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Critical Education

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Critical Pedagogy and Engaged Scholarship

Lessons from Africana Studies

REFLEXIVE ESSAY: *C. Wright Mills' rich concept of the sociological imagination places individual biography, history, and society in dialogue with an eye toward sparking creative analyses of important social issues. Here I use the construct of the sociological imagination as an organizing principle to revisit two different sites of Africana Studies that had an important influence on my intellectual activism. Both illustrate these relationships among my personal biography, the historical times in which I was doing intellectual work, and the specific social settings where I was located. In both social locations, I was neither blindly trying to change society nor dispassionately studying it. Rather, I was actively engaged in trying to foster social justice, using the power of ideas as my weapon of choice.*

MANY PEOPLE THINK of me primarily as a professor of sociology who teaches classes, writes books, and serves on endless faculty committees. Others view me as an accomplished scholar of Black feminism whose interdisciplinary work inspires their own. Still others have met me during my more than twenty years of service to the American Sociological Association. I suspect that many other points of view on who I am exist—a role

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I presented a working outline for the ideas for this essay during a symposium on my work at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society. A version of that conference presentation was published in 2012 as "Looking Back, Moving Ahead: Scholarship in Service to Social Justice." *Gender and Society* 26(1) February: 14–22.

model to junior colleagues whose work has followed in the footsteps of my work on Black feminism and intersectionality; a puzzle to my progressive white colleagues who wonder why I'm not as outspoken as they are; a straw woman to my African American colleagues who question my blackness; an African American woman whose intellect scares some people if I say what's really on my mind; or an anonymous, ordinary Black woman who can't get a good table in an upscale restaurant if she has left her business suit, attaché case, or expensive jewelry at home.

I am all of these things some of the time, but none of these things all of the time. The fluid nature of how others view me as well as how I see them has shaped the content and process of my intellectual production. My work reflects distinctive, competing, and often contradictory angles of vision that shift not only with physical and intellectual social locations but also as times change around me. While it has been tempting to simplify my intellectual travels into a homogeneous narrative to make the world more comfortable for me, my challenge has been to sustain a commitment to dialogical knowledge production, especially in situations of conflict. Stated differently, I consistently seek out connections among entities that seem disparate, resisting the temptation to synthesize things into a tidy story prematurely, yet also recognizing that a story needs to be told.

We can throw up our hands at the magnitude of the task of negotiating the complexities of our individual experiences and the viewpoints they engender, or we can embrace forms of engaged scholarship and critical pedagogy that reflect a commitment to intellectual activism. In this essay, I examine the relationship between critical pedagogy and engaged scholarship in my own work by revisiting two different phases of my career. My six-year engagement with the community schools movement in Boston, Massachusetts, and my twenty-three-year career as a professor in the African American Studies Department at the University of Cincinnati (now renamed the Africana Studies Department) each provided distinctive angles of vision on the meaning of intellectual activism.

Laying the Foundation: St. Joseph's Community School

I arrived at St. Joseph's School in 1970 to work as a middle school teacher, curriculum developer, and community organizer. At that time, the school was undergoing a transformation from a traditional parochial school to a community school. Operating both as a K–8 community school and a demonstration project of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education (HGSE), St. Joseph's aimed to forge new relationships with the working-class and poor African American residents of its surrounding neighborhood. Our students were homogeneous, but our staff was not. The school community included a heterogeneous group of teachers, parents, nuns, lay teachers, neighborhood volunteers, and HGSE doctoral students and faculty. If you wanted diversity, we had it. We faced the challenge of building a community across differences of race,

class, gender, age, region, education, religion, and ethnicity that would enable us to achieve excellence (sexuality was there, albeit still in the closet, but there nonetheless). Building a community across such differences was an uphill battle. We agreed on practically nothing except the need to do everything we could to teach, nurture, and empower the African American and/or poor children in our care.

We each brought our specific talents to the project of crafting a pedagogy that might provide the critical education that our students needed. I mined my education for both content that our students of African descent would find meaningful and skills of critical thinking that would enable them to put that content to good use. My goal was to encourage our students to think in far more expansive terms than memorizing factoids for standardized tests. The teachers, staff, and parents at St. Joseph's did not want to teach our students merely to fit into the system, although for reasons of survival, knowing how to fit in without selling out was essential. We knew that our students also needed to know how to analyze, critique, and change the systems of inequality that disempowered them. I saw my intellectual production as tethered to a broader commitment to intellectual activism whereby my engaged scholarship and critical pedagogy shaped one another.

I quickly realized that the critical thinking component of my formal education was first rate, whereas the content, especially concerning people of African descent, had tremendous holes. During my twelve years in the Philadelphia public schools, I had not taken one Black Studies course, mainly because such courses did not exist. Brandeis University did somewhat better. There I was able to enroll in all of the courses in the entire curriculum devoted to people of African descent. There were two courses, one on African Americans and one on Africa south of the Sahara (code for Black Africans, not the Arabs of Northern Africa). I enrolled in both. It became clear to me that I would have to take ownership of my own education if I wanted to learn about people of African descent. I majored in sociology because its emphasis on and progressive approach to race and racism came closest to my growing interest in studying Black people. By my junior year, I began writing papers that reflected my independent research on race, racism, and Black people. I am especially proud of a term paper that I wrote on Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that I recently discovered while going through some really old papers. I was also fortunate that the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray agreed to supervise my senior honors thesis on "Community Control of Schools." My senior honors thesis provided a conceptual foundation for my subsequent work that took me through my efforts in the community schools movement in the 1970s to my program theme, "The New Politics of Community," more than 30 years later, when I was elected president of the American Sociological Association. It also left me with a love for engaged scholarship.

Given my path in coming to terms with my own engaged scholarship, bringing this sensibility to my first full-time job as a seventh- and eighth-grade

classroom teacher felt right. I did not have the luxury of arriving with my fancy degree and untested ideas of how the world worked, expecting to share them with appreciative, complacent, docile students. My students were smart and feisty, with considerable street savvy that enabled them to overcome years of traditional parochial school training. They talked back, acted up, and acted out. They also had small biographical horizons—many had never been out of their Roxbury neighborhood to see downtown Boston or experience the wealth of cultural material in the greater metropolitan area. What we both needed was material that did not yet exist, questions that, to our knowledge, had not yet been asked.

To this day, I believe in testing ideas in the crucible of experience, and my classroom teaching at St. Joseph's Community School provided many such tests. In that setting, my engaged scholarship consisted of diligent research for my lesson plans. Responding to the historical and social context of the Black Power movement, I read everything I could on everything related to race and Black people, domestic and global. I was astounded at how much I found that, to this day, remains neglected within dominant curricular offerings. I had to teach myself before I could teach others, thus practicing the skill of creating new frameworks versus endlessly criticizing those advanced by others. Doing research with the understanding that I would have to talk to people about it almost immediately shaped how I viewed what I read and what I chose to make public. My adolescent students quickly told me when I missed the mark. Chaos in the classroom is no fun. But when I got it right, it was magical.

My engaged scholarship at St. Joseph's Community School focused on in-depth research in search of substantive ideas, whether they were written with my students in mind or not. While others in my cohort (who by then were in graduate school preparing to be professors) were reading *The Wretched of the Earth* in their graduate seminars and debating with each other, I was re-reading this book in the context of community politics, trying to figure out how to translate what was useful for my seventh- and eighth-grade students, their parents, and members of the St. Joseph's community. Because elite academics were not my intended audience, I neither published what I wrote nor saw my intellectual work as tethered to my own career trajectory. Unfettered by a scripted curriculum and undisciplined by an established field of study, I found that the intellectual freedom of this period enabled me to experience ideas and actions as iterative.

Although this was not the language that we used at the time, I can see how the ideal of social justice constituted a core principle at St. Joseph's Community School. This overarching idea enabled us to negotiate differences that ultimately enabled us to build an effective community. We did not approach our differences to erase them, because in the context of education as a site of political struggle, we knew that we needed everyone's contributions. Our view of excellence did not embrace an exclusionary politics of elitism, one where weak members are weeded out through competition, leaving the strong or excellent

behind. Instead, over time, the St. Joseph's community came to embrace an inclusionary vision of excellence, one that tried to bring the best ideas to the table to solve the problems at hand.

From our separate paths to St. Joseph's, we brought several social justice traditions that made different contributions to the collective project of building a community school. Drawing on the ethical frameworks of Catholicism, the nuns shared how poor people throughout the globe used liberation theology to challenge their subordination. From them we learned how vitally important taking principled stances is in struggles for social justice. What keeps people going in political struggles is principled commitment, not simply information.

Influenced by traditions of participatory democracy inspired by the works of John Dewey, as well as works on adult literacy and empowerment by Myles Horton at the Highlander Center and Paulo Freire in Brazil, the Harvard contingent brought critical pedagogical perspectives on social justice. From them we learned about freedom schools and the centrality of critical education to social justice struggles. Our school was not alone. Many others saw the significance of literacy for political empowerment. Our efforts were part of this broader social justice initiative.

I brought my own personal social justice perspective to St. Joseph's, one developed as a Brandeis University undergraduate. My sociological training exposed me to the work of exiled Jewish intellectuals, whose commitment to ensuring that the atrocities of the Holocaust would never be repeated (encapsulated in the phrase "never again") influenced my understanding of social justice. Reflecting continental philosophy, especially critical theory as advanced by the Frankfurt School, and Marxist social thought, my sociological training taught me much about the significance of engaged scholarship for social justice.

The parents, neighborhood volunteers, and the kids themselves were especially critical to the social justice mission of St. Joseph's Community School. Social movements for Civil Rights and Black Power, collectively referred to as the "Black Freedom Movement," reflected and encouraged a social justice ethos among African Americans, and the parents, neighbors, and kids themselves engaged the ideas of these movements from varying vantage points. Influenced by the social justice visions of political leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" served as a soundtrack for our especially political parents. The kids also drew ideas from popular culture. When I found a group of my eighth graders listening to the Last Poets' song "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" during recess, I knew that we had to speak to their issues. Claims for social justice embedded in the language of freedom now and Black Power shaped our students' sense of the world and ourselves in it. They drew inspiration from the commitment of these figures to remedy longstanding injustices rendered by racism and class exploitation.

