

BOOK REVIEWS

B. OSGERBY. *Youth media*. New York: Routledge (2004). 320 pp. HC C\$134.50 (ISBN 0415238072); Paper C\$36.95 (ISBN 0415238080).

S. MAIRA & E. SOEP. *Youthscapes: The popular, the national, the global*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2004). 320 pp. HC C\$ 66.56 (ISBN 0812238346); Paper C\$24.98. (ISBN 0812218965).

It is no longer appropriate to study youth as consumers or as spectacular subcultures, as was the tendency in the past. The two recently published books I will discuss here, one a single-authored book, the other a collection of essays, locate youth as actively engaged in cultural production either directly through producing media themselves or through their use of other media in diverse cultural, social, and geographical contexts.

Bill Osgerby's *Youth media* is an accessible, timely, and valuable examination of youth culture, the study of youth culture and its relationship to the media. Taking a "multiperspective" approach drawing on "circuits of culture" (Johnson, 1986, Du Gay, 1997), Osgerby traces the development of commercial interests, social and economic changes, actual youth cultures, and media products both made by and for the youth market. His exploration of key points in the identification and development of youth cultures from the 1930s to today is rich in historical detail and usefully located in real social and economic contexts.

This detailed account is filled with often humorous and frequently nostalgic (for the older youth) examples such as the rise of *Ready Steady Go* and its presenter Cathy McGowan in the 1960s or the 1990s Riot Girl phenomenon. He gives a useful account of key research and outlines the changes within theoretical debates, charting the early "cultures of resistance" of the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) to subcultural theory developed through Sarah Thornton's (1995) work and the more postmodern fluidities of changing identities discussed by Bennett (2000) and others. He questions the continued relevance of age related youth categories and points to "youth cultures" based not on genera-

tion but on lifestyle choices that challenge a traditional view of adulthood and raise the spectre (or promise) of a “greying youth.”

It is particularly welcome to find a book that centralizes the role of media in youth cultures. Osgerby steers a path between stressing the power and successful marketing strategies of the media conglomerates and illustrating the ways in which youth are critical audiences, sometimes subverting and answering back. His discussion of the battle between the unofficial web sites of *Buffy the Vampire* fans and 20th Century Fox illustrates the sometimes tense relationship between media conglomerates and young people. In the final chapter, Osgerby discusses the development of new media. His main point is that both the fears of a cyber take over of young people’s lives and the aspirations a democratic free cyberspace have not been fulfilled. Rather, young people are using the Internet as an extension of, not a replacement for, their existing social activities.

This is an accessible, well organized, and stylistically approachable book that will be invaluable in graduate and postgraduate courses. The section at the end of the book pointing to further reading and other resources is particular helpful in this context.

I do have two reservations, or perhaps they are requests for more. First, the section on new media is very brief and could do with more exploration. This is clearly an expanding field and new research is always appearing, but even with this in mind, in relation to the detail in the rest of the book, it feels a little unbalanced and under explored. The second is perhaps more a request for a follow-up book. The focus of *Youth media* is very much on the UK and the USA. While Osgerby has used examples from other contexts to illustrate his points, there is no discussion of different centres of youth culture or of different histories and different youth trends in other cultural contexts. With more and more of our students coming from outside the UK and USA, this is a gap that needs to be filled.

Youthscapes, edited by Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, with a foreword by George Lipsitz, is a collection of articles/essays that explore the global influences that are now an integral part of the everyday lived youth cultures no matter where you live. As the editors state, this is an underexplored area, both in youth studies and in debates about globalization. In the latter, youth are too often treated as apprentice adults, following a developmental model, and the particularity of their experience is glossed over. Drawing on Appadurai’s (1996) study of globalization through its different “scapes,” they use the term “youthscapes” as “a conceptual lens and methodological approach to youth culture which brings together questions about popular culture and relations of power in local, national and globalized contexts” (xviii). Through the essays, each one based on empirical research in different locations, they set out to explore the ways in which youth in a globalizing

world negotiate the tensions between their identities as citizens, as consumers, and as producers.

