

10-1992

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Recommended Citation

McLaren, P. (1992/1993). Critical literacy and postcolonial praxis: A Freirian perspective. *College Literature*, 19(3)/20(1): 7-27.

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This article was originally published in *College Literature*, volume 19, issue 3/volume 20, issue 1, in 1992/1993. This issue was sole runnerup in Council of Editors of Learned Journals Best Special Issue Competition for 1993.

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Critical Literacy and Postcolonial Praxis: A Freirian Perspective

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*McLaren teaches at Miami University. His most recent books include **Schooling as a Ritual Performance**; **Life in Schools**; **Critical Pedagogy, the State and Cultural Struggle** (edited with Henry Giroux); **Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis and the Postmodern** (edited with Colin Lankshear, in press); **Postmodernism, Post-Colonialism, and Pedagogy** (in press); and **Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter** (edited with Peter Leonard, in press).*

This essay examines the relationship among language, experience, and historical agency.¹ It does so in the context of recent work in critical literacy and critical pedagogy. My discussion takes its bearings from the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, described in a recent interview with Carlos Alberto Torres as “the prime ‘animateur’ for pedagogical innovation and change in the second half of this century” (12). In part this essay stands as a poststructuralist and postcolonialist rereading of Freire that, while to a certain extent “reinventing” his work in light of perspectives selectively culled from contemporary social theory, attempts to remain faithful to the main contours of the Freirian problematic. More specifically, I will draw upon recent feminist and poststructuralist discussions of the relationship between language and experience to highlight some new respects in which the Freirian perspective on literacy may be approached. Doing so may further situate Freire’s work as a general theoretical resource enabling educators to locate their own pedagogies between critical thought and emancipatory practice.

My central argument is that pedagogies always produce specific forms of practical competency—literacies—that for the most part have been pressed into the service of the dominant culture. This situation occurs because of the ways in which knowledge is inscribed in the social: certain linguistic competencies, forms of narrative address, and signs of ideological solidarity are privileged over others and

carry greater currency within the social order (Freire and Macedo). My position is that Freire's work can enable teachers to acquire forms of critical practice that can interrogate, destabilize, and disorganize dominant strategies of power and power/knowledge relations and that in doing so teachers may envisage a means of enlisting pedagogy in the construction of a radical and plural democracy.

The issue I wish to emphasize is one that follows from a poststructuralist assumption: that theory involves the imbrication of experience, language, and power. In attempting to understand how knowledge is produced, one cannot simply give primacy to experience without taking into account how experience is structured and power produced through language, whether this language refers to a tabloid editorial, a local argot, or a theoretical treatise on popular culture. Similarly, one cannot simply privilege language, because ideology is not only lived through language but also through experience—that is, through discursive, non-discursive, and extratextual forms of knowing (de Certeau; McLaren, "Schooling").

Experience takes into account our encounters with events, social practices, choices, and accidents of history. Reading about racism and oppression is not the same thing as living as their victim. Crucial to the development of contextual, critical knowledge is affirming the experiences of students to the extent that their voices are acknowledged as an important part of the dialogue; but affirming students' voices does not necessarily mean that educators should take at face value the meanings that students give to their experiences. The task of the critical educator is to enable individuals to acquire a language through which to reflect upon and shape their experiences and in certain instances transform such experiences in the interest of social responsibility (Giroux and McLaren, "Schooling"). In the pages that follow I will examine these issues in relation to Freire's perspective on language, pedagogy, and critical literacy.

With reference to the current debates over literacy and the canon, Freire's position eschews seeing the world in Manichaeian terms, as gripped by a titanic struggle between civilized high culture and the contaminating forces of the culture of the masses. Freire's approach to literacy opposes the position of critics such as Allan Bloom, whose *Closing of the American Mind* bewails the advent of postmodernity and has served as a reactionary bludgeon in debates over the liberal arts curriculum. In Bloom's highbrow paradise (which consists of Victorian salons and Tudor libraries populated by white, bourgeois males, Ivy League belles-lettristes, and other descendants from the European tradition) the Freirian educator confronts colonialism's intoxication with the selective tradition of knowledge production in our schools. Here the non-Western thinker becomes the debased and inverted image of the hypercivilized metropolitan intellectual. In other words, both non-Western knowledge and the uncultivated knowledge of the masses become a primitive non-knowledge, a conduit to barbarism. Thus a fantasy narrative is played out that is common to many bourgeois male academics, one the hegemony of the eternalized language of the capital city intellectual makes it easier to script:

Euro-American civilization is keeping the savage at bay in the name of Truth. Freire's work directly challenges this perspective.

Despite the insurgent power contained in Freire's project of social transformation, his work runs the risk of being reconfigured by liberal educators who would hold him captive as a benevolent father to be venerated because of his experiential "method." But I wish to emphasize that Freire's work cannot be appropriated or appreciated if it is abstracted from its sociopolitical and geopolitical roots. Freire's contribution to contemporary social thought goes well beyond an innocuous liberal pluralism. The politics of difference that underwrites his pedagogy does not locate identity in a centrist politics of consensus that leaves individuals to function as unwitting servants of the state; rather it invites them to be shapers of their own histories (Freire, *Politics*).

