these youth comes from disciplining them towards other hegemonic institutions. Rather than schools serving youth as people trying to survive an experience of marginalization, many schools are inclined to serve the interests of hegemonic society. In particular, when youth in gangs go to school, their deviancy and gratuitous acts risk being seen as inappropriate and are mistaken to be their true beliefs, values, and interests without

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<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Trump, "Gangs, Violence, and Safe Schools," in *Gang in America*, ed. C. Ronald Huff (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Vigil, "Young People Join Gangs Because of Social Marginalization."

further investigation. The disciplinary reactions that result are in the form of harsh punishments, such as repeated suspensions and expulsion. This includes sending these youth to juvenile detention centers<sup>37</sup>. Thus, as a result of the illegitimacy that youth in gangs experience from school officials, schooling may have a profound affect on how these youth perceive the value of schooling.

### *Conclusion*

The representation of youth in the media, in particular those involved in gangs, tends to be negative given the motives of various media networks. This negativity frames public perceptions of youth often before they have a chance to speak for themselves. The media tends to portray their negativity more often than not and this perception has a lasting effect on how segments of the public understand them as humans. Youth in gangs in particular are often deemed negative in public discourses. While the media representation captures a negative side of youth involvement in gangs, what is missing is a more *ambiguous* perspective of these youth in gangs.

Specifically youth in gangs are not only capable of being violent, but they also have fears. Threats, whether perceived or actual, simulate much of the violence that we hear about in the media regarding youth in gangs. By making the analytical distinction between violence and threats, a more ambiguous understanding of youth in gangs emerges. These youth are not irrationally violent; rather, the violence we hear about often can stem from some deeper aspects of agency that are often overshadowed by the magnitude of their violence. To understand youth gangs as a more complicated phenomenon than the mere concept of violence, this is why I analyzed themes such as family structures, street socialization, and schooling.

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<sup>37</sup> Henry Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 83.

These themes form a more ambiguous reality of youth in gangs that is not often captured. The violence captured in the media is not diminished, but nor is it verified as the sole factor in understanding youth gangs. Rather, youth gangs are ambiguous and evoke different feelings or different perception depending on how one perceives them. As with the character Caine in the Movie *Menace II Society*, one's judgment about youth gangs depends on what factors one decides to hold as exemplars. But with this ambiguous understanding of youth gangs comes clarity in how we can talk about youth in gangs. It is not acceptable to believe the representations of youth gangs in the media at face value; rather, one has to make an argument(s) regarding their judgment of youth in gangs.

But without counter-narratives of the media representations of youth in gangs the public discourses around youth in gangs are likely to be one-sided. Accordingly a question that is salient is if many youth in gangs have to the skills to tell their side of the story in public realms. In the next chapter, I will analyze the conceptual framework of critical media literacy towards understanding how it can be a source of empowerment for youth in gangs. If possible, there is great potential in equipping youth in gangs with literacy skills and awareness necessary to read media texts about themselves and to critique such media texts towards producing their own stories. Such awareness for these youth not only serves as source of empowerment given the ability to understand the negative connotations that segments of society place on them, but it also may serve as basis from which these youth can tell their stories in public spaces.



## Chapter 2| Critical Media Literacy Theory

I begin my analysis of critical media literacy with Elizabeth Moje's article titled "To be Part of the Story": The Literacy Practices of Gangsta Adolescents."<sup>38</sup> This article is first-rate in beginning a conversation around questions of how media literacy can be empowering for youth in gangs. Her qualitative analysis of the literacy practices of youth associated with gang activity revealed an ethos that helps towards making an educative connection between the lives of youth in gangs and literacy.

Moje's article helps establish the connection that literacy and identity constitute each other. When one talks about literacy they have to understand the identity in play and when one talks about identity one has to know how this identity is conveyed. In drawing out this connection between literacy and identity, Moje states that literacy is "complexly shaped by a myriad of social commitments, positions and ideologies associated with gender, ethnicity, color, age and class relation."<sup>39</sup> Literacy is not exempt from the complexities of social reality and is rather contingent on social reality – the two have to be thought of together. When teachers evaluate students' literacy skills, this implies that they are indirectly evaluating students' identities to some degree.

Accordingly, given that literacy is contingent on students' identities, as students traverse between school and their neighborhoods, there may be a rift between the literacy practices developed outside of school and the literacy practices developed inside of schools. Specifically, youth in gangs develop the ability to perform different types of literacies in order to make it

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<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Moje, "'To Be Part of the Story': The Literacy Practices of Gangsta Adolescents," *Teachers College Record* 102, no. 3 (2000).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 666.

through their environments. Moje contends that this is why some youth in gangs learn literacy practices that are considered “unsanctioned” literacy practices.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, knowing the type of literacies that schools approve of, such as writing, reading, and speaking in *Standard English* is mostly useful in school, but unsanctioned literacies, such as graffiti, tagging, and gang representations through body language and dress codes<sup>41</sup> is useful outside of school, which is where youth in gangs dwell.

Thus, unsanctioned forms of literacy can become more common for youth in gangs than the type of literacy taught in schools; yet, the way they use unsanctioned literacy practices is not much different from any other form of literacy. Youth in gangs use unsanctioned literacies to communicate in the sense of conveying meaning. For example, Moje points out that unsanctioned literacies are “a way of conveying, constructing, and maintaining identity, thought, and power.”<sup>42</sup> Through unsanctioned literacies, these youth are able to speak with their family and friends in their community, but also, they are able to gain legitimacy in forming or joining youth gangs.<sup>43</sup> Like any literacy, unsanctioned literacy is contingent on some identity and in this case that identity is that of a marginalized youth.

But what I found most significant in Moje’s study is the realization that youth in gangs saw unsanctioned literacies as a form of empowerment, not just as a means for communication. Unsanctioned literacies are empowering because it enables them to tell their stories in life. Unsanctioned literacies offer these youth the opportunity to “claim a space, construct an identity,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 651, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 661.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 651.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 662.

and take a social position in their worlds.”<sup>44</sup> As noted in chapter one, too often youth in gangs are seen as people who are violent and many point to their literacy practices – i.e. graffiti, tagging, and harsh language. However, there may be more to youth in gangs’ literacy than violence. Through unsanctioned literacy practices, these individuals are able to find a space of empowerment.

The point of highlighting these youth’s ability to tell their stories through unsanctioned literacy practices is not to romanticize gangs, as if they are unproblematic. Rather, it is to show that they have a deeper sense of agency, and from an educational perspective this should be encouraging because it means that there is room for growth and expression.

