

## The Philosopher as Teacher

### CLASS IN THE CLASSROOM: ENGAGING HIDDEN IDENTITIES

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**ABSTRACT:** Using Marcuse's theory of the total mobilization of advanced technology society along the lines of what he calls "the performance principle," I attempt to describe the complex composition of class oppression in the classroom. Students conceive of themselves as economic units, customers pursuing neutral interests in a morally neutral, socio-economic system of capitalist competition. The classic, unreflective conception of the classroom responds to this by implicitly endorsing individualism and ideals of humanist citizenship. While racism and cultural diversity have come to count as elements of liberal intelligence in most college curricula, attempts to theorize these aspects of social and individual identity and place them in a broader content of class appear radical and inconsistent with the humanistic notion that we all have control over who we are and what we achieve. But tags such as "radical" and "unrealistic" mark a society based on the performance principle. Marcuse allows us to recognize a single author behind elements of psychology, metaphysics, and capitalism. The fact that bell hooks hits upon a similar notion suggests that we might use Marcuse's theory of the truly liberatory potential of imagination to transform and reconceive our classrooms so that the insidious effects of class, racism, and individualistic apathy might be subverted. Specifically, I outline and place into this theoretical context three concrete pedagogical practices: (a) the use of the physical space of the classroom; (b) the performance of community through group readings and short full-class ceremonies, and (c) the symbolic modeling represented by interdisciplinary approaches to teaching. All three of these practices engage students in ways that co-curricularly subvert class (and, incidentally, race divisions) and allow students to imagine, and so engage in, political action for justice as they see it.

**Keywords:** African American feminist theory, class-economic, class identity, cultural diversity, bell hooks, Herbert Marcuse, pedagogy, phantasy, philosophy of pedagogy, racism.

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"We do know that we must do more to reach out to our children and teach them to express their anger and to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons."

—President Bill Clinton  
(on Littleton, Colorado, after four weeks of bombing in Belgrade),  
cited in *The Nation*, May 10, 1999

A college classroom presents one of the richest possibilities for advancing social justice, but only if it remains open, both in its composition *and* its ultimate outcomes. Each classroom, conceived as a community of learners, provides a threshold toward liberation, both social and intellectual, to students who must themselves, by their various engagements and apathies, embody whatever justice is to be accomplished in society. The dual enemies of learning are indoctrination and anonymity.

But the classroom, among the most public of spaces, is also both object and subject of political ideology, economic inequity, and historical injustice. The phenomenon of economic class brings the confluences of the classroom into particular focus. My basic question, then, is this: How do class distinctions and the broader power dynamics of a classed society structure the experiences of both students and professors in the college classroom? From the point of view of moral action, how ought we, as professors and actors in this material drama, conceive our pedagogies so as to address class injustice? What understandings of the classroom emerge from a theoretical investigation into functioning of class in the classroom?

To answer these questions, we must first note their philosophical aspect. Class imposes identity; economic opportunity determines broadly the possibilities of experience. We all carry with us identities, many imposed, others approaching the authentic (even when their authenticity remains opaque to us). The dialogue we aim at in a classroom depends on the extent to which we are able to speak and listen from a genuine position of personal engagement and vulnerability. What gets learned emerges directly from *who* comes to class, *who* listens, *who* speaks. Is a genuine conversation possible—a community and communication of learners? Or do our official voices, those of both professors and students, present mere postures—even, in extreme cases like Clinton's, abominations so vivid as to preclude shame, fellow feeling, mutual recognition and respect?

The multiple identities that affect dialogue, the pedagogical principles that unwind the injustices of class, the theoretical status of the possibilities for liberation that emerge from a class-conscious classroom—the study I propose traverses these three movements. Class, classroom space, and the desired outcome of education, that is, an engagement toward justice—these provide my themes. I take my context, meanwhile, from Marcuse's analysis of class and from bell hooks' reflections on the multiple challenges and oppressions facing black women in America. And all that I say will bear the marks of my experience as a philosophy teacher in classrooms populated by women of diverse ages, races, and faiths, women who embody the dynamics of class in America today.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The uniqueness of my classroom experiences from 1995 to 2000 has inspired my study. Trinity College, Washington, D.C., where I taught, is a small Catholic women's college whose traditional daytime, as well as weekend and evening programs, serve an occasionally explosive mix of students who measure statistically as about 40% African

## I. Class: The Hidden Identity

If Marx is right about the pervasiveness of class struggle, then even the most immediate questions of college professors as pedagogues will turn on an analysis of class. On a concrete level this may seem strange. I am tempted to include the most immediate curricular concerns of myself and my colleagues under three simple headings: content (canon), competence, and diversity. That is, we want our courses to cover what we have learned such and such a course ought to cover (i.e., a range of authors or ideas, an historical period, a body of facts, etc.), we hope our students acquire certain skills that our specific discipline is especially equipped to offer, and we are all touched to different degrees by the polemics surrounding academics as a whole, specifically the moral predicaments of a post-colonial world and of a post-slavery America. But there are other preoccupations that touch us as professors. We deal directly with students at many levels: we have to attract them to our classes, and indirectly to our colleges; we respond to them and, to different degrees, care about and nurture them, and resist their manipulations; we form conceptions of them, both individually and generally; and we promote change in them along an obscure trajectory between their desires and their needs. We also, in most cases, give out grades.

Where is class in all of these professional activities? The answer comes from the students themselves. When I ask them why they are pursuing an education, the responses of my 18 to 22 year old students divide between job credentials (“to get a job”) and habit (“it’s the thing to do”). Interestingly, students aged 25 to 50 cite instead career advancement and personal development. Yet the economic nature of all these responses is evident, especially if we acknowledge the extent to which notions of one’s personal development are colored by career comparisons.