Freire's position is not accretive in the sense of simply urging that other voices be added to the menu of mainstream cultural perspectives. In that Freire "thinks from the margins," viewing the oppressed not as special-interest groups to be added to an already harmonious pluralism but rather as offering legitimate articulations of experience ("dialogical angles"), his pedagogy invites comparison to Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of social and ethnic diversity (Stam). Freire's perspective on difference has much in common with Chandra Mohanty's notion that difference cannot simply be formulated as negotiation among culturally diverse groups against a backdrop of presumed homogeneity. Difference is the recognition that knowledges are forged in histories riven with differentially constituted relations of power; that is, knowledges, subjectivities, and social practices take shape within "asymmetrical and incommensurate cultural spheres" (181). Marginalized groups' experiences of oppression provide them with a vantage point in deconstructing the mystifications of the dominant social order. So that critical pedagogy may avoid enunciating its call for liberation as if it were the sole theoretical representative of the oppressed, teachers should allow the peripheralized to develop their own language for interrogating the conditions of their oppression (I will argue that such analysis is based on but not limited to experience). Like Bakhtin's dialogism, Freire's pedagogy is reciprocal in that both interlocutors, teacher and student, are altered in any dialogical exchange (Stam).

Freire's move away from the pseudo-equality of liberal pluralism is evident in his quest to deepen our understanding of how individuals can narrativize their desire, name their own histories, and claim the necessary personal and collective force to resist the deforming effects of social power. His project can offer much to educators in the United States, where modernism has unified coercively the heterogeneous culture of the Other through the values of patriarchy, self-perfection, and individual autonomy. These values have been forced upon the culture in part by the conflation of the logic of the marketplace with Eurocentric views of rationality. While to a certain extent Freire's work shares some of the metatheoretical concerns of post-Enlightenment Western thinking, in the main it constitutes an agenda of dissent by breaking away from modernism's foundational unities (subject/object,

fact/value, self/other): Freire perceives a need to ground all knowledge of social life in history, culture, and relations of power.

Perhaps more than any other educator in this century, Freire has revealed to us that literacy practices are practices of power. As such, literacy may link hope to possibility through developing various means of resisting oppression so that a better world can be summoned, struggled for, and eventually grasped (Freire, *Pedagogy*; Giroux and McLaren, "Schooling"). On the other hand, literacy may serve as a political restraint that uncouples hope from possibility, inhibiting the development of a world less terrorized by the conflict between those who have and those who hunger. The former type of literacy means a critical assessment of the prevailing hegemony in which the cultural spaces of everyday life are seen within asymmetrical relations of power and privilege, relations that need to be combated if we are to construct a more equitable society (see Freire and Macedo). The latter type of literacy is merely functional. It harnesses ideology to social relations of domination, encouraging individuals to form their values, politics, and reading of the world in static, reified images produced by the dominant culture. It is to the former, liberatory type of literacy that Freire's work is directed.

All language, according to Freire, works to reproduce dominant power relationships, but it also carries with it the resources for critique and for dismantling the oppressive structures of the social order. Freire has made clear that an important correlation exists between the democratic socialist project and discourses that encourage self-reflexivity. He argues that we need to understand the contexts and ideologies that give these discourses shape and meaning. Furthermore, he teaches that contradictions in the larger social order have parallels in individual experience and that educators must restore the political relation between pedagogy and the language of everyday life. Since all pedagogical practices are constituted within regimes of truth, privileging norms, and social arrangements, the important questions become: What pedagogical forms permit the emancipation of potentialities, and what social and institutional structures should be in place for such capacities to develop unimpeded in both the classroom and society (see Simon)?

Freirian literacy programs involve an examination of hidden economies of power and privilege and of how these help to inform students' subjectivities. Too often words recapitulate the asymmetrical relations of the larger society. As historical agents, we are geopolitically arranged by dominant literacies. For example, Enrique Dussel has tellingly illustrated that the Cartesian *ego cogito*, which informs the voice of First World subjects, enjoys an imperial legacy from "I conquer" and "I vanquish" to "I enslave" (8). He maintains that the ontology that justifies the empires of the center (England, Germany, France, and the United States), and the ideologies that give them a "good conscience," are carried in the subjectivity of the colonizer, the oppressor who is unaware of his or her status with respect to the Other.

Refusing to fall prey to the modernist illusion of the self as self-cohering, self-situating, self-explaining, non-differential, and monocentric, Freire contends that the self is constituted dialectically within language and social action and is capable

of exercising a critical consciousness. Even though human subjectivity is not an irreducible nexus of action, desire, belief, and intention, individuals can still act as “contrary antagonists” to the educational system and its role as a cultural medium for acceptance, passivity, and accommodation. Freire firmly believes that individuals can form a praxis of liberation. In this context, self-identity is always a *situated* practice rather than an inviolable, self-contained, and unified state in the sense that there exists some metaphysical edition of ourselves that can be won—as market-place logic tells us—through hard work and perseverance. Thus although knowledge may be embedded, constructed, and temporal, it can still establish the conditions for emancipation, even though these conditions may be partial and provisional.

Liberating praxis is not the creature of reason alone, but is undertaken as an action both in and on the world. Freirian pedagogy makes clear that theory and practice work in concert; it is counterproductive for teachers to view critical pedagogy as essentially a theoretical and descriptive exercise. Rendering theory as a form of practice intrinsic to human social activity, Freire has consistently illustrated how theory and practice unite in the dialectical and political act of knowing. As he notes, “There is a ‘politicity’ of education in the same way that there is an ‘educability’ of the political; that is to say there is a political nature to education just as there is a pedagogical nature to the political act” (*University*). His radicalism, as Robert Mackie points out, is not sectarian, but built upon *conscientização* (97). In this regard, Freire writes that “consciousness of and action upon reality are therefore inseparable constituents of the transforming act by which people become beings of relation” (*Cultural Action* 53).