Moje’s study is a great conversation starter when it comes to understanding how literacy can be a form of empowerment; however, the scope of the study presents some key issues that need to be developed. First, Moje’s study analyzes youth in gangs’ literacy by focusing on print literacy in relation to other social practices.<sup>45</sup> However, she does not address the issue of media literacy, where the focus is on media texts such as online articles with hyperlink features, video clips, and blogs. For this reason, bridging the gap between the unsanctioned literacy practices of youth in gangs and media literacy is needed.

Second, Moje revealed that while youth in gangs know unsanctioned literacies and sanctioned literacies, they lacked an understanding about the implications of these literacies in regards to how society treats them. In particular, Moje argued that they failed to be aware of how their unsanctioned literacy practices may be furthering their marginalization given that they feed

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 653.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 655.

into negative stereotypes that become public forms of knowledge via media.<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, there needs to be a better understanding of the type of education these students should receive if it is to help them develop the connection between their literacy abilities and representation in public discourses. While being able to tell one's story is empowering, it has to be argued that it also entails certain responsibilities.

Lastly, Moje argues that more needs to be done to encourage these students to tell their stories through their literacy skills, but in a way that mitigates the dangers that come with unsanctioned literacies and instead allows these students to produce counter-texts.<sup>47</sup> Being in a gang is a complex situation that is filled with both good and bad, empowering and heart wrenching moments. But it is a part of our society and if literacy is an avenue for empowering these students then it is something educators should consider. For this reason, media education, particularly critical media literacy, becomes important in seeking to develop youth in gangs' abilities to tell their stories.

### *Media Education*

At times, the term media education can become too vague in describing the uses of media in education. To avoid this problem, I will elaborate on what is media education. To begin, in *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*, David Buckingham writes that media education deals with "communicating with people indirectly."<sup>48</sup> Media, whether visual or aural, is about conveying firsthand accounts of information to people. We engage news and

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 681.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Buckingham, *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*, 3.

reality television shows to understand particular information that we have not witnessed firsthand or do not have the opportunity to know firsthand. Engaging media is an indirect experience because it involves taking time to evaluate what is significant about information we have not experienced.

This experience of evaluating information within media is an ideological act. What makes information indirect through media is that someone else is telling us what happened, what to think, and/or what to do based on some information of a particular event that we may not have experienced ourselves. In order for someone to be successful in conveying this indirect information for a particular social effect on the audience, there has to be a frame of reference, a discourse, in which communicators and audiences understand each other. One obvious frame of reference is language – for example, for an English based audience, English communicators will be best to convey the information.<sup>49</sup> But an equally important piece of this frame of reference is the ideologies of communicators and the audiences. The ideologies of communicators and audiences are an important point of contention if communicators want their message to be evaluated as they intend. Clarence Karier addresses the importance of ideologies and the evaluation of information, stating:

Evaluation inevitably occurs within some kind of value orientation that is part of an ideological framework. This does not mean that [people] will always be true to their

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<sup>49</sup> Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), 92.

ideological commitments; nor does it imply that all these commitments are necessarily reasoned and understood.<sup>50</sup>

Evaluating information- in this case media text, which is defined as “texts often [combined of] several ‘languages’ or forms of communication – visual images (still or moving) and written language” - is not mere arithmetic; it is a social process.<sup>51</sup>

Even the phrase, “let the audience decide,” is mostly true in reference to the language and discourse in play. Discourse refers to the “discursive form” of ideology.<sup>52</sup> Given that media is an indirect attempt to convey an understanding of an event, the success of communicators with audiences depends on the ideological gap in the form of discourse between communicators and audiences.

That said, since media education consists of evaluating indirect information and because evaluation is an ideological act, therefore media education is an ideological act. Media education seeks to equip students with abilities to evaluate media text, which is media literacy. Media literacy consists of the ability for students to be aware that information conveyed through media texts are constructed and that evaluating media texts requires awareness of ideological orientations. Failure to approach media as conveying indirect information and failure to equip students with awareness of ideological orientations results in some other kind of media learning, but this could not be media literacy.

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<sup>50</sup> Clarence Karier, "Ideology and Evaluation: In Quest of Meritocracy," in *Educational Evaluation: Analysis and Responsibility*, ed. Michael Apple, Michael Subkoviak, and Henry Lufner (Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1974), 279.

<sup>51</sup> Buckingham, *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," 91.

If we look at the current trend of media education in our nation's public schools, there is no national standard for best practices in media education. Even *Common Core*, which is the newest (federal) standard curricula that States are adopting, uses vague references towards the use of media and evaluation. For example, the standards for Grades 11-12 states that students are to "integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., quantitative data, video, multimedia) in order to address a question or solve a problem," but there is no definition on what evaluating consist off.<sup>53</sup> The standards for Grades 6-8 and Grades 9-10 are not much different. There is no clear language for addressing the reality that information in media is indirect and thus reflects another's perspective of ideological orientations; rather, there is concern for integration of standardized knowledge that will be given to the student by the teachers. As a result, *Common Core* focuses on the uses of media as neutral instruments, not on media education.

Given the absence of a national standard of media education, one of the next best spaces to look at are organizations that promote media education. In this decentralized media education context, influential organizations are trendsetters. The absence of standardization encourages organizations to form as representing a collection of individuals who have agreed upon a particular understanding of an issue. This collection of individuals brings a sense of cohesion and direction that otherwise may be lacking in the public. The ability to displace feelings of uncertainty and a lack of direction within the public realm is one of the main reasons why influential organizations become trendsetters.

For media education, the National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) continues to be a leading influential organization. In particular, well-known corporations and

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<sup>53</sup> Common Core, "Common Core State Standards Initiative " <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RST/11-12/7>.

national organizations are affiliated with NAMLE. Some of these organizations include Nickelodeon, Center for Media and Information Literacy, Participant Media, Common Sense Media, Girls Scouts of America, and National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture. The influence of NAMLE also includes support from universities such as Baylor University's Curriculum and Instruction program and Brigham Young University's College of Fine Arts and Communications.<sup>54</sup> NAMLE has also created an online space to spread their influence by allowing companies to post advertisements of technology classes and similar initiatives. Given the affiliations and outreach of NAMLE, it is clear that NAMLE is having success in pushing its message of media education in the public realm.

As an influential organization, NAMLE is setting trends in understanding media education and the practices of media education. For example, the organization allows for technology education companies to post openings for classes regarding various forms of technological and media learning. In the context of NAMLE, these classes can be seen as developing skills towards media education. In particular, one company is EverFi. On the resource page link in the 2013 September edition on NAMLE's website, EverFi advertised its services. These services include teaching a curriculum that focuses on the "nuts and bolts" on how technology works" and teaching students how to handle themselves in "virtual environments...including privacy, security, cyberbullying, [and] digital relationships."<sup>55</sup> Given the organization's influence, it is able to promote particular understanding of technological learning towards media education.