To see the ideological dimension here we must dig a bit deeper. Consider the following familiar (imaginary) refrains: “Students are in many respects like customers; they have paid for, and we owe them, a product. This is part of academia’s responsibility and accountability to society as a whole. Universities form the last link in a public education system which exists for the overall economic good—a good advanced by students’ integration into a system of consumption and production. In this regard, colleges and universities operate almost like public utilities, answerable, at least, to the regulatory oversight of legislators and public leaders, especially in the case of public universities.” This public duty interests conservative writers and journalists, who use the practices of higher education as a foil for the articulation of elitist agendas and the creation of public enemies. “To the extent that professors not only train

American, 30% white, 20% Latina. This is consistent with the feminist mission of the founders, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, who dedicated themselves to educating women who would otherwise be excluded from education.

workers, but also imbue them with cultural values, the wrong sort of classroom behavior becomes a national threat, a distant cousin of treason. Citizenship requires, if not a canon, at least commonality; difference breeds diffidence.”<sup>2</sup> So, at least, they tell us.

At the university level, we are the trustees, inheritors, and, to a large extent, beneficiaries of such educational legacies and, as agents, we must operate within constraints established by and in the spirit of capitalism. I am not making an argument about complicity here, because the term and the debate suggest that noncomplicity is a possibility, as is a certain kind of political purity. Rather, I am arguing that such agency as we have must be contextualized and understood within the limits imposed by the institution. *Agency begins only at that point at which we recognize and think critically about these limits.* (Stabile 1997, 211)

Here then is the first challenge of class in the classroom. To conceive and accomplish pedagogical goals with any sort of lucidity necessarily involves an awareness of the broad operations of class dynamics in the university as a social institution. Furthermore, a morally reflective pedagogy requires some translation and transmission of this ideological awareness into the classroom itself. Only then will one avoid unconscious replication of oppressive hierarchies and habits.

But class colors the classroom in deeper ways as well, affecting the direction and demographics of our students and our teaching. The educational heritage to which Carole Stabile refers above carries an implicit individualistic paradigm. It is often thought that students arrive in class as a result of their independent choices and accomplishments, receive grades on the products of their individual intellects, and are humanistically enhanced with knowledge and reason to go forth and pursue their individual good, their own political and economic interest.

<sup>2</sup> My reconstruction of the remarks in my two imagined quotations is fictional, but cf. Bloom 1987, 26–27: “Every educational system has a moral goal that it tries to attain and that informs its curriculum. It wants to produce a certain kind of human being . . . Over the history of our republic, there have obviously been changes of opinion as to what kind of man is best for our regime. We began with the model of the rational and industrious man, who was honest, respected the laws, and was dedicated to the family (his own family—what has in its decay been dubbed the nuclear family) . . . A powerful attachment to the letter and the spirit of the Declaration of Independence gently conveyed, appealing to each man’s reason, was the goal of the education of democratic man . . . This education has evolved in the last half-century from the education of democratic man to the education of the democratic personality . . . The old view was that, by recognizing and accepting man’s natural rights, men found a fundamental basis of unity and sameness. Class, race, religion, national origin or culture all disappear or become dim when bathed in the light of natural rights . . . The recent education of openness has rejected all that . . . It is open to all kinds of men, all kinds of life-styles, all ideologies. There is no enemy other than the man who is not open to everything. But when there are no shared goals or vision of the public good, is the social contract any longer possible?” This attitude is sometimes reflected in the administrative, curricular, and hiring policies of colleges and universities.

Our students' general indoctrination in the ideology of individualism often prevents them from identifying structural causes of problems and larger social forces of oppression . . . [T]he overwhelming hegemony of individualism blocks students' access to the social power of collective action, limiting students' awareness of the possibilities and procedures for political action based on the shared experience of social groups and shared interests among groups. (Strickland 1997, 175)

To the extent that we allow our students to circulate in and out of our classrooms under the illusion of autonomous accomplishment, we reinforce the anonymity and sterility of consumerism. Competition is assumed, inequity is depersonalized.<sup>3</sup>

Nor are the effects of inequity and competition simply present in the subsequent economic lives of our students—they have recently occupied the terrain of college admissions. The courtroom politics of affirmative action define academe as the battleground, no doubt in part because many academics see not only economic, but also intellectual, philosophical, and pedagogical necessity in a classroom and community that includes diverse and challenging viewpoints. Squelch affirmative action on college campuses and the conservation of other privileges and inequities will follow. The whiteness of our classrooms and, equally important, the segregation of our campuses, have their roots in class privilege.<sup>4</sup>

In this we encounter the clearest of the multiple intersections of class and racism. Race, however, speaks its name; class identity hides. Why is this? If all that I have said is true, then students should be easily brought to an awareness of their class position in society. Moreover, the polemics of the academy and our pedagogical reflections should revolve around individualism, competition, and privilege. If class pervades the classroom as I have suggested, then one might expect economic, even Marxist, literacy to be accorded the same importance as diversity and multiculturalism in discussions on how to reform academic practice. Of course, this is not—and perhaps cannot—be so.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lipsitz 1997, 11: "The mere promise of upward mobility depends on the support of class tensions, the erasure of class differences, and the construction of an ideological 'middle-class' identity that is not so much a description of actual social roles or status as an affirmation of allegiance to competition, individual ambition, and the pursuit of personal material gain as the center of the social world. As a result, our pedagogical practices privilege activities that encourage students to distinguish and differentiate themselves from their classmates, to pretend that knowledge is an atomized individual activity rather than a shared social act. Destructive as process, these practices also have negative consequences for the production of knowledge."

<sup>4</sup> Strickland (1997, 167-68) brings this into interesting focus through his consideration of the political buzz word "accountability": "Demographically, our student body is whiter and somewhat more affluent than the population of the state as a whole. So some people—many people of color, many working-class people—are working and paying taxes in Illinois [where Strickland teaches], supporting our endeavors, and yet not being represented sufficiently, as demographic groups, in our classrooms. Don't we need to be accountable to them?"

