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# Literacy as Resistance; Resistance as Literacy: An Essay Review

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"…the truth…involves honesty, courage and a readiness to break ranks."
~ Terry Eagleton

Imagine a large-scale public education project operating on the theoretical and practical assumptions that: (1) we are confronted with multiple crises emerging from current institutional directions, historical trajectories, intellectual traditions, and structural requisites that urgently demand new sets of pedagogical priorities and actions rooted in new standards and new struggles for peace, substantive freedom and equality, ecological

rationality and social justice; (2) it is far more preferable to work to comprehend and construct systemic imperatives and institutional prerogatives dedicated to heightening the opportunities and likelihood of solving urgent economic, environmental and political crises rather than working to reproduce current arrangements that maximize possibilities for further global violence, environmental degradation, political authoritarianism, exploitation of workers, economic and social inequalities and injustices, and even "social suicide" (Kolko, 2006); (3) we are capable of promoting and producing participatory and protagonistic forms of democratic engagement at political and economic levels that work to satisfy human needs and nurture and nourish the full-development of human potentials in ways that allow that full development to feed back into social, economic, political and cultural reconstructions that further develop human capacities and satisfy human needs, (Lebowitz, 2006); and (4) commits to literacy as a moral and political imperative not only in terms of the development of linguistic literacy, but crucially in terms of the interrogation and development of critical forms of economic, social, historical, environmental and cultural literacies that also recognize and include the interpenetrating importance of visual, empathic, spatial, aesthetic, scientific and human rights literacies. (Powell, 1999)

Critical literacy, in multiple forms, offers one such pedagogical project grounded in forms of intellectual discipline, methodological rigor, moral commitment and political struggle that create opportunities and experiences for learners and teachers to construct, activate, and develop vital forms of individual and social agency capable of transforming words and worlds in substantively democratic directions. (Freire, 1998)

Critical literacy, in short, is an evolving set of processes offered for learning and teaching in the multiple domains and content areas of public education, inside and outside classrooms. Critical literacy recognizes the dialectical relationships between learners and teachers and individuals and society so that we are no less learners for being teachers and no less teachers for being learners, and no less social for being individual and no less individual for being social. Furthermore, it offers to learners/teachers reading and literacy theories and practices to develop modes of understanding, along with tools and skills, to make-meaningful, critique, understand and transform the complex relationships between: (1) power, authority, knowledge, ideology, historical trajectories, intellectual traditions, institutional structures and systemic imperatives; along with (2) words, multiple texts and worlds; and (3) work inside classrooms and responsibility as citizens outside classrooms. Critical literacy is committed to not only learning and teaching in order to understand how the world works but in order to make the world work in ways that are environmentally rational, peaceful, and substantively free and equal. It is designed to be: self-reflective and self-critical; informative, involving and inclusive; engaging and empowering in ways that open possibilities for meaningful and effective participation in, contributions to, learning from, and shaping the decisions, institutions and conditions that impact our lives individually and collectively; and to challenge us to resist the various

cultural and social forces that too often oppress, regulate and control our lives inside and outside schools.

*Critical Literacy as Resistance: Teaching for Social Justice Across the Secondary Curriculum* is an essential volume for learners and teachers in public education at all levels and in all content areas. It provides captivating, challenging, insightful and vital openings across a wide-array of interrogations of critical literacy theories and practices that on the one hand challenge the constraining norms, programs and assumptions currently constricting public education's abilities to function as a transformative democratic public sphere capable of educating toward resistance to injustices and inequalities, and on the other hand offer pathways for exploring and engaging crucial pedagogical projects rooted in social justice, ecological sustainability, peace and human rights that assist in problematizing and understanding the complex and interpenetrating relationships between learners/teachers, education and society. Crucially, critical literacy also explores what might be required to rationally and urgently address and overcome the multiple crises we now confront locally, nationally and globally, ranging from environmental destruction to WMD, from food crises and disease pandemics, and from political, economic and religious fundamentalisms to grotesque economic inequalities and forms of exploitation.

**Interpenetrations**

The edited volume is organized around three sections (along with a foreword, introduction and conclusion) linking critical reflection to critical action and critical theory to critical practice within and across multiple content areas both inside and outside schools: (1) "Problematizing Literacy Learning;" (2) Curricular and Pedagogical Possibilities;" (3) "Enactments of Critical Literacies."

At its core, critical literacy recognizes education as a complex socialization process in which there are interpenetrating relationships between learners/teachers, education and society so that we can say: learners/teachers and society are causes of education which in turn is a cause of society so that learners/teachers are causes of society as mediated by education (suggesting the importance of critical and transformative education projects); education and learners/teachers are causes of society which in turn causes learners/teaches so that education causes learners/teachers as mediated by society (suggesting the importance of critical and transformative social projects); and add that society and education are causes of learners/teachers which in turn cause education so that society causes education mediated by learners/teachers (suggesting the importance of forms of experience and knowledge that raise the critical consciousness of individuals in ways that link energy and enthusiasm to courage and sustained commitment). (Lewontin, 2000)

This is a complicated way of saying we make history and society, history and society make us, therefore we should be very careful about the kinds of history and society we make. Or, perhaps in language more Freirean: our being shapes our becoming, and our becoming shapes our being, therefore we should be very careful about what we become.

Critical literacy is deeply concerned about this complex set of relationships particularly at a time in which the histories and societies that have been made now threaten our very existence, and thus call for large-scale radical transformations ideologically, materially and institutionally. A radically contextualized critical reading of interpenetrating multiple texts and the world requires that we understand the important relationships between how, what and why we read, learn and teach, how we connect and apply these processes to the knowledge, histories and experiences learners and teachers bring to pedagogical spaces while also circulating the pedagogical theories and practices through reflections upon and interrogations of the power relationships, institutional prerogatives, hidden and visible agendas, knowledge constructions, systemic projections, and historical events and trajectories that condition our ideological positions, material realities, and social possibilities.