But most important is the realization that the power of NAMLE's influence stems from its core principles. Like most organizations, having core principles provides the cohesion and

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<sup>54</sup> <http://namle.net/membership/organizational-members/>

<sup>55</sup> <http://namle.net/2013/09/26/ignition-digital-literacy-and-responsibility/>



certainty that many may be seeking in a decentralized space. Core principles consist of words and ideas that people can attach themselves to in various ambiguous situations. Core principles guide peoples' actions and allow people to have a sense of direction. Core principles provide a sense of purpose and assurance. Without core principles, it would be difficult for an organization to maintain its influence in a decentralized environment.

In particular there are six core principles. The first core principle states "Media Literacy Education requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create"<sup>56</sup> This principle focuses on how all media messages are "constructed." The need for critical thinking and inquiry is to uncover the underlying messages and relevant background information of messages. This principle attempts to make sure that students are aware of the source of such messages when evaluating messages. The point is for students to be able to think about the reasoning behind particular messages.

The second core principle is "Media Literacy Education expands the concept of literacy (i.e., reading and writing) to include all forms of media".<sup>57</sup> With the rise of various forms of media, this principle aims to encourage forms of literacy not traditionally considered. The organization wants to extend the concern for literacy with printed text to forms of media text. This principle focuses on how educators think about literacy and why various media text in general ought to be treated as legitimate literacy concerns.

The third core principle states "Media Literacy Education builds and reinforces skills for learners of all ages. Like print literacy, those skills necessitate integrated, interactive, and

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<sup>56</sup> National Association for Media Literacy Education, "Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States," National Association for Media Literacy Education, <http://namle.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/CorePrinciples.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

repeated practice”.<sup>58</sup> This principle aims to build a collaborative environment where students and educators can evaluate media text together. The goal is to have an environment where evaluating media text becomes comfortable. The concern is developing habits in students that allows for students to make media familiar.

The fourth core principle is “Media Literacy Education develops informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society”.<sup>59</sup> This principle focuses on making students engaging citizens through media literacy abilities. Students should be able to discern various points of view with respect to cultural differences and similarities as community members within media text. Accordingly, students should not be shielded from such differences; rather, students need to be able to take on differences in an engaging manner - if creating students with a democratic ethos is the goal of this nation, then students need to be able to engage media text with a democratic ethos.

The fifth core principle states “Media Literacy Education recognizes that media are a part of a culture and function as agents of socialization”.<sup>60</sup> This principle is restating the concern for diversity of opinion and information that students ought to engage. This includes educators actively making opportunities available to hear the opinions of their students in regards to others. It represents an attempt to make sure that media is seen as an avenue for dialogue and understanding of society. There is a concern for students to realize that media happens in a society and is a space where people create meaning.

The sixth core principle is that “Media Literacy Education affirms that people use their individual skills, principles and experiences to construct their own meanings from media

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

messages”.<sup>61</sup> This principle is about teaching students how to arrive at their own understandings of media text. It brings emphasis to the interaction between media and individuals and how individuals can choose to relate or disagree with various messages. This position advocates that media education is not emphasizing any ideological understanding of society, but for students to arrive at their own thoughts.

All of NAMLE’s core principles engage media as indirect information with a general realization of the importance of ideologies. The first core principle focuses on the indirect nature of how information is conveyed through media. It encourages students to think about the relationship between the message and their understanding. The fourth core principle encourages the connection between the purposes of media education in developing media literacy skills towards a flourishing democratic society. Principles five and six address the significance of social meaning within media text. They invite students to bring themselves into discussions regarding media text with something more than analytical analysis.

Based on its core principles, NAMLE is a good start in implementing media education in a decentralized context. The core principles grapple with the heart of what media education is, which is evaluating information found within media texts. The core principles that address the ideological reality of media speak to NAMLE progressive influence in pushing media education. However, the core principles have shortcomings, especially given the organization’s mission for a more democratic society through media education.

The shortcomings of NAMLE can be grasped by understanding that its overall conception of evaluation espoused through its core principles, while sharper than Common Cores’s conception of evaluation, is too vague given a lack of contextualization. As an advocate of media education, NAMLE does emphasize the concept of evaluation towards increasing

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

students' awareness of indirect information within media text and awareness of how ideologies provide orientation. There seems to be a lack of social and historical context to describe what is at stake regarding the evaluation of media. Whether for their own ideological reasons as a more progressive child-centered focused organization versus a social reconstruction/critical pedagogy focused organization, or for the motive to appeal to the most people as possible in the public realm, the core principles of NAMLE neglect to place the issue of evaluation of media text in the social and historical context of hegemonic ideologies versus suppressed ideologies.

The significance of NAMLE failing to contextualize its conception of evaluation is that all social acts against social injustices are deliberate acts grounded in a contextualized understanding of social reality. Overcoming social injustices requires for people to ask what power is, and in asking this question, seeks to understand who has power and who does not. It requires for people to understand what those without power experience and what consists of this experience – are people experiencing alienation, apathy, or anger? It requires for people to see what gives dominant social forces power and how did they obtain such power. This is the kind of contextualization that NAMLE's core principles fail to acknowledge.

Given this lack of contextualization, NAMLE is an organization that is inadequately continuing the pursuit of a more democratic society. Ultimately, this is one of the main criticisms of NAMLE. In particular, in "The Re-Politicization of Media Literacy Education," Benjamin Thevenin and Paul Mihailidis make the point that even with the presence of NAMLE, there is no "politically empowering media literacy education" that connects media with the daily lives of students and the world of politics.<sup>62</sup> This criticism is coming from an article published in

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<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Thevenin and Paul Mihailidis, "The Re-Politicization of Media Literacy Education," *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 4, no. 1 (2012).

NAMLE's own scholarly journal, which speaks to the real danger of NAMLE lacking a contextualized understanding of media education.

Furthermore, Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share have pointed out the problem of this lack of contextualization in media education such as NAMLE displays through its core principles and the United States in general. They argued that this lack of contextualization is a burden for a society that strives to be a democracy for all people. Specifically, they state:

The critical component of media literacy [media education] must transform literacy education into an exploration of the ideological role of language and communication to define relationships of power and domination.<sup>63</sup>

As Kellner and Share contend, people need to engage media education with the realization of how power and relationships are inherently present in media text. Being aware of power and ideology in regards to media is an important aspect of what it means to be media literate. NAMLE, like other media education organization and initiatives is missing this point. This is one of the reasons why Critical Media Literacy is important in the conversation of media education.

