The Rhetoric of Diversity and the Traditions of American Literary Study

Critical Multiculturalism in English

LESLIEE ANTONETTE

Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series
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Series Foreword

Educational reform has fallen upon hard times. The traditional assumption that schooling is fundamentally tied to the imperatives of citizenship designed to educate students to exercise civic leadership and public service has been eroded. The schools are now the key institution for producing professional, technically trained, credentialized workers for whom the demands of citizenship are subordinated to the vicissitudes of the marketplace and the commercial public sphere. Given the current corporate and right wing assault on public and higher education, coupled with the emergence of a moral and political climate that has shifted to a new Social Darwinism, the issues that framed the democratic meaning, purpose, and use to which education might aspire have been displaced by more vocational and narrowly ideological considerations.

The war waged against the possibilities of an education wedded to the precepts of a real democracy is not merely ideological. Against the backdrop of reduced funding for public schooling, the call for privatization, vouchers, cultural uniformity, and choice, there are the often ignored larger social realities of material power and oppression. On the national level, there has been a vast resurgence of racism. This is evident in the passing of anti-immigration laws such as Proposition 187 in California, the dismantling of the welfare state, the demonization of black youth that is taking place in the popular media, and the remarkable

attention provided by the media to forms of race talk that argue for the intellectual inferiority of blacks or dismiss calls for racial justice as simply a holdover from the "morally bankrupt" legacy of the 1960s.

Poverty is on the rise among children in the United States, with 20 percent of all children under the age of eighteen living below the poverty line. Unemployment is growing at an alarming rate for poor youth of color, especially in the urban centers. While black youth are policed and disciplined in and out of the nation's schools, conservative and liberal educators define education through the ethically limp discourses of privatization, national standards, and global competitiveness.

Many writers in the critical education tradition have attempted to challenge the right wing fundamentalism behind educational and social reform in both the United States and abroad while simultaneously providing- ethical signposts for a public discourse about education and democracy that is both prophetic and transformative. Eschewing traditional categories, a diverse number of critical theorists and educators have successfully exposed the political and ethical implications of the cynicism and despair that has become endemic to the discourse of schooling and civic life. In its place, such educators strive to provide a language of hope that inextricably links the struggle over schooling to understanding and transforming our present social and cultural dangers.

At the risk of overgeneralizing both cultural studies theorists and critical educators have emphasized the importance of understanding theory as the grounded basis for "intervening into contexts and power . . . in order to enable people to act more strategically in ways that may change their context for the better."[1] Moreover, theorists in both fields have argued for the primacy of the political by calling for and struggling to produce critical public spaces, regardless of how fleeting they may be, in which "popular cultural resistance is explored as a form of political resistance."[2] Such writers have analyzed the challenges that teachers will have to face in redefining a new mission for education, one that is linked to honoring the experiences, concerns, and diverse histories and languages that give expression to the multiple narratives that engage and challenge the legacy of democracy

Equally significant is the insight of recent critical educational work that connects the politics of difference with concrete strategies for addressing the crucial relationships between schooling and the economy, and citizenship and the politics of meaning in communities of multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual schools.

Critical Studies in Education and Culture attempts to address and demonstrate how scholars working in the fields of cultural studies and the critical pedagogy might join together in a radical project and practice

informed by theoretically rigorous discourses that affirm the critical but refuse the cynical, and establish hope as central to a critical pedagogical and political practice but eschew a romantic utopianism. Central to such a project is the issue of how pedagogy might provide cultural studies theorists and educators with an opportunity to engage pedagogical practices that are not only transdisciplinary, transgressive, and oppositional, but also connected to a wider project designed to further racial, economic, and political democracy.[3] By taking seriously the relations between culture and power, we further the possibilities of resistance, struggle, and change.

Critical Studies in Education and Culture is committed to publishing, work that opens a narrative space that affirms the contextual and the specific while simultaneously recognizing the ways in which such spaces are shot through with issues of power. The series attempts to continue an important legacy of theoretical work in cultural studies in which related debates on pedagogy are understood and addressed within the larger context of social responsibility, civic courage, and the reconstruction of democratic public life. We must keep in mind Raymond Williams's insight that the "deepest impulse (informing cultural politics) is the desire to make learning part of the process of social change itself."[4] Education as a cultural pedagogical practice takes place across multiple sites, which include not only schools and universities but also the mass media, popular culture, and other public spheres, and signals how within diverse contexts, education makes us both subjects of and subject to relations of power.