In short, as Laraine Wallowitz makes clear in an introduction (pp. 2-10) that provides a useful overview of how we might further define critical literacy, "critical literacy interrogates texts in order to identify and challenge social constructs, ideologies, underlying assumptions, and the power structures that intentionally and unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities and injustices." (p. 2) As such, critical literacy includes, but moves beyond, simply decoding printed words to examine other influential textual fields such as films, television, advertisements, art, music, food production and consumption, clothing, the Internet, corporate structures, etc., in order to include what too often have been marginalized groups, ideologies, and histories, as well as often silenced cultural imperatives and textual constructs. Critical literacy is grounded in examining the dialectical relationships between learners/teachers, education and society in order to promote and produce active individual and social agents capable of intervening in the world to carry out transformations that liberate from oppression, inequality and injustice and also free us to make rational (and ethical) judgments regarding human futures under threat of annihilation.

Following from Paulo Freire's problem-posing approach to pedagogy the book evolves from and revolves around a series of crucial questions grounded in critical literacy theory and practice while planting seeds for further and better questions and applications. For example, "What does a critical classroom look like?" "How [especially under times of deskilling, constrictions and fragmentation] do teachers incorporate both standards and critical pedagogy?" "How do teachers incorporate activism in and out of the classroom? How can literacy continue to be used as a vehicle for resistance?" (p. 4), "What are possible [multiple] readings of [a particular] text?" (p. 227) How can learners and teachers use multiple lenses in order to see differently, analyze more profoundly, and

comprehend more widely in order to gain a wider and deeper understanding of school culture, popular culture, and the powerful institutional structures and prerogatives that bear down on our lives? How can we explore the complicated relationships between critical literacies in particular content areas and the general development of individual and social knowledge in education and culture, etc.? How can we use history as a way to understand why things are the way they are in order to construct viable pathways to alternatives? What must be done to ensure that the critical work in which we engage is educating and not alienating?

Critical literacy makes clear that there is no position of neutrality in education. Any claim to neutrality is a stake in a position, i.e. refusing to take a position is taking a position that supports that against which one is not taking a position. For example, if person X claims to be neutral regarding torture, X's lack of a stand against torture is a support of torture on the basic grounds that we are morally responsible for the predictable consequences of our actions *and inactions* (to the extent we can predict those consequences). "Remaining neutral-or silent-in the face of discrimination always condones the behavior of the oppressor." (p. 5)

"Choosing to create a classroom free from controversial topics does not situate the teacher as impartial or objective," (p. 4) it simply positions the classroom as one that is partial to some other objectives, for example, a corporate delivered and business oriented curriculum and testing program within an increasingly militarized culture and economically unequal society in the US. Here we might reflect on why it is "controversial" to promote peace, social justice and more equitable distributions of wealth, income and resources in many U.S. schools, but not "controversial" to support international military aggression and a Pentagon-centered economy, not to mention the brutalizing lessons and prevailing notions regularly taught in economics and business classes that support structures and imperatives that lead to mass human suffering, poverty, misery and despair, along with grotesque levels of inequality, on a regular basis. Having the willingness to "break ranks" with prevailing notions, the courage to challenge the conventional wisdom and the fearlessness to confront and resist the stultifying standards and imperatives of the powerful will always be accompanied by perils, but we are reaching a critical condition in history where not taking these sorts of risks in the interests of producing processes of critical education that are humanizing and humanizing processes of education that are critical carry far greater risks.[1]

Critical literacy works to create pedagogical spaces: *in which* learners and teachers are challenged to critique the "common sense" of the culture in order to confront and overcome trends toward depoliticization, de-moralization and de-historicization: *through which* the public can express its voices, concerns, views, and educated and mobilizing

[1] Given the global nature of most of these problems, there is also now an element of self-interest involved in working to constrain and overcome those forces and institutions intent on carrying out assaults against the natural environment and human societies.

hopes, dreams and desires, while simultaneously subjecting them to critical interrogations around the social, cultural and historical contexts in which they have been constructed along with how they are positioned by virtue of matters of race, gender, class, ideology, etc, (Simon, 1992); and, *out of which* learners and teachers can emerge as empowered workers, critical agents and engaged citizens capable of transforming in substantively democratic directions the social, political and economic institutions that condition our lives. (Giroux, 2007) Crucial to the creation of such pedagogical spaces is critical self-reflection on theory and practice in the sense that we must regularly "read [our] own classrooms as spaces of unequal power relationships, conflicting ideologies, [as well as spaces of] resistance and possibility" where solidarity, democracy, educated hope and equality can be examined and practiced. (p. 5).

**Problematizing Literacy Learning and Learning Problematizing Literacies**

In taking up the issue of "Problematizing Literacy Learning," Cara Mulcahy takes on the "tangled web" between "critical literacy and critical thinking," Kurt Love examines "critical literacy in science," Elizabeth de Freitas engages "critical mathematics education," and Tracy Hogan and John Craven address the use of science in developing the public voices of students.

Mulcahy (pp. 15-27) scrutinizes the relationship between critical literacy and critical thinking by focusing on how they compare on matters of "fair-mindedness, problem solving, point of view and questioning," and what is their relevance for content area education. Critical literacy challenges the assumption that we can be "fair-minded," i.e. that it is possible to remain neutral and unbiased because ideas and positions are always embedded in various systems of power and thus directive and formative with particular interests, values and goals in mind. Critical literacy recognizes contingency as a crucial component in rational thought and evaluative reflection, a component that demonstrates that while we may not necessarily be incorrect we will always be incomplete and unfinished in our knowledge and understanding. The incompleteness is a springboard for working through contradictions and making sense of how we are positioned and conditioned by structural, ideological and material forces.