On one level, this fact results from the complexity of the workings of class distinctions. An argument that would reduce racism to a mere manifestation of class struggle is inadequate, especially if the strategy serves as a way to avoid troubling questions of racial difference. But a deeper explanation of the elusiveness and oddity of class questions within the present academic debate leads us to see specific ways in which we might meet the pedagogical challenge of transforming our classrooms. The goal is to address the inequities and oppressive dynamics of class while, at the same time, broadening the discussion and undoing racism. I am thinking specifically of Marcuse's claim that the state of the advanced technological society we currently experience is one of "total mobilization" (1964).

The defining characteristic of a society of total mobilization is the rationality of its irrationality:

The society of total mobilization, which takes shape in the most advanced areas of industrial civilization, combines in productive union the features of the Welfare State and the Warfare State . . . The main trends are familiar: concentration of the national economy on the needs of the big corporations, with the government as a stimulating, supporting, and sometimes even controlling force; hitching of this economy to a world-wide system of military alliances, monetary arrangements, technical assistance and development schemes; gradual assimilation of blue-collar and white-collar population, of leadership types in business and labor, of leisure activities and aspiration in different social classes; fostering of a pre-established harmony between scholarship and the national purpose; invasion of the private household by the togetherness of public opinion; opening of the bedroom to the media of mass communication. (Marcuse 1964, 19)

Marcuse, not unlike Althusser, sees advanced capitalist society as organized around not only principles of market competition, but also the total saturation of life (leisure as well as work) by commercialization, or "the performance principle." Not only do we consume, we are consumed by consumptions. We cannot even imagine gratifications, fulfillments beyond the commodifiable.

Réduire l'imagination à l'esclavage, quand bien même il y irait de ce qu'on appelle grossièrement le bonheur, c'est se dérober à tout ce qu'on trouve, au fond de soi, de justice suprême. La seule imagination me rend compte de ce qui *peut être*.

To reduce imagination to slavery—even if one's so-called happiness is at stake—means to violate all that one finds in one's inmost self of ultimate justice. Imagination alone tells me what *can be*. (Breton, qtd. in Marcuse 1966, 149)

Realms that intrinsically and historically existed outside of work,

commerce, and economy presented grounds of possible rebellion against exploitation and were accordingly targeted by the forces of capitalism. In a society of total mobilization, such as we now experience, art becomes advertising, dream diminishes to disparaged utopia, love sells itself as sexuality. The sublime, for Marcuse, is desublimated. Nowhere in our experience do we find the exultation of a symphony, a sacrifice, a sunset—places of connection among community, the sensual, and the beautiful. Moreover, we are happy with this; any attempt to imagine, let alone work, beyond this performance principle is derided as unrealistic or impractical.

The relegation of real possibilities to the no-man's land of utopia is itself an essential element of the ideology of the performance principle. If the construction of a non-repressive instinctual development is oriented, not on the subhistorical past, but on the historical present and mature civilization, the very notion of utopia loses its meaning. The negation of the performance principle emerges not against but *with* the progress of conscious rationality; it presupposes the highest maturity of civilization. (Marcuse 1966, 150)

A brief note on the theoretical context of Marcuse's remarks before we turn to two concrete pedagogical implications of his analysis. Marcuse provides a theory which is at once both descriptive and prescriptive. He aims ultimately at liberation, a goal he realizes will not automatically result from capitalism, through capital's intrinsic, unsustainable expansions. To the extent that capital has pacified existence, Marcuse's role as theorist must be to raise consciousness of the oppressions and violence hidden in general social satisfaction. Moreover, to the extent that Freud's theory on phantasy and reality validates the complacencies advanced by technological society, Marcuse is concerned to establish the theoretical possibility of something freer than mere satisfaction. He argues that imagination, phantasy, and the erotic provide us—in the midst of our current alienations—with a glimpse, not of the subconscious and unreal, as Freud would have it, but of the truly free.

My interest in Marcuse derives not from his possibly problematic preoccupations with Freud and Marxist materialism. Rather, to return to our theme of class dynamics in the college classroom, the value of Marcuse's work lies in the twofold nature of his project: descriptive and prescriptive. On the descriptive side, Marcuse plausibly theorizes the otherwise puzzling phenomenon we have noted: the workings of and identities imposed by class are both pervasive but hidden in our classroom, as in society. Black students are expected to represent the black community and have ready solutions to racial injustice. White students, meanwhile, view themselves as free of racial responsibilities, representing a neutral, normal ideal of humanist citizenship, while pursuing an education for the general betterment of themselves and society. Complementing the whole educational process, President Clinton can sincerely present himself as a

passive observer in catastrophes such as Littleton; he mouths the words his prescribed role demands, and we believe him.

If Marcuse is right, we should expect this. Advanced technological capitalism hides the inequities and oppressions of class behind the welcome facade of democratic consumption: the same range of consumer choices are open to us all, therefore (as received wisdom would have it) class distinctions are merely incidental, not structural. Marcuse allows us to diagnose such expressions of false consciousness as the very symptoms of an oppressively classed society.

Anecdotally, Marcuse's theory derives support from the enthusiastic reception his writings have received in a course I have taught on theories of the individual and society. More than half of the students in this course were African Americans holding full-time jobs. They responded to Marcuse's sweeping analysis as if veils were falling away from their multiple frustrations at trying to understand their experience. I suspect that the frequently hodge-podge conspiracy theories one hears on urban radio call-in shows which court African American audiences would also find fulfillment in Marcuse. Talk radio aside, the point behind this theory is that the deliberately complex and confounding arrangements of capital demand broad analysis. As an interesting corroboration, bell hooks reaches a similar conclusion through a discussion of Paule Marshall. hooks articulates the special importance of such analysis to black Americans: "Marshall is one of the few black writers who shows a connection between advanced capitalism and black folks' consuming desire for goods that erases our will to experience the realm of the senses as a location of power and possibility" (1993, 120).