Following in the tradition of Hegel, Marx, and John Dewey, Freire emphasizes intentionality as a precondition for knowing. According to Henry A. Giroux, this emphasis “includes a view of human agency in which the production of meaning takes place in the dialogue and interaction that mutually constitute the dialectical relationship between human subjectivities and the objective world” (“Literacy” 11). From this perspective, the bourgeois mode of subjectivity that privileges inner experience and valorizes high culture is rejected in favor of understanding and exposing the arborescent relationships of power making up the antagonisms and contradictions of mundane social experience.

Freire could be charged with positing reality as relational, but he is hardly a relativist. The distinction is worth emphasizing. He does not consider all ideas to be of equal merit, but rather argues that they must be understood contextually as subject to the forces of material and symbolic production—along the lines of what Giroux calls “the *relational* nature of how meaning is produced, i.e., the intersection of subjectivities, objects, and social practices within specific relations of power” (“Literacy” 11). In this sense, Freire considers knowledge not through the atomized logic and positivist/empirical explanations bequeathed by Enlightenment thinking, but as always occupying a point between the specific and the universal. His position is clearly post-Cartesian: We cannot hide the word’s inherence in the world. Rather than vitalizing the objectivity of knowledge, this position under-

scores its insinuation into human interest, social power, and everyday pain and pleasure.

According to Freire, knowing is action-reflexive. It entails an active transformation on and through the world, not an accommodation to it. Dialogical knowing always views an individual or group's existential predicament in relation to a sociopolitical context. While it is true that Freire's work is concerned with self-transformation, grounded as it is in the concept of conscious intentionality, it is equally (if not more) concerned with social transformation, assuming as a central referent the reconstruction of the existing social order. Given these dual foci, it is easy to see why for Freire critical reflection cannot occur in antiseptic isolation from the public sphere.

Critical reflection—what Freire calls “critical transitivity”—is a form of social empowerment. It cannot be achieved in isolation, for this merely valorizes personal transformation at the expense of making and remaking history with and for others. Personal history is always embedded in social forms that are part of our collective cultural present and that owe an ideological debt—whether good or bad—to the past. Thus critical reflection is part of a long political process, a battle waged on behalf of the peripheralized subordinate class who seek freedom from the totalizing constraints of the prevailing cultural and moral hegemony. Freedom, in the Freirian sense, means unmasking the social and cultural mechanisms of power as a basis for emancipatory action. Like Michel Foucault, Freire recognizes that the distinction between truth and power needs to be blurred, and that sociocultural power is a double-edged sword that can both sever the bonds of domination and be wielded by oppressors. Such power can be dangerous since it can conceal its means of operation.

Freire's conception of literacy involves understanding both how and how often groups refuse to be absorbed into the dominant culture as docile bodies split off from empowering processes. In this case, dominant forms of literacy may serve as a process of colonization, whereas illiteracy often signals a refusal, as Giroux puts it, “to learn the specific cultural codes and competencies authorized by the dominant culture's view of literacy” (“Literacy” 13). Accordingly, critical dialogue is a process of “situated pedagogy” (Shor and Freire 104)—of collaborative discourse in which thought and action combine to dismantle the structures that support oppression. In this way students can share in the critical transformation of both the self as social and the social as self. This suggests that self-transformation cannot occur without the transformation of social structures, which in turn requires that individuals both understand and work against their personal co-articulation with systems of repression.

It must be emphasized, however, that Freire does not equate revolutionary consciousness with achieving human awareness through dialogue; such consciousness involves changes not only in forms of subjectivity but also in the larger social order. Change can be achieved both within the field of signifying practices (for instance, by undermining the discourses of patriarchy, the unicity of the Cartesian order, and liberal humanism's conjunction with positivist science) and through

direct political challenges to oppressive public policies and institutions. This generic distinction between Freire's critical literacy and conventional cultural and functional literacy highlights the former's potential for institutional and/or representational address and the latter's deep-seated inability to recognize the rhetoricity of knowing and literacy's status both as a discourse and as a servant of power.

Freire's project illuminates the praxis necessary for establishing critical literacy in classrooms and for contesting the power arrangements that structure the politics of the everyday. It is understood that language does not give us transparent access to reality or a means of discovering the ultimate tribunal of reason and civility; rather it serves as a medium for constructing meaning. Consequently, knowledge is not a hidden and invariant truth, but is inseparable from the language that gives it birth and from its social use. Thus it stands to reason that language does not simply incarnate reality without implicating agents in relations of power—usually through totalizing systems situated in the dominant regimes of truth, in which interpretive strategies are employed to classify the way “we” understand the social and cultural practices of “they.”

In other words, language is more than an arbitrary system of differences in which meaning is guaranteed by the linguistic system itself. There is no Rosetta Stone—no privileged access to meaning in the sense of discovering the master code that explains how elements of a social text function together (which is not to claim that there exists no access to extratextual reality or that reality is an endless deferral or deformation of meaning). Rather than granting codes a transcendental status as privileged referents around which other meanings are positioned, Freire emphasizes meaning as a terrain of struggle in which individuals take up often conflicting subject-positions in relation to signifying practices, which in turn structure and are structured by social relations, modes of intelligibility and their legitimating norms.

Poststructuralist readings both complement and extend Freire's position on language. As subjects, we are always constituted by language and cannot step outside it in order to reflect upon how we are positioned within it. We are forever inscribed in the system of differences that constitutes a language. While linguistic structures are ontologically dependent on specific communities of speakers, there are no *a priori* rules of language, and the relations between signifiers and signified are arbitrary in terms of other languages. We effectively follow the rules of language *as if* they were necessary. As Keith Phelby notes, discourse is always finite, transitory, and historically situated. Signs are always populated by other signs and meanings (63).