While Mulcahy suggests "from the standpoint of critical literacy, many possible inferences, interpretations, and conclusions may emerge from an analysis-with no one being more correct than another," we should guard against believing that all ideas are relative or equally correct or that an opinion is valid simply because someone has it. Some ideas are relatively right and others are horribly wrong, and we should hold onto our capacity to tell the difference so we can work to improve those that are relatively right and overcome those that are horribly wrong. While we might tolerate the right to express ideas that are absurd, nonsensical or even offensive, we need not consider them legitimate or acceptable, and we must be willing to take a position in defense of humanity and against dehumanization. While certain wings of postmodern critical literacy fear the

notion of "truth," we should not allow notions of relativity to undermine basic realities, for example, when 10,000 workers lose their jobs, life for all too many people has become more perilous, or when cruise missiles explode in houses filled with people destruction and trauma will ensue. Critical thinking is important but critical literacy asks: critical thinking about what, under whose management, with what goals, in what direction, in whose interests, and with what likely consequences? Surely there are plenty of "critical thinkers" on Wall Street and at the Pentagon (we needn't tarry on the "true" consequences of their actions).

Critical literacy advises that questions be posed that interrogate normalized systemic arrangements and challenge social practices that are too often naturalized such as maximizing profits at all costs, torturing, exploiting global workers, oppressing women and people of color, wrecking the environment or engaging in monstrously destructive international military aggression. In short, problem posing from a critical literacy standpoint questions assumptions, unpacks agendas, challenges conventional wisdom, interrogates dominant discourses, and cultivates doubt, while holding power and authority accountable in the context of encouraging popular agency and empowerment.
All content areas are now zones of literacy education ("for or against something or someone" (Freire, 1998)), and critical literacy education includes examinations and explorations of the multiple literacies that condition our lives inside and outside schools. Literacy is no longer simply "skill-based" but includes discerning reflections upon processes that shape, inform, direct and construct values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, desires, identities, allegiances, aspirations, and ways of being and becoming in, with and through the world. Critical literacy thus relates and connects learning and teaching in particular classrooms to learning and teaching in other classrooms to learning and teaching in social, political, cultural and economic worlds outside of classrooms and in this crucial sense is a border-crossing approach to education. (p. 26)

While critical literacy, like critical thinking, involves analysis, evaluation, critique, cultivation of the intellect and creativity it is also grounded in "praxis," i.e. the connections between practice, reflections on practice and actions that emerge from practice and reflection, with the goal of social transformations that address and overcome discrimination, injustice, violence, ignorance, oppression and inequality. While critical thinking is often self-directed, critical literacy is both self and socially directed (and dialectical), always a political and ethical practice, and regularly enmeshed in interrogations of the connections between intellectual cultivation, analysis and evaluation and the historical, political, economic and social contexts in which these occur and develop. Critical literacy is guided by: "disruptions of the commonplace" in ways that challenge dominant discourses in order to move from what Freire calls "common sense knowledge," (i.e. the knowledge we share in common because of the power of hegemonic discourses to shape our thinking and actions) to "epistemological knowledge," (i.e. knowledge that is liberated from the bureaucratizing constraints and estranging limitations imposed by dominant ideologies and material structures and that opens

possibilities for engagements with the social as historical and social subjects capable of learning from history, changing the present and inventing the future while working to produce conditions for the full flourishing and fulfillment of our individual and collective multiple individualities); "the interrogation of multiple viewpoints," in order to engage our contradictions and to develop a wider and deeper understand of the world, our place and roles in the world, and the multiple ways in which knowledge of the world and words is and can be produced, interpreted, grasped and applied; "a focusing on social, political and economic issues," in order to develop an awareness and understanding of the complex interpenetrations and interconnectedness of the systems in, through and out of which our lives are lived and constructed; and developing agency in order to engage in transformative social actions in pursuit of social justice, ecological rationality and peace. (Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, 2002) (p. 18)

Kurt Love (pp. 29-46) challenges the passive, standardizing and subordinating receiver model of reading too often accepted by learners and teachers operating under corporate, state and locally imposed ideologies and training models and explores critical literacy in, and applies critical literacy to, frequently assumed "bias-free science texts" by encouraging a problematzing approach in which "critical readers are consciously active in the processes of: questioning [and analyzing] the author's agenda and purpose for writing the text;" interrogating their "own processes of incorporating information;" exploring, investigating and applying multiple viewpoints; examining and locating scientific knowledge and texts within the economic, political and cultural power relationships in which they were produced and circulated; and crucially, "acting in ways that reshape and mold [new discoveries and understandings] with the thoughts, prior knowledge, [histories] and identity" learners/teachers bring to the pedagogical engagements. (pp. 29-31)

Critical literacy in this instance encourages learners/teachers to produce opportunities and experiences in and through which to "critique, ponder, question, and reject concepts," realize that scientific theories, knowledge and contentions are always time-bound, frequently reflective of sources of power and funding, never neutral and concretized, and always capable of being reexamined, reformulated, reoriented, and re-conceptualized. For example, in the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge in the hard and soft sciences as imposed on public education, the goal is "not to produce radical students who challenge systems of power," (p. 32) nor is it the goal of systems of power in the larger society to produce radical schools dedicated to creating conditions in which learners/teachers can develop as transformational public intellectuals capable of engaging in critical political activities inside or outside science that might, for example, challenge reductionist views of humanity's positioning with nature that paints nature as an object to be dominated and exploited rather than as a source of life with which we live in mutual and reciprocal relationships, or work to temper the destruction of the environment in ways that impede the pursuit of power, profits and privilege in order to construct ecologically rational and sustainable forms of engagement with nature. Rather schools

(reflecting objectives of larger power systems) are generally in the business of producing docile, passive and subservient teachers and students imbued with the dominant corporate and militarizing ideologies who will obediently carry out the agendas set by the centers of power and authority. In response to this general trend, critical literacy projects present occasions for challenging and disrupting political, economic, cultural, techno-centric, military and social power structures. One form of disruption involves the connecting and recognition of ideology to technology in order to see how, for example: militarizing ideologies produce destructive technologies that brutalize, traumatize and destroy life; profit-maximizing ideologies replace workers with robotic technology thereby increasing the immiseration of workers; centralizing-power ideologies combined with privatizing and profit-geared ideologies produce alienating technologies that favor truncated forms of communication (such as text-messaging, distance education, and email) over oral traditions and face-to-face engagements along with isolating forms of transportation over public forms of transportation, and thus undermine opportunities for public engagements with and experiences of democracy. (p. 39)