### *Critical Media Literacy*

The paradigm that Kellner and Share are writing from is Critical Media Literacy. From this perspective, teachers are expected to teach students how to “read, decode, and critique

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<sup>63</sup> Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share, "Critical Media Literacy: Crucial Policy Choices for a Twenty-First-Century Democracy," *Policy Futures in Education* 5, no. 1 (2007): 61.

media.”<sup>64</sup> Critical media literacy intends to be a foundational form of education where adequate reading skills are necessary to engage text. But it is not enough just to know how to read.

Teachers also have to teach students how to decode. The purpose of teaching students how to read and decode texts is to teach students how to unravel the stories portrayed in media texts.

The purpose of critique for this paradigm is to unearth “one-sided positions” in media texts. One-sided positions refer to media texts that only portray one ideological viewpoint of an event. By intentionally teaching students to identify the one-sidedness of media text, students are developing the ability to create new meaning from text other than the intended ideological viewpoint, what Stuart Hall originally called preferred readings. When students are able to critique media texts such as online articles, the hope is that they are able to see how a story may or may not be one-sided, or what is commonly referred to as bias. What this aspect of critical media literacy emphasizes is that there is always the potential for bias in media text that can be discerned through critique.

By training students to unravel one-sidedness in media texts, what is being developed is students’ abilities to also understand the connection between media texts and current social reality. Kellner refers to this as “making connections between texts and contexts.”<sup>65</sup> Media texts do not emerge from a valueless environment of some sort; rather, media texts emerge from situated experiences, contexts full of values and social practices engulfed in positions of power. Both blogs and vlogs are produced by people and supported by organizations that have values, social practices and positions of power. Thus, when students engage media, they are engaging the social context from which that media emerges.

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<sup>64</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Toward a Critical Media/Cultural Studies," in *Media/Cultural Studies: Critical Approaches*, ed. Rhonda Hammer and Douglas Kellner (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 6; "Multiple Literacies and Critical Pedagogies: New Paradigms," in *Revolutionary Pedagogies*, ed. Peter Trifonas (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>65</sup> "Toward a Critical Media/Cultural Studies," 8.

Furthermore, there are different teaching methods that teachers can use in teaching students to read, decode and critique. One approach that is common is textual analysis. Textual analysis consists of “close textual readings to analyze” media texts.<sup>66</sup> This means that students have to read deeply and carefully in attempting to make sense of the bias of particular media texts. Rather than encouraging students to merely read for the main idea, they are encouraged to read for patterns of ideas. It is not good enough to know the gist of a story; students have to be able to know how to analyze a story.

Another method is content analysis. Content analysis can proceed from both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Specifically, Kellner states, “ranging from quantitative context analysis that dissects the number of, say, episodes of violence in text, to qualitative study that examines images of women, black, or other groups...”<sup>67</sup> Whether through quantitative approaches or qualitative approaches, a content analysis can be conducted as long as students are able to read, decode and critique. For example, students can examine television shows to determine how often particular social groups are misrepresented or they can watch a television show and examine the common themes between particular characters. In either case, students are using analysis skills to arrive at a critical understanding of some media text.

However, the word “critical” is not without controversy. There is a strong sense of disillusionment with what it means to be critical in contemporary media education discussions. For one thing, the notion of being critical has usually been tied to the consciousness of students. One perspective on this, as Buckingham writes, is that teachers who emphasize making their students critical by focusing on their consciousness are actually condescendingly arguing that

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 13.

their students need to go from some naïve consciousness to a more critical consciousness.<sup>68</sup> From this perspective, students are seen as victims of their circumstances who have the faculties for overcoming naïve viewpoints by the foresight of teachers. Accordingly, students are expected to unlearn and relearn aspects of what they know to develop an appropriate state of consciousness for critical engagement.

Thus, if being critical is a continuum from naïve consciousness to critical consciousness, the problem of whose view about reality is not naïve arises. This is a problem that Buckingham points to by stating, “while claiming to speak on behalf of the oppressed, such authors continue to reserve the right to define others’ best interest in their own terms...”<sup>69</sup> What this means is that if students are seen as naïve people, then teachers have to be able to rid them of this mythic understanding of social reality with an expert account of reality. However, at what point does ones’ attempt to enlighten someone actually become indoctrination?

Another point of contention on this same issue is what Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk point out as the critical thinking paradigm critique of what it means to be critical. In particular, critical thinking proponents argue that the use of the word critical by the Critical Pedagogy tradition, and by extension the critical media literacy discipline, are disingenuously using the word critical - instead of the word critical it should be swapped for the word political.<sup>70</sup> Rather than letting people develop their natural ability to think critically in the sense of “critical thinking,” it is argued that that critical in a critical pedagogy paradigm is actually a form of political indoctrination, not educational development. For example, in a critical pedagogy course,

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<sup>68</sup> Buckingham, *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*, 108.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk, "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits," in *Critical Theories in Education*, ed. Thomas Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge, 1999), 54.



what happens when an oppressed student does not feel oppressed or does not claim to be oppressed? Should the teacher correct this student to show them that they are oppressed or let the student have their thoughts and carry on with their class? For the critical pedagogue, it would seem they must take time to correctly engage the student. Those who are cautious of the critical pedagogy tradition would then argue if one is really helping the student overcome some naïve consciousness or indoctrinating the student to believe what you want them to believe for political reasons?

This is a stinging critique of the critical pedagogy tradition because it forces critical pedagogues to be accountable for their ideas and how they see students. However, it is not a fatal critique because it downplays an important foundation of the critical pedagogy as relying on the process of dialogue, which may or may not influence the outcome of students and is a process where multiple ideas are shared and argued over rather than lectured about.

Thus, being critical does not have to be a matter of absolutes. Rather, as Henry Giroux writes, critical literacy is about the inclusion of multiple points of view depending on who is partaking in the class, where “the world is always implicated in relations of power.”<sup>71</sup> This means that a student’s identity as a man or woman, rich or poor, or young or old, has a significant impact on the dialogue when it comes to unearthing bias in media text. Accordingly, the transition from naïve consciousness to critical consciousness is not a linear continuum of awareness; rather, it is more of a web of awareness where one’s identity is important toward contributing to the general web of awareness.

The point that Giroux writes about speaks to Kellner’s argument that critical media literacy includes the development of students to be able to have multiple literacies. It is not

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<sup>71</sup> Henry Giroux, “Literacy and the Politics of Difference,” in *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern*, ed. Maxine Greene (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 368.

enough just to know how media texts speaks to one's own world, but they must also be aware of how any given media text may speak to another's world. For students to be able to have this understanding of how media texts may speak to others, they have to know how others may read the media text. Once they can demonstrate multiple literacies that allow them to make these insights, then they are in an empowering position because they can read media texts from multiple perspectives in a way that increases their awareness.<sup>72</sup> It is through developing multiple literacies (i.e. the ability to read text from different perspectives) that enables the opportunity for students' social awareness to genuinely increase.