Extending Freire's position, it could be argued that meaning is not the function of the speaker because signs are only known in the context of other signs. Meanings cannot exist outside language. Meaning is lived within and through discourse as linguistic “gestures” constructed within and through bodies. Inscription through the flesh—“enfleshment” (in the sense that metaphor is a correlate of patterns of bodily action and interaction; see Jackson)—is discursive power and the founding act of culture. Freire stresses that we can only know the real through

historically lived systems of representation, the result of class, race, and gender struggles. Meaning consists of concrete struggles over naming reality. Thus signification is an eminently political enterprise involving a relationship among discourse, power, and difference. As such, historical agency (how we act in and through history) is not something we automatically acquire. It does not arrive serendipitously or as a developmental stage. Historical agency is decidedly not inevitable.

I am using the term “historical agency” here because Freire’s ideas draw upon an interactive nexus of philosophical terms such as exile, oppression, struggle, and identity (or large-scale terms such as “the people speak their word,” “the popular library,” “the illiteracy of literacy in the United States”), in which the struggle to help the oppressed release themselves from their historical bondage is the primary (and elegiac) *leitmotif*. According to Freire, historical agency has its basis in emancipatory acts as individuals challenge the everyday language and social practices others use to give shape and meaning to their world. It is an ongoing process involving the development of a plurality of literacies. Such literacies can assist in the formation of alternative subject-positions so that the many-sided agent of history can take ethical action that is self-reflexive and critically contemplative. In other words, people need self-consciously to shape the direction of their desiring and to struggle against the decline and deformation of the possible.

Dialogue emerges from Freire’s pedagogy as a practical option for teachers and students in replacing the traditional authoritarian mentor approach. In contrast to functional or cultural literacy’s claims about a self-contained and palpable knowledge, Freire’s approach emphasizes knowledge’s dependence on already existing and highly conventionalized meanings—on a sociolinguistic system of “language games.” Throughout his writings, knowing is invariably made critical, reflexive, and necessarily incomplete precisely as it is employed to uncover the interests that inform conventionalized meanings.

Because he implicitly recognizes that discourses are always pragmatically negotiated and adjusted through difference, and that ignorance can never be irrevocably surpassed, to establish universal principles with which authoritatively and unambiguously to shape classroom practice is antithetical to Freire’s own “problem posing” pedagogy and to most Freirian-based liberatory praxis. His position has much in common with the counter-positivist dissent found in the sociology of knowledge, existential phenomenology, and certain strands of poststructuralism. From these vantage points, knowledge that aspires to the condition of empirical science and falls into the classical encyclopedism, atomized logic, and generic conceptualizing of logical positivist understanding betrays a commitment to dualized categories of meaning and logocentric strategies of identity and hierarchization: in short, to grand theory. And it is precisely against grand theorizing that Freire’s work has taken shape. Critical pedagogy, as Freire envisions it, seeks to examine texts and modes of production in terms of their relation to other social and cultural forms; in this sense critical pedagogy is not a methodology that can be cranked out to interrogate various cultural domains. Rather it constitutes a politics of textual production and reception and historical embodiment, that is, a politics of

signification able to question the political consequences of its own modes of analysis and commitment to emancipatory praxis.

LANGUAGE AND THE POLITICS OF EXPERIENCE

I will now turn to the topic of language and experience in order to discuss a particularly troublesome problem for Freirian educators who work in the United States. My concern is with certain pedagogical approaches that, like Freire's, are grounded in student experience. The problem arises when (as so often happens) direct experience is thought to speak for itself. It is not uncommon to find a self-styled Deweyan or Freirian educator who insists upon privileging experience over theory. However, Freire (and Dewey for that matter) neither romanticizes experience nor fails to render it problematic.

Roger Simon and Donald Dippo highlight an ongoing concern in critical pedagogy when they argue that educators must avoid confirming what people already know. By this they mean that experience should never be celebrated uncritically; it is true that student voices need to be encouraged, but so does the simultaneous interrogation of such voices. Experience does not speak for itself, but is a way in which individuals confront the contingency of the present, the inevitable alternation of oppression, and the politics of daily living. Though one should not deny the importance of nondiscursive experience, experience is largely constructed linguistically as a continuing interpretation of a concrete engagement with social practices, symbols, and forms.

No experience is pristine and unmediated. How we talk about our world largely shapes our understanding of why things are as they are, which images of "that which is not yet" are possible and desirable, and what needs to be done for matters to be otherwise. E. L. Doctorow, for one, believes that "a book can affect consciousness—affect the way people think and therefore the way they act. Books create constituencies that have their own effect on history" (Trenner 43; cited in Hutcheon 200). This is not to suggest that a physical encounter such as being cracked on the head by police during a demonstration doesn't teach you something directly or doesn't leave an experience inscribed in memory's flesh. But the way we respond to such encounters is largely linguistically determined through whatever competing discourses are available and through how these discourses resonate ideologically for individuals interpreting the event. The police baton is transformed into a signifier of state brutality; society writes its law into the flesh of the body—a process that I have elsewhere termed "enfleshment"² and that Michel de Certeau calls "intextuation."

At the same time individual bodies are inscribed within the body politic, they are offered a number of subject-positions to assume: innocent victim, casualty of state-inflicted barbarism, martyr, freedom fighter. Or perhaps they choose to forge some new position. But these choices are made largely on the basis of the affective and symbolic economy in which such an event is situated, the discourses available to subjects, their reading formations, and the selection process undertaken.

The point I am accenting here is that the language of teaching too often shapes the way both teachers and students make sensuous and linguistic sense of their experience. In order to escape a liberalism that frequently imposes patriarchy upon feminine subjectivity, teachers need to recognize how much their personal histories, ideological assumptions, and Eurocentric and patriarchal narrative forms (not to mention those of their students) are grounded in liberal capitalism. I would suggest that as cultural workers, teachers should recognize that the knowledge and understanding that students are prevented from bringing up is as important as the knowledge and understanding that students are permitted to narrate. It is important, too, to remember that students may reject certain forms of “professional” adult knowledge as invasive of their own identity and meaning.