These foundational experiences at St. Joseph's Community School have shaped my scholarship and teaching ever since. I never intended to be a college professor, yet the high bar that I set for myself in preparing lesson plans for

middle school students in a context where I had to engage multiple social justice traditions influenced my subsequent decision to become one as well as the kind of scholar and professor that I became. St. Joseph's enabled me to explore the connections between critical pedagogy and engaged scholarship, thus delaying for a decade the deadening "publish or perish" ethos of higher education. Instead, it put me on a different path of being a rigorous scholar and a public intellectual, with an eye toward social justice traditions. From the nuns who worked so tirelessly in community organizing, my elite colleagues from HGSE, my spirited middle school students, and a broader community of working-class, African American citizens thirsty for sophisticated yet accessible analyses of inequality, I learned that intellectual activism requires a synergy of thinking and doing, in this case, the dialogue between engaged scholarship and critical pedagogy.

Africana Studies and *Black Feminist Thought*

A few years back, a high school teacher in inner-city Baltimore sent me a link to a YouTube clip featuring one of his debate team participants. He thought that I would be interested in knowing how a young African American girl used my analysis of Black feminist epistemology to frame her arguments. After viewing her video, I was impressed. Seeing this young debater wield the ideas of Black feminism made my struggle to get *Black Feminist Thought* published worth it. Her intellectual activism helped validate my twenty-three years as a professor whose tenure line appointment was solely within the Africana Studies Department at the University of Cincinnati. Some people use their joint appointments to dabble in Black Studies, retreating to their home departments when the going gets rough. With my tenure line solely in Black Studies, I didn't have that option.

Intellectual freedom is a wonderful thing, but you have to fight for it. In the 1980s and 1990s, Africana Studies was a difficult space to be, primarily because universities devalued these units. Black Studies remained chronically underfunded and largely disrespected. Despite the challenges of being a professor *within* a Black Studies unit with no graduate program, I chose to stay because, in several ways, I understood my involvement in Africana Studies as an extension of the kind of engaged scholarship that I began at St. Joseph's Community School. I loved the students that I taught at the University of Cincinnati. I felt at home with them, not only because they reminded me so much of my St. Joseph's students but also because their issues closely resembled my own. They were trying to better their lives and saw school as an important part of their hoped-for upward social mobility. Many sacrificed to attend college, working jobs that supplemented their student loans and substituted for the scholarships they never received. The vast majority of my students, including my white students, were from working-class backgrounds, and many were the first in their

family to attend college. Africana Studies courses also enrolled a high percentage of African American students, and the majority of those students were women, populations with whom I have a special affiliation.

I also valued the pedagogical freedom that I had in Africana Studies in developing my individual courses as well as the overall curriculum. Our ongoing struggles to ensure our right to exist at all repeatedly reminded us of how politics shape the social construction of knowledge. As a unit, we were not examining "race" and "racism" exclusively as abstractions. Instead, the Africana Studies curriculum had palpable ties to African American politics as well as scholarly knowledge of the academy. As at St. Joseph's, my time in Africana Studies provided a vehicle for what I now call a "contrapuntal reading" between everyday lived experiences and scholarship that seemingly explains those experiences. Despite the difficulties of remaining in a devalued academic unit, that same unit provided me with the freedom to fuse engaged scholarship with critical pedagogy. Stated differently, building the Africana Studies Department was a site of community organizing, a direct descendent of the hard work that we did at St. Joseph's Community School. Both sites were devoted to building vibrant intellectual communities that served their respective populations.

When it came to questions of gender and/or sexuality, there were some significant differences between St. Joseph's Community School and the Department of Africana Studies. In the 1980s and 1990s, Africana Studies was a friendlier place for Black women than the rest of the academy, but only if we accepted second-class citizenship within the department. At that time, paradigms of Afrocentrism held sway in ways that routinely relegated Black women to second-class citizenship. One way that Africana Studies fended off external assaults from the academy that questioned its very right to exist was to embrace patriarchal Afrocentric frameworks. These frameworks routinely elevated the needs of Black men over those of Black women. Because I came from traditions of strong Black female leadership, such as that at St. Joseph's School, I found the patriarchal norms of Africana Studies confining. At the same time, it was clear to me that even the most sexist Black man in Africana Studies cared far more about the welfare of Black people than did my academic colleagues outside the department. If I really cared about gender, I needed to stay in Africana Studies.

In hindsight, I now see how my years within Africana Studies at the University of Cincinnati constituted a rich, albeit often painful, influence on my intellectual activism. My undergraduate teaching not only provided intellectual freedom for me and my students but also helped shape the distinguishing themes and main arguments of *Black Feminist Thought*. For example, my course "Contemporary Black Women" served as a vehicle for a dialogical knowledge project on Black feminism. Each time I taught this course, I revised it and eventually used my syllabus as the table of contents for the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought*. When it came to selecting the book's title, my students taught me about the politics of naming. I knew that a book titled *Black Feminist Thought*

would be more marketable than one titled *Contemporary Black Women* or *Black Womanism*. Yet, when it came to African American women and their perceptions of Black feminism, I faced an uphill battle. My students flatly rejected the term "feminism." In their minds, feminism was for white women, but not for them. I grappled with that issue throughout the course by teaching the main ideas of Black feminism, yet without the use of the term "feminism." Imagine my students' surprise at the end of the course when I told them that our course was an extended exploration of the main ideas of Black feminism. They loved the material when they didn't know it was called "Black feminism." I concluded the course with the question, "Who benefits from your rejection of the term 'feminism'? Who benefits when you claim Black feminism and its main ideas?"

Critical pedagogy within Africana Studies also enabled me to explore the significance of standpoint epistemology. For example, my students in the "Contemporary Black Women" course pushed me to see how my earlier understanding of situated standpoints as an *individual* concern was too narrow. Situated standpoints were also *collectively* constructed angles of vision on the world that often drew on alternative epistemological criteria (standards for assessing truth). The revelation came in class one day when, for unknown reasons, the white students skipped class, thereby creating a class composed entirely of Black women. The entire classroom atmosphere changed. Everyone seemed more relaxed, including me. We were scheduled to discuss an article by a prominent sociologist on African American love relationships. My students had no interest in delving into the reading—they wanted to know about the author. "Was he a Black man?" "Did he have a white girlfriend?" "Was he married?" Not only the atmosphere of the class, but also the very rules of class itself had changed. Initially, I was frustrated by my students' seeming lack of scholarly engagement with his arguments. But then I realized that these Black women were using an alternative epistemology, one grounded in knowing who produced knowledge and how that person's social location might shape his or her analyses. In that setting, they rejected dominant classroom norms of uncritically accepting ostensibly objective scholarship by academics whose God's eye on the world legitimate the truths they see. Instead, these Black women refused to read knowledge projects outside of power relations, reminding me of the iterative nature of knowledge and the power relations that produce it for people seeking social justice.

At the same time, I wondered how I could continue to challenge my students to move outside of their comfort zones without putting myself in a similar situation. If I planned on developing Black feminism as foundational to my intellectual work, I needed to engage Women's Studies and the feminist politics it advanced. In the 1980s, Women's Studies programs were overwhelmingly white and lacked today's diversity, primarily because racial segregation was prominent in U.S. society overall. As someone who believed passionately in Black feminism, I felt hemmed in by the kinds of questions that racially segregated

Women's Studies units pursued. I was tired of being asked, "How can black and white women get along?" This was an important question for white women, but it was not my top priority. Furthermore, I wondered, if I managed to develop Black feminist analyses within patriarchal Black Studies settings, without the help of white women, why were they seemingly so in need of my help in bringing a hard-hitting racial analysis to feminist theory and politics?

By the 1990s, things were changing, and for the better. Women's Studies students became increasingly diverse, a shift that facilitated my decision to teach graduate courses for the Women's Studies program at the University of Cincinnati. I'm glad that I did. Beyond giving me the opportunity to work with some terrific students, the Women's Studies program enabled me to develop further my foundational ideas about intersectionality. I developed three graduate courses: "Race, Gender and Class"; "Race, Gender and Nation"; and "Race, Gender and Sexuality." These courses were vital in giving me the intellectual space to develop an analysis of intersectionality that, while generated by my experiences in Africana Studies, catalyzed an important intellectual and political foundation for my subsequent scholarship.

These classroom and pedagogical experiences from both my Africana Studies and Women's Studies classes were vital to several of my books, from the content of each volume to the processes I used in writing them. For example, standpoint epistemology is an important theme in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), one that I further develop in *Fighting Words* (1998). The intersectional analysis advanced in *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism* (2006) stems directly from both my Women's Studies graduate seminars and my undergraduate teaching. Two sections of *From Black Power to Hip Hop* contain essays where I analyze the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality that emerged from my position as an "outsider within" Africana Studies and Women's Studies at the University of Cincinnati. For *Black Sexual Politics* (2005), I placed the ideas from my graduate Women's Studies seminar on "Race, Gender and Sexuality" in dialogue with my undergraduate course "Introduction to Black Sexual Politics." *Black Sexual Politics* constitutes the culmination of strategies of dialogical knowledge production from the critical pedagogy that I pursued.

I am convinced that my subsequent work on intersectionality was enhanced by the challenges of making intersectional arguments about Black feminism intelligible within Black Studies settings as well as within Women's Studies. I see my focus on analyzing how race, class, gender, nation, age, ethnicity, and sexuality mutually construct one another as unjust systems of power, as well as my choices to analyze intersectionality as a knowledge project that is embedded in power relations, as reflections of my years at the University of Cincinnati. In sum, the social location of where we engage in our intellectual activism shapes the characteristic themes in our work, the perspectives we take, and what we believe counts as legitimate knowledge.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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12

Teaching for a Change

Critical Pedagogy and Classroom Communities

REFLEXIVE ESSAY: *When it comes to helping people who are on the bottom empower themselves, oral truth-telling, or telling the truth of their own experiences, constitutes an important part of intellectual activism. In* Fighting Words, *I wanted to unsettle assumptions that knowledge is a top-down creation. This essay explores ideas from a series of talks that I delivered in the mid-1990s, when I was working through these ideas. This essay illustrates how the critical pedagogy gained from my teaching, in this case, an experience with inner city second-grade students, can serve to guide more complex theoretical arguments. This essay also shows how critical pedagogy and scholarship in service to social justice are interconnected, both providing a foundation for intellectual activism.*

IN *FIGHTING WORDS,* I describe an experience that I had as a classroom teacher in the community schools movement. I include the following detailed passage taken from the "Introduction" because the experience it describes shaped my subsequent understandings of both critical pedagogy and the multi-layered significance of community.