But the teaching of multiple literacies requires teachers to be aware of the type of students they are teaching also. It is not reasonable to expect that all students acquire the same depth of multiple literacies given that students are unique individuals and come to classrooms with many differences – such as age, interest, and cognitive ability.<sup>73</sup> Second grade students should not be expected to be taught or learn the same media literacy skills as High school students. And I would take it further in saying that not all high school students should be expected or required to be taught in the same manner. In other words, there has to be a balance between content and form.

Accordingly, another problematic aspect of critical media literacy is who determines the standards for what students learn and how to be taught? This problem is nothing new when it comes to schooling and education in general, but it still must not be ignored. But, there is going to be some differences in how students should be taught and what they should be taught in respect to their identities, and this emphasis avoids the cavalier argument that media literacy is

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<sup>72</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Multiple Literacies and Critical Pedagogy in a Multicultural Society," *Education Theory* 48, no. 1 (1998): 109.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 112.

inherently good and without complications. Indeed, increasing students' awareness through the process of teaching multiple literacies through dialoguing with people is a challenge, but it still one of the goals of critical media literacy.

That being said, the development of students' awareness is only one aspect of a bigger process that critical media literacy attempts to develop in students. In particular, the notion of praxis is central to the critical media literacy paradigm. In particular, Kellner states:

The core concepts of media literacy are most relevant to progressive and transformative education when taught through a democratic approach, with critical pedagogy that follows the ideas of progressive educators like John Dewey and Paulo Freire.<sup>74</sup>

What Kellner is getting at is that while Dewey and Freire came from different perspectives regarding education, both identified praxis as necessary for the prosperity of a democratic educational environment. A democratic society cannot have people who do not make the connection between their thoughts with their actions, or, who fail to see the connections between others thoughts and actions in the public. Just as the concept of praxis was important in progressive and critical education, it is a fundamental concept in critical media literacy as well.

The reason praxis is important is because it deals with the relation between action and theory.<sup>75</sup> Theory refers to the ways we want to frame particular phenomena in the world. How we see phenomena is shaped by particular terms and ways of talking that explain what is going on. It is through theory that people are able to grapple with the significance of their social reality. For example, through a given theory students would be able to look at particular media texts and engage them from an intellectual position. Rather than students merely seeing their perspective

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<sup>74</sup> Kellner and Share, "Critical Media Literacy: Crucial Policy Choices for a Twenty-First-Century Democracy," 63.

<sup>75</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Donaldo Macedo (New York: Continuum, 2000). See Chapter 3

as a capricious, theory implies that their perspective is a part of something universal. Theory is used as a source of empowerment because it provides language for describing phenomena.

On the other hand, practice refers to what people actually do. Practice is the action that people take to change their world. It is not good enough to have a theory of a phenomenon, but students also have to be able to act on the phenomenon in order for their empowerment to come to full fruition. For example, students who read a particular media text have to act on the media text, but the actions have to come from reading of the text. Otherwise, what comes into question is if critical media literacy is changing lives or merely an academic exercise. To avoid just being an academic exercise, students have to be able to act on their knowledge, not merely be aware of some phenomenon. Practice is the counterpart to theory and it is through practice that students see results from what they have discerned.

Accordingly, practice and theory have to go together for there to be genuine learning. As Paulo Freire writes, a theory without a practice or a practice without a theory is harmful.<sup>76</sup> The two necessitate each other in order for students to strive to genuine learning, towards a more critical consciousness. This is why he argues that practice and theory – i.e. praxis – is the basis for a critical education. Within this paradigm, critical media literacy is about praxis because the goal is to get students to think about media differently and to act on what they know about various media texts. Without praxis, students are not engaging texts in a critical manner, meaning that their lack of theoretical proclivity or practical action may be enabling the continuation of a bias in media text and in social reality. The point of an education based on praxis is to get students to change the world, to rethink and remake the world when necessary in spite of the oppressive situations. Thus, critical media literacy is about changing the world through media.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

But it must be stressed again that the critical in critical media literacy is not some party line position where individuals have to agree on the same point in order for them to be considered “critical.” What is critical is the disillusionment of one-sidedness, of hegemonic bias in media text. Accordingly, dialogue becomes an important aspect in critical media literacy. For example, while making an argument about why teachers should engage in conversations between themselves and students regarding the issue of media texts and cultural representations, Kellner highlights the importance of having such conversations. He writes:

A more dialectical approach to media literacy engages students’ interest and concerns and should, as I suggested above, involve a collaborative approach between teachers and students since students are deeply absorbed in media culture and may know more about some of its artifacts and domains than their teachers do. Consequently, they should be encouraged to speak, discuss, and intervene in the teaching/learning process.<sup>77</sup>

This means that teachers are not just lecturing to students, but rather, they should be engaged in a conversation, a dialogue. Without this dialogue, then the relation between teachers and students may become too distant when the objective is for collaborative learning. While not all teachers and students can uphold this idea of collaborative dialogue to its fullest the idea holds that dialogue is something to be strived towards

Therefore, when analyzing what dialogue is, there is a lot that could be said. But I want to point out some of the themes that come up when the concept of dialogue emerges. One theme is the idea of consensus that needs to be distinguished from the idea of consent. From Social Reconstructionist accounts of consent regarding actions to what I consider accounts of consensus

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<sup>77</sup> Kellner, "Multiple Literacies and Critical Pedagogies: New Paradigms," 205.

regarding understanding, the outcome of dialogues will differ depending on the type of dialogue. For notions of consensus regarding understanding, Burbules points out that consensus may not be possible or desirable depending on who is a part of the dialogue.<sup>78</sup> However, for the notion of consent, participation is necessary given that absence of participation has implications regardless if there is no consensus.<sup>79</sup> Still, dialogue provides the medium through which ideas and arguments are exchanged and developed. This is where the aspects of praxis are worked out and where a web of critical insight used to critique bias aspects of media text. Dialogue encourages students to begin bridging the gap between theory and practice by allowing students to argue their point of view. But equally important, dialogue forces students to talk about social reality – it encourages them to deal with context. It is in this sense that media education truly becomes a contextualized educational experience.

