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Critical Pedagogy and Disturbing the Pleasures of Silence

Comments for the Interactive Symposium and Dialogue –
Building Support for Diverse Communities: Perils and Possibilities

by

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I want to begin this section with a disclaimer and a claimer: I do not romanticize the use of oppositional cultural texts, for there are contradictions and complexities embedded within such texts. For example, bell hooks (1994) writes about the contradictions in Paulo Freire's liberatory theory:

I came to Freire thirsty, dying of thirst (in that way that the colonized, the marginalized subject who is still unsure of how to break the hold of the status quo, who longs for change, is needy, is thirsty), and I found in his work (and the work of Malcolm X, Fanon, etc.) a way to quench that thirst. To have work that promotes one's liberation is such a powerful gift that it does not matter so much if the gift is flawed. Think of the work as water that contains some dirt. Because you are thirsty you are not too proud to extract the dirt and be nourished by the water. (p.50)

I agree with bell hooks, it is important for us to know and name the contradictions in our work. For I name some of my contradictions: "I dance in and out

of fear and courage; I dance in and out of subservience and subversiveness; I dance in and out of talking back and silence; and I dance in and out of being ignorant and being aware" (Smith, 1996, p. 181). However, my claim is that I do have a passion for a pedagogy that seeks to bring forth the complexities and freedom embedded within struggle. I argue for a pedagogy that helps us to understand how we participate in hegemony within classrooms. As Peter McLaren (1994) writes, "Hegemony was at work in my own practices as an elementary school teacher. Because I did not teach my students to question the prevailing values, attitudes, and social practices of the dominant culture in a sustained critical manner, my classroom preserved the hegemony of the dominant culture" (p.182).

Further, I advocate a pedagogy that nurtures diverse voices and breaks the silencing of experience that is crucial to understanding who we are as individuals; individuals who comprise a community. I stand for a pedagogy that is "radical but not doctrinaire" (Giroux, 1994, p. 133). One that, as Giroux defines,

. . . self-consciously operates from a perspective in which teaching and learning are committed to expanding rather than restricting the opportunities for students and others to be social, political, and economic agents. As agents, students and others need to learn how to take risks, to understand how power works differently as both productive and a dominating force, to be able to 'read' the world from a variety of perspectives, and to be willing to think beyond the commonsense assumptions that govern everyday existence. (Giroux, 1994, p. 133)

This leads me back to Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*. I use her book in an advanced curriculum theory course and her unpopular cultural text becomes pedagogy that creates opportunity for us to "study" our own autobiography as we travel down the dusty Appalachian hills with Bone Boatwright. In addition, black students can experience poor, white Appalachian culture from Bone Boatwright's perspective. This is important for these students to "see" that not "all" white people are economically and socially privileged. The Boatwrights make visible the need for social relations that

inform a number of considerations that cut across our society's diverse terrain (Giroux, 1994).

I specifically identify black students because I listen to many of their stories regarding white racism and there seems to be consensus, among them, that "all" whites have access to certain forms of materialism that blacks do not. I certainly do not trivialize their lived experiences relevant to racism and colonization; and I do know that race is a powerful divider of human beings. However, my commitment to justice moves me in practice to be morally and ethically correct: to "gently" push black students to understand how power works and read the world through a variety of lens. I think that it is imperative for blacks to move from home space and embrace others' experiences around difference. I want them to be able to read Dorothy Allison's proceeding testimony and place her language and experience inside, rather than outside:

What I know for sure is that class, gender, sexual preference, and racial prejudice form an intricate lattice that both restricts and shapes our lives, and that resistance to that hatred is not a simple act. Claiming your identity in the cauldron of hatred and resistance to hatred is more than complicated; it is almost unexplainable. (1993, p. 143)

Furthermore, I want black women and men in my classes to be able to engage in meaningful dialogue regarding black male patriarchy and violence in order to lead to healthy relationships and healthy communities. For example, one semester Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) was a required text: it also is an unpopular cultural text on some schools' banned list. The class was fairly mixed with a predominant representation of white students. My goal in all of my classes is to think of ways to create dialogue that address social, political, and economic agendas in schools. The white students tended to be silent and uncomfortable in talking about Maya's experiences with racism. However, the black students were "knowingly" engaging the text, specifically around racism. This resonates with bell hooks' assertion that "All students, not just those from marginalized groups, seem more eager to enter energetically into classroom discussion when they perceive it as pertaining directly to

them (when non-white students talk in class only when they feel connected via experience it is not aberrant behavior)" (1994, p. 87).

