Critical Pedagogy: Dreaming of Democracy

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In two weeks, classes will begin at the small, private Texas university where I now teach. The tapes of vigorous, radical class discussions that I've played in my head all summer mysteriously begin to fade as I struggle with the syllabus for my first-year composition course. Like many writing teachers, I am attracted to the student-centered pedagogies and themes of social justice it has become fashionable to espouse; I want to empower students, to engage them in cultural critique, to make a change. But as Ira Shor remarks in *Empowering Education*, the start of a new semester is both "rich in possibilities and cluttered with disabling routines" (200), and as I plan my fall class, I am reminded that, despite my subversive intentions and the liberatory rhetoric of my course descriptions, my teaching often retreats to the level of sporadic creativity or, worse, to rather predictable English-teacher experimentation and circling of chairs. I fear that I am, in Peter Elbow's phrase, "bamboozled"—that is, I "call things by the wrong name. . . . [I] preach freedom, but [I] don't really practice it" (*Embracing Contraries* 92, 98). I write this essay, then, in hopes of reducing the bamboozlement of compositionists everywhere (including myself)—if that is, indeed, what we suffer from—by examining the goals, the realities, and the controversies of critical pedagogy.

"To propose a pedagogy," says Roger Simon, "is to propose a political vision," a "[dream] for ourselves, our children, and our communities" (371). Critical pedagogy (a.k.a. liberatory pedagogy, empowering pedagogy, radical pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, or pedagogy of possibility) envisions a society not simply pledged to but successfully enacting the principles of equality, of liberty and justice for all.[1] "Dedicated to the emancipatory imperatives of *self-empowerment* and *social transformation*," critical pedagogy engages students in analyses of the unequal power relations that produce and are produced by cultural practices and institutions (including schools), and it aims to help students develop the tools that will enable them to challenge this inequality (McLaren 163). In this, as in the controversy it has generated, critical pedagogy closely resembles and often overlaps with cultural studies and feminist pedagogies (see essays by Diana George and John Trimbur and by Susan Jarratt in this vol-

ume). However, critical pedagogy can be distinguished from these two pedagogies by its usually explicit commitment to education for citizenship. Henry Giroux, arguably the foremost American theorist of radical education, claims that the task of critical pedagogy is nothing short of "reconstructing democratic public life" ("Liberal Arts Education" 120). McLaren, Giroux's former colleague, asserts that the commitment of critical pedagogy stems from

> the moral choice put before us as teachers and citizens, a choice that American philosopher John Dewey suggested is the distinction between education as a function of society and society as a function of education. We need to examine that choice: do we want our schools to create a passive, risk-free citizenry, or a politicized citizenry capable of fighting for various forms of public life and informed by a concern for equality and social justice? (158)

To create this "politicized citizenry," critical pedagogy reinvents the roles of teachers and students in the classroom and the kind of activities they engage in.

At the center of critical pedagogy scholarship, ironically—though, perhaps, given current gender configurations within the academy, not too surprisingly—is a group of mostly white, middle-class men: Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, Stanley Aronowitz, Donaldo Macedo, Peter McLaren, and Roger Simon, with Freire, Giroux, and Shor constituting a kind of "Big Three" in the field. The "ur text" for critical pedagogy is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. A Brazilian educator, Freire was exiled after a military coup in 1964 for his work in the national literacy campaign, teaching peasants to read both the word and the world of oppressive economic and political domination in which they lived. During a nearly twenty-year exile, Freire became well known for his work developing literacy programs in Latin America and Africa.[2]

Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) lays out many of the terms, assumptions, and basic methods that still define the project of critical pedagogy today. Freire's educational philosophy is grounded in his conviction that oppression "interferes with man's [sic] ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human"—that is, to know oneself as a subject in history capable of understanding and transforming the world (40–41).[3] In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire presents his well-known critique (often excerpted in first-year readers) of the "banking" concept of education, in which students are seen as "receptacles" waiting to be filled with the teacher's official knowledge; education thus becomes little more than information transfer, "an act of depositing" (58). Instead, Freire practices what he calls problem-posing or dialogic education, in which teachers work with students to develop *conscientização* or critical consciousness—the ability to define, to analyze, to problematize the economic, political, and cultural forces that shape but, according to Freire, do not completely determine their lives. Hence, the content of problem-posing education is material from students' experience; dialogue among students and teacher revolves around "generative themes"—domination, marriage, or work—that represent students' perceptions of the world.[4] "This pedagogy," Freire writes, "makes op-

pression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation" (33). This relationship between reflection and action is what Freire refers to as "praxis," and it is essential for Freire: neither critical consciousness nor unreflective action alone will enable people to transform the world.

Critical theorists and teachers have found Freire attractive for a number of reasons, not least of which are his radical analysis of schooling as an instrument of domination and his understanding of the situatedness of all theory and practice. Shor's volumes *Freire for the Classroom* (1987) and *Empowering Education* (1992) illustrate the interdisciplinary appeal and applicability of Freirean pedagogy; teachers from disciplines such as history, media studies, and women's studies as well as some from departments we might not expect like architecture, the life sciences, and mathematics are implementing critical pedagogy in their classrooms. However, as James Berlin suggests, Freire has become especially interesting to scholars and teachers in English studies and particularly in composition because of his insistence that thought and knowledge are socially constructed, linguistic products: "language—in its mediation between the world and the individual, the object and the subject—contains within its shaping force the power of creating humans as agents of action" ("Freirean Pedagogy in the U.S." 170). Because language and thought are inextricably linked, language instruction becomes a key site where dominant ideology is reproduced—or disrupted. Finally, Freire's belief in the possibility of resistance to oppression has been vital to radical theorists like Aronowitz and Giroux, among others, who seek to move beyond the overly pessimistic assessments of domination typical of much leftist critical and cultural theory.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS: RADICAL DREAMS OF DEMOCRACY

