Making the Political More Pedagogical: Reading Homi Bhabha

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If you learn him how to read, he’ll want to know how to write; and, this accomplished, he’ll be running away with himself.

a former slave owner

Racism is often the leading ideology of the most educated and literate people.

Homi Bhabha

Currently, the relationship among culture, politics, and pedagogy is the subject of heated debate for educators, social theorists, and political pundits, and the controversy cuts across ideological lines. Much of the animus is familiar—the detritus of the conservative recoil from difference—though it has taken on a new urgency as part of a broader backlash against women, minorities of color, youth, and the underlying fabric of the welfare state itself. But some of the criticism provides a welcome opportunity for rethinking the relationships between cultural politics and politics in general, between cultural politics and the politics of difference, and between pedagogy and agency.

The more familiar script goes like this: cultural politics is repudiated in the interests of a new—actually old—orthodoxy of anachronistic materialism, or it is simply dismissed as a corrupting influence on the universal values of truth, beauty, and reason. Caught between the modalities of a timeless universal aesthetic or a narrowly defined economism, culture in both instances is abstracted from power. By removing culture from the play of power and politics, conservative and liberal educators and critics alike dissolve the possibility of understanding how learning is linked to social change, how the struggle over identities, meanings, desires, and values takes place across the whole spectrum of social practices (or how social authority) is wielded to make it difficult for subaltern groups to participate in such struggles in ways that carry any legitimacy or weight.

The contours of this debate are most visible within two traditions that have captured the popular imagination. On the one hand, there are the familiar “fall from grace” arguments put forth by conservatives such as Harold Bloom. Bloom cannot bear the politics of what he calls “identity clubs” and argues that “multiculturalism is a lie, a mask for mediocrity for the-thought-control academic police, the Gestapo of our campuses” (“Numbers” 27). Bloom wants to situate culture exclusively in the sphere of aesthetic transcendence, unhampered and uncorrupted by the politics of representation, the struggle over public memory, or the democratic imperative for self and social criticism. For Bloom,
cultural politics is an outgrowth of cultural guilt, a hangover from the sixties that begets what he calls "the School of Resentment" (Western 29). On the other hand, liberals such as Richard Rorty and neo-enlightenment leftists such as Todd Gitlin believe that culture does not constitute a sphere where political struggles over broad visions of social justice can be waged with any effectiveness. Rorty and Gitlin call for a progressive politics that is color-blind and materialist-based, a politics for which the question of difference is largely irrelevant to a resurgent economism that defines itself through an appeal to the universal category of class and that serves as the antithesis of the cultural. In this version of politics, the pedagogical is reduced to an old-time labor organizing that historically has primarily benefited white men and refused to interrogate the exclusions that constituted the conditions of its own existence. Similarly, within the narrow confines of this discourse, cultural politics is tantamount to the politics of difference and victim politics, and the university and public schools do not qualify as viable public spheres in which to wage political battles. For all these theorists, the political does not include sites that trade in pedagogy, knowledge, and the production of knowledge. In contrast to such stark dismissals of cultural politics, theorists in cultural studies such as Stuart Hall and Lawrence Grossberg have also grappled with the interrelationships of culture, politics, and pedagogy. For both Hall and Grossberg, culture cannot be confined to questions of difference, the domain of meaning, or matters of taste. On the contrary, culture is a site of the production and struggle over power, where power is understood as the effect of discursive practices that always presuppose a complex of institutional and material forces. Cultural politics, in this context, proposes "combining the study of symbolic forms and meanings with the study of power," or more specifically what Hall calls the "insertion of symbolic processes into societal contexts and their imprecation with power" (Osborne and Segal 24). This work provides an important theoretical framework for making pedagogy central to the politics and practice of cultural production, for understanding pedagogy as a mode of cultural inquiry that is essential for questioning the conditions under which knowledge and identifications are produced and subject positions are taken up or refused. Central to such work is not simply the issue of how we think politics—that is, how we understand the dynamics of culture within the shifting discursive practices and material relations of power—but also how we can, as Larry Grossberg suggests "inquire into the conditions of the possibility of agency" ("Identity" 102). For these theorists culture is a strategic pedagogical and political terrain whose force as a "crucial site and weapon of power in the modern world" can, in part, be understood in its contextual specificity, but a specificity that can only be engaged in relation to broader public discourses and practices and whose meaning is to be found in its articulation with other sites, contexts and social practices (Grossberg, "Toward" 142).

