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POWER, AUTHORITY, AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

ABSTRACT: This essay addresses the problem of left-liberal educators who want to promote their own values through their teaching but fear that doing so would contradict these values. The problem may arise from an oversimple notion of power as always oppressive; whereas a three-part model of power can show that it has legitimate forms, e.g., "authority." The notion of authority is developed through analysis of the work of Henry Giroux, Elizabeth Ellsworth, and bell hooks [this author spells her name without initial caps].

Let me begin by assuming that many of us teaching today feel caught in a theoretical impasse. On the one hand, we wish to serve politically left-oriented or liberatory goals in our teaching, while on the other, we do not see how we can do so without committing the theoretically totalizing and pedagogically oppressive sins we have inveighed against in the systems we want to resist. Another way to describe this impasse would be to say that we want to serve the common good with the power we possess by virtue of our position as teachers, and yet we are deeply suspicious of any exercise of power in the classroom.

I want to address this impasse in two ways. First, I will examine the theoretical bases for our suspicion of exercises of power. I will suggest that the categorical rejection of all uses of power results

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from an insufficiently differentiated concept of power; in other words, it results from a totalized notion of power as a unitary force with uniform effects. I will attempt to derive a more usefully articulated concept of power from work in critical pedagogy by Henry Giroux, Elizabeth Ellsworth, and bell hooks. I understand the term “critical pedagogy” to refer to Marxist-influenced theories of education that seek both to delegitimize forms of pedagogy that imitate and generate unjust social power relations, and to delineate forms of pedagogy that imitate and generate egalitarian social power relations. “Critical pedagogy” should be taken to refer to a variety of practices, not one orthodox methodology.

Second, if I can outline a concept of usable power, I then want to suggest how this power might be brought to bear in the design of composition curricula. I will argue that we have not yet sufficiently examined the question of the content of composition courses; we have held ourselves aloof from the canon debates in literary studies and supposed that the controversy over cultural literacy did not have much to do with us. On the contrary, I will suggest that we look at what notions of cultural literacy we are implicitly conveying in the way we teach composition, and what alternate notions we might want to convey.

I

One might read the history of modern composition studies as a series of attacks on classroom uses of power. Key books in the modern formation of the field, such as Ken Macrorie’s *Telling Writing* (1970), Janet Emig’s *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (1971), and Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), all call into question in one way or another the teacher’s traditional role as controller of classroom activities. What Maxine Hairston called in 1982 a “revolution” in the teaching of writing comprised a new pedagogical paradigm emphasizing students’ control of their own writing processes as they generate texts meaningful to themselves. In 1990, Andrea Lunsford described our field as “non-hierarchical and exploratory, intensely collaborative,” “dialogic, multi-voiced, heteroglossic,” and “radically democratic” (76).

It seems to be crucially important to our sense of ourselves as professionals that we do not exercise power oppressively in the classroom. For some time now, composition scholarship has shown an affinity for critical pedagogy, because we see ourselves as sharing with critical theorists a rejection of oppressive pedagogical power. Brazilian literacy educator Paulo Freire is perhaps the best known critical theorist to scholars in composition studies, and I believe

many of us would agree that his concept of "banking education" names what we reject in traditional writing pedagogy. We are less sure, however, whether what we admire can be comprised in his concept of "education for critical consciousness." An implicit objective of my analysis here is to explore what we might do instead of "banking education." Given the impasse I described earlier, I think it is now time for us to reexamine our relations to the concept of power. I suspect that we hold an insufficiently differentiated notion of power, such that all exercise of power is bad. Let me suggest, instead, a three-part anatomy of power.

One sort of power might be imagined as exercised by A over B, regardless of B's consent or best interests. Here A uses B to benefit A, and there's nothing B can do about it. I will call this sort of power "coercion." This is the sort of power, I believe, that we reject when we reject traditional writing pedagogy. To give this rejection a left-oriented political interpretation, I might say that we reject the coercive pedagogy because we see the teacher, A, imposing standards of good writing on the student, B, which will not really help B to become a better writer but will only test to see whether B is already a member of A's elite group. The student who can meet the teacher's standards is allowed to stay in school and progress to the positions of social power granted to college graduates; the student who cannot meet these standards is thereby identified as someone who comes from a group to be denied access to positions of social power, and someone who therefore should be expelled from school.