In *Illiterate America*, Jonathan Kozol quotes Sir William Berkeley, governor of Virginia in the seventeenth century, on the dangers of mass literacy: "I thank God there are no free schools nor printing [in this land]. For learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing hath divulged them . . . God save us from both!" (93). Kozol's study of literacy in the United States—he estimates that one-third of adult Americans are illiterate—leads him to conclude that Berkeley needn't have worried: public education has not produced unrest or disobedience among the masses; it has, Kozol argues, been designed to ensure that students, particularly working-class students, are thoroughly schooled in passive compliance, if little else. That is, these children receive substandard educations not because their teachers are unqualified or too permissive nor because of cafeteria-style curricula that ignore the basics (as repeatedly asserted in conservative studies) but because schools function as "sorting mechanisms" (McLaren 160) to maintain inequality:

> If all of this is not political in purpose and result, if it is all a matter of "defective methods," of "inadequate technique," it is remarkable with what sustained coincidence we have assigned the worst techniques, the least efficient methods, to the poorest people in our nation. But we know well that none of this is true. It isn't coincidence. It isn't technique. It isn't the wrong method. It is, in William Berkeley's terms, precisely the *right* method. It is a method that assures perpetuation of disparities in power and of inequities in every form of day-to-day existence. (Kozol 93)

Kozol's by now familiar claim that cultural institutions function to reproduce the ideology and power of dominant groups was seconded by many radical educators during the 1980s when conservative administrations in both England and the United States prompted increased response from the left.

Indeed, although American critical pedagogy has roots in the turn-of-the-century progressive educational reform movement, the 1980s marks the contemporary rebirth of the project. One look at this essay's bibliography reveals the boom in critical pedagogy scholarship during the Reagan-Bush years, as radical educators responded to a host of conservative reports on education released beginning in 1983, the two most influential of which were *A Nation at Risk* (produced by Secretary of Education T. H. Bell's National Commission on Excellence in Education) and *Action for Excellence* (written by the Education Commission of the States). These reports announced a crisis in American education, a system wallowing in mediocrity that crippled America's ability to compete in the world economic market; they proposed an authoritarian, back-to-basics, teacher-proof curriculum to restore excellence to the schools. Giroux argues that the 1980s signaled a "major ideological shift" (*Schooling* 16) in public education as conservatives worked to undo reforms of the 1960s and to redefine schools not as sites for civic education and social justice but as "company stores" in which good citizenship is equated with economic productivity and "cultural uniformity" (*Schooling* 18).[5] The popularity and success of conservative educational reform suggested to radical educators that the country was experiencing not just a crisis in education but, as Giroux and McLaren argue, "a crisis in American democracy itself" (216).

Hence, in *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (1980), Shor presents a blistering Marxist critique of the community college system, developed during the late 1950s and bulging by the late 1970s, as a warehouse for surplus workers. Community colleges, Shor argues, simultaneously feed off the American Dream and shortcircuit it by building a large pool of skilled workers for a shrinking number of increasingly deskilled jobs. Unlike elite liberal arts colleges, which prepare students for roles as future problem-solvers and decision-makers, community colleges with their vocational curricula train students to follow orders and accept subordinate roles in society: "mass colleges were not to be Ivory Towers or 'the best years of your life' or homecoming parades on crisp autumn afternoons. They were from the start shaped outside the elite traditions of the academy, by the state for the masses, in the genre of public housing and the welfare bureaucracy" (13). Given American mass culture and mass education,

Shor suggests, it is hardly surprising that ours is a country in which " 'freedom' is not the practice of democracy but rather the practice of shopping, casual complaining, and individualism, in a society which offers wide license for individualism" (xi).

Three important studies by Giroux—*Theory and Resistance in Education* (1983), *Education Under Siege* (coauthored with Aronowitz) (1985), and *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life* (1988)—further advance the radical critique of public education. Like Shor, Giroux explores the "hidden curriculum," the subtle but powerful ways schools construct students' and teachers' knowledge and behavior, validating positivism and competitiveness over other forms of knowing or behaving. For Giroux, then, it is crucial that radical educators contest conservative definitions of education and citizenship in the interests of "naming and transforming those ideological and social conditions that undermine the possibility for forms of community and public life organized around the imperatives of a critical democracy" ("Literacy" 5). This project is important, he argues, not only to give voice to the poor and minorities but also to reach countless middle-class Americans who have "withdrawn from public life into a world of sweeping privatization, pessimism, and greed" ("Literacy" 5).

This utopian move toward social transformation signals a clear break that Giroux, Aronowitz, and other liberatory educators have made with more orthodox Marxist theory that, by focusing entirely on schools as mechanisms that reproduce dominant culture, gives radicals a language of critique but not one of intervention. At the risk of oversimplifying, if schools simply reproduce dominant ideology, and if they are as good at it as leftist critics insist, then there's no escape and no hope: students and teachers alike become victims of false consciousness, trapped in or by an oppressive ideology they will not even recognize because it seems as natural, as unquestionable, as air ("that's just the way things are"). Aronowitz and Giroux reject this "profound pessimism," insisting that although schools *are* reproductive, they are not *merely* reproductive—that is, insisting that schools are arenas characterized by struggle between competing ideologies, discourses, and behaviors and which, thus, include spaces for resistance and agency. Hence, Giroux writes of "cultural production" rather than cultural *re*production, acknowledging that cultural institutions produce varying degrees of accommodation and resistance (*Schooling* 136).

Similarly, Shor argues that community colleges, like the one he teaches in, complete with diverse or nontraditional student populations, cramped classrooms, and functional architecture, can open up spaces for critique and resistance by focusing students' attention on their all-too-obvious place in the socioeconomic hierarchy. Like Giroux, Shor describes students not as dupes of dominant ideology but as people fighting for their humanity without quite realizing how they might reclaim it:

> Beneath the hesitancy, the doubt, and the rigidity of my students, there remain stores of intellect, emotion, comedy, and Utopian needs, waiting to happen. They have fought the robotizing of their characters to a kind of stand-off. In class or on the job, they know how to sabotage any process which alienates them. They have ways to set limits on their own dehumanization. . . . Still, they

> have been invaded and distorted by machine culture. . . . While they limit their cooperation with the corporate order, they don't have a vision of alternatives. . . . They learn how to break the rules and get away with it, but they don't yet assume the responsibility of being the makers of the rules, together. (*Critical Teaching* 53)

This, then, is the aim of critical pedagogy—to enable students to envision alternatives, to inspire them to assume the responsibility for collectively recreating society. To do this, Giroux and McLaren argue in "Teacher Education and the Politics of Engagement," critical teachers need to conceive of schools as democratic public spheres: "schools can be public places where students learn the knowledge and skills necessary to live in a critical democracy." In these schools-as-public-spheres, "students are given the opportunity to learn the discourse of public association and civic responsibility" by doing—that is, by participating in democratic dialogue about lived experience, including the content and conduct of their own education (224).