Why is contextualization of media education so important? The reason is that in confronting social injustices, all marginalized people are in need of a contextualized pedagogy. Simply advocating awareness of how media text are constructed through ideological orientations is not enough to build a foundation for mindfulness towards confronting oppression and reconstructing society. Pointing out the importance of the need of a contextualized media education, Kellner argues “education needs to foster a variety of literacies to empower students and to make education relevant to the demands of the present and future.”<sup>80</sup> Without a contextualized media education, i.e. a contextualized conception of evaluation, efforts to

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<sup>78</sup> Nicholas Burbules, "The Limits of Dialogue as a Critical Pedagogy," *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> William O. Stanley III, "Social Reconstructionism for 21st-Century Educators," in *Social Reconstruction through Education: The Philosophy, History, and Curricula of a Radical Idea*, ed. Michael James (Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1995).

<sup>80</sup> Kellner, "Multiple Literacies and Critical Pedagogy in a Multicultural Society," 103.

empower marginalized students through media education for the present or the future are compromised.

### *Conclusion*

If the aim is to expand youth in gangs' media literacy skills, then the paradigm of media education – particularly critical media literacy – is important. The type of media education espoused by NAMLE is not enough to empower marginalized students, and this is why critical media literacy is a beneficial paradigm when thinking about media education for youth in gangs. In particular, and within the scope of this thesis, in order for these youth to have the opportunity to engage media literacy skills in a way that enables them to produce counter-narratives as Moje writes about, media education must be political and culturally motivated. Otherwise, it would be very difficult for media literacy to have meaning for any person, especially youth who are grappling with his or her own misrepresentation in the media.

With a critical media literacy lens we have a better understanding about what media education should be teaching and how to teach it towards youth in gangs. The next chapter is about what this type of instruction may look like for these individuals. When it comes to teaching critical media literacy, we do not have an adequate understanding how this form of media literacy education can empower these particular students.

### **Chapter 3 |Applying Critical Media Literacy to Youth in Gangs' Literacy Practices**

While the media portrays youth in gangs as mainly violent, there is more to the story than what the media chooses to represent. In particular, it is youth in gangs themselves that could contribute with their own stories. This is why literacy, particularly critical media literacy, is important. As Moje demonstrated in her study, literacy offers youth in gangs a medium from to tell their stories. An interesting question is can they experience feel the same empowerment when it comes to critical media literacy.

Does critical media literacy have anything to offer these youth? Some of the core principles of critical media literacy emerge from the principles of Critical Pedagogy, a form of pedagogy aimed at the empowerment of oppressed people. It would seem then that critical media literacy has something to offer. However, would a critical media literacy class for youth in gangs be the same as for all oppressed students? If the answer were yes, then it would appear that perhaps we did not think about what it really means to teach a critical media literacy class to a particular social group of oppressed people who have unique problems different from those of other oppressed people. In other words, what does critical media literacy mean for youth in gangs in particular?

#### *Critical Consciousness and Youth in Gangs*

For critical media literacy, critical consciousness is an important principle. It speaks to the internal development of students' awareness. When this principle is put in the context of youth in gangs, what comes to mind is what does it means for a student in a youth gang to have a critical consciousness. Youth in gangs come from struggling family structures, street



socialization practices, and deal with the status of being illegitimate students among other variables. Accordingly, critical consciousness is going to mean something more specific than simply the development of one's awareness of their social reality and oppression.

In particular, if youth in gangs do commit acts of "deviancy" given that their family structure supposedly enables it, what would it mean for youth gang members to be critically conscious? In one instance, it could mean that they become aware of how the acts they commit are feeding into the negative representation of themselves in the media. And with this awareness they could begin to look for different acts that allow them to acquire the material they need without feeding into a "villain" image. But on the other hand, if these acts are made out of necessity then it is almost naïve to assume that simple awareness of negative representation in the media is a reason alone stopping them. Something more nuanced would seem to emerge when it comes to understanding their consciousness regarding acts of "deviancy."

Critical consciousness would seem not to be a simple admission of guilt or a celebration of deviancy. The truth would lie somewhere in between and perhaps only the genuineness of youth in gangs could express this middle ground. Critical consciousness for youth in gangs would begin to relate their supposed recklessness with the necessities of their social reality. For example, rather than simply admitting that some acts of deviancy are necessary to maintain a certain quality of living, perhaps there would be deeper connections to how particular social actors and institutions make this reality possible and those that could change this reality. Would more neighborhood jobs for these youth reduce their "deviancy?" Perhaps so, but it would take the situated perspectives of youth themselves to help pinpoint in social reality the compelling understanding.

### *Dialogue and Youth in Gangs*

When it comes to dialogue, the ability to have genuine conversations is pivotal. This is one of the benefits and drawbacks of dialoguing depending on who is involved in the dialogue. Dialogues are about having particular conversations over particular topics, so when dialoguing with youth in gangs there will be a particular line of discourse taking place. A central question is what consists of this line of discourse. Educators cannot simply talk about anything educational to youth in gangs and expect the dialogue to be meaningful or empowering. Rather, the dialogue would have to connect to the social reality of these youth and with the themes that these youth are willing to talk about.

In particular, are youth in gangs willing to talk about acts of deviancy without incriminating themselves? Are they willing to share the realities of their peer socialization and how complicated this reality may be for them to bear? Or, are they willing to reveal how they feel in the eyes of school officials? Dialoguing with youth in gangs is not as easy as merely talking about poverty and lack of political representation. There are serious potentially incriminating conversations that could take place that might put educators in awkward positions. So if one is going to dialogue with youth in gangs, one cannot simply ignore the elephant in the room – criminal behavior.

Furthermore, as Burbules points out, all dialogues have limitations. In particular, he states, "...social practices always entail at least implicitly prescriptive norms, and in this sense *always* run the risks of being impositional, normalizing, and exploitative of relatively powerless persons or groups. Alternative social practices may avoid these failings, but replace them with others."<sup>81</sup> With that said, the dialogue I am describing in regards to youth in gangs is a specific dialogue, a limited dialogue, but not an apologetic dialogue. If youth in gangs are experiencing

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<sup>81</sup> Burbules, "The Limits of Dialogue as a Critical Pedagogy," 271.

marginalization due to forms of social oppression then that ought to be the main focus. However, the lingering question that must not be ignored by instructors is if to engage such a dialogue and this is why approaching the portrayal of them as ambiguous is important. If instructors do not take the time to know the social reality of their students and how their students are situated, then forming a dialogue of any quality may become increasingly difficult.