This series challenges the current return to the primacy of market values and simultaneous retreat from politics so evident in the recent work of educational theorists, legislators, and policy analysts. Professional relegitimation in a troubled time seems to be the order of the day as an increasing number of academics both refuse to recognize public and higher education as critical public spheres and offer little or no resistance to the ongoing vocationalization of schooling, the continuing evisceration of the intellectual labor force and the current assaults on the working poor, the elderly, and women and children.[5]

Emphasizing the centrality of politics, culture, and power, *Critical Studies in Education and Culture* will deal with pedagogical issues that contribute in imaginative and transformative ways to our understanding of how critical knowledge, democratic values, and social practices can provide a basis for teachers, students, and other cultural workers to redefine their role as engaged and public intellectuals. Each volume will attempt to rethink the relationship between language and experience, pedagogy and human agency, and ethics and social responsibility as part of a larger project for engaging and deepening the prospects of

democratic schooling in a multiracial and multicultural society. *Critical Studies in Education and Culture* takes on the responsibility of witnessing and addressing the most pressing problems of public schooling and civic life, and engages culture as a crucial site and strategic force for productive social change.

Henry A. Giroux

NOTES

1. Lawrence Grossberg, "Toward a Genealogy of the State of Cultural Studies," in Cary Nelson and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, eds. *Disciplinarity and Dissent in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 143.

2. David Bailey and Stuart Hall, "The Vertigo of Displacement," *Ten* 8 2:3 (1992), 19.

3. My notion of transdisciplinary comes from Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton, "Theory, Pedagogy, Politics: The Crisis of the 'Subject' in the Humanities," in *Theory Pedagogy Politics: Texts for Change,* Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 10. At issue here is neither ignoring the boundaries of discipline-based knowledge nor simply fusing different disciplines, but creating theoretical paradigms, questions, and knowledge that cannot be taken up within the policed boundaries of the existing disciplines.

4. Raymond Williams, "Adult Education and Social Change," in *What I Came to Say* (London: Hutchinson-Radus, 1989), 158

5. The term "professional legitimation" comes from a personal correspondence with Professor Jeff Williams of East Carolina University.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge Professor Henry Giroux for allowing me the opportunity to consider the concept of critical multiculturalism within the framework of critical education. It is through the work of Professor Giroux and the work he has sponsored that I have gained access to critical theories of education. His work has been a significant influence on my work. I would also like to thank him for this opportunity to enter into the professional conversation regarding critical multiculturalism. I am also directly indebted to the work of Paolo Friere. Through the work of Professor Giroux, and also through the work of Ira Shor, I was allowed to see a model of what I thought education should be. Giroux helped me translate the theory at work in Friere's work, and Shor provided me with a practical model. In my own work, I have to put them together. Not that the work of either Giroux or Shor suffers in theory and practice, but that is how I was able to synthesize Friere.

In my understanding of Friere there is a bottom line and that is that in an educational process there is no bottom line. Learning is a fluid, individual, constant process. When students become aware of their ability to learn in myriad situations and learn that they control the process, they become invested members of the knowledge-making community. In American culture this is necessarily a multicultural endeavor. The multicultural reality of the United States of America is not something that must be accommodated; it is a source of great wisdom and knowledge. It is a reality that we need to engage and investigate. It is a reality that we need to "see" at work in our everyday lives. Critical pedagogy, critical literacy, liberatory education,

citizenship education, and critical multiculturalism are all attempts at gaining access to that reality and the meaning it offers us as a culture. These are very different projects than the "celebration" of difference and diversity, a noncritical pedagogy, theory and multiculturalism offer. A critical multiculturalism attempts to make visible the means through which multicultural reality has been subordinated to a monocultural hegemonic agenda. The argument that this work finally rests upon is this: a critical multiculturalism may produce a multicultural hegemonic agenda that cannot replicate the problems and issues that concern a monocultural hegemonic agenda. This, however, does not mean that a critical multicultural hegemonic agenda will not possess its own set of problems and issues.

I am indebted to Professor Steven Gould Axelrod for my participation in this conversation. His patience, wisdom, and encouragement have kept me at work. Thank you for being so generous with your time. I needed quite a bit of it to think through this maze of multiculturalism. Professor Axelrod allowed me to follow my interest in a topic that was new, uncertain, and confusing. However, I needed to know more about it, and he respected my need to know. He not only supported my interest; he challenged it. He made me articulate the value I saw in entering this conversation. This taught me that I could control my educational experience, and reinforced the idea that my interests are valid and useful. The educational experience provided by Professor Axelrod informed my own teaching style. He was encouraging, supportive, and firm in his refusal to accept anything less than the best I could produce. When I said that it was the best I could do, he believed me and then showed me how to improve it.

I would also like to thank Professor Rise B. Axelrod for her kindness, patience, and direction. I had the opportunity to study with Professor Axelrod at California State University at San Bernardino. She was a rigorous and exciting teacher, and she has become a supportive friend and a role model for me.