"The greatest action that a teacher can do," Love argues, "is to help students disrupt power imbalances, promote peace, and create ecological sustainability." (p. 33) This sort of disruption is often grounded in critical questioning, the absence of which points to the disappearance of public spaces and social opportunities where public citizens can develop the sorts of critical mentalities and complex thought-processes that emerge from regular opportunities to engage with others in dialogue, discussion, inquiry, reflection, research and debate and thus make substantively democratic politics possible.
Elizabeth de Freitas (pp. 47-64) moves beyond mathematics as simply a set of drills for mastering skills into the lived experience of real life connections between discerning forms of mathematics, citizenship, agency, caring and social justice where math practitioners recognize and utilize the powerful tools math provides to ethically meet real world needs. For Freitas, math should be reconceived "as a site of political power, ethical contestation, and moral outrage" where the school curriculum is "more inclusive (to challenge the continuing correlations between math achievement and socio-economic status), more playful (to awaken the sense of joy that can be derived from the work of the mind that leads to discovery, understanding and transformation), and more relevant," so that math is a springboard for thinking and imagining differently, troubling the current arrangements, and pursuing what is socially and politically possible in order to construct alternatives to "what is." (p. 49).

Freitas brilliantly critiques the "Consortium of Mathematics and its Applications'" (COMAP) yearly contest of math problems for students that purport to "capture the messiness of 'real life' problems." While the problems presented by COMAP capture some important essence of the complex realities of the physical world, they are typically without critical "ethical or political context," and operate on unchallenged assumptions, for example, that profit-making, and its concomitant exploitation of nature and people, is acceptable. The unfortunate lesson for many of the participants is that the "real" world of

math is disconnected from the world of political and moral costs and consequences. Freitas provides examples of reworking the COMAP problems to make them more critical by, for instance, setting up questions that require considerations of multiple perspectives (i.e. who are the winners and losers, victims and non-victims, owners and workers, etc.), with varied solutions. For instance, when COMAP calls for completing the task of building a resort in an island community that requires destroying a mountain "as quickly as possible" one could add, to make the problem more critical, "while minimizing the damage to the local environment," thus linking questions about business efficiency to ethical costs and consequences.

Freitas then provides very useful critical reformulations and re-contextualizations of standard math textbook word problems that offer models for further questioning and reformulation, as well as ethical applications, that assist learners and teachers in seeing into, through and beyond the political, economic and cultural biases very often present in math problems. In order to challenge the biases frequently present in math problems one might offer something along the lines of the following that compares two approaches to a similar issue: by asking students to calculate profits at a Disney store, (for example, if the store makes 25% profits on every $24.00 Disney shirt sold and the store sells 600 shirts on average per month, what is the yearly profits coming from the $24.00 shirts?) a textbook is not only promoting Disney products in the classroom but also reinforcing the idea that profit-making is good. One could demonstrate a different lesson by examining how much women in Haiti are paid per hour to produce Disney shirts and learn something crucial about exploitation and wage slavery and the lives and work conditions of those who make the products we consume. Suppose women in Haiti earn 50 cents per hour and they work 12 hour days, seven days per week while producing ten shirts per hour that sell on the US market for $24 each. The women earn $6.00 per day, or $42.00 per week, or roughly $2,200 per year. In the first 10 hours of labor, on the first day of work for the year, they produce enough shirts to bring in $2,400 on the US market, i.e. more than enough to pay their wages for the entire year. Excluding other costs incurred by the owners (shipping, electricity, materials, marketing, etc.), it can be suggested that after the first day of work, the women are slaves for the rest of the year, receiving no compensation for the product of their labor, thus providing a crucial lesson in how wage-slavery and exploitation of working people is perpetrated while profits soar for the owners. This lesson can then be applied to local wage-slave work in which students may be engaged, for example, at fast-food restaurants, etc. A number of questions are thus generated: why is this form of slavery continuing and permitted; what can be done to overcome it and construct conditions of work that are fair and fulfilling; what is required to produce conditions of local and international solidarity? Challenging "the public perception that mathematics belongs to an abstract realm…disconnected from the world of language and politics," (p. 56) these sorts of questions open up possibilities for overcoming math as a disengagement from the social to move into math as an engagement with the social that also encourage math learners and teachers to cross borders into social studies to explore the history of working people struggling for rights,

i.e. for better wages, hours, conditions, democratic control of the workplace and the economy, etc., and also into literature classes where working class poetry, short-stories, films and novels can be engaged. (For example, the films of Ken Loach and John Sayles often take up these issues.)

Tracy Hogan and John Craven (pp. 65-84) address the dangers of fundamentalist approaches to science, politics and society that attempt to "control the beliefs and actions of others; manipulate values held by individuals and society; censure knowledge and information; control which questions can and should be asked; and dictate modes of inquiry." (p. 66) Purportedly "objective science" is never far removed from funding sources, political agendas and the ideologies of power, and it is therefore incumbent on learners and teachers, as a precondition for creative thought, to develop habits of inquiry that persistently question authority and prevailing wisdom as part of regular attempts to comprehend, critique and challenge "aspects of the scientific enterprise…that are working against inclusivity and open democracy." (p. 67) Theories, scientific, or otherwise, should never claim infallibility but should be accompanied by the humility that experience teaches and grounded in the recognition of the contingent nature of knowledge and ideas. Absolutes are inconsistent with rational inquiry and analytic progress, produce dangerous illusions regarding conceptions of human behavior and social development, and are counterproductive in terms of constructing useable and credible social alternatives. Economic, political, religious or military power and authority should never be considered a legitimate source of "truth" regarding scientific, pedagogical or social theories. Too often the interests of economic and political power undermine explanatory power and serve to justify actions and policies of those who rule at the expense of everyone else. While we should not, of course, simply dismiss the constructive and useful power of scientific knowledge and understanding in addressing social problems and in helping to comprehend how things work, we should also not forget its destructive capacities that too often undermine how things work. There are always elements of blindness and insight in any human enterprise. Scientific knowledge can assist in treating some diseases, but at the same time the diseases might largely be a consequence of the application of scientific knowledge to the altering of the environment that feeds back to undermine human health (most cancers are environmentally linked). Science constructs airplanes that carry people to new places that can make life more interesting, but also airplanes that drop bombs that destroy life and make it more horrific.