Let us pull together the threads of what we have said. On the level of description and analysis, our discussion, through the lens of Marcuse, has shown us the complex fabric of class oppression in the classroom. First, consistent with the view of legislators and the general public, students conceive of themselves as economic units, customers pursuing neutral interests in a morally neutral, socio-economic system of capitalist competition. The classic, unreflective conception of the classroom responds to this by implicitly endorsing individualism and ideals of humanist citizenship. While racism and cultural diversity have come to count as elements of liberal or cultural intelligence in most college curricula, attempts to theorize these aspects of social and individual identity and place them in a broader context of class and the workings of capital appear radical and inconsistent with the notion that we all have control over who we are and what we achieve. But tags such as "radical" and "unrealistic" mark a society based on the performance principle. Marcuse has pointed us to a deeper understanding of society, one which recognizes a single author behind elements of psychology, metaphysics, and capitalism. Finally, the fact that bell hooks hits upon a very similar notion suggests that we might use Marcuse's theory of the truly liberatory potential of imagination to transform and reconceive of our classrooms



in such a way that not only the insidious effects of class, but also racism and individualistic apathy, might be subverted.

## II. Preforming, Performing Utopia: Mind, Body, Space

We turn to the pedagogically prescriptive principles in this discussion. Most obviously, reading Marcuse might address and transform the influences of class on college learning. This advice will apply, however, to only some classrooms. More importantly, Marcuse points us to phantasy and imagination as vehicles for liberation. We can actively invoke these realms in our classroom practices. Opening phantastic and imaginative spaces within our teaching may not accomplish the social revolution that Marcuse advocates—we may not witness on graduation day the disintegration of the capitalist performance principle and its replacement with “to each according to need.” But creative transformation of Marcuse’s theory into pedagogy accomplishes two ends. First, effectively and with ingenious indirection, it undoes students’ enervation at prospects of social change and work toward social justice. Mutual recognition of fellow learners physically answers the pacifying relativism espoused by many students—(not) “Everyone is entitled to her opinion.” Second, the introduction of social consciousness via an imaginative, rather than a curricular, avenue avoids indoctrination. Preaching Marxism and syndicalism not only invokes a conditioned response—“this guy’s a radical”—it also arrogates the articulation of the social direction our students will take. Utopias emerge; they can’t be imposed. So too with justice and democracy.

Concretely, I am suggesting that the classroom can be conceived as an extraordinary public space whose physical, imaginative dimensions we often neglect. Specific classroom activities evoke the public, communal nature of learning space but, before turning to these, I want to underline the theoretical foundations, the deep nature of these practices. As we have seen, Marcuse suggests that imagination and phantasy negate the total mobilization of capitalism. An undoing of the inroads of class divisions in the classroom can be achieved if we evoke this dimension of students’ experience. bell hooks names this same dimension the “erotic.” Conceive of the erotic broadly, as a life force, the human, creative energy that escapes conceptualization.<sup>5</sup> For hooks, the decolonization and liberation of black women in America wait upon the construction of an “erotic metaphysics”:

<sup>5</sup> See hooks 1993, 113. Consistent with hooks, Iris Murdoch (1997, 488) has eloquently understood Plato’s notion of eros: “Eros is there. This darkness is sex, power, desire, inspiration, *energy* for good or evil. Many people live their whole lives in that sort of darkness, seeing nothing but flickering shadows and illusions, like images thrown on a screen—and the only energy they ever have comes from egoism and dreams. They don’t know what the real world is like at all. Not only could they not understand any difficult thought, they cannot even *see* ordinary things—like that wine cup or the face of Socrates—because anxiety and selfishness are making them blind, they live behind a dark veil.”

Borrowing this term from philosopher Sam Keen, who uses it in his work *The Passionate Life*, “an erotic metaphysic” evokes a vision of life that links our sense of self with communion and community. It is based on the assumption that we become more fully who we are in the act of loving. Keen elaborates: “Within the tradition of erotic metaphysics, which goes back to Augustine and Plato, love is assumed to be prior to knowledge. We love in order to understand.” To think of an erotic metaphysics in black women’s lives is to automatically counter that stereotyped version of our reality that is daily manufactured and displayed in white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture. (hooks 1993, 115)

hooks aims to provide concrete advice to black women regarding how they might respond in positive, non-oppressive ways to their position in American society. Specifically, she wants black women to tap into their ability to love and, subsequently, to carry that love—and the creative strength it engenders—to all areas of their lives: work, family, community, and self-conception. Such love will answer, she thinks, the habits of toughness, resignation, and cold independence which became the key to black women’s survival under slavery and its lingering injustices.

For our pedagogical concerns, the point here is that the theoretical confluence between hooks’ empowerment of black women and Marcuse’s Marxist analysis of the advanced manifestations of class distinctions sounds a unified call. To evoke the erotic and the aesthetic is to transcend pedagogical tricks and to engage in an open-ended social and political *experience* with our students.<sup>6</sup> We can advance and embody a form of social justice to the extent that we create an emotional learning space alongside our curricular coverage. To ignore this dimension furthers mobilization, the invisible exploitation of the classroom and of academe.