> In the early 1970s, I was assigned to teach a curriculum unit entitled "The Community" to a class of African American second graders. The community in my students' textbook consisted of single-family homes nestled in plush, green grass, populated by all sorts of friendly white people they had never met and probably would never meet. Sentences such as "Let's visit our men at the firehouse," "Cross only at the corner," and "The policeman is your friend" peppered the text, all designed to

reassure my second graders that children are loved, cared for, and safe in their communities.

My students lived in quite a different community, however. Most resided in a nearby, racially segregated public housing project. Their neighborhood experienced all of the social problems that typically accompany poverty and political powerlessness. As I read to them from the pages of their text and saw their blank, bored, and occasionally angry expressions, I realized that I was lying to them. Worse yet, we all knew that the book and I were lying. So I asked them to tell me about their community as they experienced it. One little boy tentatively raised his hand. To my shock, he shared a story of how, because the housing commission had left the doors open, his best friend had fallen down an elevator chute the day before. His friend had been killed.

At that moment, I faced an important choice. I could teach the status quo, or I could teach for a change. I could not see how I could lie to my students, no matter how pure my intentions to "prepare them for the third-grade entrance test on community vocabulary." So we closed those texts full of smiling, affluent white people and began to talk.

At first, my class could not quite believe that I wanted to hear from them. Despite their young age, so many had been silenced by classroom practices that rewarded their obedience and punished their curiosity that they were justifiably afraid to question the public transcript known as their curriculum. They kept their own oppositional knowledge hidden, relegating it to discussions on the playgrounds, on the streets, and in the privacy of their apartments. But because they were still young, they were able to come to voice much easier than those of us who have endured years of such silencing. With minimal prompting, they shared their feelings about the horror of their friend's death, especially their sense of vulnerability that something similar might happen to them. In some cases, they exploded, sharing deep-seated anger.

Through dialogue, these children began to develop the voice so typical of any relatively powerless, outsider group that begins to frame its own self-defined standpoint in hierarchical power relations of race, class, gender, and in their case, age. Some blamed the victim, claiming "he had no business being near that elevator anyhow." Others condemned his mother for being at work while it happened. "Why couldn't she stay home like she was supposed to?" one little girl queried. Still others wanted to "tell somebody" that something was wrong with the way that people in their community were treated. One little girl summed it up, saying, "It's just not fair, Miss Hill. It's just not fair." (*Fighting Words*, ix–x)

For me, this incident marked the day when I realized how important teaching for a change can be. Educational reform often begins by revising existing bodies of knowledge within academic journals, scholarly books, textbooks, and

teaching materials. Other reform efforts place faith in retraining teachers to do a better job of accomplishing the predetermined mission of schools by revising their existing syllabi or incorporating technology into the classroom. These efforts are certainly of value, yet they merely scratch the surface.

Teaching for a change involves more than this. If we centered classroom practices on empowering both students and teachers who are disempowered by systems of social inequality, how might classrooms be different? The list of people who occupy positions that simultaneously privilege and penalize them within race, class, gender, and sexuality as intersecting systems of oppression is much longer than we might think. African American women and men, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, white women, working-class and poor people, gays and lesbians, bisexuals, the very young and the very old, the physically challenged, and progressive and conservative white men all have some degree of privilege and penalty. What forms of critical pedagogy might work to address their needs?

I see two areas where we must teach for a change. The first involves developing a critical consciousness in our students and ourselves about these social conditions. The struggle for critical consciousness starts from the premise that to be other than what is defined as natural, normal, and ideal by dominant curriculum offerings and classroom practices is perfectly acceptable. Each individual struggles to create an honest self. Such identities can never be finished. Instead, as lifelong endeavors, they require skills of critical thinking, dialogical engagement, and empathy. For educators, doing this kind of work involves recognizing that not only our students but also we ourselves have been differentially privileged and penalized within intersecting systems of oppression. For teachers and students alike, the struggle for self-definition means developing a critical posture on what we have been taught about ourselves and others.

Although necessary, critical pedagogy aimed at critical consciousness is far from sufficient. Teaching for a change involves struggling for institutional transformation so that we leave the social institutions that educated us better than we found them. Thus, the struggle for self-definition must be joined to the struggle for institutional transformation of classroom communities. My second-grade students needed to develop a critical analysis of the failures within their own community that led to the death of their classmate. Yet they also needed the tools to envision a more socially just community as well as a skill set that might move the communities they build for their children closer to this valued social ideal.

Critical Consciousness and Classroom Communities

More than twenty years ago, I published an article titled "Learning to Think for Ourselves: Malcolm X's Black Nationalism Reconsidered." I opened that piece with the following excerpt taken from the transcript of a conversation that Malcolm X had with Black youth. His response gets at the heart of critical

consciousness: "One of the first things I think young people, especially nowadays, should learn is how to see for yourself and listen for yourself and think for yourself . . . this generation, especially of our people, has a burden, more so than any other time in history. The most important thing that we can learn to do today is think for ourselves" (59). On my first reading, I found his answer puzzling. Malcolm X was a brilliant Black intellectual, yet he refused to tell young people what they should think.

Learning to think for themselves is equally needed by the second graders I taught decades ago and the students enrolled in my graduate courses on social theory. Thinking for ourselves is virtually impossible if we do not understand how we are situated in the social world. Developing a critical consciousness involves coming to see how our individual biographies are shaped by and act on our specific historical and social contexts. These individual biographies in turn provide the foundation for understanding distinctive group histories that grow from power differences of privilege and penalty.

Members of oppressed groups have special need of critical consciousness, because social institutions have routinely worked against their developing it. Developing habits of questioning social injustices maladapts people on the bottom to stay there. This issue framed the first class I ever taught on African American women, a class consisting of junior high school girls attending an inner-city school in Boston, Massachusetts. In one class assignment, I asked my students to think about anything associated with the words "black" and "white." When we shared our lists, they began to see the magnitude of the negative associations with blackness and darkness that pervade Western culture. Nothing on the list was new or unfamiliar. These students *knew* that black cats brought bad luck, villains in Westerns wore black hats, and black was the color of mourning at funerals. They *knew* that whiteness symbolized purity, goodness, light, and virginity. They *knew* that they were "black." Yet, despite this experiential knowledge, they had not yet learned to think for themselves about these widespread racial meanings. Their knowledge remained subjugated, suppressed, and scattered. The classroom exercise was designed to make this knowledge explicit and self-defined.

In developing a critical consciousness, my middle school students resisted separating reason from emotion, thought from feeling, and feelings from actions. Just as they examined their experiences in holistic ways, the process of developing a critical consciousness took a similarly holistic form. When they saw the negative patterns and associations with the term "black" and realized that they were Black, they began to talk from the heart. It was this talking from the heart—expressing the pain, the anger, the energy, the criticism of adults who had knowingly and/or inadvertently taught them to feel this way about themselves and each other—that was the first step along their path of identity politics.

It is empowering to reject interpretations of one's own experiences that serve the interests of other groups and empowering to claim those that serve our

own. Gaining this clarity fosters a confidence in Black women or any oppressed group about larger institutional contexts in which we reside. Without the foundation of a critical consciousness, subordinated groups continue to view their experiences through the framework of the dominant group. "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," contends Audre Lorde. "They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."

Developing a critical consciousness can position individuals and groups to challenge social injustices. Learning to think for oneself often leads to action. In speaking out about the necessity of addressing social problems that face African American communities, Hadiyah Rashid, a student in my classes, succinctly put it, "We must be bold." Black feminist thought and similar forms of self-defined knowledge can empower members of subordinated groups to "be bold" enough to question social injustice and demand change. Such knowledge is central both in reforming dominant curriculum offerings and classroom practices and in developing alternatives to them.

Learning to think for oneself can foster a paradigm shift, an unsettling recognition that the world is not as one believed it to be. The facts no longer fit what one held to be true. This dynamic space of being unsettled creates space for seeing and creating alternative truths. Black feminist thought and similar knowledge created by people on the bottom often read like a breath of fresh air to people who are searching for new truths when the old certainties no longer deliver.

Classroom communities that aim to teach students *how* to think, not *what* to think, can be vitally important in this move toward critical consciousness. Just as Malcolm X refused to deliver a lecture on his principles of Black nationalism to Black youth, teaching for a change means teaching people to think for themselves. It is exciting to help students grow in their ability to craft their own self-defined standpoints on their worlds.

Such clarity often takes surprisingly little to accomplish. I once asked a sixth-grade class of African American students to listen carefully to a twenty-minute lecture on American history. I told them that I was going to tell them three "lies." Their task was to raise their hands when they thought they heard a lie. At first they protested, "Miss Hill, this is silly. We know you wouldn't lie to us!" Thinking of my second graders, I responded, "People lie all the time, even when they love you and have the best of intentions." So they listened and raised their hands, sometimes in unison, sometimes in small groups, and sometimes in solitary dissent. Whenever even one hand went up, I stopped the lecture and we discussed the patterns of hand-raising. Why did some people think the fact in question was a lie, while others trusted its credibility? This exercise made the process of knowledge legitimation visible. Someone had decided what counted as truth and what would be dismissed as a lie. This was a very different kind of classroom practice than the standard pedagogy of requiring students to listen passively and write down nuggets of truth we call "notes." My students were

being encouraged to listen analytically and to use their own experiences as a starting point for critiquing classroom knowledge. Importantly, this exercise helped each individual and also showed the importance of collaboration in figuring out the lies.

Living one's life as a person on the bottom involves listening for lies all the time. The challenge lies in thinking critically about race, class, gender, and sexuality without driving yourself and your loved ones crazy. When oppressed groups embrace their own experiences to challenge dominant curricular offerings and classroom practices, they create space for their own self-defined view of the world.

Institutional Transformation and Classroom Communities

Whatever the group, whether my second graders' point of view on their community or Black feminist thought created by African American women, developing a critical consciousness inevitably confronts structural barriers that limit what is possible under existing power relations. Critical pedagogy can aim to stay at the level of curriculum reform, yet developing and fully engaging the self-defined standpoints of the less powerful involves institutional transformation. As James Baldwin points out, one of the problems of education is that "precisely at the point when you begin to develop a conscience, you must find yourself at war with your society. It is your responsibility to change society, if you think of yourself as an educated person."

Being at war with society means seeing the small and large ways that institutions foster social injustice, and working for transformation involves thinking through how institutional transformation might occur. When it comes to education, the lion's share of attention has gone to curriculum transformation projects. Yet, because transformation projects aim to change idea structures and not decision-making institutional structures, these efforts remain partial. At best, curriculum transformation projects believe that rewriting the curriculum will foster different behaviors in learners. At worst, such efforts believe that adding information without changing the paradigms themselves will be sufficient. Neither approach goes far enough. Institutions change when people change both knowledge and power structures from the actual social locations where they find themselves. Because classrooms are currently the bedrock of educational institutions, changing classroom practices becomes an essential part of institutional transformation. I see institutional transformation not solely as a top-down series of reforms initiated by elites but also as a bottom-up, grassroots community organizing endeavor, one classroom at a time.