In calling for schools constituted as public spheres, Aronowitz and Giroux seek to recover the nearly forgotten American tradition of radical education found in the work of John Dewey and his fellow progressives such as George Counts, John Childs, and William Kilpatrick. Dewey, whom Shor dubs "the patron saint of American education" (*When Students Have Power* x), pioneered experiential, student-centered learning that aims to integrate education with home and public life as well as develop the "free and equitable intercourse" and hence the shared interests essential for communal life (*Democracy and Education* 98). Dismissed by many radical theorists as merely liberal, Dewey is making a long-overdue comeback. Readers today may find his texts surprisingly in tune with current understandings of the relationships among knowledge, ideology, cultural practice, and language. Indeed, Aronowitz and Giroux stress the parallels between Dewey's work and that of Freire and Antonio Gramsci (10).[6] All three sought to create a theory of critical literacy that would empower citizens to disrupt dominant ideology and to revitalize democratic practice.

It's this vision of a democratic public discourse that attracts me to critical pedagogy. It's why I teach or, rather, why I teach writing—an occupation that has always been for me a high-stakes enterprise with implications not only for students' academic and professional success—important as those are—but also for the health of participatory democracy. I admire critical educators who struggle to enact a pedagogy devoted not just to dreams or texts or talk about democracy, but a pedagogy that would itself be the practice of democracy, that would use democratic means to reach democratic ends. But that, alas, is where the trouble begins.

MEANS AND ENDS

Shor says that "it's a tricky business to organize an untraditional class in a traditional school" (*Freire for the Classroom* 106). Just how tricky critical pedagogy

can be is not always readily apparent, however, in stories by critical teachers which, as Knoblauch and Brannon point out, tend to represent the teacher as classroom superhero (67–68). (Brannon rightly singles out Shor as the most heroic—it's no accident that in those imaginary tapes of successful classes I've played all summer in my head, I resemble some sort of Ira Shor in drag.) Shor's two most recent accounts of his teaching experiences, *Empowering Education* (1992) and *When Students Have Power* (1996), are frankly inspirational—funny and provocative and so full of handy tips and interesting assignments that even the most bamboozled among us will be reassured that we, too, can be effective critical teachers. *Empowering Education* is quite simply the most compelling book on education I've read since Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*. From the first day of class, Shor foregrounds student writing and student voices as he poses questions that ask students to critically examine course material and institutional power: "What is good writing?" "How do you become a good writer?" "What questions do you have about good writing?" Why are you taking this course? Why is it required? (37). Shor encourages students to talk to each other by backloading his comments and breaking eye contact when students speak only to him. Students in Shor's classes negotiate grading contracts, write classroom bylaws, choose reading materials and paper topics. *When Students Have Power* is, in part, a cautionary tale: Shor tells the story of one group of students who very nearly used their authority to negotiate the class out of existence. Despite Shor's encountering such difficulties, however, everything comes right in the end.

Similarly, Alex McLeod's "Critical Literacy: Taking Control of Our Own Lives" recounts the work he and John Hardcastle did with teens from one of London's most impoverished districts. Hardcastle's class of disruptive students, many of whom spoke nonstandard dialects or had serious difficulties writing, reportedly produced remarkably improved writing on topics such as the Falklands War, Nigerian history and culture, and the myth of objective media coverage. The article's title, taken from a student-produced documentary on education, highlights the transformative power of critical pedagogy: "if the type of English work which we have been discussing continues, then the possibility of taking control of our own lives, our own education, and becoming our own experts, is extremely exciting" (49). I do not mean to be flip or to devalue the efforts of these talented teachers; writing instructors, especially those teaching against the grain, need the reassurance these success stories provide. But we need stories of failure, too—stories that keep expectations realistic, stories that enable the ongoing self-critique essential for sound pedagogy. And those are hard to come by.

Of all the examples of liberatory pedagogy I've read, *Composition and Resistance* (1991), edited by Mark Hurlbert and Michael Blitz, is one of the few that clearly illustrates the difficulties of implementing—or even defining—critical pedagogy. This collection contains some interesting pieces by Berlin, Knoblauch (who tells a failure story), Stephen North, Kurt Spellmeyer, and James Sledd and a wonderful essay by Marian Yee on resisting, reevaluating, and recovering cultural narratives. But the real bonus in this volume is tran-

scripts from round-table discussions at three CCCC and NCTE conventions that contributors attended as part of the process of writing their essays. In these transcripts, participants interrupt each other with claims and counterclaims and generally disagree on everything from the meaning of resistance to the viability of the whole project of critical pedagogy. So, Donna Singleton challenges students to write complaints about campus problems to university officials, but Joe Harris calls the urge to validate discourse only when it moves beyond the classroom a "trap"; he argues that academic work can be resistant in and of itself, regardless of its "real-world application" (*Composition and Resistance* 152–53). So, Knoblauch argues that the classroom can be a site for social change—that human agency does exist. Nancy Mack agrees, claiming that students already have the power to "intentionally [author] their lives," but they don't realize it, don't use it; according to Mack, the job of writing teachers is to make students aware of their power. But Jeff Golub suggests that not realizing one's power might be the same as not having any and, further, that Mack's reasoning makes social change too easy: all we do is show students their power, and, poof, the revolution will begin. Singleton says that her inner-city students, who may truly be powerless, often see education as their only hope. Mack warns that "we have to be really careful that we aren't selling that—'a college education gives you power'" (*Composition and Resistance* 150–51). Here, we finally get a glimpse of the "tricky business" of liberatory teaching, of defining means and ends.