### *Multi-Literacies and Youth in gangs*

One of the ways that educators can dialogue with these youth is towards multiple literacies. Youth in gangs need the skills to code switch, to know how to say one thing in another context in such a manner that their message gets across to others. Being able to have the unsanctioned literacies practices that Moje writes about with the media literacy skills of critical media literacy in addition to the “standard” literacy skills taught in K-12 schooling is extremely beneficial for a social group that is constantly marginalized in society. Critical media literacy has to bring these various literacy practices together in a manner that enables these youth to talk about various media texts in a sophisticated and nuanced manner, a manner that allows for decoding and encoding messages of texts with their own insights.<sup>82</sup>

Having the ability to perform multiple literacies is also a skill in listening to and speaking back to multiple publics that claim to have a say on who and what regarding these youth. When youth in gangs hear criticisms of rap music, or depictions of thugs in the news, they ought to have the ability to read these texts beyond the content and into the ideologies of why these media text were created in the first place. There comes a realization that to speak back to a text is more than talking about the content, its talking about the ideas that gave reason to why that content

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<sup>82</sup> Hall, "Encoding, Decoding."

was selected in the first place. Youth in gangs need the ability to engage these conversations with and beyond the unsanctioned literacies that they learned in their community.

And ultimately, having multiple literacies would seem to be about equipping youth in gangs with the ability to combat the constant negative image making of corporate media networks, such as local news stations and cable networks. These media outlets are some of the most powerful image shaping mechanism in our society and for youth in gangs to be able to tell counter-narratives about who they are is pivotal. These counter-narratives have to be told not just from the perspective of savvy journalists, sociologists or criminologists, but youth in gangs themselves.

### *Praxis and Youth in gangs*

The praxis of youth in gangs would have to go through a transformation when it comes to critical media Literacy. A well-situated praxis is the sole outcome of a good critical media literacy course. If a critical media literacy course has not changed the praxis of youth in gangs in any degree, it would be hard to argue that enough learning has taken place. Youth in gangs should leave a critical media literacy course with some particular theoretical understanding of their actions.

For example, when youth in gangs commit deviant acts, what is the “theory” that substantiates these acts? This is not the same as asking what are the reasons for these acts, it is asking what theoretical assumptions exists that give credence for these reasons. In particular, many acts of self-destruction happen for the pursuit of self-identity and kinship among other youth in gangs. It would seem then that these youth are operating with some theoretical

framework about what is self-identity. Relating youth in gangs' actions with theory is about bridging the social reality with analysis.

To engage anyone genuinely there must be a willingness to think with them. This is true in regards to how these youth theorize their social reality and accordingly how they act in social reality. If there is no connection between the two, then the extreme problems of verbalism and activism that Freire writes about become salient.<sup>83</sup> The actions and theories of these youth need to be analyzed, challenged and developed for the lessons to stick with them beyond the classroom. Otherwise, the genuine intentions of critical media literacy do become some form of verbalism or activism that does not empower in a deep and meaningful manner towards self-actualization.

#### *What a Critical Media Literacy Course for Youth in gangs May Look Like*

An example of a critical media literacy course for youth in gangs may be beneficial in understanding the benefits and drawbacks of such a course. I present this example as an initial class session, but such a class as I am describing may actually require multiple class sessions to complete the first lesson. Equally important, the ideal locations for these types of courses would mostly likely not be in standard K-12 settings. Rather, these types of courses would mostly likely take place in afterschool programs and alternative forms of education that may be already serving youth held in juvenile programs. Tied to this notion of where these classes could take place is also who would teach these classes. This second question is obviously dependent on the first. For afterschool programs, perhaps teachers' and schooling administrators interested in providing this service to their students would mostly like be in charge of leading these courses.

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<sup>83</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

On the other hand, if taking place in juvenile programs, perhaps the institutions that provide educative services to their youth can provide such courses.

That said, what would a critical media literacy course for these youth look like? Towards answering this question, suppose a class of 10-15 students instructed by one teacher begins to watch and analyze the movie *Menace II Society*. As said before, *Menace II Society* is a movie that captures many of the complicated realities youth involved in gang activity. This movie could serve as a starting point for beginning a dialogue and emphasize the notion of ambiguity. It touches on many of the subjects discussed in the previous paragraphs and offers to be an example for classroom practices. And it offers to help us to understand the extent that critical media literacy has something to offer these particular youth.

The class could begin by the teacher giving a quick synopsis to prepare the students for thinking about this movie critically, that is, getting them to think with a problematic mindset. Putting the students into a critical mind frame will help them to avoid watching the movie passively. Watching movies in school settings often translates into a sentiment that the class for the day will be relaxed. The teacher has to ensure that students are not mistaking the study of media texts for an excuse to not engage. Thus, priming students to watch this movie with attention, perhaps even encouraging them to jot down notes while watching the movie, is ideal.

After the movie ends, then students should have an opportunity to reflect on what they watched. Students should begin consolidating their thoughts and the major themes that they believe reflects the core of the story about the main character, Caine. The writing of themes will allow for the movie to become something that students can work with throughout the class. By describing possible themes, students are beginning to act like researchers by noting enduring

categories to dialogue about later. By students forming themes, they are analyzing the movie for deeper meanings beyond the preferred meaning of the movie.<sup>84</sup>

Once the students have put together their themes, next the teacher should ask the students to form a circle to begin a dialogue about what they thought was salient in the movie. The dialogue could begin with the teacher asking the question “was Caine good or bad?” Or the teacher could ask, “Was he a victim or a brute?” By starting off with some either/or question, the teacher is avoiding the simplistic summarization of a story that some could offer. Granted, some students may refuse to participate in the dialogue, but this should not be seen as necessarily discouraging. The goal is to get students thinking about the justification of Caine as a character. Doing this enables for further dialogue in relation to students’ own lives.

Specifically, once the students have laid out some of their thoughts about the merits of the character Caine, the teacher should begin to challenge and ask a why one group of students believe Caine is good rather than evil and the other group why are they so critical of him. The teacher can ask what actions in particular substantiate their beliefs. For example, if a group of students believe that Caine was a victim trying to do good but got caught up in unfortunate situations he could not avoid, they might actually point to the first scene in the movie where Cain’s friend Old-Dog put him in a compromising position as an accomplice to murder.

Alternatively, the teacher may turn to the group that believes Caine is bad and ask why and based on what interpretation. The students may pull from the themes they documented and argue that given Caine’s willingness participate in a drive-by shooting, he is wrong and thus no victim of circumstances. Rather, he is a consequence of his action, which exceeds any righteousness that he may have. What the teacher should be looking for is how students are beginning to take their analysis of this movie and bringing it closer and closer to practices that

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<sup>84</sup> Hall, "Encoding, Decoding."

actually happen in their social reality, perhaps even their own lived experiences. The teacher is not supposed to question students as Socrates did to Meno, were it seems that Socrates' questions were disingenuous because he seemed to always be one step ahead of Meno. Rather, the point is for the teacher to be an instigator, a target that either group can take down and build self-efficacy from.