The current debate over the viability of cultural politics provides an important opportunity for assessing the strengths and limitations of Homi Bhabha’s theoretical analysis of the relationship between culture and pedagogy,
knowledge and power, meaning and investment. For Bhabha, culture is the terrain of politics, a site where power is produced and struggled over, deployed and contested, and understood not merely in terms of domination, but of negotiation. Culture also provides the constitutive framework for making the pedagogical more political—for investigating how educators can make learning meaningful in order to make it critical and transformative. At a time when the social function of the university is frequently derided by liberal and progressive critics as either the handmaiden of an ever-evolving and encroaching corporatism or an “always already” bastion of support for the status quo, Bhabha’s attentiveness to the relationships among writing, agency, and self- and social-transformation provides educators with a much-needed reminder of the potential importance of their work in the university. At the same time, Bhabha is careful to assert that we must not fetishize literacy as a de facto socially ameliorative or democratic force; he claims, in one of the most insightful and sobering moments of his interview, that the leading ideology of most literate people is racism. That caution having been made, he explores what postcolonial criticism has to offer the student of writing. What might it mean, he poses, to do theory “by doing a certain kind of writing,” to develop ideas that also “shape, enact the rhetoric”?

Linking questions of critical literacy to self-representation, particularly for students who cannot find themselves “within the sentence,” suggests for Bhabha a strategy that Guha calls “writing in reverse” (333). Such an intervention does not simply articulate the absence of marginalized histories and narratives, it also reads dominant narratives against themselves in order to understand the moment of disruption that is, for Bhabha, the quintessential postcolonial moment. Exposing students to the discourse of “sententiousness,” educating them to think “outside of the sentence” and insisting that they “occupy” the fissures, gaps, and hesitations in declaratives that they take for granted are for Bhabha a means of opening up a liminal or middle space for critical and potentially revisionary—or revolutionary—engagement with what he calls “the consensus of common sense.” Of course, such strategies run the risk of reversing while maintaining the operative binaries, but Bhabha’s work is well known for refusing such a construction. On the contrary, Bhabha problematizes the very act of enunciation and address to make both its object and subject a site for negotiation, dialogue, and critical engagement. As important as the marginalized discourses of race, gender, and sexual orientation are to any progressive pedagogy, they must also be understood as non-essential and open to interrogating the very nature of authority that gives such discourses political and ethical valence.

Bhabha’s critical literacy is not only about refining one’s capacities for rational and rhetorical argument, for identifying and exploding contradictions within a highly and historically racialized society. Bhabha provides an additional theoretical service to educators by complicating the process of becoming critically literate, by invoking the role that affect and emotion play in the formation of individual identities and social collectivities. In an attempt to
understand how education works as a productive force in the making and unmaking of contexts, Bhabha makes the pedagogical more political by taking seriously those maps of meaning, affective investments, and sedimented desires that enable students to connect their own lives and everyday experiences to what they learn. Moreover, he problematizes the contemporary scholarly affinity for what he calls “the mantras of multiculturalism” by redefining cultural difference as a “particular constructed discourse at a time when something is being challenged about power or authority,” rather than “a natural emanation of the fact that there are different cultures in the world.” To this end, his theory of “hybridity” both challenges essentialist claims to an authentic identity and emphasizes—through “strategies of appropriation, revision and iteration”—the necessity of “negotiation” between texts and cultures in situations of unequal power relations. Bhabha’s politics and pedagogy of indeterminacy, partiality, and movement refutes the traditional modernist narratives of certainty, control, and mastery, making it possible for educators to develop pedagogical practices that allow them to argue a position while refusing the “arrogance of theory.”