A critical literacy approach to science would challenge the idea that science produces final truths about which all scientists agree, or that science is not a diverse field of multiple sciences (it is), and suggest that scientific "truths" are contingent, always open to critique and further examination, and that any form of absolutism (because it virtually guarantees impercipience and the repetition of errors) is largely irrelevant to constructing useful social and pedagogical theories or building better societies. We should also develop the habit of mind to ask questions about the nature of knowledge and about the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge in order to reveal biases

(political, economic, and cultural) that are typically present in science and elsewhere.

**Curricular and Pedagogical Possibilities**

In addressing pedagogical possibilities Rachel Matson examines notions of tolerance in anti-homophobia literacy methods, Lisa Hochtritt explores the role of graffiti in art education, Jane Bogatz and Kevin Colleary, engage historical thinking skills by asking "what color was Joan of Arc's hair?," and Bruce Castellano takes on human rights issues through an "Increase the Peace" approach to critical literacy.

William Sloane-Coffin notes that universities are often tolerant but also passive institutions and that is a dangerous combination because too often the consequence is that we learn to tolerate the intolerable. (Sloane-Coffin, 1999) Rachel Mattson (pp. 87-100) takes up "anti-homophobia education" and "the limitations of tolerance as a social justice goal" (p. 92) by locating the struggles and contributions of pacifist and Civil Rights activist Bayard Rustin within larger social, political and historical engagements. It is designed to assist learners and teachers in understanding not only discrimination against gays but crucially "how power works" (p. 90) and how too narrow a focus can lead to a tolerance of grave injustices against individuals and society. For example, when the US Navy dropped a bomb on Afghanistan emblazoned with the hate-slogan "high jack this fags," a photograph of which was circulated by the AP, the response from some influential segments of the gay and lesbian community noted how this "reinforce[s] the ideas of hatred and division that our nation seeks to defend against [and] we must not emulate the intolerance of our enemies." While the response rightfully called out this form of intolerance and hate, by omission it tolerated and thus supported the U.S. aggression and the militarism and violent forms of masculinity and destruction that accompany military aggression and indoctrination, and by commission it assumes that dropping bombs on people is not "hateful and divisive." When tolerance is reduced to learning how to be polite so as not to be divisive and internalizing narrow codes of acceptance to minimize bigotry (both important goals that should not be minimized), institutions of power are too frequently left outside the investigation and the structural causes of the derogation and degradation of fellow humans are left intact.

A critical literacy approach to this event would work to locate a problem IN the system (homophobia) to the larger problems OF the system (militarism, domination, and aggression operating in an economic system that produces exploitation, discrimination and inequality). By not locating the events in the larger problems OF the system, the call for tolerance of gay people "misses the opportunity to provoke conversations about the complex mechanics of power in U.S. culture and politics" and this absence points to a need for more complex examinations and dialogues "about the meanings, presumptions, methods, and intentions of anti-homophobia education." (p. 91) Senator, and white-

supremacist, Strom Thurmond attempted to vilify Rustin, first as "a communist," and then as a "sexual pervert [i.e. homosexual]." The first attack failed, but the latter attack garnered publicity which generated an outpouring of solidarity with Rustin from the Civil Rights Movement. Thurmond was using these attacks on Rustin in an attempt to discredit the Civil Rights Movements and undermine the 1963 March of Washington – a standard (mal)practice in US politics and culture that attempts to collapse the social into the personal, the public into the private, and the collective into the individual. Using these events to draw vital links between the repression of individual rights and desires and larger institutional formations rooted in forms of domination, violence, discrimination and control, opens crucial questions about the links between human and civil rights, power, hierarchy, struggle and social transformation. Threats against gays also "threaten the liberties" of all (p. 90), and these combined threats point to the need to invest tolerance-based education with active and activating forms of critical literacy that guard against forms of passivity in the face of injustice that condition us to learn to tolerate the intolerable.

Critical literacy often asks how we can bring the world of learning and experience outside the classroom inside the classroom. For example, what are the "events, practices, activities, ideologies, discourses, and identities" (p. 101) that can be explored to connect student lives to curriculum and to encourage the contributions students bring to pedagogical spaces to be honored and employed in learning and teaching processes? Lisa Hochtritt (101-118) brings the public space of artwork outside (i.e. "art that is present on the streets, walls, billboards, parks, or even on the sidewalks") into the public space of artwork inside through the study and creation of graffiti. (p. 109) Consider the following questions: why does public art so rarely make its way into public education? Who determines what is "public" and what is "art" and how do these questions impact how we might think about the role of public education in creating public art and public art in creating public education? These questions open into other questions, for example, what is art and who decides what is legitimate and illegitimate, and what do we mean by "public" in public education? Why are some artists and art forms marginalized and others celebrated and mainstreamed, and how does that maintain the status quo both inside and outside the world of art? (p. 109)