Krystyna Pomorska writes that the language we use determines at least in part how we make sense of our experiences and what type of social action we choose to engage in as a result of interpreting them. It also determines the range of possibilities we have to organize our world, to develop new forms of sociality and (as teachers) of pedagogy. If experience is largely understood through language, and language shapes our views and actions, it follows that experience does not guarantee truth, being always open to conflicting interpretations. That is, our experience is not some fixed or fluid essence, some concrete reality that exists prior to language, waiting to be reflected (Brown). Rather, experience is constituted by language.

Experience—“events and behaviors occurring in social formations” (de Lauretis 42)—is highly constitutive of subjectivity. Since language enables us to interpret our experience, it follows that language also helps form subjectivity: that is, an individual’s conscious and unconscious understandings. Subjectivity is constituted in language in that while we construct language as power, we are simultaneously constructed by power through language. I have noted that experience does not speak for itself, outside the frames of reference (discourses) associated with the language we select or are given in order to make sense of that experience. At issue here are the ways in which we have been inserted into language as both teachers and students. To situate ourselves reflectively in discourse—in language—is to historicize our role as social agents. If we conjure only those ideas we already have the words to express, then our presence in history remains more or less comfortably static. Part of this crisis is reflected in the unavailability of subject-positions in which students are permitted to practice forms of radical critique.

While experience is important in knowing, it is frequently blind. Consequently, it is in “the political *interpretation* of experience that existence becomes fruitful” (Eagleton 104; emphasis mine). Likewise, Donald Morton and Mas’ud Zavarzadeh attack the concept of direct or intuitive experience when it is presumed that such experience is “transdiscursive . . . free of all political, social, economic, and linguistic constraints . . . [and outside] the opacities of culture” (163). Experience is not an “unmediated, and direct, intuitive knowing of the body of the world” (163). Rather they concur with Catherine Belsey’s argument that “experience itself is the location of ideology, not the guarantee of truth” (Belsey 17).

Again, John Shotter follows Ludwig Wittgenstein, C. Wright Mills, and Bakhtin (especially the latter's notion of "addressivity") in asserting that "the main function of language is not the representation of things in the world, or the giving of 'outer' expression to already well formed 'inner' thoughts, but its use in creating and sustaining social orders" (141). Experience does not speak for itself, because, as Shotter notes, our experiences are expressed "in terms that are intelligible and legitimate within this order" (142). If we are able to act in an accountable manner within the pattern, our everyday communications necessitate the reproduction of social authority. If the ways in which we speak to each other are constrained, then "our experience of ourselves will be constrained also" (141). And I would add here that our choice of actions will be qualitatively affected. Shotter claims that there exists a great deal of pressure on us as individuals to sustain our status and that therefore we must express ourselves in ways approved by others: "We feel our reality must be of a certain kind" (141).

The point I am trying to make is that only certain languages (terms, vocabularies, narratives, concepts) are deemed legitimate within the discourses used by educators. And often those languages are those of management and technical efficiency, which fail to capture the complexity of social life. I am not suggesting that teachers and students should only converse in elaborate codes, but rather that a variety of critical languages should be made available. And, of course, students should learn the limitations of the critical languages that purport to help them understand their everyday experiences, forms of social engagement, and intuitions. We should explore with more exigence how meanings and hegemonic articulations are manufactured outside actions and purely discursive modes (McLaren, "Ideology"). It should be made clear, however, that while a language of critique is important for an emancipatory praxis, it is not the sole enabling condition for transforming history. Such a language must serve as a means of social critique, but it must also legitimate the principles through which praxis is justified, articulate future possibilities, and motivate new strategies of political alignment and collective decision-making that cut across a multiplicity of public spheres.

GENDERED EXPERIENCE: ESSENTIALISM AND BEYOND

The point here is that the language of experience should be recognized as always historical and gendered. While it is true that a pedagogy of liberation that does not attend to the specificity of experience—but instead attempts to universalize it in terms of race, class, and gender—is doomed further to entrap women, minorities, and the poor, what needs to be stressed is the nature of the theoretical discourse brought to bear on the sensuous and concrete specificity of experience. This means engaging theoretical discourses that are not based on the domination of the female by the male, the subordination of nature to reason, or the marginalization and oppression of the Other by the patriarchal and Eurocentric narratives of the self that within our citadel culture so tenaciously shape desire and agency.

Experience is never transparent to itself and always occurs within particular social and cultural forms produced within specific regimes of discourse serving particular interests. With reference to feminist pedagogy, Diana Fuss argues that female experience is not as unified, knowable, universal, or stable as it often appears within critical theories based on experience. In fact, she asserts that “belief in the truth of Experience is as much an ideological production as belief in the experience of Truth” (116). Further, the “politics of experience” can lead individuals and groups to itemize and rank identities, in which case certain considerations of difference can delegitimize others. They can also cause us to see only one part of an identity—“male,” “Asian,” “lesbian,” and so on. Hierarchies of identities are sometimes set up *within* speaking subjects as well as between them (116). Ranking identities is used to authorize or deauthorize individuals to speak, on the premise that “some essences are more *essential* than others” (116). Finally, “The anti-essentialist displacement of experience must not be used as a convenient means of silencing students, no matter how shaky experience has proven to be as a basis of epistemology” (117).