A second sort of power might be imagined as exercised by A over B only with B's consent, which is given only if B is convinced that doing as A suggests will serve B's best interests. I will call this sort of power "persuasion." This is the sort of power, I believe, that we would like to think we exercise under our new pedagogical paradigm. We do not set standards for good writing that we can compel students to attempt to meet. Rather, we simply try to create a classroom climate in which the students can generate their own standards of good writing. We may try to have some say in what standards they generate, even if only by way of gently preventing one grammar-obsessed and vocal student from dominating the discussion. But our guidance can only be offered in the form of advice on how the students may best accomplish their own goals. For example, we might recommend a change in a piece of writing, or further work on a draft, not simply because we as teachers require that it be so, but because, as we might say to the student, "This will help you convey to the other students how you really felt when your grandmother died," or "This will help you convince the history

professor that you really understand Voltaire's place in the Enlightenment."

Notice that in these examples, A must enter into B's thinking in order to figure out how to convince B that B's interests will be served by the course of action A recommends. In other words, A must be able to imagine being in B's place in order for A to exercise the kind of power I am calling persuasion. Ever since the era of Socratic Greece, rhetoricians have argued about whether A can do this with no consequences to A, that is, whether A can enter into B's thinking sufficiently to change B without A's own thinking being affected. My own position in this argument is that A cannot enter into B's thinking sufficiently to change B unless A also is changed, but I do not want to pursue that argument here. For the purpose of the definitions I am trying to lay out now, let me simply say that if A is able to change B without being changed, then what we have is an instance of coercion, not persuasion. In persuasion, it is key that A not be using power on B instrumentally, with no consequences to A, but rather that A and B are engaged in a kind of collaborative enterprise. It is our preference for persuasion that leads Lunsford to employ such terms for composition studies as "dialogic" and "non-hierarchical."

I certainly share this preference for persuasion over coercion, and yet I am uncomfortable with classroom situations in which persuasion becomes inadequate to the task of moving students in the direction of my own left-oriented political goals. For example, suppose I am unable to convince the class that this student's paper we are reading makes a weak argument when it rejects feminism on grounds that women are biologically determined for the sole occupations of wife and mother. If I reject a return to coercion such that I require students to adopt a feminist perspective and penalize them with bad grades if they do not, what recourse do I have in such a situation?

I want to begin to answer this question by defining a third sort of power, which I will call "authority." Authority is exercised by A over B instrumentally in the sense that sometimes B must do what A requires without seeing how B's best interests will be served thereby, but A can exercise such authority over B only if B initially grants it to A. This means that I am imagining authority as being exercised through a two-stage process. The beginning of the exercise of authority lies in persuasion: A must persuade B that if B grants A authority over B, B's best interests ultimately will be served. This stage of persuasion would be subject to all the conditions of collaboration described earlier in my discussion of persuasion. But, once B has been persuaded to grant authority to A, their relationship

changes to a less dialogic one. B empowers A to direct their course of action without A's having to exercise persuasion at every step taken.

In a writing class, this might mean that the teacher A can require the student B to try to argue in a certain way, to enter into a particular audience's point of view, or to give credit to another writer's reasoning, even if these activities seem very uncongenial to the student at the time. The student's initial reluctance to undertake these activities is not allowed to prevent their practice, however, or to delay it while a lengthy process of persuasion is undertaken. The student agrees to attempt these activities while they still seem quite uncongenial, because the student has decided to trust A's assurance that some good for the student ultimately will come out of it.

I know that we postmodern people all love stories in which trust in authority turns out to be disastrously misplaced. Even though I've suggested that the collaborative exercise of persuasion must precede the exercise of any legitimate authority, I fear that some will accuse me of recommending blind faith to students who have little reason to trust that the American educational system has their best interests at heart. To be sure, the requirement of persuasion means that we would have to talk to our students about the problematic nature of our relation as liberatory teachers to an oppressive system before we could hope to get our students to trust us. We would have to present not only our professional but also our political credentials. I think many of us do this sort of thing now, informally, and perhaps without quite realizing what impulse prompts us to do so—we find ways to share our own writing with the class, to talk about our own educations and publications, to drop hints about our extracurricular political activities, and so on. I'm suggesting that this kind of self-validation perhaps should be foregrounded in the introduction of every course we present.