As an exercise in opening these questions to further consideration an expanded notion of "reading" can be introduced to students. If "reading" basically means "making sense of things," endless possibilities arise for reading on the simple grounds that we are constantly trying to make sense of something. Hochtritt asks students to literally take note (in a written or visual journal) of what they see when they come to and leave school and "read" it. This engagement with the "bombardment of images and items they confront each day" (on walls, billboards, buses, pavements, in advertisements, magazines, computers, television, clothing, etc.) opens critically literate opportunities for deciphering, deconstruction and reconstruction, i.e. it creates "reading" experiences that offer pathways to making sense of how power operates to shape realities, direct attention,

construct identities, position perceptions, inculcate values, silence certain perspectives, sell products and lifestyles, etc., and for producing and inhabiting forms of historical presence and agency capable of forging new and original publicly oriented realities. Portrayals of the past and present, along with visions of the future, are never free of bias but always directive and formative. Therefore, as Jane Bolgatz and Kevin Colleary argue (pp. 120-131), learning and "teaching critical historical thinking skills" are vital for fostering participatory, protagonistic and critical political attitudes and engagements that assist in understanding how, within various social, economic, cultural and political contexts, we are positioned by historical texts and we position historical texts. To help students understand the fluid nature of historical interpretation, they use Joan of Arc, burned at the stake in 1431 at the age of 19, as a symbolic figure that has been portrayed and can be read from multiple perspectives, for example, as a transgendered warrior, as a nationalist figure to promote anti-immigrant attitudes in France, or as a Warrior for God. (p. 120) Central questions that drive this critical literacy pedagogy of historical searching and researching, include: How do learners and teachers use historical evidence: to make sense of the past and present and to imagine futures; to understand how history is constructed with particular goals and interests in mind; and, to construct original historical interpretations that remain open to dialogue, debate, critique and discussion?

Through the critical examination of multiple historical textual sources, including films, paintings, children's literature, primary source documents, theatrical works, etc., the authors aid learners and teachers so they "can realize that the telling of history-and of current events-is always a construction," conditioned by relationships of power, ideology and authority operating at "particular times and places" that must always be critiqued for the positions and biases they present, for the agendas they make visible and also the agendas they keep hidden that always "position us as viewers, readers, and political beings." (p. 128-130) Key components involved in the critical processes of examining history include interrogating authors ("sourcing"), scrutinizing the conditions and circumstances in which authors write-including one's own-("contextualizing"), and comparing texts from multiple sources ("corroborating") (p. 130).

This sort of active engagement with history in the present is decisive for constructing and answering basic critical questions such as: why are things the way they are and how did they get to be that way? When historians (all of us), discover that things are the way they are because they got that way and not because they have to be that way, it is a short extrapolation to conclude that the future will be the way it is because it gets that way not because it has to be that way, and this basic understanding introduces what Paulo Freire calls "the cornerstone of the education adventure," i.e. "the unfinished nature of our historical [social, cultural, intellectual, political, economic and biological] presence in the world and our consciousness of [the interpenetrating nature of that presence and] that unfinishedness." (Freire, 1998) Therein rest the roots of political agency and our possibilities for producing historical circumstances that respect human rights, construct global peace, commit to ecological rationality, and overcome the multiple perils humanity

now confronts.

Elie Wiesel suggests that the greatest peril facing humanity is indifference. (p. 145) That *may* be the case, but the question would be "what is producing the indifference?" With that question, we can work to locate the institutional and historical sources of the purported indifference. The inculcation and acceptance of the hopeless and stultifying neoliberal mantra "there is no alternative" may be at the core of what Wiesel calls "indifference," but this "indifference" is more likely frustration, alienation and ignorance linked to the general failure of public education, at all levels, inside and outside schools, to provide opportunities for critically analyzing and understanding power structures and systemic imperatives, developing senses of solidarity, resistance and agency, and exploring and constructing serious, credible and sustainable alternatives to the current arrangements that are rooted in profit seeking, destructive creation, and the concentration of power that leave most people on the outside with no voice in or impact on policy formation. In short, the peril is less 'indifference" and more a crisis of citizenship in dire need of address. It is not that people do not care; it is more that people do not know what to do, individually, and crucially collectively, in order to transform their frustrations, confusions, silencing and disappointments into empowering forms of agency, clarity, inspiration, and into economic and political institutions that promote and are grounded in substantively democratic citizenship.

If wars, aggression, the spread of weapons around the world, and the increasing likelihood of state and non-state terror are among the greatest perils causing the most frustration, fear and confusion (and perhaps "indifference"), a critical literacy project dedicated to "increasing the peace" (ITP) is urgently needed. Bruce Castellano (pp. 133-148), "through the lens of human rights issues," (p. 133) presents just such a project where students become teachers of other students in multimedia workshops around matters of prejudice, bullying, acceptance of difference, genocide and peace that frequently connect with national and international human rights organizations so that learners/teachers have opportunities to interact with and learn "from advocates, activists, and victims of human rights offenses." (p. 134) Castellano offers a detailed overview of the difficulties (from working with different emotional, psychological, social, academic and age levels in confronting often very difficult matters of human rights violations and abuse, to fitting ITP projects into increasingly standardized school formats, to meeting the creative needs of students while maintaining an organized structure, to providing students comfort during periods of disagreement and discomfort, to apathy and indifference, to working the program into various content areas, to dealing with hostile or oblivious adults, etc.), rewards (learners and teachers develop resources, knowledge, information, compassion and understanding, as well as modes of support, involvement and solidarity, to take on human rights issues locally and globally), and the multiple steps associated with an ITP curriculum. Castellano demonstrates the workings of the student-based, critical literacy ITP model by incorporating Wiesel's short novel "Night." The model is both specific and general enough to be adopted across a wide-array of content areas and

human rights concerns in informed, directed, exploratory and creative ways. Of particular import are ITP programs in US public education (age appropriate at all levels) that look carefully, honestly and critically at the horrors generated by US power's long-term and current commitment to global violence, militarism, imperialism, torture, the Pentagon-system, the spread of weapons, and the perpetration, funding and support for human rights violations, exploitation and oppression. (Herman, 1999; Blum, 2003) The goals of such a program would include historical systemic understanding, comprehension of the connections between economic, political and military structures, goals, interests and policies, the public pedagogy of militarism, and, most important, ending these abuses and abominations and transforming the machine of military aggression, violence and destruction into a global source of peace, care and creativity.

**Enactments of Critical Literacies**

Resistance oriented critical literacies are enacted in Laraine Wallowitz's interrogation of "Resisting the White Gaze," Rita Verma's move "Beyond Tacos and Pizza" in World Language Classrooms, Robert Petrone's and Carlin Borsheim's look at multimodal and multimedia texts engaged in English classrooms, and Alice Pennisi's activating take on "Visual Critical Literacy" and collaborative art making.