Rather than bemoaning the fact that we do not teach in ideal multicultural, economically diverse classrooms where the students are well mannered, get along, and learned to read when they were three, we might imagine possibilities in the classrooms as they actually exist. Teachers matter. The materials and

texts that we use are less important than how we use those materials. If it's not too dangerous, the school itself can become the material that we study. The possibilities for learning to think for ourselves are as infinite as the situations that we encounter in our daily lives. Yet we are simultaneously constrained in teaching for a change by the established organization of educational institutions. Race, class, and gender shape preschools and graduate programs alike. Schooling in the United States reflects the segregation of race and class in the United States, with layers of gender and sexual segregation encapsulated within.

Working in Segregated Classroom Communities

In an ideal world, we would all participate in heterogeneous, multiethnic communities where people could struggle directly with one another to develop a critical consciousness on their own experiences and those of others. Yet the structures of segregation that shape society overall also structure the kinds of classrooms in which we find ourselves. Homogeneous classrooms of wealthy white students in prestigious liberal arts colleges and working-class Black students in two-year community colleges reflect the institutional policies of race and class segregation. What are some of the constraints and possibilities for critical pedagogy within homogeneous classrooms?

Homogeneous classrooms predominantly, if not exclusively, composed of poor white students, or female students, or Chicano/Chicana students, or wealthy African American students can become effective sites for institutional transformation. Just as survivors of domestic violence benefit from support groups where they can talk with each other, so do groups of people experiencing any form of domination. Imagine how difficult it would be to develop a critical consciousness on your own victimization as a survivor of sexual assault if your support group contained individuals who, through no fault of their own, resembled your abusers, or worse yet, were themselves rapists. Despite their significance, homogeneous groups functioning to support their members were never meant to be a way of life. Their intent is to assist people in articulating a critical consciousness in spaces of safety. Groups that separate themselves to develop a critical consciousness on the world differ from those that separate to retreat from the world.

The patterns of student dialogue varied when I taught classes where African American students were the clear majority. Black students tend to raise issues in classes where they feel empowered that rarely surface in racially heterogeneous classrooms. African American students wanted to discuss how they could better their neighborhoods. For many of them, their daily lives were spent grappling with the myriad expressions of everyday racism—my African American male students were routinely stopped by the police for no apparent reason, my African American female students were routinely followed around stores as potential shoplifters, and because the large majority were from working-class backgrounds, they all struggled with chronic financial worries about how to pay for school. Given these everyday realities, African American students did

not want to spend their time convincing white students that racism was real or helping white students better understand how it felt to be "black."

White students have a different challenge. Their experience is also one of racial segregation, typically with considerable class segregation as well. Yet they do not see spaces where they are in the clear majority as racialized spaces. For white students, such spaces are not racially marked until a student of color enters the space and "brings" race with him or her. Colleagues have asked me how they can teach about race when they only have one or two Black students in their classes. They assume that it is the responsibility of African American students to educate whites about racism or that Black people possess the "experiences" that will sensitize whites. My reply is that such educators begin to think creatively about how to use racially homogeneous spaces differently.

Like support groups, racially homogeneous spaces can become safe spaces for white students to get on with the task of developing a critical consciousness toward whiteness. Many white students feel that only people of color have "race," and that they themselves somehow stand outside of the racial order as "individuals" or just human beings. This is a perfectly reasonable thing to believe, given that white students have come of age in a context of colorblindness where many believed that to speak of race was to *be* racist. These students need a new model of how to talk about race that takes race into account and challenges racism.

Early-twenty-first-century scholarship on whiteness should be very helpful in developing critical pedagogy for overwhelmingly white classrooms. For example, Mark Warren's book *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice* is a must-read volume for white students who are grappling with contemporary racial politics. Classrooms can provide safe space for students to engage Warren's ideas. We may not like some of these ideas because they may make us feel uncomfortable or guilty. But since so many white students are already in racially segregated classrooms, we must make them aware of how they got to that classroom and how they might get to another type of classroom that contains people who don't all look like them.

Working in Diverse Classroom Communities

Because knowledge results from collaboration between teachers and students, classroom communities are dynamic political spaces where this knowledge production continually happens. Given the significance of classrooms, what actually happens when diverse classrooms become organized around critical pedagogies that encourage critical consciousness? Unlike homogeneous classrooms where teachers help students see existing diversity that may be hidden, diverse classrooms may be where people encounter diversity for the first time.

Teachers are not merely technicians who can be trained to implement someone else's ideas and theories. Classrooms organized around a critical pedagogy do not resemble the metaphor of the symphony, one where every instrument

has a scripted part, where there is a clear hierarchy of first violin, second violin, and the like, and where a conductor is needed to "keep order." In this model, individual players are interchangeable in and out of predetermined social positions. While this model of classroom community can produce beautiful music by one set of aesthetic standards, it is predictable, leaving little room for human creativity and improvisation.

Ideally, teachers and students in classroom communities might all strive to become more like jazz combo facilitators. In such groups, the goal is to get all instruments to come to voice, to sing their own songs, but to do so in dialogue with each other. There are clear differences between the instruments—the drums could drown out the saxophone if the standard of who can talk the loudest were the standard of participation—but the goal of the facilitator is to ensure that balance is maintained, that ethical turn-taking occurs. The goal is not cacophony of sound or anarchy of political practice. Allowing for individual difference does not necessarily degenerate into blind relativity, meaninglessness, and loss of community. Instead, one hears a different kind of music (or knowledge), ever changing, full of surprises, and much more adept at responding to the everyday needs of the people playing the instruments.

What will be required for developing such classrooms? How do we develop classroom communities that are organized around democratic processes? Ideally, for the struggle for institutional transformation, we each need to see the partiality of our own individual and group experiences. No one group possesses an objective view of constructs, such as community, or paradigms for interpreting human experience, such as positivist science or postmodernism, or epistemologies for deciding what will count as knowledge. No matter how much sense they may make to us as individuals, the constructs, paradigms, and epistemologies we develop that emerge solely from our own experiences necessarily remain partial.

Because classroom communities put people in touch with one another in actual time and space, and through the materials that community members bring to the space from other times and places, classroom communities contain the potential to negotiate this partiality of experiences. For example, I love African American women's fiction for what it tells me about my own experiences. Yet I limit myself when I concentrate exclusively on my own group. Moreover, how I engage other groups is crucial—I do not aim to recast their experiences into a preconceived notion of the world that has been developed solely using my own experiences. This is how dominant knowledge works. Mimicking this process only replicates its worst features.

Reading fiction by women of color gives me a sense of the types of connections that exist between African American women and other historically marginalized groups. But it also gives me a sense of how Black feminist thought provides a partial perspective. For example, Amy Tan's path-breaking book on Chinese and Chinese American women, *The Joy Luck Club*, resonates with themes that pervade the work of Black women writers: mother/daughter

relationships, domestic violence, racial/ethnic identity, generational differences, and the constraints and contributions of culture. But in reading Tan, I realize how she is differently positioned than I am in discussing these issues. I read her works because I want to hear her point of view, I want to develop empathy for Chinese and Chinese American experiences, I want to develop interpretive communities that can sustain multiple points of view. I read her novel neither to study uncritically at the feet of a putative expert on motherhood nor to prove her view of motherhood wrong and mine right. To me, we each have a partial point of view that stems from the specificity of our experiences. We need each other's partiality to make more sense of our own.

Empathy constitutes an important skill within critical pedagogy. We can't remake another group's experience by collapsing it into our own, but we can use our own experience to imagine what that group experiences, thinks, and feels. Developing a critical consciousness on one's own experiences is a vital first step, with this self-knowledge becoming the basis for imagining a comparable human experience for other groups. Empathy enables us to identify points of similarity and divergence between the aspirations of our own group and those of other groups, to engage in dialogues with other groups, and to enter into workable coalitions.

Grounding classroom communities in critical pedagogy potentially leads to alternative epistemologies, or ways of knowing, that legitimate what counts as knowledge. Those ideas that are validated as true by African American women, African American men, Latina lesbians, Asian American women, Puerto Rican men, and other groups with distinctive standpoints become the most "objective" truths. Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. Yet, because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' experiences without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives. "What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life," maintains Alice Walker, "is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity." Partiality, not universality, is the condition of being heard.

Why Teach for a Change?

Classroom communities that are grounded in a critical pedagogy are vitally important for social justice projects. The knowledge that emerges from classroom communities may create more useful constructs, paradigms, and epistemologies than those offered in the dominant curriculum. Moreover, the processes used to arrive at that knowledge may be equally, if not more, important.

My second graders had an angle of vision concerning the meaning of *community* that grew from their lived experience. Many middle-class white children

and increasingly children of color may also live in communities that resemble the version of community in my second graders' text; many do not. There are so many other variations on community in the United States that resemble neither my students' realities nor the lives of white middle-class children idealized in the texts. How do homeless children living in the parks of Berkeley, California, experience community? What's the meaning of the term to the children of undocumented Asian and Mexican immigrants? How do the Haitian children incarcerated in Florida camps awaiting a judgment on their bid for asylum feel about the term "community"? Poor white kids are conspicuously missing in debates about community services. How do middle-class white children really feel about growing up in these idealized communities? Is this how they see their world, or does this perspective represent the beliefs of the adult textbook writer? The community life of American children is deeply textured and different. Moreover, if these children do not readily encounter each other in their second-grade classrooms, they may later on in high school, college, or the workplace. Shouldn't these individuals collectively be allowed to redefine the meaning of the construct "community" so that it reflects the differences of their multiple realities?

Content matters, yet an even more significant benefit stemming from teaching for change is that everyone in the classroom actively creates knowledge rather than passively receives it. My second graders needed to know much more about their community than how the rules of the game worked. They needed skills that would equip them to change those rules. When we create vibrant classroom communities, we each know that we are not alone in this quest.