In other words, I am describing a kind of authority that cannot take itself for granted. The teacher cannot ask students to grant him or her authority simply on grounds that anyone appointed to the position of teacher is thereby certified to be worthy of authority. Nor can the teacher appeal to some merely personal, that is universal, grounds for granting authority such as that the teacher loves each and every student individually. Rather, I am imagining a form of argumentation in which the teacher demonstrates links between his or her own historical circumstances and those of the students, to suggest that their joining together in a liberatory educational project will serve all of their best interests.¹

My thinking here has been strongly influenced by the work of critical education theorist Henry Giroux, who has recently devoted

much attention to working out what he calls a concept of “emancipatory authority.” The general thesis of his book *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life* (1988) is that if teachers rely only on what I have called persuasion, they will be put at a crucial disadvantage in an educational system in which existing power relations are far from the egalitarian ideal required for true collaboration. In other words, you cannot persuade someone whose social and political power over you makes it unnecessary for them to listen to you; by adopting a persuasive stance, you only make it easier for the powerful person to change you by requiring you to accommodate to his or her thinking. By the same token, you cannot persuade someone over whom your own social and political power remains an implied threat of coercion behind your seemingly conciliatory and consensus-seeking words; by adopting a persuasive stance, you only awaken the mistrust of your audience who suspect that you are trying to manipulate them unawares—unfortunately, a common reaction of students to the collaborative classroom. Giroux’s solution to this problem is twofold:

First, the purpose of schooling can be defined through a democratic public philosophy based on an ethical discourse that is critically attentive to the issues of public responsibility, personal freedom, and democratic tolerance, as well as to the necessity of rejecting norms and practices that embody and extend the interests of domination, human suffering, and exploitation. On the basis of such a public philosophy, teachers can defend the curriculum choices they make through a discourse that aims at developing an educated, empowered, and critical citizenry. Second, such a public philosophy provides the guidelines for carefully mediating between the imperative to teach and defend a particular selection and view of knowledge and the necessity of avoiding a pedagogy that silences the voices of students. (107–108)

It seems to me that Giroux is here describing a moral position for the teacher that can be demonstrated to be consistent, or at least to be attempting consistency, both in the teacher’s curriculum choices and in the way the class is conducted. Giroux here gives the example of a teacher who chooses to teach material relating to the Holocaust. Giroux explains:

In this instance, the teacher would not assume a position that suggested to students that supporting the Holocaust represented simply another point of view. At the same time,

different voices in the class could be engaged around questions on how the Holocaust developed, the nature of the ideology that informed it, why people supported and/or participated in it, what such an event tells us about the present, how a similar logic might be manifested in different social and cultural forms of contemporary daily life, and so on. (108)

In "Postmodernism and Border Pedagogy" (1991), Giroux discusses this kind of authority in terms of what he calls a "border pedagogy." Border pedagogy adopts a thoroughly postmodern view of texts as heteroglossic, crammed with a diversity of speaking muted voices that have accrued and changed their relative positions over time. This historical construction of texts becomes the object of study, but Giroux emphasizes that students will have to be guided by the teacher to engage in such study fully, to submit their own preferred histories and narratives to analysis as well as the discourses of power they want to debunk, and, as Giroux says, not only "to develop a healthy skepticism towards all discourses of authority, but also to recognize how authority and power can be transformed in the interest of creating a democratic society" (248).

The teacher is to model this kind of transformative authority in the classroom; here, Giroux's examples have to do with pedagogy committed to attacking white-supremacist racism:

This suggests that teachers use their authority to establish classroom conditions in which different views about race can be aired but not treated as simply an expression of individual views or feelings. . . . An anti-racist pedagogy must demonstrate that the views we hold about race have different historical and ideological weight, forged in asymmetrical relations of power, and that they always embody interests that shape social practices in particular ways. In other words, an anti-racist pedagogy cannot treat ideologies as simply individual expressions of feeling, but as historical, cultural, and social practices that serve to either undermine or reconstruct democratic public life. These views must be engaged without silencing students, but they must also be interrogated next to a public philosophy that names racism for what it is and calls racist ideologies and practices into account on political and ethical terms. (250-251)