Nevertheless, Fuss needs to acknowledge that essentialism—or identity politics—is not something misused primarily by the exclusionary practices of marginalized groups. As bell hooks points out, dominant groups employ essentialist strategies that produce exclusionary behavior buttressed by institutional structures that neither criticize nor check it (“Essentialism”). While it is important to oppose practices that construct identities in monolithic ways, it is also important not to relinquish the power of naming one’s experience in new ways. Suffering, for instance, needs to be engaged through what hooks calls “multiple locations.”

Feminists are often faced with either adhering to essentialist doctrines or fostering the dissolution of feminism into localized struggles representing the interests of particular women (Grosz). The way out of this dilemma, argues Elizabeth Grosz, comes in recognizing that feminists need not take on universalist assumptions in the same way as patriarchs. Gloria Anzaldúa suggests that the task is one of formulating marginal theories

that are partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference (if that is possible), theories that overlap many “worlds.” We are articulating new positions in these “in-between,” Borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academies, feminist and job worlds. . . . In our *mestizaje* theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of the existing ones. We recover and examine non-Western aesthetics while critiquing Western Aesthetics; recover and examine non-rational modes and “blanked-out” realities while critiquing the “languages” of the dominant culture. . . . If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories. (xxvi)

It is also important that Freirian educators reject what Ben Agger has termed “methodological pluralism,” which assumes that the world is really all of a piece but can be read differently depending on one’s personal ontological coordinates. This view prevails in many courses that teach different interpretive approaches (such as new criticism, historicism, Marxist literary theory). The problem with employing a variety of supposedly equal but different approaches is that doing so often “assumes a single, simple world named differently,” and therefore “misses the constitutiveness of writing entwining a theory of being and explanation” (315). Agger underscores that when the educator neglects how knowledge has been historically produced within a nexus of power relations, the world’s own self-understanding and self-referentiality then become the basis of criticism, and thus critical interpretations of social life can become domesticated and ultimately discarded as weakened versions of other forms of analysis. Critical social theory such as Freire’s becomes, in this view, just another gloss on reality. And presumably the instructor, standing in a site unspoiled by ideology, can invoke critical literacy as one theoretical perspective within a shopping-mall version of social and cultural criticism. From the instructor’s perspective, the political can be conveniently collapsed into the personal, and the analysis of the social and the development of a politics of refusal can be reduced to a lifestyle conflict that demands polite tolerance rather than a struggle over power, self-identity, and history (Mohanty). Epistemological pluralism is anti-Freirian in that it operates as a form of neopositivism; it is discursive fiction that is always already “preontologically available” as a means of reading the world (Agger).

Yet the centrist practice of slicing up the world into a “balanced curriculum” comprising conservative, liberal, and radical positions really works to usurp critical research under a liberalism that locates it as an example of the “openness” of the social system. Within such a logic, even critical approaches can become “ironically a genuflection to an *uncritical* discipline” (Agger 316). This amounts to nothing less than the subordination of advocacy to analysis and desire to knowledge.

It is important to stress that educators teach not just in a classroom but within a field of competing discourses that help structure a variegated system of relationships. Classrooms are not simply the physical location where learning takes place; they are also the site of teachers’ embodiment in theory/discourse and disposition as theorists, within a specific politics of location. Critical pedagogy necessitates recognizing the complexity of social relations and educators’ socially determined positions within the reality they are attempting to describe.

The status of teachers as truth-bearers from the culture of whiteness and maleness imbues them with a putatively impartial intelligence, reinforces the lesser status of the student’s anecdotal logics and local knowledge, and binds power and truth together so as to privilege and normalize existing relations of power. This situation habituates students to the established direction of pedagogy and the dominant culture’s regime of truth. It is also why teachers and students need to encounter each other collaboratively. Teachers need to share with students how

discourses are shaping classroom relations and how the teacher's personal and intellectual biography is contributing to them.

In this manner, Freire's pedagogy recognizes that subjectivities are forged in asymmetrical power relations and that historical subjects are created nonsynchronously within various hierarchies of discourses, cultural forms, and social practices according to one's race, class, and gender. For instance, a working-class black woman's subjectivity is shaped by forces qualitatively different from those affecting a middle-class white man. At times gender relations will figure as the dominant site of victimization or assume the chief place in our critical project of resisting and transforming oppression. At other times race and social class will figure more prominently in the formation of subjugated or resistant modes of subjectivity (McCarthy).

Critical pedagogy creates what I will call an arch of social dreaming—that is, a forum for sharing pain but also for constructing new hope through efforts that arch towards and eventually unite those whose subordination appears to have minimized the possibility of their active struggle for an emancipated subjecthood. To engage in critical pedagogy is to recall how, as subjects, we have become disproportionately constituted. The purpose of such remembering is to free us from the mystification that results from living unreflectively within social discourses and material constraints. But critical pedagogy is also always a form of utopian dreaming. Here I want to follow Ernst Bloch in rejecting the standard critique of utopian thinking that rests on the claims that the nature of things is given, that utopia is not grounded in the real world, and that we depart from reality when we dream of perfection. Freire's utopia is not one of "unbridled subjectivism" or "totalistic, adolescent psychological states" that provide "an illusory basis for human action" (Hudson 50–51). While to embrace utopia categorically is to deny alternatives to the present reality, provisional utopian thinking such as Freire's invites a constant promotion of alternatives to the present asymmetrical distributions of power (Dauenhauer). It not only demystifies the present by allowing us to recognize ourselves from a critical/historical perspective as, disproportionately, oppressors and oppressed; it also carries future possibility in its reconstruction of the present moment. It is in this sense that Freire's critical reflection can be compared to a redemptive remembrance: what Richard Kearney refers to as bringing "together the utopian 'horizon of expectation' with our actual 'field of experience'" (23) and what Bloch describes as the concordance of hope and concreteness.