It is interesting to see, then, how slippery discussions of the means and ends of democratic education become when we turn to some of the more noted critiques of critical pedagogy. In "Considerations of American Freireistas," for instance, Victor Villanueva argues that while he shares the Freireans' revolutionary goals, he thinks their strategy of turning the classroom into a "political arena" is precisely the wrong means for the end. Villanueva reports on an ethnographic study of Floyd, a Freirean-trained teacher working in a Writer's Project for low-income, primarily black youths. By Freirean standards, Floyd seems perfect for the job: he's a talented black teacher and poet who grew up in the neighborhood where the project is located. He's overtly political, has participated in literacy campaigns in Nicaragua and Grenada (where he even met Freire). He taught the Writing Project students about black history and culture, about ideology and oppression. He encouraged them to become radical intellectuals: they wrote; they participated in antiracism demonstrations. And yet, in the end, although Floyd inspired some of his students, Villanueva claims that Floyd's political message reached only those already predisposed to accept his revolutionary agenda. Why would such a talented teacher fail? Because in America, Villanueva says, "counterhegemony cannot be easily sold" (251):

> Floyd's students . . . were in school to fulfill a dream, a longtime American dream of success through education. They were not in school to have their dreams destroyed. They would naturally resist any such attempt. Floyd's students could reason that no matter how slight their chances of getting into col-

> lege or the middle class, they did have chances, maybe better than most. . . . Floyd had himself made it through college, was a teacher, a published poet, a world traveler to pan-African conferences. In the students' eyes, Floyd made a better model of the bootstrap mentality than he made a model of the revolution. (256)

A more successful strategy, Villanueva claims, is based on the dialectic between hegemony and counterhegemony, between tradition and change. Arguing that students need to understand tradition in order to desire change, Villanueva designed a course in which students read one canonical and one noncanonical text and discuss ways their own lived experience connects to the two. As a result, students develop an understanding of the dialectical relationship between individuals and their environment—an understanding that, according to Villanueva, underlies students' willingness and ability to change both themselves and their world.

Gregory Jay and Gerald Graff also propose an avowedly leftist political pedagogy in "A Critique of Critical Pedagogy," but their complaint is not so much that the means of critical pedagogy are ineffective but that they are unethical—that is, undemocratic. Jay and Graff argue that although, in theory, critical pedagogy speaks of dialogue and students' authority to initiate and freely pursue critical analyses, in practice such a pedagogy merely reaffirms the authority of the teacher who has the "political clarity" (the term is Freire's) students lack. "How real can the Freirean dialogue be," Jay and Graff ask, when "the proper outcome of critical pedagogy is already predetermined. . . . Who the oppressors and the oppressed are is conceived not as an open question that teachers and students might disagree about, but as a *given* of Freirean pedagogy" (203). By contrast, Graff's familiar "teach the conflicts" curriculum would, they argue, explicitly foreground politics in the classroom without imposing any particular political agenda on students: "it would look to turn the campus into a *polis*, a community where empowered citizens argue together about the future of their society, and in so doing help students become active participants in that argument rather than passive spectators" (213). The force of Jay and Graff's argument about democratic means (and, indeed, their implicit claim that theirs is an argument only about means and not about ends) rests on their assertion that critical pedagogy amounts to coercion and on the perhaps dubious assumption that exposing students to counterhegemonic academic arguments is enough to more broadly or permanently shift students' critical habits and to heighten their sense of political agency.[7]

One of the more conservative attacks on critical pedagogy, Maxine Hairston's "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing," is also presented, at least partly, as an attack on educational means rather than ends. In this polemic against radical teachers who put "dogma before diversity, politics before craft" (180), Hairston identifies goals that she and other compositionists share with radicals: the desire for social reform, for freedom of expression, and for "diversity and a genuine multicultural environment" (189). Indeed, according to Hairston, it is the existence of these common goals that has enabled composi-

tionists to be so easily "co-opted by the radical left, coerced into acquiescing to methods that we abhor because, in the abstract, we have some mutual goals" (187). But, in addition to attacking the methods of radical teachers, Hairston also clearly defines different goals—for instance, her insistence that writing instructors "stay within [their] area of professional expertise" (186). Hairston argues that if compositionists try to teach students about complex socioeconomic or racial issues, they will all get into a terrible muddle. In doing so, Hairston ignores the fact that citizens in a democracy constantly need to make decisions about just such complex issues. In the final analysis, Hairston's argument seems as much about her desire to guard the independence of composition studies from critical theorists and "political zealots" as her goal to meet the needs of students living in an increasingly diverse society (192).

Oddly enough, it's the argument that seems to distance itself farthest from critical pedagogy—that criticizes both its means and its ends—that I find to be the most compelling challenge. Although not targeted specifically at critical pedagogy, Jeff Smith's essay, "Students' Goals, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics," argues that radical teachers often willfully confuse means and ends, most obviously by their refusal to acknowledge that they function primarily as means to students' ends. If writing teachers are serious about being democratic, if they are serious about letting students set the agenda for their own education, then they should honor students' professed desires to get the credentials needed to secure professional-managerial jobs. "To do otherwise," Smith claims, "is undemocratic at best, if not infantilizing and frankly oppressive" (317). "We *are* ethically bound by students' own aims," he continues, "even if those aims seem uncomfortably close to elite values. Our distrust of such values does not permit us to tell students what they 'really' want, or should want" (317).