I find Giroux's theories challenging for the bold assertion of the teacher's right to set a classroom agenda, bold in the sense that

Giroux must assume a postmodern audience for whom the common wisdom is that pedagogical assertiveness is oppression. Perhaps this notion of authority requires a leap of blind faith from us teachers, faith in our abilities to realize our intention to serve our students' best interests, to go beyond the primary Hippocratic principle of doing no harm to them. In one sense, I suppose, this objection can be answered only by recommending the doubter to prayer. But in another sense, we might draw courage from looking at two accounts of critical pedagogies in the classroom, one where it goes wrong and one where it goes right.

II

Elizabeth Ellsworth has attacked one version of critical pedagogy on grounds that its concept of pedagogical power is coercive; whereas I believe that her difficulties with this critical pedagogy stem from her attempts to practice it using persuasion rather than authority. In contrast, bell hooks gives eloquent personal testimony about how she as a marginalized and disenfranchised student benefited from the exercise of authority by her teachers, whom she now wishes to emulate as a critical pedagogue.

Ellsworth expresses her critique of critical pedagogy through a discussion of a graduate education course she taught at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The announced aim of the course was to design educational materials to combat the white-supremacist racism evinced in recent incidents on the campus. Ellsworth also announced that she intended to employ critical pedagogy in the class, that is, that it would be collaborative and dialogic. This seems to be an admirably conceived experiment in critical pedagogy, and one would think that the students who selected the course would have been ready to carry it out. Nevertheless, Ellsworth reports that the course was a failure. The group fragmented along lines of race, sexual preference, religion, social class, country of origin, and/or physical size and health (the thin and able-bodied constitute a privileged group, Ellsworth points out). Students became tongue-tied when they felt that their group's interests were being pushed aside in class discussions. Most of their effective learning, Ellsworth suggests, took place outside of class in what she calls "affinity groups" in which students felt they could talk more freely and provide reality checks for each other.

When Ellsworth's students began to complain about their group's interests not being respected in the classroom, Ellsworth responded with dismayed acknowledgement of the extent to which her own culturally interpreted positions, as white, middle-class,

thin, and able-bodied, prevented her from fully appreciating their difficulties, regardless of the insight into oppression given her by being a heterosexual female. Ellsworth argues that critical pedagogy did not help her deal with this situation because it is couched in language that is too universalistic, tending to assume that all people of good will have essentially the same interests and that rationality alone is enough to enable people to recognize and act on these interests.

Ellsworth therefore calls for critical pedagogy to be corrected by what she calls a “pedagogy of the unknowable” (318ff.). If the “critical” in critical pedagogy implies rational control, Ellsworth wishes to destabilize this control by asserting that teachers and students alike must approach the classroom in the dark about what forms the social construction of difference will take in their work together. Moreover, all participants in the educational process must acknowledge that whatever perspectives they bring to the classroom or acquire there must always be partial, limited, conditional, and “‘potentially oppressive to others’” (324).

Ellsworth’s pedagogy of the unknowable seems praiseworthy to me in that it would bring everyone into the classroom in a frame of mind conducive to persuasion—alert to the limitations of their own perspectives and committed to trying to understand how each other thinks in order to communicate their perspectives and arrive at some mutually beneficial bases for educational projects. I do think, however, that she attacks other critical pedagogues somewhat indiscriminately. As I read him, Paulo Freire may indeed be susceptible to the charge of universalism and insufficient attention to barriers to teacher-student communication; but Henry Giroux seems quite attentive to these barriers and committed to addressing them in a historicizing way. In making a rather sweeping condemnation, Ellsworth backs away from the next stage of analysis critical pedagogy calls for, namely how one moves from the stance of persuasion to authority in the classroom.