In what follows, we hope to build on Bhabha’s timely and provocative work by further investigating the dynamics of writing, agency, and social change and by raising questions about the relationship among what we call strategies of understanding, strategies of engagement, and strategies of transformation as well as the mediating role of affect and desire. Here we have to think at the limit regarding theories of cultural difference, hybridity, and identity formation and their centrality to issues of agency, power, and politics. In short, we want to extend Bhabha’s insightful attempts to make the pedagogical more political by exploring how we as educators can make the political more pedagogical. In Bhabha’s terms, this means rethinking the tension between the pedagogical and the performative by asking how the performative functions pedagogically. To this end, we ask the following: To what degree do Bhabha’s strategies of negotiation in and of themselves actually challenge unequal power relations? In other words, what other conditions—beyond the capacity to identify and “inhabit” the gaps and fissures of dominant discourses—must be realized for the subject of reading/writing to experience him or herself as an agent of social change? Clearly, Bhabha does not ignore institutional power, but his emphasis on exploring and exploiting discursive ambivalence at times undermines the force and gravity of such forces. To what degree does his critical methodology for reading and writing “outside” or “beyond the sentence” rely on an already critically engaged and willing inquisitor of common sense assumptions? What role do affect and desire play in one’s decision to critically engage in—or disengage from—the process of becoming literate, and what are the implications of this for educators? And finally, what are the limitations of a politics of identity/difference for theorizing strategies of social transformation that demand not individual but collective intervention?
Frederick Douglass and the Subaltern

We want to work through the density and complexity of these issues by means of a brief historical illustration that we hope will be familiar to an audience of compositionists and rhetoricians. There is an extensive history in African-American letters of exploring the relationships among literacy, the acquisition of agency, and self and social transformation; in what follows, we attempt a theoretical response to the preceding questions by turning to the celebrated work of another subaltern intellectual whose dedication to the emancipatory possibilities of rhetoric and writing bear striking resemblance to Bhabha's. Although Frederick Douglass’s work on race and rhetoric derives from a very different historical context—engaging four hundred years of enslavement—we find that a careful translation of his work offers much insight for theorizing the pedagogy and politics of critical literacy in relation to the gross inequalities of present day social relations. When one considers a whole range of new social relations—from the privatization of the prison-industrial complex to the conditions of workers in an ever-growing international sex trade—“slavery” may well prove an apt metaphor.

In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass relates his first encounter with the power of rhetoric in the pursuit of self-representation and self-determination. When young Douglass’s tutelage by his mistress in Baltimore was cut short by his master’s outrage at the idea of a literate slave, it was already too late. Douglass instinctively assented to his master’s proposition that “if you teach that nigger ... how to read the Bible, there will be no keeping him .... It would forever unfit him for the duties of the slave” (146). And in doing so, he discovers what had been for him a painful mystery to dispel: “to wit, the white man’s power to perpetuate the enslavement of the black man” (146). His master’s comments not only provided Douglass with a special revelation of the power of literacy to transform his life, it also fed his desire to read and learn, even under the threat of severe punishment by law. Douglass recounts the point in his life when he had secreted away enough money for his first purchase: a then popular school rhetoric, *The Columbian Orator*. The reader contained one essay, among others, of particular interest to Douglass that describes a dialogue between a master and his slave; he summarizes it at length in his autobiography.

It seems that a slave has been captured after his second attempt to run away, and the dialogue opens with a severe upbraiding by the master. Having been charged with the high crime of ingratitude, the slave is asked to account for himself. Knowing that nothing he has to say will be of any avail, he simply replies, “I submit to my fate.” The master is touched by the slave’s answer and gives him permission to speak on his behalf. Invited to debate, the slave makes a spirited defense of himself and an unimpeachable argument against slavery. Hence, the master is “vanquished at every turn in the argument; and seeing himself to be thus vanquished, he generously and meekly emancipates the slave...” (157-58). Douglass recalls that speeches such as these not only added to his “limited stock
of language," but armed him with "a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression, and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man" (158).

Shortly after, however, Douglass writes that he himself has been confronted with the same opportunity to defend himself as the fortunate ex-slave and refuses it. Aware that his mistress wants an explanation for his dramatic change in temperament, he withholds, stating,

Could I have freely made her acquainted with the real state of my mind, and given her reasons therefor [sic], it might have been well for both of us. . . . But--such is the relation of master and slave—I could not tell her. . . . My interests were in a direction opposite to hers, and we both had our private thoughts and plans. She aimed to keep me ignorant; and I resolved to know* (161; emphasis added)

We find that what Frederick Douglass (mis)appropriates from the lessons of his rhetorical self-training is instructive on a number of levels for engaging both the strengths and limitations of Bhabha’s theory of Hybridity and agency. Douglass strategically replays the master-slave encounter in the context of his own life with a crucial difference that begs the simple question: Why does he refuse altogether the invitation to “appropriate” and “revise” dominant discourses about the immorality of oppression and the rights of man that he so carefully studied in The Columbian Orator?