So, what, concretely, are we talking about? How does one engage in erotic teaching and not get fired? Two broad reflections lead us to possible classroom practices. As a first approach to reconceiving the classroom, try to appreciate how privileged and unique the classroom space, especially the college classroom, is for the student. Students have the habit of being forced into class. Elementary and secondary educations in the United States are mandatory, routine, and accordingly fused with discipline. High schools exist to teach, but also (miserably so, in some cases) to warehouse students who understand implicitly that their mere physical presence is (often) at once despised and all that is required. Such a difference then to

<sup>6</sup> The distinction between a traditional classroom centered on presentation of knowledge and the sort of physically experienced pedagogy I am aiming at finds an echo in Wole Soyinka’s distinction between (traditionally European) representational drama and (traditionally African) ritual theatre: “The concern of ritual theatre in this process of spatial definition which precedes, as we shall discover, the actual enactment must therefore be seen as an integral part of man’s constant efforts to master the immensity of the cosmos with his minuscule self. The actual events which make up the enactment are themselves, in ritual theatre, a materialisation of this basic adventure of man’s metaphysical self” (1976, 40).

arrive at college, where students become responsible not only for their presence, but also for their ideas. Many students arrive at college habitually (recall: "it's the thing to do"), but I suspect that nearly all are soon surprised at the level of engagement and responsibility required of them. Not only do college classrooms truly value discussion, but this intellectual space also receives (at least in principle) institutional protection. We name academic freedom as a virtue. We expect serious self-expression. Discipline is hardly mentioned, but rather simply assumed. Ideas attain greater value in colleges and universities than anywhere else in American society.

Socially as well, college students, be they late adolescents or returning working women, encounter an extreme. Even on small campuses, students arrive in class, open to experience, anxious about professor, books, and possible new acquaintances. Students accept that they will come to *know* others in class, intellectually and intimately. Customary assumptions about privacy are suspended. Moreover, the classroom represents a serious threshold to adult life and career. The high school student can look to college as a safe zone, but those exiting college face a break, either from their protected economic status as adolescents or, in the case of older women, from their previously limited employment opportunities toward hoped-for new possibilities. The college classroom is the most experimental, crucial, transitional public space that many of us will ever encounter.

My first general reflection, then, calls our attention to the excitement, the erotic energy, which is palpable on the first day of class and can be sustained and channeled. Second, however, attending class, like all other activities, becomes routine. Despite professors' brilliance as thinkers and pedagogues, students daydream—they become bored, they reduce dialogue to a matter of what the professor expects, they view classtime as an intrusion into the really important things in their lives: work, television, dorm life, pizza, etc. Our discussion of Marcuse and bell hooks casts this element of our professional lives in a new light. To the extent that we respond to student daydreaming and distraction with complaint, reprimand, or general scholarly disgruntlement, I think we implicitly reinforce a compartmentalization of life that is useful to capitalist exploitation. Do we really want the classroom to be a place where students must leave the rest of their lives behind and put themselves into a unique and abstracted mental state of total attention?

An alternative would be to attempt to integrate the space of student boredom and daydream. Simple, explicit acknowledgement that students will become bored with lecture and theory can mark a powerful break with dominant social norms, as can any practice that devotes classtime to aesthetic and erotic aspects of the students' lives. Students understand that there are twenty-eight class meetings in a semester, seventy-five minutes each. (They likely also know exactly how many of those minutes they can

skip without it affecting their grade!) How important a symbol then if we slow down in class, if we take the time to move outside of our material, if we create a space that incites student imagination and daydream.

When we are always busy meeting the needs of others, or when we are “used to pain,” we lose sight of the way in which the ability to experience and know pleasure is an essential ingredient of wellness. Erotic pleasure requires of us engagement with the realm of the senses, a willingness to pause in our daily life transactions and enjoy the world around us. (hooks 1993, 116)

The advice bell hooks articulates for black women translates directly into all pedagogy, with the tangential effect that our classrooms function to undo not only class divisions, but also racial alienations. One hopes the broad reflections and theoretical analysis above have inspired various specific ideas of classroom method. Three notions deserve special articulation: physical space, communal spirit, and interdisciplinarity.

### **III. Practice: Strategies For Open Pedagogy**

*Physical space:* We harvest the fruits of student phantasy and daydream when we engage them physically. The physical is the neglected but existential element in traditional academics. As the “total physical response” pedagogy has long recognized, we affect a simple change in this tradition if we simply move about the room as we speak. Movement visibly undoes the spatial hierarchy of lecturer-authority/student-apprentice. More radically, we can have students move about the room. How often do students acknowledge and attend to the physical presence of their fellow students? How often do students encounter and feel the symbolic margins of their social position, the walls of the classroom, the blackboard, the floor beneath their feet?

I have successfully experimented with several physical movement exercises in the classroom. I emphasize the notion of experiment, since in devising a day’s plan and exercise, I rely more upon the principles behind the exercise than on a fixed form. Each teacher must apply these principles in his or her own way; the only constant, perhaps, is the bellwether feeling of a bit of discomfort—a stretching of oneself. Some of my examples here reflect a curricular motivation behind the movement exercise, others are directed at contexts broader than the disciplinary focus of the class. In all cases, I orally articulate my own reflections on the significance of the exercise for the students, to reinforce the seriousness of the practice. Allowing for slightly uncomfortable moments of silence and reflection also seems crucial, so that it is clear that the instructor is not an authority about the reasons for the exercise.

One of my favorite activities of this sort is intended to bring the students to recognize the history and economic consequences of the actual architec-

ture surrounding them. In my case, this architecture involves the evocative walls of a 100-year-old granite building whose history is evident in squeaking oak floors and solid plaster walls. I invite the students to move to the front of the room first, to gather as a group, then I direct them to move the necessary desks and books and find a place where they can come into full contact with the walls. Along with them, I lean against a space on the wall. I instruct them to turn, face the wall, and then to push as hard as they can.

In addition to minor cardiovascular benefits, this exercise seems playful to the students. Obviously, we cannot make these walls fall down. But after observing this, I ask the students to reflect on what this means. I reflect on the age of the building, the motivations and fears of those who first undertook to found the college. I reflect on the cost of such a huge building. I invite the students to reflect on how lucky we all are that others have built this building and that we can share in its space. In this regard, I might mention the daily maintenance of the building and of our presence in it, asking students to acknowledge their economic and also communal relation to the janitorial staff, the cafeteria workers, etc.<sup>7</sup> I also note that the building will remain after we are gone. We are, in effect, part, but not the whole, of a tradition and community we can see symbolized in these walls.