As I read Ellsworth, she does not wish to claim authority in the classroom. Her understanding of the partiality, in every sense, of her own perspective incapacitates her for the function of facilitator of classroom discussion. The students’ competing discourses of oppression and victimization seem to have confused Ellsworth—like the old woman who lived in a shoe, she doesn’t know which way to turn first. Even in her essay, she can’t mention the social construction of difference without reminding us that she knows it comprises many categories by listing them: racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, classism, homophobia, able-ism, and fat oppression. It isn’t that these aren’t all forms of oppression that need to be

resisted; and it seems futile to engage in debate as to whether the pain suffered under one category is greater or lesser than that under another category. The point is that in the face of this diversity, all Ellsworth seems to be able to do is to name the problem as the "unknowable," and to predict in advance that the classroom cannot become a site of border crossings into the unknowable by condemning what she calls "the essentially paternalistic project of education itself" (306). Apparently, she now rejects even such authority as she exercised by setting the liberatory agenda for the graduate education class whose failure prompted her critique.

Ellsworth seems to think that if the universalistic, rationalistic argument for assent to critical pedagogy is removed, then she has no basis on which to work for her students' assent. All she can do is to recognize difference with them, her voice having no more power than any others'. Leaving aside for the moment the obvious contradiction here, namely that Ellsworth is still the teacher with the teacher's grade-giving power, I want to point out that Ellsworth has also missed Giroux's discussion of how the teacher must establish his or her claim to authority in a highly contextualized way, with reference to historical interests teacher and students share. Ellsworth's class, it seems to me, desperately needed her guidance to help them see that their various experiences of negatively constructed difference might be brought together around a shared project of fighting all oppressions, today anti-white-supremacist racism, perhaps, but tomorrow homophobia or anti-Semitism. The teacher who helps students see this vision of collective action is not paternalistic, in my view, but Utopian.

Perhaps the key to my sense of the limitations in Ellsworth's position can be found in her negative view of Utopian thinking. She seems to regard the term "Utopian" only in its popular, pejorative sense, meaning something like "self-deluding" or "criminally negligent of social realities." I would argue, on the contrary, that there is a place for Utopian language in education, not to pretend that we all already have common interests when in fact these have to be laboriously constructed through a dialogic process, but rather to assist this process by projecting images of what we might achieve. I want to turn now to the account of critical education furnished by bell hooks, for I think that what she is demonstrating is, in effect, the power Utopian thinking exercised in her own education and in her vocation as a teacher.

Bell hooks comes from a working-class Black family in Kentucky, where she attended largely Black public schools before moving on to Stanford, and ultimately to a Ph.D. in English literature and a series of prestigious academic appointments (she is

now at Oberlin). In her recent collection of essays on feminist theory and critical pedagogy, *Talking Back* (1989), hooks speaks positively about Black women teachers she had as a child, who used their very directive classroom authority both to acquaint her with a wide range of accomplished Black and White writers, and to encourage her to believe that she could range over their styles and develop an accomplished literary repertoire herself. These teachers' stance toward hooks reminded her of the demanding kind of support she got from her own strong female relatives, who themselves argued, cajoled, and "talked back" with great vigor but fostered her development of a similarly strong voice by denying her the privilege of speaking until she was strong enough to demand it. Hooks describes her dismay upon encountering a version of the new composition pedagogy in her college writing class, where she was urged to employ a so-called "authentic voice" that the teacher and other students assumed would be some form of Black dialect (16). Hooks felt she was capable of speaking in many voices, and she refused, as she says, to speak "as 'other,' speaking to difference as it is constructed in the white-supremacist imagination" (16).

When she discusses her own practices as a teacher, hooks often invokes the name of Paulo Freire, and clearly her educational project aligns with a version of critical pedagogy, although I think hooks's theories are really more in line with those of Giroux, since she is similarly alert to the historical contexts of pedagogy and to the ways pedagogical power must indeed be exercised but in a transformative project (note that Giroux's book *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics* is dedicated to hooks). Hooks explicitly rejects not only "traditional ways of teaching that reinforce domination," but also a simple inversion of this position whereby the students' personal experiences become the sole topic of discussion while the teacher sits passively by (52). Hooks seeks a form of legitimate power in the classroom, and it seems that she persuades her students to grant authority to her. Here is how she describes her pedagogy:

My classroom style is very confrontational. It is based on the assumption that many students will take courses from me who are afraid to assert themselves as critical thinkers, who are afraid to speak (especially students from oppressed and exploited groups). The revolutionary hope that I bring to the classroom is that it will become a space where they can come to voice. Unlike the stereotypical feminist model that suggests women best come to voice in an atmosphere of safety (one in which we are all going to be kind and nurturing), I encourage

students to work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or see themselves at risk. The goal is to enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel empowered in a rigorous, critical discussion. Many students find this pedagogy difficult, frightening, and very demanding. They do not usually come away from my class talking about how much they enjoyed the experience. (53)

I hear echoes here of how hooks herself learned to “talk back” as a girl. She is clearly exercising authority as I have defined it, in that she is asking students to continue with practices that they find uncongenial, even painful, in hopes that the eventual outcome will benefit them.