On a quite literal level, Douglass makes clear that one cannot engage the evils of slavery from the subject position of slave—such is the relation of master and slave. It seems that finding oneself in a liminal or hybrid space—no longer subject to a slave mentality and not yet free—does little here to alter relations of power and oppression. It is only after Douglass has successfully managed to escape captivity that he engages his former master on the necessity of abolition. Douglass’s decision to waive his defense suggests that the strategies of negotiation that Bhabha proposes must take into account questions of location; they must consider, as Douglass makes clear, where the subaltern can speak in a way that carries authority and meaning. But the capacity to alter one’s location is crucially tied to questions of one’s mobility and access to resources. Here agency “is not simply a matter of places but is more a matter of the spatial relations of places and spaces and the distribution of people within them. . . . It is a matter of the structured mobility by which people are given access to particular kinds of places [and resources], and to the paths that allow one to move to and from such places” (Grossberg, “Identity” 101-02).

Moreover, Douglass’s critical repetition of the master slave narrative suggests to us that rhetorical strategies of appropriation and revision do not adequately address the material dimension of “discourse.” In other words, the politics of culture cannot be reduced to the politics of meaning, while issues of material organization and consequences of life disappear (Grossberg, “Genealogy”). Douglass’s autobiography everywhere emphasizes the relationship between the discursive rationalization for slavery and its concrete material and spatial effects. For example, the sanctioning discourse of paternalism suggests
that slave owners are responsible for their slaves' material and spiritual needs and
that slaves in return owe them their work and their undying gratitude. Such logic
translates for Douglass into the denial those material resources and opportuni­
ties for decision making that might enable any independence of action, any
semblance of self-determination. Aware that a language of resistance may have
dire material consequences in a slave state, Douglass must wait several long years
before he can effect his escape and combat the institution of slavery from a
position that matters.

Combating Official Discourses
As this example makes clear, combating official discourses demands being
attentive to "both what is said and what is done." For Stuart Hall, the importance
of the idea of the discursive is "To resist the notion that there is a materialism
which is outside meaning. Everything is within the discursive, but nothing is
only discourse or only discursive" (Osbourne and Segal 31). Unfortunately,
according to Hall, what frequently disappears in most appropriations of
Foucault's notion of the discursive is the role that social forces play. The upshot
is thinking about discourses—like ideologies—as merely ideational rather than
as fully concretized in the structures of daily life. Hence, a pedagogy and politics
of critical literacy must not only push students to rhetorically challenge and
rewrite "the consensus of common sense," as Bhabha insightfully argues, but
also to think about and engage the ways that common sense becomes embedded
in the material structures and machineries of power that frame their daily
experiences. It is one thing to challenge the logic of racism in our classrooms
and quite another to confront the way its historical legacy has structured the still
largely segregated experience of schooling—and daily life. Bhabha's astute
observation that racism remains the leading ideology of most literate people
poses another interesting problem in relation to his strategies of negotiation and
translation. Douglass's narrative makes problematic from the start the assump­
tion that his oppressor is unaware of the contradictions at the heart of the
rationality of enslavement. Historically, the institution of slavery drew upon
myriad forms of knowledge—scientific, philosophical, religious, aesthetic,
legalistic and economic—for its legitimacy and sanction, largely by "proving"
the gross racial inferiority of the enslaved. Such discourse confirmed that the
master race was rational, civilized, dispassionate, capable of moral judgment, and
hence, capable of self-determination; they also imparted the "knowledge" that
subject races were the antithesis of the master race: irrational, savage, sexually
lascivious, morally bankrupt, and completely incapable of self-determination.
So why the legal prohibition of literacy for the enslaved, if by virtue of their
biological race they were incapable of rational judgment and moral outrage?
Why does Hugh Auld, Douglass's former master, astutely argue in the excerpt
that begins this essay that reading leads to writing leads to freedom if a slave by
definition can't think or act in his behalf? Nor was Douglass unaware of the
contradictions that constitute the slave system. Even as a boy, Douglass
struggled less with the veracity of how the white world constructed “reality”—
with the insidiousness of the role that it cast for him and for itself—than with
what it meant to fight the seeming historical inertia of its racist discourses, the
sheer historical weight of them. He does not submit to the crippling logic that
another discourse can’t emerge and be heard; but he is careful not to equate the
force of such narratives with his own counter-narrative.