Hence, Smith accepts the obligation to be useful to students, teaching the grammar and generic conventions they will need to succeed. My sympathies for Smith's argument stem, in part, from a similar uneasiness with some of what I read in critical pedagogy texts. Hurlbert and Blitz, for instance, celebrate a student who "resisted composure" by ignoring the conventions of an assigned research paper and turning in, instead, a series of quotations followed by a series of reflective paragraphs. The authors suggest that one thing composition teachers can do to subvert dominant ideology is "to stop teaching students to underwrite the university, to stop demanding written material which can be easily *gathered* and *assessed*" (*Composition and Resistance* 7). Now I am not a great fan of wrapped-in-a-tidy-package-with-a-bow papers, but such proclamations make me nervous, for while students benefit from having both the impulse and the rhetorical wherewithal to "resist composure," there is work in the world (quite often the kind that pays the rent but also various forms of political activism) that requires them to be proficiently, even eloquently composed.

What interests me about Smith's position is that in some ways it is much closer to Freire's or Shor's than readers might initially imagine. First of all, allowing students to direct their own education, as Smith says instructors should, is a cornerstone of critical pedagogy. In addition, Freirean teachers believe, as

does Smith, in providing students with useful education, for although Freire argues in *A Pedagogy for Liberation* that he's not doing his duty if he doesn't try to move students beyond purely vocational goals, the idea of not training them well for their chosen careers is, he says, "an absurdity. . . . What is impossible is to be an *incompetent* educator because I am a revolutionary" (Shor and Freire 69). According to Freire, the liberatory teacher will, thus, train students yet simultaneously problematize that training—will, for instance, teach standard English and correct usage while also problematizing their status as inherently superior to other dialects or grammars. Finally, although Smith says a teacher's role is to provide means, not to have ends, Smith, like critical teachers, has his own ends for students and for the larger society—ends that constitute part, if not all, of what critical pedagogy seeks: "I want the world that I and those I care about are going to live in to have capable people doing the kinds of jobs students say they're looking to do. . . . I want what I teach to be good not just for people, not even just for citizens, but for future doctors and lawyers and organic chemistry majors" (318–19).

The difference, then, between Smith and practitioners of critical pedagogy is not a simple one of opposing means and ends, for Smith says the instructor is the means expert, and Smith presumably would approve of any means that produce "capable people." Rather, the essential differences may stem from Smith's insistence that means can be separated from ends—"good things are learned even by less than ideal means" (310)—and that students have sole responsibility for setting the goals of their education without any input from instructors. Nevertheless, Smith, the critic who seems least interested in Freirean pedagogy, sometimes, through his ethical commitment to equality, democratic education, and students' needs, comes closer to Freire's position than some avowedly leftist instructors. Shor is right; this *is* a tricky business.

"WHO IS TO BE LIBERATED FROM WHAT?"

When Gregory Jay and Gerald Graff complain that Freire's pedagogy closes off disagreement over key issues such as the identity of the oppressed and of their oppressors, Freire is impatient with what he sees as Graff's "misguided relativism" (Freire and Macedo, "A Dialogue" 386); especially in Brazil, but even in the United States, Freire argues, it is easy to identify the poor, the hungry, the homeless. Nevertheless, when American writing teachers step into the classroom—or look into the mirror, for that matter—identifying the oppressed and the oppressors can become a task fraught with difficulties. Hence, in *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy*, Knoblauch and Brannon wonder whether the traditional goal of liberatory pedagogy to empower "outsiders" fits the complexities of American society, leaving all sorts of bewildering questions:

> Who is to be liberated from what? Who gets to do the liberating? Is the U.S. government an oppressor in the same sense that the South African government is? Are middle-class black persons as "outside" as underclass Hispanic? Is Eliz-

> abeth Dole an outsider? Where exactly is the inside? Is the goal to make the outsider into an insider? Is it to transform one inside into another? Is it to abolish capitalism? Does the moral commitment, and the political authority, of the critical teacher properly mandate a change in the consciousness of arguably disenfranchised students regardless of their own wishes, their own sense of what they might gain or lose from accommodating themselves to the dominant culture? (60)

And for the large number of writing instructors like me who walk into classrooms filled almost entirely with white, middle-class students who will likely fare very well in the system, it can be pretty hard to see their work as liberating oppressed students. In fact, radical American teachers often seem to assume just the opposite—that students belong to the oppressor group. What can liberatory pedagogy possibly mean under these circumstances? Knoblauch wonders, for instance, if liberatory teaching is even plausible, given the self-interest that stands in the way of students' critical examination of their status: "Is critical teaching anything more than an intellectual game in such circumstances? . . . What do my students have to gain from a scrutiny of values and conditions that work to ensure their privilege?" (60, 64).

Linda Finlay and Valerie Faith offer an answer in their essay "Illiteracy and Alienation in American Colleges: Is Paulo Freire's Pedagogy Relevant?," which reports on their work with upper-middle-class university students in remedial writing courses. Using keywords to uncover their students' generative themes, Finlay and Faith found that their students felt a gulf between their public (institutionally controlled, inauthentic) and private (emotionally satisfying, free, "real") lives, a gulf that caused them to feel oppressed despite their acknowledged economic privilege. Their students believed, Finlay and Faith explain, that their education was nothing more than a means to funnel them into appropriate middle-class jobs; it would not enable them to either enlarge the private realm or challenge the public. Finlay and Faith also learned that their students' resistance to writing—part of their public life—was linked to this sense of domination; once students connected language use to their private lives, their writing improved dramatically. Students' literacy, then, is intimately connected to what Freire has called "the world"; furthermore, students occupy multiple and often contradictory positions in relation to dominant culture:

> [they] fear and distrust the culture that runs the schools, a culture that they perceive as subordinating individual activity to the needs of a consumer economy. Since our students are not children, however, their education is complicated by their awareness that they have become accomplices in maintaining this culture and its values. They want those consumer goods, they want the college degree for earning power, political power, social power of many kinds. We and our students had to face the contradiction between the values of the consumer society—the products of which they enjoy—and their "childlike" instinct for personal determination. (82)

If students present untold complexities for critical teachers to sort out, teachers need to examine their own positions no less critically. Knoblauch and Brannon ask:

> What is the meaning of "radical teacher" for faculty in . . . privileged institutions—paid by the capitalist state, protected from many of the obligations as well as the consequences of social action by the speculativeness of academic commitment, engaged in a seemingly trivial dramatization of utopian thought that the university itself blandly sponsors as satisfying testimony to its own open-mindedness? (60)

Questions such as these cause Stephen North ("Rhetoric, Responsibility, and the 'Language of the Left'") to refuse to adopt the language of critical pedagogy although he admires many of its advocates. One sticking point for North is what he sees as a mismatch between the revolutionary pedagogy he'd advocate inside the classroom and the hours he spends outside the classroom "in or on a life that I would characterize as a system-supporting, system-supported, pro-capitalist, American mainstream life" (132). If he were truly to commit himself to radical teaching, North argues, he'd feel compelled to change his lifestyle.