Critical pedagogy must serve as a form of critique and also as a referent for hope. And it must move the non-poor to recognize their privilege in order to make alliances with the oppressed. Histories of suffering must be recounted, including instances of domination that take the form of social practices or claims to universal truth, as well as racism, sexism, and classism. Hope must also be learned (Bloch) through memories offered to reclaim the historical agency of the revolutionary subject. Liberation entails changing not only the material but the psychological conditions of oppression (Aronowitz). Not surprisingly, liberal educators often launder the political import of psychological liberation in Freire's work to refer to

ameliorating forms of individual distress (in which case everybody constitutes the oppressed) and lose sight of his concern with the social reality that produces forms of collective victimhood.

Hence it becomes the task of critical pedagogy to invite students to engage the means through which they produce the ideological dimensions of their experiences, deep memories, psychological blockages, and passionate investments in everyday life and to relate these to the material and symbolic structures of power that operate in the larger context of social life. In some present-day Freirian analysis we are left with the impression that experience should be privileged, often with little consideration for developing a critical vernacular outside of the language of analysis that students and teachers use to mediate between their own reality and their ideological and material location within the larger social order. This privileging of experience over understanding works against the very premises of critical approaches to schooling.

This does not mean that the language and theoretical constructs used to analyze experience should not be open to debate; it is important that the particular language that educators endorse can move outside the constraints of “name-of-the-father” vocabularies (to use the Lacanian term) and, further, serve as a stronger liberatory medium for people of color. It also remains undeniable that critical reflection requires a language that highlights the contingency of everyday discourse and questions subjectivity. Theoretical language must resymbolize ordinary social life in order to reveal its imprisonment in existing power relations and to locate transformative “openings.” In this respect, critical pedagogy must recover the meaning of identity as a site of remapping and remaking historical agency within a praxis of liberation. This need has never been more urgent than within the “cultural dominant” of late post-Fordist capitalism—what has been termed “the post-modern condition.”

Freire recognizes that critical language must not position individuals in such a way that they are made to see from the perspective of the Eurocentric male theorist. A critical literacy for global decolonization must always be aware that theoretical paradigms may need to be modified due to the semantic context surrounding the geopolitical specificity of their origins (Lash). While we must situate problematically the sexism of Freire’s language and his phallogocentric paradigm of liberation, in which freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are conflated, this criticism of Freire’s “blind spot”—as hooks puts it—should not overshadow his insights (“Speaking”).

In other words, discourses of liberation should not unproblematically reflect a European, masculinist, or teleological view of history, should not unqualifiedly endorse an Anglo-European scholarly axis. Critical theory, in the United States in particular, must engage discourses of non-Western liberation struggles (for instance, Latin American counter-narratives that fracture the Eurocentric philosophical time of concepts and surmount the categorical oppositions of philosophical logic). But at the same time, every community of resistance must work to appro-

priate any discourses of liberation that can potentially be helpful and connect them to its own revolutionary tradition.

Freire's pedagogy reveals consensus to be social difference dressed up in discourses of equality that hide the real domination behind. But his interrogation of these discourses does not transcend the culture in which they are embedded in the form of a dogmatic system of thought or totalizing critique. Freire does not need to take shelter in a transcendental citadel that stands above the messy terrain of concrete struggle, lived history, and the paradox of enunciation in contemporary social life. Yet I would like to emphasize that while his work centers on affirming the knowledges of individuals within particular contexts, his pedagogy in no way abandons the concept of totality. As Fredric Jameson remarks, "Local struggles . . . are effective only so long as they remain figures of allegories from some larger systematic transformation. Politics has to operate on the micro- and the macro-levels simultaneously; a modest restriction to local reforms within the system seems reasonable, but often proves politically demoralizing" (386). George Lipsitz underscores this idea, arguing that while totality can do violence to the specificity of events, a rejection of all totality would likely "obscure real connections, causes, and relationships—atomizing common experience into accidents and endlessly repeated play . . . [and that] only by recognizing the collected legacy of accumulated human actions and ideas can we judge the claims to truth and justice of any one story" (214).

Without a shared vision of democratic community, we risk endorsing struggles in which the politics of difference collapses into new forms of separatism. As Steven Best points out, poststructuralists rightly deconstruct essentialist and repressive wholes, yet they often fail to see how crippling the valorizing of difference, fragmentation, and agonistics can be. He writes: "The flip side of the tyranny of the whole is the dictatorship of the fragment . . . without some positive and normative concept of totality to counter-balance the poststructuralist/postmodern emphasis on difference and discontinuity, we are abandoned to the seriality of pluralist individualism and the supremacy of competitive values over communal life" (361). Best is correct in suggesting that what needs to be abandoned is the reductive use of totality, not the concept of totality itself. Otherwise we risk undermining the very concept of the democratic public sphere.³

Freire's understanding of knowledge as a creature of limits and borders can help educators recognize how literacies are implicated in particular selective economies of truth, value, and power. Knowledge is always bound up in relations of power, and power is distributed laterally and historically—that is, unequally—among groups differentiated by ethnicity, gender, and class. If we believe that the human mind is quintessentially creative and that schools should be in the business of enhancing, deepening, and developing creativity for its own sake, we risk privileging the "creative experience" as the centerpiece of a transformative practice—which, of course, reflects most liberal-arts programs. Even if schools were to enable students to successfully construct knowledge in the main modes of artistic understanding—the aural, visual, verbal, kinesthetic, and enactive—these

forms of knowledge production would never be innocent. The production of knowledge in schools always occupies specifiable locations in relations of power. All forms of knowledge, including those we claim are creative, are inescapably linked to evaluative choices. Such choices need to be seen as historically and socially constructed. Educators need to examine cultural choices and consider the degree to which they are liberating or oppressive.

