LITERACY, PEDAGOGY, AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

I want to analyze in this essay some central questions relevant to the debate that is increasingly being waged over the relationship among literacy, culture, and difference, particularly in terms of how we might restructure school curricula in order to address the needs of those groups who traditionally have been excluded from the dominant educational discourse. In what follows I will develop some general remarks about the importance of redefining literacy as a cultural politics and pedagogical practice central to deepening and extending the possibilities of radical democracy. Taken up in these terms, literacy provides a referent and a form of social criticism for engaging those conditions necessary for cultural workers and students to learn the knowledge and skills essential for self-reflection and collective agency. More specifically, literacy becomes an enabling condition for forms of citizenship in which members of dominant and subordinate groups are offered subject-positions that address what it means to live in a society in which they have the opportunity to shape history in emancipatory terms rather than be the subject or object of its oppressive and colonizing practices (see Agger). The logic that informs my argument situates literacy in the complex relationship between the discourses of postmodernism and postcolonialism. In this case these discourses become important to the degree that they offer theoretical insights that can be used to redefine literacy as part of an attempt to connect educational struggles with broader efforts to democratize, pluralize, and reconstruct public life.
In the discourses of postmodernism, literacy in its varied versions can be taken up as both the politics of representation and the representation of politics. In the first and most influential approach to literacy, the principles that structure, order, inscribe, and contain meaning are made problematic inside rather than outside the dialectical interplay of history, power, and ideology (see Solomon-Godeau; Hebdige). In the second instance, to consider literacy as the representation of politics makes visible how regimes of signification are both cause and effect of particular relations of production, reception, and distribution within circuits of power that give the discursive and non-discursive elements of these practices a particular historical expression (see Lash; Aronowitz and Giroux, Postmodern Education). Within a postmodernist framework, literacy restructures the boundaries and borders that have traditionally been used to constitute meaning, disciplinary structures, art, and life. Literacy in this account addresses the meaning and construction of disciplinary subjects and subjectivities beyond the limited theoretical space of "unity, coherence, consensus, and resolution" (Hutcheon 10). Here literacy is engaged as part of a broader reconceptualization of culture taken up in terms of collective discourses, multiple literacies, and diverse relations of difference.

Postcolonial discourses are not only concerned with how subjects both write and are written by culture but with how they can change it. That is, postcolonial discourses subordinate textual criticism to politics so as to extend the theoretical parameters of literacy to include practices of representation that disrupt existing material, epistemological, and ideological systems. Literacy becomes critical to the degree that it makes problematic the transcendent and universalizing claim of the unifying authoritative voice of Eurocentric tradition (as exemplified, for instance, in Bloom), the structure and practice of representation, and the material legacy and concentrate practice of neocolonialism (see Spivak; Minh-ha; Mohanty et al.).

In this instance, literacy is not reduced to learning simply how to read, write, or listen. As part of a broader politics of difference, it also serves to focus attention on the importance of acknowledging that meaning is not fixed and that to be literate is to undertake a dialogue with the multiple languages, discourses, and texts of others who speak from different histories, locations, and experiences (see Freire; hooks). Literacy is about more than negotiating and translating the terrain of cultural and semiotic differences. It is also a rupturing practice that engages questions regarding who writes for what audience, in what institutional setting, and with what purpose in mind. Literacy, in this case, becomes a form of ideology critique that makes visible how oppressive and dominating practices mediate between the margins and centers of power (see Said). As an emancipatory practice, literacy represents the subject positions and social identities of "others" as part of a progressive set of politics and practices aimed at the transformation of material relations of domination and the abolishment of oppressive regimes of signification (see Freire and Macedo; Giroux, Schooling).

Defining literacy as part of a broader politics and democracy means bearing in mind at least three important considerations. First, such a stance makes visible the historically and socially constructed strengths and limitations of those places and borders we inherit and that frame our discourses and social relations. Second, we must recognize that literacy is a form of ethical address that structures how we
construct relationships. It marks out the boundaries of difference that "define the places that are safe and unsafe, [that] distinguish us from them" (Anzaldua 3). Borders signal both metaphorically and literally how power is inscribed differently on the body, culture, history, space, land, and psyche. When literacy is defined in monolithic terms -- from the center -- within a linear logic that erases uncertainty, it recognizes only the borders of privilege and domination. Third, this definition of literacy calls into question those spaces and locations that intellectuals inhabit as they seek to secure authority through specific ways of reading or misreading their relationships within the world and with others. Moreover, literacy raises here the responsibility of intellectuals in "recognizing those structures (social, cultural, economic, and so forth) that both enable and constrain [their] activities" (Miklitsch 93).