The book is organized in three sections. The first centres on discussions of citizenship and the ways in which migration and transnationalism challenge institutions of the state and the conceptual framework of belonging in the USA. Each of the four essays in this section focus on very particular situations (Somali youth in North American schools, gangs in a town near Chicago, the negotiations of race-based terminologies in a Californian high school, and Muslim identities after 9/11). They all have implications for social policy debates, challenge accepted notions of belonging, and raise useful questions in relation to education, both formal and informal, and social welfare practice. Although it is acknowledged by the editors, it is a shortcoming of the collection as a whole, particularly stark in this section, that so many of the essays are based in the USA.

This is not true of the next section, in which the essays focus on the ways in which both lived and imaginary lives intersect with ideological and national borders in three very different settings. The first traces the ways in which global beauty products become an integral part of the aspirations of young Thai women. The second looks at the ways in which ideology and social connection is a more powerful discourse than geography for youth gangs between El Salvador and Los Angeles. The third is a powerful essay showing the ways in which the cross currents of global media, military language, concepts of childhood, forgiveness, and rights are played out in the lives of child soldiers in Sierra Leone and that challenge the underlying assumptions contained in the work of NGOs. I found this section particularly rich. The enmeshed nature of the local and the global are powerfully illustrated.

The third section focuses on media consumption and production drawing on four very contrasting locations and discussing the different ways in which youth use media to negotiate place and identity. In fact, it is striking but no surprise that media weave their way through every essay even where it is not the main focus. In this way, it is a very useful development on books such as *Cool places* (edited by Skelton & Valentine), and Lipsitz, Maira and Soep acknowledge this relationship. It is absolutely relevant that this collection should include essays from different academic disciplines, illustrating the benefits of studying globalization from different angles.

Again, I have two reservations, one being that the majority of the essays are USA based. Second, I feel there is a tendency both in the title and the introduction to stress the national rather than the local. In fact, most of the essays are taking a very detailed look at the ways in which youth experience globalization and most of them examine extremely local contexts, and the national for many of these youth would be irrelevant. This is another discussion that needs to be addressed.

These two books complement each other and are excellent additions for students and researchers. The first might be more suitable as a course reader and the second would go a long way to complementing that and reminding us all that we can no longer think only nationally and regionally. Youth are, after all, actively engaged in forming and transforming global living and thinking.

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JABARI MAHIRI (Ed.) (2003). *What they don't learn in school: Literacy in the lives of urban youth*. New York: Peter Lang (2003). 284 pp. C\$51.41 (ISBN 0820450367).

Reading this book is akin to eavesdropping on juicy conversations which allow you to gain insight into what makes people tick - their actions, fascinations, and obsessions – and also to understand the political underpinnings of the events told. The heart of this book is perhaps best summed up in the final sentence, the task of “re-defining whose culture and way of life counts as worth knowing and worth living” (p. 272). Jabari Mahiri’s anthology begins with the understanding that “contextual factors such as place, time, and community and social structures... are essential to understandings of literacy” (p. 188). The essays included in this anthology explore the production of meanings by spoken word poets, embittered wait staff, dedicated *X-File* fans, and many others.

The curiosity and admiration the authors bring to this work is contagious. Following Mahiri’s introduction, there are eleven original studies, each based

on research conducted at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. In the tradition of New Literacy Studies, the analysis presented is derived predominantly from ethnographic investigation. Refusing the dominant discourse of positioning youth, and in particular racialized youth, as dangerous Others, the authors of this text hold the subjects themselves as the central authorities on the literacies they are engaged in. It is never forgotten that these are actual people who are in the process of making sense of their actual lives. The contributors demonstrate a compassionate and respectful engagement with the youth, a rare accomplishment and one worthy of celebration.

Looking across the text as a whole, the essays may feel rather disconnected from one another and contain a wide range of writing styles. While a few of these articles read like slightly warmed over thesis papers, others draw the reader in completely with their warmth and insight. The text is, however, united with a central purpose. Contributors are engaged with researching people in the context of their everyday lives who are, for the most part, alienated or excluded from dominant discourses. The research presented focuses on the themes of resistance, re-inscription, and the rewriting of dominant discourses in literacy subcultures.

Mahiri brings a sharp format to this book by having each essay followed by a response written by “major scholars in the fields of language, literacy and cultural studies” (p. 9). This provides a dialogic vantage point for the reader to consider the ideas within each essay. While some responses, particularly in the final chapters, serve primarily to summarize the essay, others provide powerful critiques and provoke important questions. For example, in “Border discourses and identities in transnational youth culture,” Wan Shun Eva Lam presents her study of Willis, an American Chinese immigrant youth who is deeply involved in the literacy community of Japanese popular culture comic books. Lam argues that the creation of these transnational ties promotes transmutation and hybridization of cultures, allowing for a third space in which agency to resist subordination is fostered. Claire Kramsch challenges Lam, asking “but what kind of agency is this?” (100). Kramsch suggests that the agency Willis experiences works to inspire a neutralizing reaction to disenfranchisement rather than to fight against it.