What became clear for me was that there was no naming of Maya's childhood rape experience by her mother's boyfriend. As I indicate in this essay, I seek to practice pedagogy that is risky and powerful; therefore, I raised the issue of black male violence perpetuated against the young Maya. The black women students became angry that I would raise such an issue in "mixed company." They "slapped me on my wrist" for hanging "our" dirty clothes out for the "enemy" to see. Their belief was that black women should be fighting against racism not sexism in order to protect "our" men. I vehemently disagree that there should be silencing relevant to this issue. However, I agree with Dorothy Allison's position that ". . . racial prejudice forms an intricate lattice that both restricts and shapes our lives, and that resistance to that hatred is not a simple act" (p. 143).

This leads me to reveal that the black southern part of me admits that I want to protect my father, my brothers, my nephews, my lovers and friends; however, the critically conscious "me" knows and understands that it is not as simple. And I named this in class at that moment for I was vulnerable. I wanted these black women and me to know that I know the experiences, too well. I wanted them to know that my critical examination was done with care and love, not malice. But when education is for the practice of freedom both teacher and students are at risk. We are at risk for pain, unwanted dangerous memories, and a form of nakedness that seems uncoverable. However, there is a dialectical relationship at work whereby we stand to gain justice, freedom, and healthy, nurturing relationships and communities.

The danger, for me, is that if we are not risky in our pedagogy then we continue self-normalizing practice, that is, "our willingness to accept and internalize questionable limits on what we can know about ourselves and how we might act" (Pignatelli, 1993, p. 412). For when we engage in knowing and naming we bring private lives out onto the public stages; by keeping personal matters private we not only allow immoral practices to continue but we also legitimate authority by covering it with the cloak of our confidentiality (Farganis, 1987). There is room for a disturbance of silencing which is a self-normalizing practice.

In conclusion, a pedagogy of possibility (or critical pedagogy) empowers us to practice dreams and to understand why things are the way they are; to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside our immediate experience; to take risks and struggle with ongoing relations of power from within life-affirming moral culture; and envisage versions of a world which is not yet in order to be able to alter the grounds upon which life is lived (Simon, 1988). For me this means that I must continue to go deep inside in order to understand why some storytelling is "good" and some is "bad." I must remember to tell my niece, Mache, stories that she is yearning to hear and know.

Furthermore, I must continue to use unpopular popular texts to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside our immediate experiences; to open gates of experience that are risky; and to understand that it is not always so simple and almost unexplainable. "So, while I do the contradictory dance called the 'two step' I understand that it is more dangerous to be silent" (Smith, 1996, p. 181). As Audre Lorde (1984) testifies:

And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, 'Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside.' (p.42)

And I add Leslie Marmon Silko's (1996, pp. 125-126) story to Audre Lorde's story for closure.

Tse'itsi'nako, Thought Woman, is sitting in her room and whatever she thinks about appears. She thought of her sisters, Nau'ts'ity'i and I'tcts'ity'i, and together they created the Universe this world and the four

worlds below. Thought Woman, the spider, named things and as she named them they appeared. She is sitting in her room thinking of a story now I'm telling you the story she is thinking.

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Many critical pedagogy scholars claim that agency and dialogue in the classroom can only be achieved through students'™ engagement in verbal deliberation to "œvoice" against oppressive actions. As current discourses in the critical pedagogy literature tend to consider silence as a negative attribute in the classroom, I argue that they privilege a western construct and a very particular way of being and thinking. By using performative pedagogy as a theoretical framework, it is imperative to discuss the macro and micro implications of how discourses in the critical pedagogy literature affect how w