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13

Another Kind of Public Education

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REFLEXIVE ESSAY: *From its inception, I envisioned* On Intellectual Activism *and* Another Kind of Public Education *as complementary volumes of public sociology. Together, they are expressions of intellectual activism aiming to speak to a general public. I include the preface from* Another Kind of Public Education *because it provides a succinct statement of how my analysis of critical education in that book constitutes extensions of core themes of Black feminism that I present in Part I of* On Intellectual Activism. *The ideas in these companion books reappear across many of my publications.*

ON AUGUST 28, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech to an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 people who were gathered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. One line stands out: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Some would say that the outcome of the 2008 U.S. presidential election has been either the realization of King's dream or evidence of its failure. We can speculate endlessly about how and why Barack Obama won and John McCain lost, but this may not be the best use of our time. For the United States and the globe, too much is at stake to concentrate too closely on winners and losers.

Quite frankly, no one wins and everyone loses if the social issues that face growing numbers of the world's population are not given serious thought. We know the list—environmental degradation, illiteracy, poverty, HIV/AIDS, a global fiscal crisis, hopelessness, and violence in all its forms require critical analysis coupled with new action strategies. Everyone loses if we continue to

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think of the world's population itself as divided into winners and losers. Who wins, for example, if the children and youth of the world lose?

This framework of winners and losers is unlikely to shed light on the complex issues of our times. In this context, political parties or any other group that claims to have quick and easy solutions may itself be part of the problem. When times are tough, people look to leaders to give them hope and tell them what to do. It is seductive to see our most cherished leaders as responsible for solving problems—vesting them with authority enables us to praise or blame them for the answers they propose. Yet the more sobering realization is that they can only lead us where we are willing to go. We must learn to think for ourselves as individuals and also to act collectively. We are each unique, yet each of us is also part of something bigger.

I think that the United States is at a turning point in its history and that it should look to the lessons of world history for guidance. Blind faith in strong leaders has gotten many groups of people into trouble. In countries where a small group seizes power and imposes its will on an unwilling populace, we recognize that shift of power as an illegitimate coup. But we are less skilled at seeing how individuals and groups manipulate structures of power for their own ends, often within legitimate structures of government. For example, the National Socialist German Worker's Party was elected to office in Germany in 1933. There was no palace coup—the Nazis did not seize power. Instead, a legitimate democratic election bought them to power, and once in office, they so quickly changed the rules of the game that they eviscerated the meaning of democracy. There are numerous cautionary tales such as this, of how democratic power was wrested from an unwilling public, or worse yet, willingly relinquished by a public that confused its own interests with those of its elected officials. In democratic societies, people who passively follow the rules and uncritically obey their leaders open up their countries to undemocratic outcomes. Unquestioned obedience may be the best way to run an army, but it can be the death knell for democracy if a citizenry chooses this path.

The United States prides itself on being one of the greatest democracies of all time and calls on each individual citizen to defend democracy from its enemies. The enemy, however, is not the historically imagined enemy of brown or black youth, more often depicted as America's problem than as its promise. The enemy is not the nameless, faceless, yet ethnically imagined terrorist that we have been encouraged to fear in the post-9/11 environment. Rather, the greater enemy to American democracy is more likely to be an uninformed and uncritical American public that can be manipulated by soothing political slogans, feel-good photo ops, and an endless round of holiday sales.

What the United States needs is another kind of public education, one that encourages us to become an involved, informed public. What this country needs is a recommitment to schools and other social institutions whose mandate lies in delivering the kind of public education that will equip us for this task. We miseducate the public and students when we dumb down big ideas

and shy away from politics. We do not need a public that stands on the sidelines, cheering on political candidates as if they were heavyweight contestants in boxing matches, or a public that passively listens to political commentary with an ear attuned to the latest put-down. Voting, for example, is more serious than calling in one's opinion to *American Idol*, or text messaging one's fan favorite to *America's Next Top Model*.

In *Another Kind of Public Education: Race, Schools, the Media and Democratic Possibilities*, I argue for another kind of education that better prepares the American public for democratic action in our contemporary social and political context. Two core questions shape this entire project: First, what kind of critical education might the American public need to envision new democratic possibilities? Second, what changes can we envision in schools and other important social institutions that might provide this critical education? Because these questions can never be answered in any one book, here, I focus my discussion on four important themes.

First, I emphasize the persisting effects of race in a seemingly colorblind society. Because of its history, race has been tightly bundled with the social issues of education and equity in the U.S. context. Moreover, in the current seemingly colorblind context, where the next generation of Americans is increasingly of color, the United States must find a way to build a democratic national community with an increasingly heterogeneous population. Rather than equating excellence with elitism—the posture that encourages keeping people out—we might define excellence as being compatible with diversity. Only with a range of points of view involved in the democratic process will the United States get the kind of innovation that it needs. I posit that grappling with this deeply entrenched challenge to U.S. democracy should yield provocative ideas and new directions for dismantling similar social inequalities.

Second, I focus on schools as one important site where these challenges are negotiated. Because public schools in America are vested with the responsibility of preparing each generation of new citizens, schools are inherently political. I also focus on pedagogy as a crucial component of democratic practice. Teachers have vitally important jobs, not simply delivering skills for jobs or acting as simple conduits for information. Rather, teachers are front-line actors in negotiating the social issues of our time. Teachers are the ones who black and brown youth turn to for guidance for upward social mobility. Teachers can be facilitators or gatekeepers of this fundamental democratic ideal.

Third, I focus on the media. If you define public education as what public institutions teach us about our place in the world, schools are by no means the only institutions educating young people and the broader public. In this book, I would like you to watch out for how kids get another kind of public education beyond school-based learning from the media. Whether we like it or not, for youth, the media provide an education that often contradicts and supplants school-based learning. New technologies are the currency of youth, and a criti-

cal education requires media literacy that prepares youth to be critical consumers of media as well as cultural creators.

Fourth, I speak to and about youth. When I think about the American public, I envision a heterogeneous population of youth characterized by vast differences in wealth, religion, appearance, sexual orientation, gender, linguistic competencies, immigrant status, ability level, ethnicity, and race. Some are in schools, some are not, and all are trying to figure out their place within American democratic institutions. I see the talent and potential of this heterogeneous population as crucial for American democracy. Yet I also see tremendous differences in opportunities that are offered to youth. In this context, just as school is inherently political, so is this youth population.

As young adults in early-twenty-first-century America, youth see the challenges that face them—a deep-seated worry about the uncertain future that awaits them in such volatile times; a growing disenchantment with the seeming inability of the United States to provide equal opportunities to a sizable proportion of its youth of color; their impatience with parents, teachers, clergy, and others who struggle with the rapid technological shifts that brought the wonders of the Internet and cell phones. But mostly, the politically savvy among them see the significance of themselves as the next generation of leaders.

Youth will not be following us. Rather, we will be following them. I want them to be prepared to lead me in directions that eschew complacency and put some genuinely new ideas on the table. I do not want to follow them down a path of hopelessness, but rather look to them to envision and take action toward new possibilities that I could not consider in my life. Therein lies the critical significance of delivering another kind of public education to youth. They will inherit not only social issues but also the responsibility for addressing them. To meet these challenges, youth will need another kind of public education that equips them with tools to take informed action.

As you read, I'd like you to keep in mind several factors that shaped this book. First, *Another Kind of Public Education* grew out of my activities as a public intellectual and sociologist of race. The issues that I investigate come not only from academic settings but also from the ordinary conversations of everyday life. I talk with different kinds of people on a regular basis about a wide range of topics. I don't seek out issues—rather, they come to me through my talks on college and university campuses, conversations with friends and neighbors, chats with people while standing in line in supermarkets and airports, or commiseration with people after my exercise classes. Because I have been working on the ideas in this volume for some time, the arguments presented here have been honed through dialogue with a variety of people.

My career as an educator constitutes a second factor that influenced this book. I have spent more than twenty-six years teaching in public systems of higher education. Before that, I spent four years as a university administrator and six years teaching elementary and middle school in the community schools

movement of Boston, Massachusetts. As a lifelong educator, I understand how important teachers are at all levels of education. I also see how education is vitally important to solving the major social issues that confront democratic societies such as ours. Thus, I write not only as a scholar of education but also as a practitioner. In this book, I draw on many examples from my own teaching, not as examples of best practices to emulate, but rather as examples to carry the main ideas of my argument.

Third, this book had a specific catalyst, a factor that influenced how I wrote it. *Another Kind of Public Education* was developed from a series of lectures that were originally given in spring 2008. When I received the invitation to speak to the public as part of the *Race, Education and Democracy* lecture series at Simmons College, I had been thinking about these ideas for some time and had this title in mind for the actual book. The invitation to participate in the lecture series could not have come at a better time. The chapters presented here reflect a choice of language and tone commensurate with the lectures. Unlike much of my other writing, I occasionally use a more personal, informal style. Whenever possible, I have also incorporated some of the many rich ideas that characterized each lecture's question-and-answer period. The fact that these were lectures helps explain my ambition for the book—to bring to a general audience a line of thinking and ideas that are usually talked about in scholarly conversations. I remind readers that public dialogue and debate is the cornerstone of democracy, and I was fortunate enough to develop this book in that context.

Fourth, I should point out that this approach to using conversations with a wide range of people and, in this case, the more focused dialogues of the *Race, Education and Democracy* series constitutes a contemporary expression of a longstanding thread within American democratic social thought. In writing this book, I consulted not just current debates about education but also a broader conception of public education that draws inspiration from traditions of American pragmatism. John Dewey's work on democracy and education, as well as that of William E. B. Du Bois, Jane Addams, and Alain Locke, among others, has a special place here. In the early twentieth century, thinkers such as these emphasized the significance of educating the American public for democracy in a rapidly changing society. We face similar challenges today. I draw inspiration from and amplify their historic calls for linking democracy and education. I place myself (modestly, but ambitiously) in a tradition of public intellectuals speaking to these issues.

Finally, the intertwining themes of race, schools, the media, and youth are woven throughout the entire book. The volume focuses on racism and its effects on American youth, yet I suggest that if we can diagnose racism, we can envision new democratic possibilities. In what ways do schools perpetuate racism and other forms of social inequality, and what can parents, schools, teachers, and students do about it? How might youth in a consumer society speak the truth to a powerful force of media that now holds sway? What will it take to pre-

pare youth from heterogeneous backgrounds for the challenges they will face in sustaining democratic institutions?