During this activity students have a comfort zone in that they are each snug against a different part of the wall; they have more personal space than in their desks and are physically supported by the walls. A more demanding activity has met with mixed success. Essentially an adaptation of theatrical technique, I usually save this activity for a point in the semester when students are bogged down in a difficult unit of reading. At the beginning of the class, I call students to the front—to the circle with which they are already familiar from previous exercises. I ask for two volunteers who are willing to let the other members of the class move their limbs and suggest poses. I then invite all students to propose concepts or scenes from the reading we have been doing. An example might be love, or injustice, or tyranny. I usually begin by suggesting a concept. Any student is then encouraged to pose or move the two volunteers into a silent *tableau vivant* that somehow illustrates the concept. Silence is an important factor for this activity, as it engages the students with the text on a nonverbal level. It demands their imagination, but also their trust of one another, as both the volunteers and those posing them must use and offer their physical pres-

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Lipsitz 1997, 19–20: “Most important, I hope to engage my students in processes that will lead them to understand and analyze the nature of social class today, to understand that they live the lives they do because other people have to clean their classrooms, grow their food, build their houses, and sew their clothes under conditions they do not control for rewards that increasingly do not allow them to meet their own basic needs. I hope to show that identities of race and gender always intersect with class, that unlikely coalitions across identity categories have succeeded in the past, but only when people honestly acknowledged the things that divided them and created actual practices and structures of inclusion rather than just abstract calls for unity.”

ence to the others.

Other activities can draw more directly from the texts studied: Plato lends himself easily to brief theatrical productions or reading by parts. Even something as obscure as Epicurus' atoms in the void can be illustrated by having the students arrange themselves in a phalanx, taking simultaneous steps forward "in the void," until one "spontaneously" swerves and sets off a spreading disruption of the orderly phalanx.

As I say, the possibilities are as open-ended as the instructor's willingness to move beyond the lecture and unidirectional teaching; the caveat is to make clear the connection and relevance of the activity to the themes of the class. To have students touch the margins of the room, or to touch each other, to have them simply hold hands in a circle or to look—truly look—each other in the eyes—simple rituals such as these bring them, perhaps in ways they have lifelong been discouraged from pursuing, to recognize their vulnerability, the fragile miracle of embodied life, the common awe we all feel in the face of death and love.

Does the caress embarrass us because it serves as an active reminder that we are flesh and in need of tender loving care? Should we be surprised that a people whose bodies have been perpetually used, exploited, and objectified should now seek to turn flesh into armor? (hooks 1993, 119)

I do not mean that this realization will be lucid to the students. Rather, gathering them in a circle at the front of the room during the first or last five minutes of class is usually an occasion for giggles, giddiness, attempts to dismiss "this guy" as another nut. The conversation and giddiness will, moreover, move into the hallways outside of class.

But this is precisely the point: the physical performances of the students in class open up spaces, occasions for their imagination—they enact a form of connection and community which daily life does not sanction. Class can become a model before the fact, a preformation of a community of social justice. It suffices to let go:

If, as Jessica Benjamin suggests in *The Bonds of Love*, it is "mutual recognition" that disrupts the possibility of domination, then it is possible to speculate that black women who suffer a lack of recognition often feel the need to control others as a way to be noticed, to be seen as important. . . . It is healing for black women who are obsessed with the need to control, to be "right," to practice letting go. (Ibid., 141)

*Communal Spirit:* Recognizing themselves, their own agency and contingency, students take a first step toward others and toward seeing themselves in the context of a community. My aim is to create a learning community, one which will be unique to each class and each semester, because of the individuals enrolled. I share this goal with the students

when I introduce the class and the syllabus, but the meaning of a learning community emerges clearly only over the course of the semester, or even several semesters. There are two aspects of the learning community. First, the community interior to the class—students must rely on each other and appreciate the extent to which they learn from each other. Second, exterior to the classroom, students' understanding of the relevance of a class will be enhanced if they see the class as an extension of communities to which they already belong: family, college, city. Both of these aspects are addressed by activities that involve elements of ritual, and simply present aspects of the world beyond the class.<sup>8</sup>

Several brief and formulaic activities open each of my classes and give both the students and myself a few moments to center on the subjects and dynamic of the classroom. Before class begins, I pass out folders on which each student has printed her name in large letters on the front. The student marks the folder each day with the date, a note, a question, etc. I collect the folders at the end of each class and respond to the comments. The folders serve as attendance, as a private way for students to react to and shape the class, and as a way for students to know each others' names. The folders also allow me to circulate among the students before class, providing a concrete token of exchange between each student and me.

I then begin class with three activities: an etymology of a word relevant to the day's lesson, community news, and comments on the status of the class (calendar, upcoming due dates, etc.) The idea of an etymology is unique to my philological predilections; it might be replaced by the saying or joke of the day. The key is brevity, levity, and routine: students begin to pay attention when they see the symbolic opening of class.

The notion of community news is one that I would recommend more specifically. I explain to students that they each bring different things from their lives, external to the class, into our discussions, and that these can be both valuable and distracting. During the community news portion of the class, students are invited to share briefly any news from their lives outside the class which might be relevant or somehow impact the class. I have had students report minor car accidents on their way to class, as well as others who regularly use the time to announce upcoming athletic events or meetings of campus clubs. At the very least, students are given an impression of the interests and character of their classmates. A general sense of sharing is validated. The whole of the opening activities takes five to ten minutes, but bears rewards in students' attentiveness and commitment.