Toni Morrison's novel "The Bluest Eye," is employed by Wallowitz to examine, critique, challenge and work to overcome poverty, sexism, class divisions, the ugly power of racism to undermine lives, and the ways in which films and other media formations create subservient identities, exploit consumers, construct corporate friendly realities, and shape maximization of consumption attitudes. Matters are complicated because Wallowitz, a white professor from an elite college, is brought into a Harlem public school to teach a humanities course to "at-risk youth." In attempting to explore the impact of white corporate dominated media on the identity formation of black and Latino students, she is concerned that her status as a white "professor" might on the one hand silence students and translate as "*the* authority" on materials shared with the students, and on the other hand it might discredit her on the grounds "how can a white professor know anything about the lives of inner city black and Latino students?" These tensions were not ignored but engaged through dialogues that explored and acknowledged different struggles, histories and material realities and were mindful of how "it is not 'safer' to pretend we are all alike but to work to understand how we are all very much different in the context of being the same, and all the same in contexts of being very much different. Incorporating the work of bell hooks, and Plato's "The Cave" allegory, conflicts and diversities of experience, culture, ethnicity, aesthetics, comfort, fear and education create numerous opportunities for participants to engage in critical reflections and dialogue concerning multiple struggles of how we are positioned and directed around "gender, race, class, and sexuality" (p. 154) and how our realities are often manipulated by dominant media forms that produce "unrealistic ideal[s] in the name of profit" along with "uncertainty, anxiety, and disappointment" as a consequence of the regular exploitation of

our insecurities (many of them productions of the media in the first place). (p. 159-160)

Central to such critical engagements that press beyond the too often stultifying and boring standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing is: (1) interrogations of "the white gaze," i.e. examinations of the power of dominant media forms to condition social realities and cultural imaginings, and, to function as a colonizing and oppressive machine that "affects the identity formation of adolescent black youth" (p. 154); and, (2) the development of tools and knowledge to see through and beyond "the gaze" in order to be active agents of resistance in the production of emancipated identities and democratic social structures inside and outside classrooms.

Language is one way we represent, control and understand history. When one hears the phrase "Thomas Edison built the electric plant in Sunbury, PA," or "Carnegie built the steel mills," or "Steinbrenner built the new Yankee stadium," there are a number of misrepresentations present that direct our thinking in the interest of a society dominated by finance and concentrated power, and that hide crucial parts of working class history. Edison, Carnegie and Steinbrenner did not build anything. They may have provided some of the finance (the rest, typically most, came from public funding), but their wealth was created by working people in the first place. In order to build electrical plants, steel mills, and stadiums, working people toiled, carried out the construction, made real the vision of architects, and were typically exploited and abused in the process: brick layers, electricians, woodworkers, steel forgers, carpenters, plumbers, mechanics, ditch-diggers, heavy equipment operators, miners, truck drivers, etc. Absent this basic knowledge we might, especially as young children, assume that Edison, Carnegie and Steinbrenner are not men but Gods capable of single-handedly putting up monumental structures. It is knowledge that reinforces class-hierarchies, subservience and domination and assumes that money builds rather than people. In order to forge new and better worlds, it is crucial that we remember that working people have already constructed the worlds we inhabit and are capable of reconstructions. It is foundational knowledge for challenging the assumption that it is the "great men of history" who built the world, for producing forms of solidarity essential for overcoming class inequalities and exploitation, and for liberation from forms of language that continue to oppress. Rita Verna (pp. 165-177) takes on oppressive language forms in order to demonstrate how "language is more than [simply] a mode of communication or a symbolic practice that produces real effects; it is also a site of contestation and struggle." (Giroux, 2009)

She offers a number of case studies that work to construct resistance discourses in language classrooms by examining relationships between "language and power, prejudice and social justice," and integrating critical interrogations of global economic and political geographies to challenge misperceptions, open new perceptions, deconstruct negative beliefs, demystify stereotypes, and link all to humanizing and liberating processes of reading and literacy education. (p. 167) She argues that the "life, history and culture

behind the words" provide openings for critical discussions and understandings of class, race and gender issues that challenge presuppositions and notions about other "cultural groups and language[s]" and thus bring life to world language classrooms by allowing us to experience the "hopes, dreams, [struggles] and visions of others around the world." (pp. 165-166)

Such interventions around complex issues that include immigration, terrorism, resources, wars, cultural differences, religions, class exploitation, etc., are an important component for challenging hegemonic discourses, tapping into the "rich diversity" of human realities, overcoming oppressive forms of caricature and dehumanization that are all too prevalent in media representations of other cultures, and developing alternative knowledge for a better world. Knowledge of and for a better world requires we develop an understanding of the lives of others, their struggles, their needs, their histories, their potentials, and ways we can exercise various forms of border-crossing solidarity in order to mutually contribute to satisfying individual and social needs, and developing individual and social potentials on pathways toward substantive forms of global equality and freedom. (Lebowitz, 2006)

If our work as public educators/public intellectuals calls for the production of pedagogical experiences that are "meaningful and relevant," and that "empower students to be active [and solidaristic] citizens equipped not only to [critically] consume [multiple] texts but also to [critically] produce [multiple] texts of their own for their own purposes" (p. 205) in order to move beyond acceptance without questioning, subjugation without resistance, oppression without struggle, indoctrination without challenge, and the inculcation of false and powerful ideologies without seeking truth, how is this accomplished in an increasingly stultifying and standardizing approach to schooling? Robert Petrone and Carlin Borsheim offer critical literacy projects that assist learners and teachers in thinking and acting differently in the face of confronting a standard tenth grade curriculum that calls for "a personal narrative," a novel, and "a research paper." They expand the boundaries to include approaches to personal narratives that take into account matters of "race, class, gender, privilege, and the status quo," (p. 184) and assist learners in understanding how identities are shaped, beliefs are formed and ideas are positioned by powerful cultural, historical and social forces and contexts. This "multiple lens" approach is extended into interpretations of Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" that circulate through other texts including Woody Guthrie's song "This Land is Your Land," and Langston Hughes poem "Let America be America Again," and various myths of "The American Dream" that offer opportunities to examine social class conflicts, civil rights issues, the chasm between what society promises and what people are able to achieve, and realities of equality and inequality in education and the larger society.