Writing this book without knowing the outcome of the November 2008 elections was a real nail-biter for me. In hindsight, I am glad that I did not know. Not knowing required me to think more broadly about the core ideas of my argument, the ideas that are larger than any political party, any media figure, and the specific expression of broader issues concerning democracy as they are expressed at this historic moment. Today we confront our particular variation of the struggle to craft an American democracy that is adequate to the challenges of our times. We can learn from the achievements and unsolved problems of prior generations who grappled with the same overarching questions, but they do not have answers to our problems. There are no easy solutions. Instead, there is the need for another kind of public education so that we, as a public, will be up to the challenge.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

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14

Making Space for Public Conversations

An Interview

REFLEXIVE ESSAY: *Because classrooms are places that can deaden or elevate the sprit, teaching has been a fundamental part of my commitment to critical pedagogy. To help me think through the ways in which classrooms can facilitate public conversations between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves, I invited two sociology graduate students to help me develop and co-teach two undergraduate courses. The first, "Sociology of Black Activism," co-taught with Kathryn Buford, asked students to reflect on their understandings of activism. The second, "Public Sociology," co-taught with David Strohecker, examined the intellectual and political issues of doing public sociology. This interview is taken from a conversation that I had with my co-instructors and with Meg Austin Smith, a sociology graduate student and the editorial assistant for* On Intellectual Activism, *regarding the connections among critical education, activism, public sociology, and critical pedagogy.*

Imagination is more important than knowledge.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN (1879–1955)

Meg Austin Smith: Your work has always seemed to look for ways to make space for public conversations—space for questions that look critically at power relations, at resistance, and toward hope and democratic possibilities. Could we start by talking a little bit about how you began doing the work that you do?

This interview was conducted on March 14, 2011. Special thanks to Meg Austin Smith for preparing and editing the original transcript.

Patricia Hill Collins: My life's work originated within the context of activist politics, specifically, Martin Luther King, Jr's vision of "Beloved Community." The idea of Beloved Community envisions a public space that is heterogeneous and participatory, and where we each see how we are responsible for bringing it about.

Martin Luther King, Jr. has been much misunderstood, particularly the ways in which his signature "I Have a Dream" speech has been recast as a simple individual exercise of trying not to see the color of one's skin and instead trying to see the content of one's character. This reinterpretation fits well with current arguments that the best way for the U.S. to move forward is to reject structural changes for jobs (which was also part of the "I Have a Dream Speech") in favor of individual choice to aspire for colorblindness. Yet this particular reading of King's speech privatizes our relationships to one another in ways that recast social justice initiatives such as the Civil Rights movement primarily as individual, one-on-one relationships. King's notion of Beloved Community has also been recast in terms that uphold the worldview of people who had a vested interest in keeping the status quo. Here, the notion of Beloved Community becomes redefined as a friendly, happy, harmonious community free of conflict and social inequality. The Beloved Community is a colorblind community. Because the U.S. is so far away from colorblindness, and this vision of community, King gets reinterpreted as a "dreamer," whose Beloved Community constitutes an unachievable utopia.

King's vision was far broader than these interpretations. In his "I Have a Dream" speech and throughout the corpus of his work, he develops a more sophisticated conception of the Beloved Community as a democratic ideal toward which one aspires but that one never reaches. One cannot have a Beloved Community without ensuring equal participation by all, and this includes poor people, Black people, women, and any group on the bottom of society. His is more an altruistic and radical political framework. King's vision does have elements of utopia, but it also emphasizes strategies that one might engage with to bring about such communities.

If I had to look for inspiration for my life's work, it would be this more expansive definition of Beloved Community, but it would also be tightly wedded to remaining open to a range of strategies that might bring such communities about. For example, I remain a fan of Malcolm X, primarily because Malcolm X was quite clear about saying that we are perfectly within our rights to defend ourselves and to argue on our own behalf. Just as King has been reduced to a one-dimensional icon of nonviolence, Malcolm X has undergone a similar transformation to being a symbol of violence. Toward the end of his life, like King, Malcolm X also began to argue for a broader, global sense of social justice. Although he did not use King's language of the Beloved Community, I see their commitment to social justice as being theoretically equivalent, yet strategically distinctive. Because they were both assassinated, we don't know what either one of these important Black intellectual activists would have thought had they lived.

My life's work has engaged the types of issues that confronted King and Malcolm X. It's that simple. My life's work has been devoted to fostering both the theoretical and the strategic aspects of the Beloved Community wherever I am. Sometimes I emphasize theory more than practice, or practice more than theory, but both are always considerations for me.

The phrase "Beloved Community" remains in use today. For me, the idea of Beloved Community is best reflected in contemporary social justice projects. The term social justice functions as a big umbrella that accommodates many distinct projects: racial justice, economic justice, and environmental justice initiatives come to mind. Sometimes social justice projects refer to social groups and the case for racial justice. In other cases, social issues form the core of social justice initiatives, as is the case with efforts to reform the prison system or to protect the environment from global warming. I use the language of social justice because I think that's what works now, but I see social justice as synonymous with King's sense of Beloved Community. So my life's work speaks to intellectual and political projects that can be placed under the umbrella of social justice.

My social justice work has taken different forms. Primarily, it has been intellectual, because I really do believe in the power of ideas. Not only do I see the power of the word but I also aim to use and share it through my writing and public speaking. Yet I've also had more activist phases in my life, where I could more appropriately be identified as being an activist. For example, in the 1970s, I spent six years working with the community schools movement in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Working in the schools was no picnic, but talk about a wonderful time in my life! Many people would identify those years as my "activist phase" because they understand activism as something that you do for some liberal cause when you are young. If you are lucky, you grow out of it. But they don't seem to realize that you become more effective as an activist as you see more possibilities, as you gain the wisdom of experience.

That's how I would frame out my life's work: using the power of ideas to advance social justice projects across many different social institutions. Doing the kind of work that I do, you realize that you have to create the conditions to make the work possible. You have to protect the conditions that make your work possible. You look at the conditions you are in, and those become a set of possibilities for thinking through the particular combinations of ideas and actions or praxis, not only for that point in time but also for what comes next.

Dave Strohecker: What place, in your opinion, does activist politics have in academia?

Patricia Hill Collins: Academia *is* activist politics, where struggles over the meaning of ideas constitute the primary terrain of action. I teach a graduate seminar on the sociology of knowledge whose fundamental tenet is that all knowledge is a carrier of power. What we call something shapes how we use it,

value it, legitimate it, and de-legitimate it. Calling anything "activist politics" is the kiss of death in academia, because it is often assumed that one cannot be "academic," in other words, appropriately objective, and "activist," which many academics see as synonymous with irrationality. It is a particular view of the academy that separates out ideas and practice; that separates out mind, body, and passion; that separates out truth and knowledge from politics and ethics. That's a view of the world that I reject. Instead, I am comfortable with a worldview that sees objectivity and activism as linked—to be intellectual and activist is to be knowledgeable, critical, passionate, and caring, all at the same time. The term "intellectual activism" reflects this synergy.

We need to do a better job of analyzing how academia masks or hides its own political behavior. In this regard, the politics of academia resemble those of white privilege, where white privilege operates everywhere, but somehow we lack an effective language to talk about it. So I approach colleges and universities as profoundly political entities. Within the current broader political climate, the politics of academia have become much more tethered not just to the state interests but also to the corporate world. Maintaining the fiction that activism lies outside the university is naive, especially for graduate students, junior faculty, or people working in colleges and universities who lack the protection of tenure.

Meg Austin Smith: When you say that "academia is activist politics," recognizing that activist politics has to do with creating and protecting the conditions that make your work possible, are you thinking about things like peer review and processes of admission, things that really are all about protecting existing conditions?

Patricia Hill Collins: Activist politics is often the only reason why I grudgingly perform university and professional service. I do it because it's part of how I approach intellectual activism. You have to understand, even though I like my students and colleagues, I resent the constant drumbeat of requests to write letters of recommendation for virtually everything they have done or wish to do. I resent having to sit in my office drafting letter after letter, filling out numerous forms that say, "Person X is wonderful, so give him/her money," or "Person Y is wonderful, so please admit him/her to your graduate program." This is all part of an audit culture, where we are all required to measure ourselves by corporate criteria so we can rank people and fit them in the appropriate boxes. The endless surveys about virtually all aspects of our consumer experience circulated by airlines, banks, hotels, and stores seem to have the same purpose as the endless evaluative requests within academia. How is this vast amount of data actually used? Who really benefits from this perpetual audit? It angers me that some of my colleagues, many of whom are well-respected scholars, think that this kind of service work is somehow beneath them. Despite my frustration, I involve myself in processes such as writing letters of recommendation, and I write the best

letters that I can for my students and colleagues because I realize it is crucial to do. I don't flail away at things I can't really change by myself. What I will do is try to massage those rules to change them if I can—that is what an insider can do.

Meg Austin Smith: How does Beloved Community connect to your vision of what *public* is? How can public sociology be a strategy for working toward Beloved Community?

Patricia Hill Collins: I envision the Beloved Community as a social group that embraces all of its members. Yet, within the space of Beloved Community, with its ethos of as social justice, there is also space for disagreement. People seem to assume that communities are happy places where no one disagrees. But to construct a vision of Beloved Community, there must be conflict and dialogue, and not running away from the conflict that might come from dialogues across differences. Communities negotiate power relations across differences. What makes a community a "beloved" community is that people within it are committed to working through these differences in power in ways that make communities fair for everyone.

The idea of a public can be coterminous with the idea of community. But not all publics or communities adhere to a social justice ethos that moves them toward King's ideal of the Beloved Community. The idea of people or a public incorporates ideas about heterogeneity. Ideas such as "public" and "community" are tied to the goal of democracy, namely, as rule by the people (who, in the U.S., are heterogeneous across categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and religion) as opposed to rule by royal families, clergy, or economic elites. Public sociology tries to speak to these broader issues of democratic possibilities and democratic power relations to develop action strategies that move in that direction. This is a vision of what public could be when informed with ideas about the Beloved Community.

At the same time, I think we must be attentive to shifting perceptions of what "public" actually means. Contemporary U.S. politics seems characterized by a shrinking of respect for anything public as well as an unwillingness to commit to anything public. In *Another Kind of Public Education*, I talk about the lack of commitment to public schools, public housing, public health. Anything public is devalued in a marketplace economy. Public space is increasingly understood as stigmatized space for people who can't pay their own way. Marketplace relations that commodify and place a value on everything aggravate or even require this devaluation of the public and its associations with "free." If we were just talking about handbags, shoes, and tangible commodities, I would be much less upset about privatization. I am fine with leaving people to fend for themselves to purchase fancy handbags and shoes. But as long as we have high rates of child poverty in the U.S., I remain committed to strengthening all public institutions that support children and their families. To me, the devaluation of public institutions weakens fundamental democratic institutions.