Naming the truth, in this instance, has its limits. Clearly, much more is at
stake in developing the possibilities for political agency than being able to
challenge and revise however skillfully the gaps and contradictions in the logic
of oppression. “The subaltern is not a social category,” argues Rosalind
O’Hanlon, “but a statement of power” (qtd. in Grossberg, “Identity” 99). This
has implications not only for the question of agency (in terms of addressing how
interests, investments, and participation “as a structure of belonging” get
“distributed within particular structured terrains”) but also for thinking of
agency beyond questions of cultural identity and how such identities are
produced and taken up though practices of representation (Grossberg, “Iden­
tity” 100). In other words, we begin to see the limitations of Bhabha’s
commitment to the politics of representation, to what he sees as a recent shift
in “the very nature of what can be construed as political, of what could be the
representational objects and objectives of social transformation” (432).

That racism exists among literate people suggests that more is at work than
their ignorance of its untenable and contradictory logic. Negotiating the terrain
of racist ideologies pedagogically necessitates strategies of understanding,
engagement, and transformation. Not only do students need to understand the
economic and political interests that shape and legitimate racist discourses, they
must also address the strong emotional investments they may bring to such
beliefs. For Shoshana Felman, educators must think about the role of desire in
both ignorance and learning. “Teaching,” according to Felman, has to deal “not
so much with lack of knowledge as with resistances to knowledge. Ignorance,
suggests Lacan, is a ‘passion.’ Inasmuch as traditional pedagogy postulated a
desire for knowledge, an analytically informed pedagogy has to reckon with the
passion for ignorance” (79). Felman elaborates further on the productive nature
of ignorance, arguing that “Ignorance is nothing other than a desire to ignore: its
nature is less cognitive than performative.... It is not a simple lack of information
but the incapacity—or the refusal—to acknowledge one’s own implication in the
information” (79). If students are to move beyond the issue of understanding to an
engagement with the deeper affective investments that make them complicitous
with racist ideologies or other oppressive ideologies, they must be positioned to
address and formulate strategies of transformation through which their individ­
ualized beliefs can be articulated with broader public discourses that extend
the imperatives of democratic public life. This is not to suggest that Bhabha’s
strategies of appropriation, revision, or iteration are not useful, but that such
strategies are not equipped in and of themselves to bridge the gap between desire,
knowledge, and transformation; nor do they provide what Grossberg calls a
"normative ethical referent" for living in a democratic and multicultural society.

Bhabha's attempt to theorize the relationship between critical literacy and the politics of difference supports a notion of "public pedagogy" that is interdisciplinary in its theoretical and poetic reach, transgressive in its challenge to authority and power, and intertextual in its attempts to link the local with the national and international (Giroux). The project underlying his pedagogy is rooted in issues of compassion and social responsibility aimed at deepening and expanding the possibilities for critical agency, racial justice, and democratic life. Rigorous and theoretical, playfully and purposefully ambivalent, Bhabha's work refuses easy answers to the most central, urgent, and disturbing questions of our time. Yet, it is in his attempt to make hope the basis for freedom and social justice the foundation of his cultural politics and pedagogy that he frames a project that is open-ended and self-reflexive. Bhabha's writing both instructs and disrupts; it opens a critical dialogue but refuses "the arrogance of theory."

Bhabha's work has always refused to limit the sites of pedagogy and politics to those privileged by the advocates of "realpolitik." He has urged educators and others to take up the challenge of critical literacy and political agency from within dominant institutions, while challenging their authority and cultural practices. For Bhabha, the context of such work demands confronting a major paradox in capitalist societies—that of using the very authority vested in institutions such as higher education in order to work against the grain. Such action is not a retreat from politics as Gitlin and others believe but an extension of the possibility of politics and critical agency to the very institutions that work to shut down notions of critical pedagogy, cultural politics, and political agency. At the same time, we need to rethink the relationship between the politics of identity and the possibilities of self and social transformation. If agency involves "the possibilities of action as interventions into the processes by which reality is continually being transformed and power enacted," as Lawrence Grossberg argues, then agency must not be "confounded with cultural identity or epistemological issues" ("Identity" 99, 100); it must be associated with questions of how access, affective investments, and interests are distributed within specific structured spaces.

Works Cited


Bloom, Harold. "They Have the Numbers; We Have the Heights." Boston Review (April/May 1998): 28