This work has been influenced by the presence of some truly great professors at the University of California at Riverside. Emory Elliott, Joe Childers, Richard Boyd, George Haggerty, Carole Fabricant, Traise Yamamoto, and Gregory Bredbeck have all contributed to my ability to produce this project. This work comes directly from my own student experience. As a nontraditional re-entry student and single parent, I came to the university to learn about the world, and these professors taught me. Aside from the many valuable academic skills I learned from these professors, I also learned some poignant life lessons. That is the mark of a quality education. The one skill that all of these professors

taught me in one form or another, and for which I am eternally grateful, is silence. The absence of verbal expression does not equal the absence of power. Power exists in myriad forms and relationships. Sometimes silence can be the most powerful position one can occupy. All of these professors taught me how to pick my battles and how to use my silence, as well as my words, to my greatest advantage. I hope I have produced a text that illustrates the quality of the education I have received.

Without the help of my great friend, Lois Stephenson, this book would have been much harder to produce. Her emotional and technical support is invaluable. She is the best friend a writer could hope for. Her knowledge and experience in the field of writing are vast and she shared it all with me. Lois has been a haven for me. She has protected me, fed me, encouraged me, corrected me, and helped me to become a stronger human being and a much better writer.

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I am indebted to those I have named. I also want to acknowledge the editorial staff at Greenwood Publishing. They were helpful, supportive, and patient with me as I learned how to produce a published text. I am also grateful to East Stroudsburg University for providing me with the material to make the ideas in this book reality. I hope that the positive parts of this text will be viewed as a reflection of those influences I have named, and that the negative parts will be attributed to my own limitations.

About the Author

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Contents

Introduction

I had just finished the first major rewrite of this text and I was hungry. It was the first of the month and I had no food in the house, but I did have money in the bank. As I headed to my neighborhood grocery store, I shuddered at the realization that it was "Mother's day." In my neighborhood Mother's day falls on the first and fifteenth of every month. It is the day welfare checks arrive. I lived near the university where I taught, and the neighborhoods that border the university are made up of low-income families who live in public housing. The grocery store I frequent caters to those in the lower economic echelons. Not coincidentally, it is the best place to stock up on "ethnic food" staples, and on the first and the fifteenth of every month it is full of welfare moms, dads, and kids doing their shopping.

Having been a welfare mom for a significant portion of my adult life (even a small amount of time is significant), I was not uncomfortable in the fray—I was just hungry and did not want to wait in line. I went anyway—it was early, I told myself, maybe I will beat the rush. I did. Much to my pleasure the store was only moderately peopled. I did my shopping and as I was standing in line I allowed my eyes to wander around the store. Something tickled my nose, and when I sneezed the man behind me said "GawBress you." I turned to thank him and thought, "How nice." Mother's day is usually a day fraught with not-so repressed anxiety and tension. I looked behind the man who had responded to my sneeze and noted that the child in his grocery cart had a much darker complexion than the man I had assumed to be his father. I had, by now, identified the man as being Japanese or possibly Japanese American. But, looking at his son, I began to reconsider this judgment. When a woman who appeared to be the boy's mother walked up and

began to speak to the Japanese/Japanese American man in a distinctly Hispanic accent, I was surprised. The accent of the woman and the accent of the man were so clearly different that I was at first fascinated by what I perceived to be their bi-cultural union. I began to wonder if I had simply misheard the man's accent, and I found myself watching this family out of the corner of my eye, trying to make sense of the physiological presentation of the family members, and my interest in them.

We made it through the line and the woman paid with food stamps. As I was standing across from the Japanese/American/Mexican man, who had offered me God's blessing, bagging groceries, an older woman with a light complexion and dark hair walked over and asked him, in a very thick German accent, if she might use his cart.

"No." He responded, "Am stir using."
"Oh." She smiled. "I'm sorry."
"That's okay." He smiled back.

I stood watching this exchange, and I thought to myself, this is my world. This is my grocery store, and these are the people I interact with in the course of fulfilling my needs of subsistence. This thought entered my mind and for one-half of a second I was filled with a warm feeling of . . . power. Then the realization struck me that not only had I appropriated the experiences of these people in the grocery store as somehow being "my own," I had distanced myself from my own experience as well. I felt like an anthropologist in the field.

I tried to make some sense out of my realization, as I walked out to the parking lot and looked around for my vehicle. I saw two African American women trying to get their kids into a late sixties Chevy Impala, and a Chicano or Mexican man in a really old Ford pickup trying to get their parking space. A young, Anglo-American man with one arm approached me, while I surveyed the parking lot. He wanted a dollar. As I proceeded to my JEEP, I began to wonder what those around me might be thinking about me. After all, I was walking through the parking lot analyzing those I encountered. I wondered what it was they saw when they looked at me. I suddenly felt really "white." When this thought occurred to me I found that I had a definition of what it meant to be "white" already in my head. To be white in America is to be perceptibly Anglo-American *and* middle class. I wondered if this was the image of me perceived by those people in the store and parking lot; and I wondered how I was supposed to reconcile my feeling of "Americanness" in the parking lot with the feeling of belonging I had