There's a lot of discussion around public schools now—that's where these debates have moved—but I would like to use a different site to make this point. The refusal to fund infrastructure projects—water pipes; the electrical grid; bridges that are old, crumbling, and in disrepair—dramatically limits this country's ability to move forward. In the greater D.C. metropolitan area, for example, I cannot fathom why government cannot adequately fund public transportation (the Metro). It is at the hub of Virginia, Maryland, and the District. The Metro is crucial in transporting federal workers to and from work, as well as transporting the thousands of tourists and schoolchildren who visit our nation's capital. Many people ride this public transportation system, not just poor people, as is the case in many other metropolitan areas. Yet, not even a major train crash in 2009 that killed several riders and may have been aggravated by delayed maintenance was enough to stimulate public action. Despite the need, there remains a refusal to pay, one that I think persists because the system serves the "public," and the "public" is imagined to be African American, Latino, working class, young, poor, and generally made up of people who cannot afford a private automobile. Yet, the D.C. metropolitan area is also known for having some of the worst traffic in the nation. We expect private citizens to purchase private automobiles and drive them on clogged public roads that also suffer from a lack of public funding. When you talk about public transportation, you run into some barriers that occur around any discussion of public, writ large. For a democracy to cultivate its public, it has to fund its public institutions. You can't have it both ways: to have lofty ideals of democracy without funding the institutions that uphold them.

Dave Strohecker: Often, in the U.S., power is represented as being within the individual—stories about heroes or persons who have "overcome all odds" or the superhumanly beautiful or athletic or strong are constantly on TV, in newspapers and magazines, and in best-selling biographies and even fiction. You have written about this culture of individualism—or privatization—in which the success of "exceptional" individuals is used to mask persisting social problems and about how this culture often serves as a means of justifying vicious attacks on public institutions, as you were just describing. How can a commitment to "public" represent a kind of resistance to this logic? And how can it offer encouragement to re-imagine what is *possible*, even for those who benefit from this culture of privatization?

Patricia Hill Collins: I think the response is to pick the public institution you are going to commit to and just do it. Just go there. Committing to a public institution is one way of advancing broader goals of social justice. Not everybody wants to do this. In my case, I chose public institutions of higher education and have worked in this area for more than thirty years. I have not always attended public institutions as a student, but without access to my 12 years of quality public education provided by the Philadelphia public schools and the

expansive holding of the Free Public Library of Philadelphia, I would have been unable to compete for college scholarships, let alone attend college and find good jobs. So I have realized the importance of public institutions for upward social mobility, not only in my own life but also for all those who want to better themselves and their families.

Institutions like the University of Maryland and the University of Cincinnati are special places that should be valued more than they are for the important work that they do as public institutions. One important function of public institutions of higher education is that they provide educational access for students from heterogeneous backgrounds. That's one reason why I like public institutions—their demographics often reflect those of the general public from which they draw their students. I like teaching at public institutions of higher education because that's where I find sizable numbers of students of color, women, LGBT students, immigrant students, returning students, and not just a few token members of these groups. I like working with sufficiently large enough populations so that I can see the heterogeneity *within* various groups, among African Americans, for example, and not just stereotype African Americans based on conversations with the few individuals who happen to enroll in a given course. Public institutions are pressured to measure their performance using standards that have been developed for private institutions. Do not get me wrong—I value private institutions of higher education as well—but one reason why private institutions achieve excellence is that they have sufficient funding. If public institutions were funded to the same level as private ones, think how different that would be for the populations we serve.

I know many people who are committed to public education and public institutions of all sorts—I am not the only one. One disappointing dimension of my teaching over the past several years is how often people around me do not think that activism and political resistance are viable options within and/or against public institutions in their everyday lives. Activism is episodic, namely, something you do when your real work is done, or every couple of years, when an election is held. Students often do not see public institutions as being important venues for sustained and long-term activism, for example, becoming involved in the admissions process or being an active lifelong member of the alumni association. In *Another Kind of Public Education*, I aim to refute these views by providing domains of framework in ways that catalyze a language of resistance. With their focus on community, activism, and public, both courses drew from that framework as an organizational scaffold for the material.

Dave Strohecker: By helping students learn to question assumptions and think reflexively about where they are coming from when they form their questions, you really listen to students and students' ways of questioning in (and out of) the classroom. This helps to break down the idea of a student–teacher dichotomy—it helps students see the teacher as a learner and helps students see themselves as both learners and teachers. With the "Public Sociology" and "Sociology

of Black Activism" classes, what are some of the things you have learned about doing public sociology with students? Are there particular strengths or weaknesses they have helped you see about public sociology as a way of knowing and a way of questioning?

Patricia Hill Collins: We had great students in both courses. As individuals, they had interesting lives and I learned much from them concerning what it's like to be in one's early twenties in contemporary America. Collectively, however, one thing that stood out for me was how rusty the students have become in exercising their imaginations. Anyone who has spent time with small children knowsthat they routinely ask big questions, propose outrageous hypotheses, and are not shy in testing out their ideas. I think the undergraduate students in both courses were more passive than I would have liked in how they learned. The skill set of passivity that may have served them well in high school and in large lecture classes often maladapted them for the demands of our courses. They needed far more practice in problem solving and imagining new ways of living their lives than I initially expected. It's not that the students were resistant to ideas about activism and thinking for themselves, but rather, they initially were quite skeptical that exercising their imaginations would be worth it.

Another striking thing for me was how little our students knew about how the world worked. Students in both classes often had a minimal grasp of history. So they tended to develop solutions to problems that were new to them, but that were not necessarily new at all. Curriculum content had to fill in gaps in their knowledge, an ironic thing, given the explosion of information that surrounded them. Once they were armed with information, they often asked themselves, "Why don't I know about this?" We had students in both classes who were predisposed to wanting to change the world, make a difference, resist, and bring about a Beloved Community. But I saw a significant disconnect between their ability to imagine such communities and to draw from past wisdom in crafting solutions for contemporary social problems.

Dave Strohecker: How do you think public sociology can reinvigorate or spark imagination?

Patricia Hill Collins: To be honest with you, I don't think public sociology as a content area or field of study can do it. Instead, I think that we need solid curriculum materials that teachers can use to introduce new ways of viewing the world. For example, since the 1990s, Margaret Andersen and I have been coediting *Race, Class, and Gender*, an anthology of readings designed primarily for undergraduate classrooms. We revise our book every three years so that we can trace how this important field of study is unfolding. Via this project, we do public sociology rather than just talk about it. I also think we need critical pedagogy across a range of disciplines that helps students develop skills of critical thinking and imagination. What came out of teaching both courses for me had

less to do with the content of either course than with a renewed understanding of how important the process can be. It's far more difficult to cast a critical eye on your own teaching, and on areas of expertise in which you have a vested interest, and to encourage students to criticize them.

Course content such as that in "Sociology of Black Activism" and "Public Sociology" lends itself to the kinds of issues we have been talking about today. The bigger question is providing a critical pedagogy, regardless of content. We do not serve students well by trying to entertain them with videos (we can certainly make effective use of videos as teaching tools) or by feeding them cookies, cupcakes, and pizza to improve our teaching evaluations. Media is a great supplement for teaching—our Sociological Cinema project fielded by University of Maryland sociology graduate students speaks to that—but it is no substitute for good teaching. If I could do a little teachable moment here, let me say more about process.

Critical pedagogy rests on a three-legged stool. First, as instructors, we have content to deliver. We want people to leave our courses knowing something they didn't know before. The content of "Public Sociology" and "Sociology of Black Activism" lent itself to critical pedagogy. Neither course was required, so the students who took these courses tended to be motivated. Both courses provided historical and contemporary material that held students' interest because, while not necessarily new to us, the content was new for students. For example, I was surprised at how much the students in "Public Sociology" enjoyed reading books like Barry Glassner's *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* as a bestseller of public sociology; Charles Fishman's *The Wal-Mart Effect;* or Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's bestseller *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide.* Our students often read these books not just to unpack the arguments of the authors but also to gain information. I was similarly taken by how much the students in "Sociology of Black Activism" enjoyed our approach to activism as being grounded in music and the arts. They liked hearing the music of Nina Simone—it opened their eyes to a view that mass media is not necessarily all about entertainment and that popular culture can be a legitimate and important site of activism.

Second, we have a skill set that we want students to practice throughout a course. Teaching critical thinking is far more complicated than "teach them how to think." What does that mean? Norris Sanders' classic book, *Classroom Questions: What Kinds?*, identifies components of critical thinking that range from skills of simple translation, to application of concepts, to analysis, to synthesis, to evaluation. Critical pedagogy pays attention to these dimensions of critical thinking, trying to help students develop skills that are appropriate for them. For example, if a student cannot translate from one language to another, for example, from academic language to his or her own words, how can we expect that student to understand complicated work? Students in both courses

found certain readings difficult because they had not had sufficient practice in translating this kind of material into their own words. This is something I grapple with now in teaching social theory on the graduate level. How do you analyze something if you haven't translated it? How do you evaluate something that you don't understand?

The third leg of critical pedagogy's three-legged stool involves something called "affective learning." How students feel in class shapes so much of how they receive content as well as their ability to develop critical thinking. Emotions matter for students and teachers alike. Social inequalities become important here via all the classroom practices that create privilege and penalty in the classroom, with all the feelings of empowerment and hurt that go with them. When we set up our classes such that some people dominate classroom discussions and others never say anything, we are actually teaching inequality and the emotions that it engenders. Social hierarchy is quite crucial to how students feel about learning, regardless of content and critical thinking.

These three things are crucial, and neglecting any one of them topples the stool and can sink what otherwise might be a well-planned course. In both classes, I was able to revisit these pedagogical issues of content, skills, and affect because I co-taught them with two of you. I had another set of eyes, hands, and ears, as well as an additional heart, in the classroom, and that made an important difference. If you are co-teaching, you must have dialogue, you must collaborate, and you must see what each person brings to the table, so I think that is a very important piece of critical pedagogy as well.