It's a point that should perhaps worry more radical teachers than it does. Freire quips about this inconsistency, noting how many American Marxists "have never drunk coffee in the house of a worker!" The distance between our academic lives as compositionists and our everyday, concrete experience, between what Freire calls the word and the world, "makes us more able to *play* with theories" (Shor and Freire 136). Freire describes the particularly American dilemma of teachers who come to critical pedagogy not because of their experience of injustice but because of something they have read in a book (and I recognize myself in this description): "What happens? He or she comes to the classroom with a new conviction, but this new teacher was already shaped into the dichotomy between text and context. Then, it is hard to overcome the old dichotomy and integrate words and worlds" (Shor and Freire 136). Some radical teachers go to great lengths to integrate words and worlds; Kozol and Shor, for instance, both spent a number of years living in the neighborhoods of the students they taught. Few of us, I'm afraid, have that kind of commitment. Then what? Do we just give up so as not to make a mockery of radical pedagogy? Maybe. You see, my fears of "bamboozlement" persist. But I'm also wary of setting up radicalness requirements, and I suspect that there's a place in critical pedagogy for the not-yet-radical among us, although it's a place that remains unimagined in the scholarship.

FREEDOM AND AUTHORITY

As teachers concerned with social justice, we seem unfailingly attracted to the notion of an egalitarian space. We look for it in cyberspace; we look in liberatory classrooms. In Shor's first book, for instance, he talks about the teacher

"withering away" (*Critical Teaching* 98).[8] Similarly, Shor defines dialogue as "democratic, directed, and critical discourse" which "challenges power relations in the classroom and in society" (*Empowering Education* 87), and, in what can only be a utopian vision, Giroux describes a classroom in which "all voices in their differences become unified both in their efforts to identify and recall moments of human suffering and in their attempts to overcome the conditions that perpetuate such suffering" ("Literacy" 21).

But at numerous points in their arguments, critical educators have backpedaled from this too-easy equation of dialogue and democracy. Hence, Freire insists, "The dialogical relationship does not have the power to create such an impossible equality" between teachers and students (Shor and Freire 92). In fact, he says that it's the difference in students and teachers that make the liberatory project possible—"no one liberates himself by his own efforts" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 53); in other words, transformation depends on different and, often, unequal voices interacting, and the primary source of that superior voice, Shor suggests, is the more knowledgeable, more analytical, more politically committed teacher. Also, because dialogue is a means toward an end (it is not, Freire and Macedo and Shor insist, just talk, not aimless blah-blah-blah, not a rap or gripe session), it is directed activity. Freire says, "Dialogue does not exist in a political vacuum. It is not a 'free space' where you may do what you want. Dialogue takes place inside some kind of program and context. . . . Dialogue means a permanent tension in the relation between authority and liberty" (Shor and Freire 102).

Authority in the radical, democratic classroom? Freire says there's no getting around it: "without authority it is very difficult for the liberties of the students to be shaped. Freedom needs authority to become free. It is a paradox but it is true" (Shor and Freire 91). A teacher, by definition, has authority; for a teacher to deny that authority, Freire claims, results in license, not liberty. For Freire, it's important to distinguish between authority, which teachers must have, and authoritarianism, which is the abuse of power—a distinction that's easy enough to understand if not always to apply. Sometimes, however, radical educators work so hard to explain away teachers' obvious authority that their language could set off a doublespeak alarm. Giroux and McLaren, for instance, coin the term "emancipatory authority" (225), a little piece of bamboozlement that roughly translates "it's okay to use authority if you do it in the name of social justice." Shor and Freire run into similar difficulties trying to reconcile their notion of democratic dialogue with the fact that teachers often know more than their students: they admit that when teachers plan courses and select texts, they understand the object of study better than students, but they claim—as if to reinforce the teacher's role as just another student—"the teacher *re-learns* the objects through studying them with the students" (100). Shor and Freire seem to want to insist that the classroom is egalitarian even when common sense would say that it isn't—indeed, even when they themselves have argued that it isn't.[9]

Much more useful and interesting, then, are examples of how critical teachers actually do decenter their classrooms, and Shor is the best place to look for

these. His power-sharing moves include authorizing students to negotiate grading contracts right down to the attendance policies, to help develop the syllabus by bringing in readings and voting on unit themes, and to write bylaws for classroom behavior. In *When Students Have Power*, Shor also talks at length about the after-class group: he and a small group of students met to evaluate the day's session and to plan future classes and projects. Shor's students offered up a tremendous amount of feedback including some scathing criticisms of his choice of texts and time management; the result was a remarkable redistribution of power, knowledge, and responsibility. Shor's power and knowledge had not been erased; instead, another avenue of power had been explicitly constructed—it was now, as Shor says, a two-way street: "I found myself *immediately and continually accountable to students*" (125). Perhaps more than any other aspect of Shor's pedagogy, the after-class group undercuts complaints that critical pedagogy is all about teacher's imposing themselves on students, for within this space, students can take responsibility for the means and ends of the course. My own experience with an after-class group has convinced me that it can provide invaluable information for writing instructors, critical or otherwise, about students' interests and needs, about what's getting through and what isn't; more important, though, an after-class group can create a sense of enlarged possibilities for students and instructors as they tackle together the difficulties inherent in classrooms. My group was less brutal and less assertive than Shor's—they still tended to see their feedback as serving me rather than serving themselves—but they clearly wanted interesting, challenging work, and they pushed me and the other students to raise the level of discussion and to expand their options for writing and learning.