They include the editorial "The Burka and the Bikini" (Brumberg and Jackson, 2003) as an example of a "critical lens" exploration of contemporary society that points to various forms of social and cultural pressure women experience that force conformity to

standards and ideals imposed by powerful groups or institutions. This opens opportunities for "turning the school and [larger] community into a text" to be searched and researched. Critical discoveries and questions (assisted by viewing and discussing documentary films) ensue about the militarization of education, food over-production and over-consumption, the role of Channel One in classrooms, the dungeonification of special education, and the cultural construction of notions of masculinity and femininity through multiple media formations including advertisements, music videos, magazines, etc.

These critical projects reveal that students not only "demonstrate preexisting critical literacy" that has often been suppressed by the normalizing and bureaucratizing-of-the-mind features of schooling, they also "develop emergent critical literacy," that frequently elicits excited responses from students as they begin to make visible what was previously invisible, understand with greater depth and wider scope the workings of the world, and see themselves as critical agents capable of making sense of complexities and using that sense to constructively intervene. Additionally, students also may "resist the enactment of critical literacy" because, as Roger Simon has expressed, "to go beyond one's existing knowledge and identities constitutes no small degree of risk." (Simon, p. 62) Coherence may be challenged, a fear of failure may emerge, the responsibility to engage new terminology may feel oppressive, and one may be marginalized by those who have not adopted a critical approach. It is thus vital for educators to be astutely aware of the risks inherent in a critical approach. Acknowledgement and mitigation of these contingencies should be an essential element of any critical pedagogical project.

As noted, critical literacy works to create conditions and projects to encourage engaged citizenship among learners and teachers by developing language and text skills to question how knowledge, meaning and ideology is produced, organized, communicated and represented in society and to become participatory agents in the production of new forms of knowledge, meaning and ideology guided by alternative forms of production, organization and representation. Alice Pennisi opens up crucial visual critical literacy conversations around the worlds of art and adolescence with young women involved in an art collective called "Voices of Women Arts" (VOW) who see their "artwork as a catalyst for interaction with the public," i.e. as a means of not only learning and teaching about how the world works but also making new worlds. (p. 208-210) Pennisi poses vital questions about art education and educated art that can be easily translated into general questions about education and the responsibility of public educators and public intellectuals (both students and teachers): "What does it mean to make art now?" [What does it mean to learn and teach now?] "How do different artists come to their ideas and make work? [How do different educators come to their ideas and make work?] "What kind of art is important to make?" [What kind of education is important to engage, constructively and productively?] "What might it look like to ask students to consider beginning their work with a question, and to see the process of making the work as the means of answering or investigating it?" (pp. 220-221) How can public education, across all content areas, be a "catalyst for [transformative] interaction with the public?"

These questions and directives, along with negotiated learning experiences in which responsibility and creation is collective and collaborative, rooted in the "life, language, culture and themes of the students," and grounded in mutual inquiry, help students feel they are "making artwork" rather than simply "completing assignments," because the work emerges from processes of interactive transaction that provide opportunities for direct engagement with and investment in the work and the work's relationship with current struggles and realities. (p. 216) This mediated approach to art work, embedded in: questioning; contextualization; penetrating beyond surfaces; the activation of knowledge, history and experience; political engagement; cultural resistance and social activism, places students in the role of both learner and teacher, student and citizen, and therefore allows them to address "important social, political, and cultural issues from a deep sense of the politics of their own location." (Giroux, 1993)

**Conclusion**

One of the truths of critical literacy, a field that is often reluctant (in its postmodern incarnation) to speak of "truth" unless it is surrounded by scare quotes, is its committed call for honest and courageous examinations of the harsh realities and multiple crises we now confront, realities and crises that demand immediate attention if the future of humanity is not going to sink into monstrous darkness and despair. One criterion for judging theories and practices of any sort is their relevance for addressing human suffering and substantive freedom – will the theories and practices decrease or increase suffering and substantive freedom? The failure, over many decades, to hold social and pedagogical theories and practices (all too many of which have negative impacts) up to careful and persistent critical examination is one reason we are now confronted with multiple dilemmas and looming crises across so many domains of human existence and why suffering is on the increase and substantive freedom is on the decrease. Another reason, as noted, is the reluctance or failure on the part of public education, at all levels (inside and outside classrooms), to learn and teach about meaningful alternatives (and what might be required to construct pathways to their attainment) to the current dominant, and destructive, institutional arrangements and systemic imperatives. Critical examinations of theories and practices, along with learning and teaching about justice, equality and peace based alternatives, require a willingness to "break ranks," i.e. to resist – a not always comfortable position because of the possible negative career consequences and the general marginalization one typically endures. It seems fairly reasonable to suggest, however, that we are reaching, if we have not reached already, a time in human history when not having the courage and honesty to "break ranks" in ways that produce more beneficial and credible social and pedagogical theories and practices rooted in addressing global concerns such as militarism and peace, and solving serious and foreboding economic, environmental and political predicaments, will lead to far greater negative consequences, including horrible suffering and oppression for great masses of people.

As revealed in *Critical Literacy as Resistance,* critical literacy theories and practices, though committed to honesty, courage, and breaking ranks, do not provide a ready-made formula or prescription (any such offering would be misleading) for the kinds of social and institutional transformations required (though there are plenty of suggestions along the way). They do, however, offer challenging and critical educational processes of humanization that can construct tools and skills to assist in developing the kinds of "hard thinking" and dedicated political action necessary to develop new and better social and pedagogical theories and practices always open to critique and change, and capable of producing questions that may open up answers able to direct us on pathways toward the new and better social arrangements and institutional alternatives we so desperately need.

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