Kathryn Buford: I agree that we need to meet students where they are, and for "Sociology of Black Activism," we did get students who were predisposed to want to do "good"—somewhat of a social justice mindset. But also I think students were coming to that class to forge or refine an activist identity, or an anti-racist identity. One of our students, "Lisa," came to me to discuss one of the assigned readings. Lisa was grappling with Audre Lorde's text from *Sister Outsider* where Lorde calls out some injustices and hypocrisies in the feminist movement, particularly with white women. As a white female student, Lisa came to me, trying to get me to help her work through some of those issues she was having, such as: How is my identity associated with privilege? How can I be an anti-racist activist? How can I reconcile my commitment to helping this community without necessarily knowing exactly how to do this? She really took Lorde's critique of white feminism to heart. And I felt like she was wondering what her place was in, not just anti-racist activism, but black empowerment. In conversations that I had with her outside of class, I sensed that maybe she wanted me to help her resolve issues she was having with that, but I didn't know what to say; it kind of caught me off-guard. I realize I never brought this to you, but I'm wondering how you would have handled this. Had you anticipated students grappling with these concerns?

Patricia Hill Collins: I think that she was asking the very important question of how to be an ally if you are in a position of privilege. In this case, Lisa's questions concerned the uses to which white privilege could be put, because race was one theme of our course. Because she was white, she wanted to know how she could bring the power of whiteness to an anti-racist struggle. Fortunately for Lisa, there is a tradition of engaged scholarshipthat might help her. A classic work such as "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh (reprinted in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, 8th edition) provides a template for all the places that white privilege might be named and challenged. Social science studies of whites involved in racial justice activism, for example, Mark Warren's important study *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice*, would be excellent suggested reading for Lisa.

But the overall issues that she raises are much broader than race. Being an ally requires learning how to form working relationships across differences in power. Depending on what kind of privilege you have (race, class, gender, sexuality, age, or citizenship status), how can you be an ally to people who are disadvantaged by your privilege? How do you respect their space to do what they need to do, but without having your privilege take over? Men who are upset by the treatment of women; affluent people who are concerned about poverty; straight people who are offended by the discrimination that LGBT people routinely confront; and American citizens who think that immigration policies penalizing undocumented Latino, Asian, and African immigrants are flawed, all face this theme of how to be an allies from positions of privilege. These issues of forming relationships across differences in power are just as germane to classroom dynamics among teachers and students as they are in politics of race, gender, or economic class. She was really sensitive to thinking through those issues, and she was in the moment of thinking it through. I think she was thinking that, once she thought it through, she could just move on and be a really terrific ally.

The first thing we needed to do was to acknowledge the importance of her questions—to clap for her for raising them. White students like Lisa often receive little affirmation for taking difficult stances. That's the first thing. So often, getting people to the point where they can see their own privilege is difficult. They can see their own penalty, but not necessarily their privileges. For example, Black men do not want to examine how their gender privileges them in many situations (it penalizes them in others). Instead, they want the moral benefits that accrue to identities of being racially disadvantaged. Similarly, heterosexuals deny their heterosexual privilege regarding marriage, taxation, adoption, and police protection from hate crimes. Given this climate of denial, it is important to acknowledge the courage attached to that student's question.

I would caution you about one downside of being an African American professor. When it comes to anything concerning race, you end up with everybody on your doorstep. Students do not just learn racial content or develop skills of critical thinking by reading books by African American and African Diasporic

authors. Instead, courses like "Sociology of Black Activism" can catalyze deep feelings and emotions in students. This is what makes such courses exhausting and exhilarating to teach. Lisa had needs, but each and every other student in that course had similar questions and needs. White students like Lisa might ask how they might become allies, yet a more typical response among white students is to struggle with the meaning of white privilege in their own lives. Black students tend to express a different set of issues that can develop into demands. The material can be just as new for them as for white students, yet their emotional reactions may differ. I have encountered Black students who have shown up in my office, extremely angry, often not knowing who they should be angry with or even why they are angry. Other Black students have heard material about racial oppression so many times that it leaves them dispirited.

I decided to call the class "Sociology of Black Activism" because I wanted to focus on *activism*, not oppression, on problem-solving *actions*, whether they were successful or not. This focus avoids the trap of overwhelming students with oppression information, leaving them informed but curiously disempowered. Instead, the focus is on studying people who have harnessed the power of their emotions to the critical task of bringing about social change. The knowledge becomes a vehicle for practicing critical thinking skills. Such people need not be victorious. Just knowing that they exist is often enough.

Kathryn Buford: In a similar sense, when we began that class, I wasn't thinking there was something particular I wanted Black students to get out of that class, but when we finished it, I think subconsciously there was—I did want Black students to understand the Diaspora, understand that the Black community is global in scope. What are the implications of wanting black students particularly to get that message out of the class? When you were teaching "Sociology of Black Activism," did you have in mind something you wanted particular students to take away?

Patricia Hill Collins: Absolutely. Let me say a bit more about how the classroom community itself had to consider how content, critical thinking, and emotional learning worked together in the course as well as how students from diverse backgrounds might experience that classroom.

For "Sociology of Black Activism," the dynamics of the classroom were crucial. Teaching the course to racially homogeneous classes of white or African American students would have produced different dynamics. Both classroom settings would have had value, but they would have limited our ability to do certain things and enhanced our options in other areas. In our case, we had a heterogeneous mix, but making sure that we had built as much diversity into the class as possible involved decisions that I made before the first student walked through the door.

Developing the course as a dual-listed offering by both Sociology and African American Studies drew majors from each field. From the beginning, the

course enrolled students with different expectations about what they wanted from the course that stemmed from their respective majors, as well as a skill set that said that they were not simply shopping for a diversity experience but also could bring some knowledge of their own to our discussions. We enrolled some African American students who were Africana Studies majors but also a sizable segment who were sociology majors. I was quite happy with the demographics of the course. I couldn't have asked for a better group of students.

When it comes to understanding how students experienced the classroom, we can't underestimate the agendas students bring for why they enrolled in the course. Some students come to be exposed to new knowledge, some students enroll to understand questions that they already have on their minds, and some students sign up because they want to develop action strategies for things that they already think they understand. I see students as distributed along a continuum ranging from extremely passive learners—those who sit and wait to be taught information, to extremely active learners—those who are already involved in activist activities and want more. Our classroom process was designed to disrupt the assumptions that students had, regardless of where they were positioned along that entire continuum.

I saw no significant substantive differences between the concerns of the white students and those of the Black students, save those of our earlier discussion of the role of white allies within Black activism. We had students distributed across all three groups, with varying reasons for taking the course. That's not to say that there were no differences, only that I'm not sure that they map well onto the assigned race of the student. Recall that the "black" students within "Sociology of Black Activism" were themselves quite diverse, with some from immigrant families from the Caribbean and African nations and others African Americans of quite different social class backgrounds. The students from Africana Studies who were of African descent seemed more attuned to thinking about action strategies and thought of activism not simply as an academic area of study. The students from sociology also were interested in action strategies, but they seemed more interested in understanding the Diaspora, perhaps because this had been underemphasized in prior courses. Moreover, some of the sociology students were on a research track and had to think about how action strategies and activism fit in with that path.

I would love to see Black students become much more proactive as leaders, more outspoken when it comes to race, and I would love to see them take on many of the issues of anti-racist struggle, but I do not see them as the only people doing that, nor do I see engaging in activism as a requirement for every Black student.

I am much more interested in seeing all of my students, regardless of their backgrounds, learn to think for themselves. When they do so, they move toward becoming leaders. I am sharing my ideas about my life's work because I hope that my experiences and analyses might be helpful in developing such leadership. If there are no people to replace me, well, then that's it. It's that sim-

ple. When I turn around and look back, I want to see people behind me who have a comprehensive knowledge about how the world works, who can think and problem solve, and who are passionate about what they think and do. Via my scholarship and my teaching, I do everything I can to expose students to the range of choices they have, but I will always say that. Your choice.

Dave Strohecker: Is that where you would like to see public sociology go?

Patricia Hill Collins: I certainly would like to see public sociology go in this direction, yet I am of two minds about the future of public sociology writ large and how it might connect with the ideas I've discussed thus far. Public sociology has provided an important set of tools for my life's work. When I read and reread works such as C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination*, I see public sociology's promise. I think we are in an interesting historical moment when the public looks more favorably on sociology, with public sociology the type of sociology they encounter. At the same time, I wonder: Will this excitement and engagement persist? Is public sociology another academic fad?

One way to address your question is to focus on the "Public Sociology" course. I think talking about the course will answer that question better then talking about public sociology in the abstract. I think the future of public sociology will be worked out through courses such as "Public Sociology," or by evaluating similar action strategies. What's happening in some classrooms is instructive. One concern that I have is that many instructors conflate public sociology with service learning, a worthwhile endeavor, but something that is far narrower than the expansive ideas of public sociology. So the students go out into the public and they do good, and then they come back and they write it up. It becomes almost a way to boost the sociology curriculum so that students get some skills that help them with their careers, that make them more competitive and, hopefully, more informed. Service learning asks students to support agendas that are crafted by others. Public sociology helps them to imagine and bring about new agendas via collaboration with specific publics (communities).

By requiring public sociology projects, in "Public Sociology," we asked our students to do something that was more difficult. They had no models of public sociology projects to follow. Instead, they had to create them. In doing so, they drew from skills of traditional research projects, for example, identifying a research question, researching relevant literature, preparing a methodology, executing the project, and writing up its findings for a scholarly audience. Yet we asked them to focus on the ways in which public sociology differed from a traditional research paradigm. They engaged traditional sociology through processes of acceptance and critique.

One of the most significant differences between public sociology and other forms of sociology concerns the relationship of all aspects of research with a specific or imagined public. It was challenging for our students to think about working in dialogue with their chosen publics to create projects that their publics

would find meaningful. They had to make the conceptual shift from thinking they would learn useful information in college and take that knowledge back to their home communities or political projects to "serve" them. This is the standard disciplinary knowledge taken to an applied setting model, one where scholars talk down to the public. Instead, we asked them to consider how they would identify intellectual and/or political objectives *with* and not just *for* their chosen public. In "Public Sociology," we asked them to consider questions such as: Who's the audience for your public sociology project? Who is your imagined public? What are the best ways of determining good questions that are important to them? How will you share your findings with your public?

To address these questions, our students had to make connections between the sociological material of the "Public Sociology" course and their everyday lives. That is how undergraduates encounter sociology, and when they are happy with sociology, this type of engagement is what they are doing. I wanted them to position their public sociology projects in that space. Undergraduate students are front-line actors of public sociology, but often do not realize it. We wanted them to become lifelong sociologists and to take this public sociology sensibility into their worlds long after they ceased being sociology majors.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Andersen, Margaret L., and Patricia Hill Collins, eds. 2013. *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology,* 8th edition. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning.

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Sociological Cinema: Teaching and Learning Sociology through the Web. http://www.thesociologicalcinema.com/index.html. Accessed June 26, 2012.