The discourse of literacy cannot be abstracted from the language of difference and power. Hence literacy cannot be viewed as merely an epistemological or procedural issue but must be defined primarily in political and ethical terms. It is political in that how we "read" the world is always implicated in relations of power. It is ethical in that people "read" the world differently depending, for instance, on circumstances of class, gender, race, politics, and sexual orientation. They also read the world in accordance with spaces and social relationships constructed between themselves and others; these systems demand actions based on judgments and choices about how one is to act in the face of the ideologies, values, and experiences that constitute "otherness." It is these shifting relations of knowing and identity that frame our "different modes of response to the other (e.g. between those that transfigure and those that disfigure, those that care for the other in his/her otherness and those that do not)" (Kearney 369).

In this case knowledge and power come together not merely to reaffirm or exoticize experience and difference but to open up these domains to broader theoretical considerations, to tease out their limitations, and to engage a vision of community in which diverse voices define themselves in terms of their distinct historical and social formations and broader collective hopes. For critical educators this vision entails speaking to important social, political, and cultural issues from a deep sense of the politics of their own location; they must also see the necessity of engaging and often unlearning the habits of institutional (as well as racial, gender, and class-specific) privilege that buttress their own power while sometimes preventing others from becoming questioning subjects (see Spivak). Hence it is important that intellectuals develop "a discourse that responds to the power relations of the world system, that is . . . examine [their] location in the dynamics of centers and margins . . . [and guard] against a form of theoretical tourism . . . where the margin becomes a linguistic or critical vacation, a new poetics of the exotic" (Kaplan 189, 191).

This is not meant to suggest that as educators we should abandon our authority so much as transform it into an emancipatory practice that provides the conditions for us to speak and be taken seriously (see Giroux, Schooling, Bizzell). Of course, as teachers we can never speak inclusively as the Other, though we may be the Other with respect to issues of race, class, or gender. But we can certainly work with diverse Others to deepen both our own and their understanding of the complexity of the traditions, histories, knowledges, and politics that all of us bring to schools and other cultural sites. More specifically, while teachers and other cultural workers may not speak as Others whose experiences they do not
share, or suggest that such Others have nothing to say, they certainly can speak about and to experiences of racism, sexism, class discrimination, and other concerns as historical and relational issues that deeply affect and connect various dominant and marginalized groups through the interlocking dynamics of privilege, subordination, and oppression.

In other words, as a heterosexual, white, middle-/working-class educator, I cannot speak as or for African Americans. But I can speak self-reflectively about the ethical, political, and public issues of racism. This is not meant to suggest that all those who inhabit public life are equally complicitous with the ideologies and social relations that construct such forms of domination. Such a belief is simply a paralyzing form of pluralism that makes everyone a victim while simultaneously ignoring issues of political and social accountability. More to the point is the necessity for cultural workers to recognize that all forms of oppression have to be addressed both inside and outside the parameters of their specific focus. That is, such issues have to be addressed as problems both ideologically specific and public that affect both particular individuals and groups and the overall moral and political quality of democratic life.

If a politics of difference is to be fashioned as an emancipatory rather than oppressive practice, literacy must be rewritten in terms that articulate difference with the principles of equality, justice, and freedom in mind rather than with those interests supportive of hierarchies, oppression, and exploitation. In this case literacy as an emancipatory practice requires people to write, speak, and listen in the language of difference, a language in which meaning becomes multiaccentual, dispersed, and resistant to permanent closure. This is a language in which one speaks with rather than for others, and it has a serious implications not only for students but also for teachers and other cultural workers, particularly around the issue of authority, pedagogy, and politics (see Bleich). Put differently, the discourse of critical literacy is one that signals the need to challenge and redefine the substance and effects of cultural borders, the need to create opportunities for teachers and students to be border crossers in order to understand otherness on its own terms, and the need to create borderlands in which diverse cultural resources allow for the fashioning of new identities within the existing configurations of power (see Aronowitz and Giroux, Postmodern Education; Giroux, Crossing).

In what follows, I want to highlight briefly what I call a postmodern/postcolonial discourse of literacy and difference. The emphasis here will be on the importance of the relationship between literacy and difference rather than on the specific substance and effects of the various approaches that characterize the burgeoning field of literacy. But before I develop these issues, I think it is important to address briefly the border political context in which the debates over cultural difference and literacy have been framed during the last decade.