Other quasi-ritualistic activities occur more infrequently in my classroom. At least once a week, I plan an activity that will bring students into direct contact with each other. Such contact usually takes the form of small

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Appiah 1992: "And once we have seen that the ritual setting is ceremonious, we need only the further premise that all ceremony has elements of symbolism to complete a syllogism: ritual entails symbolism."

group activities directly focused on the text, or the gathering of the class into a circle in the front of the room for a poetry reading. The poems have generated much student response. Students see the activity as somewhat radical, but also as affirming and emotional in a way they can each pursue or articulate individually. I choose simple poems; favorites include Mary Oliver's "At the Lake" and Audre Lorde's "Sahara". Each student is given a copy of the poem as she comes to the front. We all read the poem together aloud. The symbolism of this ritual has its roots in the chorus of voices. The words are embodied in each of the members of the class; they sound different when pronounced by each person, but together they make up a single thought. As with all group recitation, the rhythm of the words is found and shaped by simultaneously listening and speaking. The class has a direct example of how they sound together, of what they can produce together. The class is brought as a group to the message of the poem, but each student takes away something different from the poem. The moment just after the reading is one in which there are brief explosions of conversation, such as "I like that," or "What is that supposed to mean?"

Often I end a class of intense discussion with such an activity. Occasionally, I will use the gathering of the class into such a reading circle as the springboard for a group activity. I structure my group activity by providing each student with printed questions that the groups will discuss. Thus the distribution of questions can be accomplished efficiently by printing them on the back of the day's poem. Once the group has finished the poem, I go around the circle giving students a number corresponding to the group they will be part of. Since the students are already out of their desks, the movement into groups proceeds easily; students find their groups and can move from their reactions to the poem into the substantial, text-centered questions they are supposed to discuss. During this activity, I move from group to group, listening and prompting each with questions which challenge the position they have arrived at.

Such group readings or guided group reflection—which is not coincidentally a little like classroom prayer<sup>9</sup>—can break the students so radically out of the ordinary that they begin to feel and reflect on the nature of the community which *is* the class. Both hooks and Marcuse conjure the image of Narcissus, whose act of self-love should not be seen as tragic, but as an inward act that leads to transformation, as a form of love which defies convention.

<sup>9</sup> "Learning can be praying, breathing can be praying. Prayer is keeping quiet and hoping for the light" (Murdoch 1997, 518; she puts the words into Plato's mouth). Compartmentalization of religious thought and practice also has the frequent effect of sterilizing professors spiritually, leading them to eschew any hint of the spiritual in the classroom space, as if acknowledgment of this aspect of the erotic would immediately rank them with magicians, clerics, or television evangelists. Murdoch (again in the voice of Plato, 516) gets this aspect of teaching (and writing) right too: "It's to do with life being a whole and not a lot of random choices. Religion must be proved by the whole of life, it isn't a sort of oddity or side issue or one choice among others . . ."



Narcisse rêve au paradis . . .

Le paradis est toujours à refaire; il n'est point en quelque lointaine Thulé. Il demeure sous l'apparence. Chaque chose déteint, virtuelle, l'intime harmonie de son être, comme chaque sel, en lui, l'archétype de son cristal;—et vienne un temps de nuit tacite, où les eaux plus denses descendent: dans les abîmes imperturbés fleuriront les trémies secrètes . . . Tout s'efforce vers sa forme perdue . . .

Narcissus dreams of paradise . . .

Paradise must always be re-created. It is not in some remote Thule; it lingers under the appearance. Everything holds within itself, as potentiality, the intimate harmony of its being—just as every salt holds within itself the archetype of its crystal. And a time of silent night will come when the waters will descend, more dense; then, in the unperturbed abysses, the secret crystals will bloom . . . Everything strives toward its lost form . . . (Gide, qtd. in Marcuse 1966, 163)

The human form is social. We evoke the social, communal crystal inherent in our students when we bow before the beautiful with them, precisely and merely for its own sake. As Marcuse did not *need* to introduce Gide's poetry into his Marxist analysis, we do not *need* five or ten minutes per week of poetry with our students. Our question, however, is: *whose* need is served by this traditional sense of curriculum? To the extent that students can be brought to recognize other members of the class as sources for their own learning—points of resistance and encouragement who will shape their own growth and experience (like the resistance and encouragement of other voices in a choral reading)—they will be drawn out of their individualistic paradigm of accomplishment. Class privilege and the normality of class structures open up as questions for the students when they see that their own lives are invaluablely intertwined with lives and voices radically different than their own. This insight is the ultimate goal of the learning community in relation to questions of social and economic class.

*Interdisciplinarity:* Our very position within the institution of education presents a hierarchy and class consciousness to the student which we only reinforce if we remain comfortable in our own expertise, specialization, and discipline. Inclusion and a prefigured hint of possible liberation demands that we ourselves take intellectual risks. We can valuably create our classrooms as learning communities, but this requires that we ourselves further engage in a learning process. Interdisciplinarity demonstrates to students that respectful collaboration is possible. Collaboration makes equity actual, even if it is only for a few brief moments in the short course of a semester. The direct experiences of intellectual equity possible through interdisciplinary collaboration enable students to imagine outcomes and practices of social engagement. Their political apathy finds an answer and direction for which they are primarily responsible.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Wakefield 1999, 281–96.

For public intellectuals, critical independence and strategic autonomy must include a willingness to contest the cult of professional expertise and specialization with its emphases on hierarchy, competitiveness, and objective, dispassionate research. This suggests demystifying the dominant politics of professionalism while simultaneously creating institutional spaces for hybridized zones of intellectual work in which faculty can create the conditions for new forms of solidarity . . . (Giroux 1997, 190)<sup>11</sup>

Henry Giroux's advice to black public intellectuals carries over to all of academe. If we want social justice, we must not only teach it as a subject, but embody it in our practices. We must erase the often false and pretentious distinctions of departments and disciplines by opening ourselves up to the dangerous, vital experience of learning, deauthorizing ourselves by teaching beyond the safe zone of our degrees.