There is a strong political centre to *What they don't learn in school*. Mahiri's own essay, “Street scripts: African American youth writing about crime and violence,” demonstrates this with particular salience. Mahiri articulates how urban youth use out-of-school literacies to develop resistances and sometimes replacements to dominant scripts that work to diminish and oppress youth. This is a process through which people may learn to produce “a stance of intervention” (p. 214) in their own context.¹ Starting from the position that economic enfranchisement, not increased literacy, is the goal, Mahiri keeps

the reader attuned to her central question, how literacies may change access to resources in a substantial way

In "Negotiating gender through academic literacy practices," Amanda Godley articulates how literacy work always holds political and ideological significance. Godley studies the conventional literacy setting of an English classroom using a strong critical framework. Significantly, she holds the relationship between students and text as central, rather than centralizing the teacher. Godley asserts that "gender and literacy are both social practices constituted through social interaction" (p. 189) and demonstrates that the ways that students do literature is shaped by notions of gender already formed out of school.

Even though the primary audience for this text is educational professionals and academics, the role of the teacher is notably absent in all but a few lines. Rather than position the teacher as messiah or director, the teacher is positioned as someone who in their attempt to impose a preset literacy, or out of lack of knowledge, has failed to see the value, opportunity, and competency that is already present in the lived literacy of the youth. The role of the teacher in this text is one who is lucky to be able to bear witness. In "Devils or angels," Peter Cowan looks at the visual discourse community centered around low-rider cars popular with the Latino/a students in his classes. Cowan emphasizes how ill-prepared he was to see the potency of this discourse in his students, and his intertwined journey to being able to hear, respect, and ultimately to be of better service to the students he worked with.

I find this positioning of teachers a necessary relief and uncommon treat. The respondent to Jane Stanley's "Practicing for romance: Adolescent girls read the romance novel," seems less delighted. Gesa Kirsch expresses disappointment that Stanley did not provide recommendations for how parents and teachers should respond to her claim that girls' enthusiasm for romance novels keeps female bodies as objects of discourse but does not hold their desires as subjects. This thus perpetuates "an almost unconscious realization" (p. 176) that access to authority and power can only be gained through male intervention.

A principal assertion in this text is that school is not the only site, or even the most important site, of significant literacy, and that in order to strengthen schooling it behooves those invested in school to consider this claim. In the chapter entitled "Spoken word: Performance poetry in the Black community," Soraya Sablo Sutton looks at the interaction between oral and written literacies as demonstrated by spoken word poets who are literary leaders in their community. These poets share experiences of being disconnected from writing and literacy in high school through an imposition of form, lack of connection to materials used, and not having their passions

nurtured. Beth Lewis Samuelson in “I used to go to school. Now I learn. Unschoolers critiquing the discourse of school,” asserts that because many youth engaged in the unschooling community do not hold the traditional discourse of formal schooling, they bring important and unique challenges to traditional assumptions about teaching and learning that should be heard.

It is understood that students whose culture is valued or promoted at school have a high level of literacy compared to those whose cultural frames are not. In the final chapter, Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade emphasize “What they do learn in school: Hip-hop as a bridge to canonical poetry.” This essay explores how to move towards action within the classroom. The authors provide vignettes in which in-class literacy projects are structured to embrace subordinated literacies, which serve as a bridge to canonical texts. As Jeannie Oakes reminds us in the response, this engagement must only be a beginning.

This book is a strong testimony that literacy is something lived. The privileged glimpses into people’s lived realities with literacy provoke my curiosity to witness the literacy worlds surrounding me. This is a hopeful text rooted in the assertion that out-of-school literacies hold meaningful, politically transformative potential. It reveals that taking the time to witness, respect, and incorporate the everyday literacies of urban youth can inspire the ability to imagine possibilities of change.

NOTE

1. Paulo Freire, as quoted by Soraya Sablo Sutton, in “Spoken word: Performance poetry in the Black community” in this text.

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