The ideological parameters of the current debate over culture and difference took shape during the Reagan era. During the last decade the terms of this debate have been principally set by conservatives such as Allan Bloom, Diane Ravitch, and E. D. Hirsch, Jr. All of these critics have presented in different ways an agenda and purpose for shaping public schooling and higher education under the terms of a cultural discourse in which the concept of difference is seen as a threat to what is labeled Western
Within this discourse the issue of culture and schooling is taken up primarily in terms aimed at overcoming of erasing difference rather than at incorporating it into an ongoing democratic and pedagogical project. The conservative position has arisen from the recognition by some of its followers that the United States in the midst of a cultural crisis that can be traced to the radical social movements that emerged during the 1960s and more recently to diverse forms of postmodern, feminist, and postculturalist theory. The villains include, among others, those who hold that intellectuals should engage public life in oppositional terms; those who reject universal as a foundation for human affairs; those who oppose totalizing narratives; those who refuse to accept for Eurocentric notions of Western culture as synonymous with the very notion of civilization; those who argue that student experience should qualify as a legitimate form of knowledge; and those who claim that racial, class, gender, ethnic differences extend rather than threaten the most basic principles of a democratic society.

In response to these developments, neoconservatives have attempted to reduce the politics of difference and schooling to forms of character education in which the call to pluralism becomes a euphemism for teaching students to follow the rules and to adapt rather than critically to engage the values that reproduce existing structures of power. In this view the concept of cultural difference, especially racial difference, is seen as threatening to the integrative character of the American polity, contrary to the merits of individualism, and disrespectful of the "high culture" of the West.

Removed from the languages of social justices, difference is associated with a notion of literacy in which critiques of Eurocentrism, racism, or cultural domination are dismissed as instances of a vile form of particularism that threatens to undermine what is unproblematically labeled Western Civilization. Similarly, there is a general tendency to view "otherness" as threatening to the notion of equality and tolerance central to the neoconservative view of national unity and security. The call to literacy become a powerful weapon used by neoconservatives in their fight against the diverse groups attempting to rewrite the cultural, political, and social codes of the dominant society. Fearful of the threat to its physical (immigration), linguistic (bilingualism), academic (curriculum and canon), cultural (art and music), and racial (segregation) borders, neoconservatives have constructed a notion of literacy that abstracts equity from difference while framing educational and cultural policies in a language that represents a new form of nativism and an assault on progressive cultural criticism.

Consequently, literacy is often defined by the pedagogical imperative to learn knowledge, skills, and values that ignore problems associated with issues of race, ethnicity, language, and religion. For example, the right-wing assault on literacy is evident in the attempts by Senator Jesse Helms and others to impose a conservative cultural agenda by cutting funding to the National Endowment for the Arts; eliminating government sponsorship of programs that bring cultural events to "neighborhood, factories, and prisons"; and putting an end to government support for individual artists and alternative cultural institutions (Vance 49). At the same time Ravitch, a prominent neoconservative, wages a public attack on critics who analyze how cultural differences have been structured in forms of dominance and subordination (see "Diversity and Democracy"). Such critics appear as particularists and separatists who have not learned how to treat her notion of literacy and the "common culture" with reverence and respect.
In my mind, this approach to difference, literacy, and culture raises a fundamental challenge to how educators and others might view educating students for citizenship in a democratic society. At risk in this debate is not merely the "tradition" of Western culture as it is represented in school curricula, not merely the issue of whether subordinate students will be given the appropriate skills to function adequately in the labor market. Of course these are important issues, but they should not be the central concerns that define the purpose and meaning of literacy and schooling in this country. That is, the purpose and meaning of schooling extends beyond safeguarding the treasures of cultural tradition or furnishing the corporate state with more literate workers.

What is at stake in this debate is the status of literacy defined in relation to the radical responsibility of ethics, a responsibility that takes seriously educating students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for establishing relations that refuse violence, aggression, and subjugation. In question are those democratic values that enable us to draw attention to the languages, histories, and voices of groups who have been traditionally excluded or marginalized from the discourse of power. More specifically, the debate on literacy, difference, and schooling raises important questions about the fragile nature of democracy itself. This suggests that any discussion of schooling and difference is inseparable from a wider concern with the reconstruction of democratic public life (see Aronowitz and Giroux, Siege).

**REWRITING THE DISCOURSE OF LITERACY AND DIFFERENCE**

In opposition to the emerging neoconservative view that defines democracy against cultural difference and literacy as a politics of equity, justice, and representation, I want to examine a rationale along with some pedagogical principles for developing a politics of difference responsive to the imperatives of a critical democracy. In doing so, I want to emphasize that public schools and institutions of higher learning cannot be viewed simply as instructional sites; they must be more broadly defined as contradictory agencies engaged in specific forms of moral and political regulation. That is, they produce knowledge, and they provide students with a sense of place, worth, and identity. In doing so, they offer students selected representations, skills, social relations, and values that presuppose particular histories and ways of being in the world. The moral and political dimension at work here is revealed in the question, "Whose history, story, and experience prevails in the school setting?". In other words, who speaks for whom, under what conditions, and for what purpose?