Behind Shor's power-sharing practices lies his realization that "*both teachers and students start out at less than zero and more than zero simultaneously. . . .* Both bring resources and obstacles to class" (*Empowering Education* 201). Students' absorption in mass culture hinders their critical study, but, Shor argues, teachers' culture of schooling equally hinders learning—and that's assuming teachers aren't also caught up in mass culture (don't we faithfully watch *ER* or *The X-Files*?). I find Shor's more-than- and less-than-zero approach to classroom status particularly productive, for then teachers are not the standard against which students' knowledge or power (or lack thereof) is measured. In addition, to the extent that Shor's line of thinking encourages teachers to recognize their own (and not just their students') multiple and contradictory positions in relation to dominant culture, it may open up a place in critical pedagogy for not-yet-radical teachers like me. That is, the lack of "political clarity" or radical commitment that might seem like a minus may actually be a plus in the critical classroom because it means one less barrier between teacher and student—simultaneous criticism of and entanglement in dominant culture can become one more problem that instructor and students sort through together.

How to think about and deal with barriers between students and teachers—with student resistance to leftist politics—is an especially vexed question for critical teachers. Freire asks, "What kind of educator would I be if I did not feel moved by a powerful impulse to seek, without lying, convincing argu-

ments in defense of the dreams for which I struggle?" (*Pedagogy of Hope* 83), but with his next breath, he insists that a critical teacher must never impose topics or politics on students. Except, of course, we *do* impose, after-class groups notwithstanding, especially when students enroll in a required writing course only to find a liberatory teacher greeting them from a back-row seat. Shor says that he never forces critical pedagogy on a class; when enough students voice discomfort with the instruction, he reverts to the role of traditional teacher for that course. But even he admits to asking several oppositional students every semester to leave the class. Berlin quips that when his students resisted a course in cultural critique, he finally "decided that was a victory because it would have been easy for them to play along with me" (Hurlbert and Blitz 9); however, Knoblauch puts such student resistance in a different light: "Well, you know 'resistance' may characterize in one way or another our relationship with some social reality, but I wonder what words characterize our implicating of our students in our resistances. You know, they're not resisting, except maybe us" (Hurlbert and Blitz 9).

CONCLUSION: TEACHING WITH/IN PARADOX

Patricia Bizzell's *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness* (1992) traces her search for means by which writing teachers might foster democratic discourse and social justice. It is a book I admire tremendously. It's not just that I like what Bizzell has to say (I do). I admire the persistence of her search, her willingness to abandon old positions and allies (Freire is one such), admire the fact that she keeps growing. Writers on all sides of the critical pedagogy debate often seem just a little too sure of themselves; Bizzell can reach a position, argue for it passionately, and still admit doubt.

In the book, Bizzell describes her early attempts to promote social equality by teaching academic discourse. She did so believing that "the critical detachment academic discourse affords" would "more or less automatically" produce both "insight into social injustices and the will to correct them" (20). But even as she worked to substantiate this claim, she began to doubt that any analytical method, in and of itself, would lead to the enlightened political commitment she hoped for. The need for such commitment is not self-evident; arguments have to be made for it, and Freire, she realized, did not make those arguments. Thus, Bizzell turned to rhetoric, determined "to figure out how to persuade [students] to identify with social justice as the common good. [She had] to figure out how we can all use rhetorical power to effect democratic political change" (30).

As I've noted, Hairston attacks Bizzell's decision to use her power, rhetorical or otherwise, to argue political issues in composition classes. "By the logic of the cultural left," Hairston reasons, "any teacher should be free to use his or her classroom to promote any ideology. Why not facism [sic]? Racial superiority? Religious fundamentalism? Anti-abortion beliefs? Can't any professor claim the right to indoctrinate students simply because he or she is right?" (188). But Bizzell's argument and practice are not so much about her *personal*

agenda (although Bizzell is quite clear about her personal and passionate commitment to it) as they are about what Dennis Lynch calls "the political values and agendas we share by virtue of living in a democracy" (353)—those values that Hairston, herself, says "all of us" share: respect for difference, fairness, a forum for the free exchange of ideas. Disavowing any foundational grounds for establishing her authority as a speaker, the central question for Bizzell becomes, "What is the legitimate authority of teachers, or any other orators?" (273). (That equation may give readers pause.) Her answer, following Isocrates, is that her authority "would be established rhetorically" (283). That is, making arguments in the classroom (or anywhere else) is not simply a matter of a teacher imposing her beliefs on students; rather, she can persuade only insofar as she builds her case on the values her students already hold. For example, Bizzell might argue against sexism by appealing to the American desire for equality, a value embedded in our founding documents as well as our current communal discourse.

That having been said, however, Bizzell still worries that her practice may violate the very democratic values she is trying to instill. Her hedges against this are, first, to help students develop their own rhetorical authority to persuade others in the class, including her, and second, to highlight through her course materials the commonalities among Americans, not by glossing over difference but by emphasizing that Americans are "united by a common experiment in negotiating difference" (293). These materials, collected in the textbook she and Bruce Herzberg produced called *Negotiating Difference*, are designed to enable students to investigate historical instances when groups negotiated differences in the search for social justice, to discover interests they share with other groups, and to learn that some past movements toward greater equality have, indeed, been successful.

Given the difficulties Bizzell faces in imagining and enacting her practice as well as the controversy her work has provoked, two points suggest themselves by way of closure. The first is the difficulty of generalizing about or judging the overall project of critical pedagogy. It seems certain that some radical teachers do abuse their authority, attempting simply to indoctrinate students. But, as in all aspects of education, so much depends on the instructor, the students, the physical classroom space and available resources, the curriculum, the school, the community (and the list goes on) that it strikes me as foolhardy to pronounce as, for instance, Jay and Graff do, that "it is just such notions of respect, trust, and faith that critical and oppositional pedagogies reject" (208), as if "critical pedagogy" were a monolith, as if it were "pedagogies" and not individual teachers and students together in a classroom who create or reject respect and trust.