Hooks argues that it is a mistake to view all painful experiences as negative—when her students talked openly “about the way in which learning to see the world critically was causing pain,” hooks wanted to present “the possibility that this pain could be a constructive sign of growth” (102, 103). Although she says she is often hurt by students’ initial negative responses to her pedagogy, hooks seems to be more willing than Ellsworth to persevere in the face of their discomfort, and hooks testifies that “students who often felt they hated a class with me would return later to say how much they learned. . . . I began to see that courses that work to shift paradigms, to change consciousness, cannot necessarily be experienced immediately as fun or positive or safe and this was not a worthwhile criteria to use in evaluation” (53).

Like the strong Black women who educated her, hooks is able to win authority from her students because she first persuades them that she has their best interests at heart—this is the conviction that keeps them working in a painful class. Moreover, I suspect that hooks is able to persuade her students partly because she initially links her interests to theirs through open avowal of her own moral agenda. She can assure her students that it is very important for her to feel that she is fighting sexism, white-supremacist racism, and other unjust social hierarchies in her pedagogy—hence, reimposing an oppressive hierarchy in her own classroom would damage her interests by hurting her sense of her own self-worth. Once hooks has persuaded her students to grant her authority, then, she can use her power to take them through a course of study only the cumulative effect of which can be seen by them to be fostering education for critical consciousness.

III

I will now conclude with some applications of the notion of

authority I have been developing here to issues in the design of writing courses. I have suggested that the modern trend in our field has been to reject what we now see as coercive pedagogical models in favor of persuasive ones. This has meant letting students develop their own composing processes and standards for good writing instead of requiring that they follow set techniques, such as the Roman-numeraled outline, and perfect their Standard English.

This has also meant changing the kinds of reading incorporated into the writing class. Fiction and belletristic essays by canonical authors may once have been assigned simply as patterns of good style for students to imitate. Now the students' own papers are likely to form the only set of texts for the course; or if we use a reader, we use one that is pluralistic as to the race, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, and social class of its contributors, and we assign or let students select essays whose subject matter is likely to be of interest to them. I would venture to guess that the anthologies used in writing courses became culturally pluralistic in these ways some time before we saw changes in the anthologies of fiction and poetry. Even student essays are now published in many composition readers, while we have yet to see undergraduate fiction and poetry in the literature anthologies.

Therefore, I do not mean to suggest that the pluralism of our reading material is not praiseworthy. But I do think we have perhaps been a little inclined to take it for granted that if the available material is pluralistic, then left-oriented or liberatory issues are bound to be addressed. Yet we often leave the choice and handling of this material entirely up to the students, with the result that they are often stunningly successful at normalizing or defusing material that we might have thought was politically explosive (for testimony on this point, see Mahala). This really should not surprise us, since leaving so much up to them sends the message that what one does with politically explosive material is entirely a matter of personal choice. One's ideological conditioning, the intertextuality of interpretations, seems to be allowably left outside.

An example of a textbook whose apparatus itself seems to take this attitude is *Ways of Reading*, edited by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. The European and American authors represented here are indeed diverse as to race, gender, and social class, and the editors' taste runs to pieces that are politically provocative, even including a selection from critical pedagogy work, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Yet the essays are presented in alphabetical order by author, with very little historical information offered about them, and with reading and discussion questions that treat each writer as a philosopher grappling with decontextualized

questions such as the nature of education in the abstract. Moreover, in the exhortatory introduction to the volume, the editors encourage each reader to develop his or her own "strong reading" of the essays included, as if each writer were a lonely striver for fame and intellectual supremacy.