In this regard, educational institutions and the processes in which they engage are not innocent. Simply stated, schools are not neutral institutions designed for providing students either with work skills or with the privileged tools of culture (see Bourdieu and Passeron; Bourdieu). Instead they are deeply implicated in forms of inclusion and exclusion that yield particular moral truths and values. In effect, they both produce and legitimate cultural differences as part of their broader project of constructing particular knowledge/power relations and specific notions of citizenship. To some this idea may sound commonsensical and a bit tiresome. But I think it is imperative to locate all levels of education within a moral and social context in order to assess how a politics and pedagogy of difference might be engaged as part of a discourse fundamental to the reconstruction of a critical democracy.
The problems facing education with regard to the issue of difference in the United States need to be reformulated as a crisis in citizenship and ethics. This view suggests that the solution to these problems lies ultimately in the realms of values and politics, not in simplistic calls for the creation of a common culture, a monolithic notion of cultural literacy, or a pluralism divorced from the issues of power and struggle. What is at stake is not the semantic difference between pluralism and particularism, but the creation of a democratic society in which cultural differences are affirmed and interrogated rather than dismissed as essentialist or disruptive. It is no small irony that may conservatives who oppose a politics of difference in the discourse of pluralism are also arguing for measuring citizenship competency through standardized cultural-literacy tests and are dismissing the voices of those who have been left out of dominant versions of academic discourse by suggesting that they are incapable of being more than self-referential and doctrinaire.

Within this formulation justice is subordinated to a plea for academic balance, while at the same time the school curriculum (canon) is defended as being representative of a version of Western history that is self-righteously equated with civilization itself. There is something ironic in the charge by those in power (white academic males), especially in higher education, that they have been pushed to the margins as a result of their defense of a Eurocentric curriculum. In the face of an upsurge of racism across the country, this type of logic translates into a self-indulgent act of mistaking the call to express or defend one’s position against forms of domination for a form of aggression. So much for the spirit of critical inquiry. The sentiment echoes what the dominant curriculum suggests and what blacks, women, and other subordinate groups generally accept as a given: it is only the voices of white males that count.

At the risk of overstating this issue, the crisis of literacy in this country must be framed as part of a politics of difference that provides students with the opportunity to engage in a deeper understanding of the importance of democratic culture while developing classroom relations that stress the importance of diversity, equality, and social justice. The ethical imperative that links difference; schooling, and democracy in institutions of public and higher education should educate students primarily in how to govern. This emphasis entails organizing curricula in ways that enable students to make judgments about how society is historically and socially constructed, how existing social practice are implicated in relations of equality and justice, and how such practices structure inequalities around racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. It also means helping students learn to make judgments about what society might be, what is possible or desirable outside existing configurations of power, and why it is important to become not only subjects of discourse but also agents of social change.

Students need more than information about what it means to get a job or pass standardized tests that purport to measure cultural literacy; they need to be able to assess dominant and subordinate traditions so as to engage their strengths and weaknesses. What they don’t need is to treat history as a closed, singular narrative that has simply to be revered and memorized. Educating for difference, democracy, and ethical responsibility is not about creating passive citizens. It is about providing students with the knowledge, capacities, and opportunities to be noisy, irreverent, and vibrant. Central to this concern is the need for students to understand how cultural, ethnic, racial, and ideological differences enhance the
possibility for dialogue, trust, and solidarity. Given this perspective, difference can be analyzed and constructed within pedagogical contexts that promote compassion and tolerance rather than envy, hatred, and bigotry.

The pedagogical and ethical practice I am emphasizing is one that offers opportunities for students to be border crossers; as border crossers, students not only refigure the boundaries of academic subjects in order to engage in new forms of critical inquiry, but are also offered opportunities to engage the multiple references that construct different cultural codes, experiences, and histories. In this context, a pedagogy of difference provides the basis for students to cross over into diverse cultural zones that offer a critical resource for rethinking how the relations between dominant and subordinate groups are organized, how they are implicated and often structured in dominance, and how such relations might be transformed in order to promote a democratic and just society. Difference in this case does not become a marker for deficit, inferiority, chauvinism, or inequality; on the contrary, it opens possibilities for constructing pedagogical practices that deepen forms of cultural democracy in order to enlarge our moral vision. But difference here does not become simply a marker for relating the self to others in a manner that problematizes issues of ethics and citizenship. It also raises questions about how educators can empower students to problematize what is said in the name of the pedagogical imperative and how such an insight can be extended into forms of self-criticism. Miklitsch states this well:

How can we empower students to interrogate not only their teacher's but their own beliefs? In other words, what can we do --as teachers -- to encourage them to think, and to think long and hard, about those things they hold dearest to their hearts? Is it possible somehow to teach students to read themselves as carefully as they read the text that is their teacher's politics? (97)

It is crucial for educators to link a politics of literacy and difference to a theory of social welfare and cultural democracy. At the very least, educators can work to insert the idea of difference into the curriculum as part of an attempt to rearticulate justice and equality. A politics of literacy and difference offers students the opportunity to raise questions about how the categories of race, class, and gender are shaped within the margins and center of power; it also provides a new way of reading history as a way of reclaiming power and identity. This is no small matter for those students who have generally been either marginalized or silenced by the dominant ideologies and practices of public schooling. Educators need to acknowledge that the radical responsibility of a politics of literacy and difference necessitates ongoing student analyses of the contradictions in American society between the meaning of freedom, the demands of social justice, and the obligations of citizenship on the one hand, and the accumulated suffering, domination, force, and violence that permeate all aspects of everyday life on the other. Such analysis requires a literacy grounded in the ethical imperative to challenge the prevailing social order while simultaneously providing the basis for students to deepen the intellectual, civic, and moral understanding of their role as agents of public formation.

Thus the debate over the politics of literacy, difference, and culture might be reconstructed to engage the broader issue of how the learning that goes on in American education may truly be attentive to the
problems and histories surrounding the actual experiences students face in their everyday lives. A pedagogy of literacy and difference needs to do more than provide students with the dispassionate skills of rhetorical persuasion and a shared language for mediating conflicting paradigms (see Graff). More importantly, it needs to provide counter-discursive strategies that open up new spaces for oppositional languages and practices invented to "overcome the enforced silencing or muting of . . . disadvantaged social group[s] . . . for collective subjects . . . engaged in abnormal discourse," and "for nonstandard interpretations of social needs and collective concerns" (Fraser 262). Any attempt within the academy and other cultural sites to foster the "centrality of the dominant discourse by enshrining the values of one particular culture as axiomatic, as literary or textual givens" must be vigorously challenged in political and ethical terms (Tiffin 19). A critical pedagogy of literacy needs to erode rather than accommodate dominant disciplinary structures and discourses. In addition, it must offer students the knowledge, skills, and values they will need to negotiate and transform the world in which they find themselves. The politics of critical literacy and cultural difference engages rather than retreats from those problems that make democracy messy, vibrant, and noisy.

Of course literacy and difference, when defined in these terms, appear dangerous to neoconservatives and others who believe that social criticism and social justice are inimical to both American education and the lived experience of democratic public life. This is precisely why educators cannot let the politics of literacy and difference be subordinated to comforting self-righteous appeals made in the name of a common culture or to the false equality of a pluralism devoid of the trappings of struggle, empowerment, and possibility. Our students do not deserve an education constrained by the smothering dictates of a monolithic and totalizing view of culture, literacy, and citizenship; they deserve an education that acknowledges its role in the preparation of critical political subjects, that prepares them to become agents capable of locating themselves in history while simultaneously shaping it.

A postmodern/postcolonial discourse of literacy and difference provides readers with diverse elements of a critical approach to literacy that ruptures universal versions of reason and linear notions of history; it points to margins as spaces that offer the opportunity for the voices to speak and to be heard. Within this perspective, literacy is not engulfed in a stifling regime of knowledge that refuses to recognize its own partiality, but in a view of uncertainty that makes dialogue and debate possible. At the same time, the call for literacies rather than literacy does more than displace regimes of certainty; it also, as Iain Chambers points out in a different context, "suggests an ecological frame in which the Other continues to simultaneously exist apart from us and yet be part of us in a shared responsibility for living in difference, for being responsible, just as we are for ourselves and the ethics that sustain such a relationship" (115). Chambers's statement of the issue points to a view of literacy that extends rather than cuts off the possibilities of acknowledging a world forged in differences that matter; it addresses the memories, traces, and voices of those who think and act in the struggle to extend human dignity. This is a pedagogy of literacy in which "differences are recognized, exchanged and mixed in identities that break down but are not lost, that connect but remain diverse" (Chambers 114). It is a literacy that both affirms and disrupts, committed to the radical responsibility of politics and ethics that inform the struggle for a better future.
WORKS CITED


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