Second, if critical pedagogy is plagued by bamboozlement or ambiguity, I'd suggest that this is not simply due to the inadequacies of its theory and methods. Rather some complications result from the inevitable presence of paradoxes, from having to live and teach with the knowledge that "human action can move in several directions at once, that something can contain itself and its opposite also" (Shor and Freire 69). So, we train and problematize; we

create freedom with authority; we teach resistance and hope for cooperation. These paradoxes are neither solvable nor necessarily debilitating. They keep teachers honest and inventive and, well, critical of their work. In an interview with Gary Olson, Freire notes the complicated position of the radical writing instructor who stands with one foot in the system, the present, today's reality, and the other foot outside the system, in the future, in utopia: "This is why it's so difficult . . . for us to walk: we have to walk like this. [With a playful smile, Freire begins to waddle across the room.] Life is like this. This is reality and history" (163).

Notes

1. For ease of reference, I use the term *critical pedagogy* to denote this whole group of teaching praxes, but it's important to note that although these pedagogies share assumptions about dominant culture as well as egalitarian goals, they often have distinct emphases. For instance, bell hooks sees her engaged pedagogy as more demanding than critical pedagogy: she insists that teachers can emancipate students only by themselves actively pursuing "self-actualization," a well-being springing from the union of mind, body, and soul (15). hooks's praxis thus emphasizes the role of the body, of pleasure and desire in learning.

2. Freire began his eighteen-year exile working in Chile as a UNESCO consultant on adult education for the Agrarian Reform Training and Research Institute; in 1969, he received an appointment to Harvard University's Center for the Study of Development and Social Change, and the following year, he accepted a position in Geneva as a consultant to the Office of Education of the World Council of Churches, where he developed literacy programs for Tanzania and Guinea-Bissau (an account of which is recorded in *Pedagogy in Process: Letters to Guinea-Bissau*). In 1981, he returned to Brazil, teaching at universities in Sao Paulo until his death in 1997.

3. Freire's later texts avoid this sexist language, a topic he addresses in his final book, *A Pedagogy of Hope*. Freire has been criticized, even rejected, by some feminist scholars who find his language problematic. bell hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress* that she once publicly confronted Freire about his sexist language, but she nonetheless defends his work as vital to the project of radical education.

4. Freire stresses the need for teachers to conduct extensive ethnographic research about their students' lives rather than guessing what might be important to the class. For Freire, this involved lengthy, multilayered study: an investigative team, which included prospective students, conducted extensive discussions with and observations of people in the community where a literacy program was to be set up. These data were then further developed by a larger team of educators, disciplinary experts, and sociologists who, in consultation with community members, generated a set of themes to " 're-present' . . . to the people from whom [they] first received it" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 101). For a more detailed account of this process, see chapter 3 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

5. Interested readers can find provocative analyses of the 1980s debate over the crisis in education in Aronowitz and Giroux, Shor (*Freire for the Classroom* and *Culture Wars*), Donaldo Macedo, and Knoblauch and Brannon.

6. The parallels between Dewey and Freire are sometimes astonishing. For instance, Freire's critique of the banking model of education in which students are seen as receptacles waiting to be filled echoes Dewey's criticisms of "teaching by pouring in, learning by passive absorption." Dewey continues, "Education is not an affair of 'telling' and being told, but an active and constructive process" (*Democracy and Education* 46). In addition, when explaining the centrality of dialogue for critical pedagogy, Freire asserts that "only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 81). Similarly, Dewey establishes the necessity for dialogue in education and communal life, claiming that "society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication. . . . Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication . . . is educative," both for listeners who gain an "enlarged and changed experience" and for speakers whose understanding of an experience necessarily changes as they formulate it to share with others (*Democracy and Education* 5–6). Dewey expands on the connection between literacy, art, and democracy in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927).
7. For the record, it's not clear that Jay and Graff have ever participated in or even observed a Freirean classroom, nor (and this is true of many arguments against critical pedagogy—a point not lost on Freire) do they cite any of Freire's texts besides *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which, by the time of their writing, was twenty-five years old and which had been further developed and qualified. It is also ironic that although Jay and Graff advocate helping students become "active participants" rather than "passive spectators," the example of democratic pedagogy they present involved a faculty symposium in which Graff and two other instructors debated revisions of Chicago's general education humanities course before a two-hundred-member student audience.
8. It's hard not to see parallels between this early version of Shor's pedagogy and Peter Elbow's "writing without teachers." Indeed, Knoblauch and Brannon argue that despite radicals' attacks on expressivism as "solipsistic" and "politically disengaged," expressivist pedagogies should be recognized as the "precursors" of critical pedagogy (126). Expressivist and critical pedagogies, they claim, share the goal of empowering students working within a narrow, authoritarian system; furthermore, Knoblauch and Brannon point out that, methodologically, "arguments for critical teaching have tended largely to reiterate the tactics of whole language and writing process classrooms"—decentered classrooms and emphasis on dialogue; use of small, collaborative groups; and attention to nonanalytic forms of expression such as narrative (129).
9. Elizabeth Ellsworth's article, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," discusses her experience trying to work with and through this sometimes idealistic or befuddled language in a graduate education course she taught called "Media and Anti-Racist Pedagogies." Ellsworth's course attracted an ethnically and religiously diverse group of men and women from the United States as well as international students, all of whom were committed to combating campus racism. Despite their apparently common goal, however, the group soon fractured into smaller "affinity groups," each with its own agenda and methods. Additionally, Ellsworth claims that the vision of the classroom as safe space emphasized in critical pedagogy scholarship made her and her students reluctant to jettison the dialogic method even though it was proving counterpro-

ductive: her students did not feel safe to speak nor did members of minority groups want to *dialogue* about their oppression; they wanted to talk back or present monologues. Further, she felt that her position as a white, middle-class professional woman left her with little authority, emancipated or otherwise, to help liberate her often marginalized students. Ellsworth argues, in short, that notions of dialogue, solidarity, and authority in critical pedagogy theory were inadequate for dealing with the power dynamics of the class; hers is one of the most extensive critiques to come from within the ranks of radical teachers.

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