What does such a book imply that a student needs to learn in the composition class? Whatever it is, apparently it is something that either comes from inside, the inner strength to project an individualistic interpretation against the weight of tradition, or else it is an acquaintance with texts that do indeed encourage collective resistance but whose acquaintance one makes, as it were, by accident, by happening to pick one essay rather than another to read. The teacher who would leave the student's acquaintance with resources for resistance to chance might well be presumed by the student to feel little urgency about the student's becoming an active resister, a politically alert or critically conscious citizen.

I would suggest that we need to do two things. We need to develop readings from composition courses that are not simply pluralistic, but politically engaged in a variety of ways; and we need to exercise authority as teachers to try to get students into these texts even if they initially seem very uncongenial. Actually, I think that we already have ways to make good use of our authority. Thanks to the new pedagogy in composition studies, we already know a lot about how to help students read, discuss, and compose arguments. Among the many excellent models of practice we have here, indeed, I would include David Bartholomae, who has been profoundly influential on my own teaching. But what we need is to develop more critically stimulating reading material.

We have an opportunity here to articulate our own notion of cultural literacy, or rather to promote an alternative, critical literacy. We should not be hindered from doing so by a mistaken notion that it would be an oppressive exercise of power; we need not bow to the quietism inherent in many attacks by literary scholars on the truly oppressive literacy work of E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom. My own idea for the direction in which we might turn is to develop a set of readings drawn solely from American political documents.

I argue for political documents because, like many other critical pedagogues, I want my teaching to have political impact and I want schooling in general to work for radically democratic ends. Moreover, as I understand the nature of the United States, the country has never been united by anything other than political compacts. We are not racially homogeneous, we have not lived on the same terrain for centuries, we have not developed longstanding and widespread small-scale cultural responses to these homogene-

ities such as a cuisine, a religion, or a common set of kinship practices. We have never even all spoken the same tongue. We are not a people in the sense that the Navajo are, for example, or the French.

I would define “political documents” quite broadly, however, to take into account that the political history of the United States can be read as a story of negotiating difference in order for some union to be achieved. In my preferred narrative, there has never been a univocal discourse of democracy, but rather a series of contending voices. Thus I would select as political documents the Puritan John Winthrop’s disquisitions on natural versus civil liberty, for example, but also the Iroquois Nation constitution called *The White Roots of Peace*; the Declaration of Independence, in its several drafts, but also critical commentary on it by Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglass, and other African-American intellectuals. I would also urge that to a set of political documents presumed to have national importance, each region add more materials relating to its own history, ethnic patterns, geography, and so on.

Putting together such materials could become an exciting project involving students and faculty from a variety of disciplines, and also diverse people from our local communities. I personally favor the idea of a citizens’ committee selected by lot. At any rate, we would want to ensure that the selection process was not controlled by a few academic experts, but that academic experts could still contribute their expertise to the decision-making process. This might become the kind of critical pedagogical project that could be ongoing within a particular town and gown relationship.

What I like most about the idea, however, is that it might foster what Henry Giroux calls “democratic dreaming,” the encouragement of visions of solidarity among our diverse American groups. Chester Finn has recently noted that the move to pluralize the American college curriculum does not seem to have resulted in increased tolerance, but rather in a collection of nonoverlapping curricula, as he says, “each designed to tell the members of a particular group about themselves, their ancestors, their unique qualities, how superior they are, how oppressed they have been and how suspicious they should be of people unlike themselves” (A40). Finn calls instead for a “*constructive* multiculturalism” that would draw material from all the diverse groups and weave them into a curriculum that everyone would study, drawn together by the common values Finn confidently hopes to find amid the diversity. I might argue that at the very least, American cultures must all find some way to value dealing with difference—that is, I would want to

tell the story that what it means to be an American, of any variety, is to commit yourself to deal openly with difference. Finn says:

The combined cultures represented in the United States in 1990 are a richer blend than is available anywhere else in the world. But this is not something many students will come to understand on their own. Would it not be better for our educational institutions to find ways to convey both the richness and the unifying themes of this extraordinary cultural amalgam rather than to deepen the lines that divide us from one another? (A40)

My answer to his question would be yes. This is a project to which I will gladly contribute my authority.

Note

¹ This anatomy of power has been strongly influenced by my reading of Patricia Roberts's work on Hannah Arendt (unpublished), and my correspondence with her.

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