Accordingly, the teacher can begin to ask how this movie does or does not relate to them. The objective is not to see who in the class is most like Caine and who is not, but to begin a reflection on students' own lived practices. The point is to get students thinking about how media texts may portray them as the movie portrayed Caine, how ambiguity can creep into the actions they commit, actions that seem so clear to them. If these students can begin to see the ambiguousness embedded in their practices, a greater space might open up for questioning these practices as how others might interpret them.

The teacher can then begin to be more direct in asking students what practices in their own lives might be seen as ambiguous. Given the deviant and gratuitous acts of self-destructive behavior that some youth in gangs engage in, there is a lot that students could bring to the dialogue. The task is how students can talk about these experiences without incriminating themselves or inciting unwanted emotions in other students who may feel threatened, whether perceived or actual. This is a question that is going to have to be settled depending on the context of this class. If the class is taking place in an after school program at a neighborhood school, much more precaution is necessary than if the class is taking place at a juvenile correction center where the course can actually serve as a form of group therapy. So depending on where this class is taking place, this course really requires students to develop their mind in a genuine manner.



This concern for genuine conversations brings up the concern for multiple literacies. If multiple literacies are a focus of critical media literacy courses, for youth in gangs this involves understanding how their narratives about their practices can be understood from multiple perspectives and spoken about in multiple frames of reference. The class setting provides a safe space for students to practice gaining familiarity with some common frames of references, such as how journalists talk about threats and violence versus police officers. Learning how others encode and decode messages as Hall writes about calls for students to grapple with media texts as interlocutors. There should be a growing sensitivity to how actions are interpreted from multiple perspectives and how students can speak to these multiple perspectives.

That said, after discussing how students perceived the movie in relation to their own lived practices, there has to come a time when then the students start to tell a narrative about their own practices without the movie as a crutch. As Moje pointed out, the power of literacy as a way for marginalized students to tell their stories must not be ignored. If a critical media literacy course is going to be helpful in this regard, it has to tap into the lived experiences of students in a way that allows them to convey their narratives with and without media texts. For example, the teacher can ask the students to pick out one practice in their own lives that may be seen as ambiguous and create a story about the practice. By encouraging students to pick out and narrate about various practices, there is room for reconstructing the meaning of that practice.

An interesting part of building narratives is considering who is the audience and how may the audience decode the story, whether the story is in print or video. At the core, what youth in gangs are offering is a counter-narrative or interpretative analysis regarding their own lived practices. What they are speaking against and with are the stories that mainstream society/media portray in news outlets and cable news networks. The depiction of youth gangs as simply violent

can be juxtaposed with their own narratives. The goal of this juxtaposing is not to prove right versus wrong, but to take what is assumed to be a concrete meaning and to liquefy it for possible reconstruction.

Michel Foucault had a point when he argued against metanarratives in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History.” In particular, he argued that to understand something begins with rejecting the notion of origin, stating “genealogy, however, seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations.”<sup>85</sup> A single “meaning” is not something embedded in lived practices waiting to be found; rather, there are meanings embedded in lived practices. The stories that one chooses to portray in the media are a privileging of one possible meaning over other equally substantiated meanings. Without falling into complete relativism, Foucault’s analysis of meaning and origins helps to make clear the tasks of critical media literacy courses for youth in gangs.

This feeling is something students can hang onto as they offer narratives about their lived practices in light of how the media may or may not represent them. For example, if students are presenting a counter-narrative of the depiction of them as illegitimate students’ in school settings, they can write about their deviant acts and in a way that turns the kaleidoscope of what being in a gang may actually be about besides being a brute. Yes, a student may argue, I am involved in some self-destructive acts, but I am also in a neighborhood that has a school full of educators that fail to say anything about the lack of economic and social opportunities in the neighborhood, thus you can convict me all you want but you are also convicting yourselves.

That said, equipping these students with the ability to engage in multiple literacy practices when it comes to media text is beneficial. But a deeper question is if this sort of class

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<sup>85</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 83.

can change the praxis of students. If students are given the opportunity to liquefy their beliefs and the beliefs of others, to reflect on their actions and how their actions reflects a social reality rather than some sinister origin, perhaps this class could lead to further discussions about the unsanctioned theories that substantiate these youth's lived practices. The obvious must become ambiguous for these particular students to have questions.

This brings the question of theory to the foreground. Have these students ever theorized themselves, their actions, or any aspect of what it means to be in a gang? This type of question might be an advanced question, but should it only be left to criminologist or sociologist? Here too, youth in gangs have work to do. If they are going to devote a segment of their life to a particular way of living, then they have a responsibility to avoid the verbalism and activism that Freire warns us about and to take on the opportunity for self-actualization. While their ability to tell their stories is important for the public to hear, it is equally important for them to hear themselves.

## **Conclusion**

In this thesis, I have offered an account of how critical media literacy can be empowering for youth in gangs. By approaching youth in gangs as ambiguous, a greater sense of dialogue and educative growth seems possible. Engaging the relationship between youth in gangs' lived experiences and critical media literacy, these individuals have the opportunity to tell their stories with a public discourse in mind.

Chapter 1 covered the misrepresentation of youth in gangs and how a closer examination of their lived experiences tends to favor a more ambiguous understanding of them rather than a negative understanding. Chapter 2 sought to develop a theoretical framework from which to think about how to engage youth in gangs towards enabling them to produce counter-narratives of themselves through critical media literacy. Chapter 3 combined the context of misrepresentation of youth in gangs with the theoretical framework of critical media literacy, offering insight about how a critical media literacy course specifically for these youth may look. Ultimately, the success of a critical media literacy course for youth in gangs comes down to students' willingness to shape and engage the class dialogue given their lived experiences with gang activities and teachers' ability to help these students sense the ambiguousness of their lived experiences towards producing counter-texts.

This thesis serves as a starting point for future qualitative research regarding youth in gangs and critical media literacy. A qualitative study, perhaps an ethnography in particular, would greatly benefit from the contribution that this thesis makes. Accordingly, this thesis is also a point from which to continue more exhaustive analysis regarding the relationship between youth in gangs, education, and social reality.

In closing, critical media literacy offers a sense of empowerment for youth in gangs. In a similar sense of organic intellectualism that Antonio Gramsci<sup>86</sup> writes about, youth in gangs have the potential to apply more political pressure on themselves and in public spaces. While more work needs to be done in order to understand what it would mean for youth in gangs – along with other publicly discredited social groups – to being seeing themselves as some form of organic intellectuals, critical media literacy courses can play an important role in this pursuit.

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<sup>86</sup> Antonio Gramsci, "The Formation of Intellectuals," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 2008).

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