CONCLUSION

Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it. (Bertolt Brecht)

Freire's project can be summed up in his own words: "There is no revolution without love, the revolution is loving" (*University*). The work of Paulo Freire suggests a compassionate fire that heats our spirits even as it softens the solidity of existing social relations, a fire whose transforming flames invite us to take Bertolt Brecht's hammer and forge on liberation's anvil reciprocal discourses of knowing and more equitable spaces for living. Yet the metaphor of the anvil, while capturing the force and density of Freire's political project, does not do justice to the complexity and interconnectedness of his ideas. To do so, one would have to speak of the warp and woof of his sociological imagination. The former metaphor testifies to the power Freire's pedagogy gains from its location in the experiences of the oppressed; the latter captures the weave of his politics, which speaks to all who suffer.

For Freire the most important sites for resisting enslavement to ideological machineries of servitude are the schools. That they are not by themselves sufficient for social change should be not a cause for despair but an indication of the radical possibilities associated with a commitment to social alliances and movements that can help realize the most radical dream of democracy, the dream of freedom. What makes Freire's work so important at this historical juncture is that it constitutes an ethics of obligation—an ethics that goes beyond the liberal-humanist concern with self-esteem prevalent in mainstream capitalist pedagogical discourses. In the final analysis, Freire offers not pedagogical rules for individuals to apply to particular social acts, but rather an attitude situated at the level of an ethical intention and based on respect for others, a principle for living informed by a loyalty to hope and a narrative imagination that tells us the story of exile, humility, historical responsibility, and liberation.

Freire's work offers a ground for contextualizing oppression and for transforming the effects of self-defeating patterns of alienation. It challenges the categorical function of pedagogy as it is frequently understood and practiced; it bends reality to the requirements of a just world and creates new spaces for critical activity and zones of transformative liminality in the home, the school, the university, the community, and larger public and administrative contexts. Freire's task has been largely postcolonial⁴ in de-centering and disorienting forms of authority that

domesticate the Other, that lay siege to the power of the margins. His goal has been to question the tacit assumptions—the unexamined faith in continuity and desire for familiarity—that make up the history of the oppressed, and to put under hermeneutical stress the norms these assumptions legitimate, the self-images they create, and the despair they foster. His contribution has been to breathe new life into historical agency in a world that has witnessed the disappearance of the subject of history (Jameson; Giroux and McLaren, “Schooling”) and to encourage those who instead of being content with visiting history as custodians of memory choose to live in history’s furnace, where memory is molten and can be poured into the contours of a dream and perhaps even acquire the immanent force of a vision.

In the current juncture of recycled McCarthyism and postmodern pastiche, Freire points to a way in which we can shape history rather than simply rehearse it through image-produced desire. His political pedagogy, if protected from the reductionistic tendency of liberal educators to turn it into a method, can help to unfocus and depotentiate the white gaze of power, to form bonds of sentiment and obligation among all oppressed people, to enable schools to become more than instruments of social replication, to turn contrasting cultural styles from tokens of estrangement into the impetus that brings separate groups together.

Freire’s words blow like strong winds through the torpor of Western liberalism and the political apathy of generations increasingly held captive by the power of global capitalism and by the meanings and social relations such power is likely to produce. They call educators to establish the grounds not only for a critical language of imagination but also for a teachable heart—a heart that invites compassion, empathy, and forgiveness through a new and revolutionary way of loving.

NOTES

¹An expanded version of this paper will appear in Peter McLaren and Tomaz Tadeu da Silva, “Decentering Pedagogy: Critical Literacy, Resistance and the Politics of Memory,” in McLaren and Leonard. Condensed sections will appear in *Access* (New Zealand) and *The Fortieth Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (Chicago). The author wishes to thank two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions on revising this manuscript.

²Enfleshment refers to the mutually constitutive enfolding of social structure and desire; that is, it is the dialectical relationship between the material organization of interiority and the cultural modes of materiality we inhabit subjectively. Enfleshment is the “quilting point” that results when the radical externality of the body/subject as resistant to our volition joins the pure interiority of our own subjectivity. Thus it involves both the entextualization of desire and the embodiment of textual forms (McLaren, “Schooling”).

³This idea has been taken from Giroux and McLaren, “Radical Pedagogy” 182.

“I wish to qualify my use of the term “postcolonialism.” I am referring here to the importance of problematizing pedagogical discourses in light of the current trajectory toward global capitalism (while admitting its disorganized character) and the narratives and cultural logic associated with and resulting from the breaking up of old imperialisms based on nation-states. I am aware that in some critical circles, “postcolonialism” is coming under the same kind of criticism as “multiculturalism.” Some critics perceive both terms as totalizing discourses that mask injustice behind subtle forms of neocolonialism. Postcolonial

pedagogy, as I am using it, is a pedagogy of anti-imperialism that questions the very categories through which the history and narratives of the colonized have been written (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). Explicit in it is a challenge both to the way knowledges are produced within the social formation and to global capitalism as a master narrative of desire and inevitability, as well as to the way that Anglo-European discourses have split off the Other and either banished or romanticized difference in politically and ethically disabling ways. Of course, the term “postcolonial” is always to be understood in context-specific ways, and I do not seek to sketch its contours without placing it in contradiction to its possible universalist assumptions. I see postcolonial pedagogy as a temporary suspension of the colonial moment, a liminal space that, while still containing traces of colonial and neocolonial discourses, effectively allows for their suspension and for the development of a community of resistance. See McLaren, *Postmodernism*.

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