The knowledge of a course will not be a hypostatized and homogenized disciplinary canonical tradition filtered through the teacher as master and text as master-resource. We must break down the walls of the classroom in order to make it possible for knowledges from other discourses to intervene, and to make the knowledges, rhetorics, and literacies produced in a particular course available to engage other discourses. (Strickland 1997, 166)

The two easiest interdisciplinary practices are inviting colleagues into one's class and including on one's reading list works that traditionally would be studied by other disciplines. But each of these techniques must truly draw one beyond boundaries. I have heard colleagues speak of the visit of another professor as a day off, while others treat non-traditional texts as secondary, less serious, supplemental. Such conceptions replicate the traditional hierarchies of authority and discipline. Far from easier, true collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines should be a demanding experience which leads one to question one's own pedagogy, one's own reading of a text. I have felt most valuably an element of unpredictability in classes I have team taught with other professors. Our best laid lesson plans before the class can often—and with great benefit to the

<sup>11</sup> Jane Rinehart (1999, 76–77) makes a similar point from a more practical angle in her reflections on an interdisciplinary teaching project she was involved in: “The academic community often operates within a lone-wolf model, making collaborative practice problematic in terms of professional recognition and reward . . . The collaborative effort required for teaching in a learning community brings support, enhanced risk taking, creativity, and stimulation. However, it can also make it more difficult to represent one's work as worthy of significant recognition in tenure and promotion processes. This difficulty is compounded when collaborative work appears too pleasurable because having a good time is often regarded as evidence that one is not doing serious work. In learning communities the problems and the rewards are inextricably connected and a rough balance between them is useful. The problems keep the community on the edge, prevent too much coziness, foster critique, and require creativity. The rewards provide the reasons for staying on the edge and doing these difficult things.”

students—go awry as one or the other of the instructors follows a student's question, or challenges a point, leading the discussion to unforeseen ideas.

Similarly, when I have included novels or short stories on my reading list, I have first acknowledged to the students that I do not know entirely how to integrate or “teach” the given text. This often serves as invitation to the students to join me in a mutual investigation. Further, I have forced myself to conceive my own approaches to the text, rather than attempting to learn how an English professor might teach the literary work. To share one's own thought-processes for responding to the text with the students is to provide them with a model of intellectual openness and lifelong learning.

The literary text must lead to central philosophical insights if the class is (as in my case) centered on philosophy, but I make it clear to the students that I might not be able to articulate the relevant philosophical points in advance. I have often found it useful to let the discussion of a literary text overlap into the next class session. Between classes I set myself to the task of summarizing and organizing the salient points that emerged from the first discussion. The notions of hierarchy, “right” answers, established boundaries, and official discipline are all implicitly challenged.

To the extent that we engage colleagues in a process of interdisciplinary teaching that is transparent to the students, we reveal to them what an intellectual community, what a community of respect, can be. The most valuable application of the privilege of tenure is not to relax into indignant routine, but rather to take risks by placing oneself in the classroom with colleagues, ideas, and texts from other disciplines.

#### **IV. Briefly Liberated Identities**

In the brief span of a semester each classroom can flow outward, into the lives of the students, in the form of a learning community. Polymorphous, radically non-routine, and aesthetically and spiritually erotic engagement of students in the classroom opens intellectual spaces. These spaces allow the students, truly and as individuals, to encounter each other—as well as others beyond the classroom—in cafeteria conversations, collaborative study sessions, or subsequent work or social contacts. They need to talk about how weird the class is. The class and racial differences of the students gradually fade in comparison to the radical ruptures from the usual and daily routine provided by charged classroom interactions. The just responses to oppression and racism find a way to emerge from the students themselves, within the context of support and interpersonal commonality offered by the learning community of the class itself.

Communities negotiate “difference” through a borderline process that reveals the hybridity of cultural identity: they create a sense of themselves to and through an other. Reed's metaphoric boundary between black and white communities, cannot then be assumed as a binary division. And black or minor-

ity intellectuals committed to an antiseparatist politics of community have no option but to place themselves in that dangerous and incomplete position where the racial divide is forced to recognize—on either side of the color line—a shared antagonistic or abject terrain. It has become a common ground, not because it is consensual or “just,” but because it is infused and inscribed with the sheer contingency of everyday coming and going, struggle and survival. (Bhabha, qtd. in Giroux 1997, 191)

We need not appreciate the full context of Homi Bhabha’s reference to Reed in order to see the summative force of his insight for our study. The abject terrain he refers to shapes our entire society, from Clinton in his political mask of hypocrisy, to our students who enter our classrooms, variously and even simultaneously, the victims and beneficiaries of a class-riven society. Race and diversity take the fore in professional debates, but the deeper cause goes to the notion of a total economic, competitive mobilization that buries personal identity behind property and prevents the connections possible in a community. The hint of such a true community is what is revealed in the erotic, as broadly conceived. It is precisely this which we can evoke, as a complement to, and—insofar as we are committed in our teaching to bringing about social justice—as a necessary component of learning and pedagogy. The taste of liberation we give to students allows them a choice, allows them to imagine social action in a genuine way. A difficult, intellectually complex sort of love which emerges in such a classroom, the love intrinsic to the act of teaching, empowers students to take love into other parts of their lives and to work for justice. This is, perhaps, the work that “makes life sweet,” the work bell hooks imagines. This is work for justice which we accomplish as teachers, and which our students themselves accomplish, whatever they might leave our learning communities to do:

When I told a group of black women that I wanted there to be a world where I can feel love, feel myself giving and receiving love, every time I walk outside my house, they laughed. For such a world to exist, racism and all other forms of domination would need to change. To the extent that I commit my life to working to end domination, I help transform the world so that it is the loving place that I want it to be. (hooks 1993, 145–46)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. hooks 1993, 41–52.

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