

Artful Anti-Racist Pedagogy

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Reading bell hooks's account of what it was like to move from an all-black school to a desegregated, racist, white school reminds me of the profound loss to all of us when our educational institutions are shaped by racism. She notes:

Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, cultural workers -- black folks who used our "minds." We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization....Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by doing so uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission.

Attending school then was sheer joy. I loved being a student. I loved learning. School was the place of ecstasy -- pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone. Home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else's image of who and what I should be. School was the place where I could forget that self, and, through ideas, reinvent myself.

School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to anti-racist struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn was what was expected of us....For black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this I lost my love of school. The classroom was no longer a place of pleasure or ecstasy. School was still a political place, since we were always having to counter white racist assumptions that we were genetically inferior, never as capable as white peers, even unable to learn. Yet the politics were no longer counter-hegemonic. We were always and only responding and reacting to white folks.¹

Now consider the following examples which seem to demonstrate Alain Locke's point that approaching racial issues from the point of view of argumentation can entrench racism.

1. A white middle-class student claims that she has been the subject of racial discrimination because she and three other white women were outnumbered by the five African American women taking the same course.²
2. A minority teacher of a course on minority groups and race relations that included discussions on race and gender dynamics has a male student bring a complaint against her, charging that she used the class as a platform for feminism, and that as a "white male" he was completely marginalized.³
3. Upon hearing that a colleague is deconstructing the term "people of color," a white faculty member exclaims: "Oh Good! I've always felt excluded by that term."⁴

Reading Audrey Thompson's paper in the context of these examples, I appreciate her claims that "the most important obstacle to improving social understanding may be a [certain form of] literal-mindedness"; and that we need to find ways to create spaces in which to envision new possibilities.

Audrey Thompson's discussion of anti-racist education in terms of aesthetic metaphor is fruitful. I find her own particular suggestions for anti-racist pedagogy rich and interesting and exciting; and

also somewhat ambiguous. I am, I think, in agreement with her and so I propose to clarify and extend somewhat the interpretation of her writing that I find most intriguing.

There are three points of ambiguity I want to address. On each of these points I assume Thompson would agree, or, dare I say, *should* agree, with the following interpretations of her position.

First is a set of ambiguous claims surrounding the nature of the hindrance posed by the argumentation labeled "propaganda" in Locke's dichotomy, that is, reactive or corrective argumentation. Is it considered inadequate because it *cannot*, in principle, eliminate racism? Or because it *cannot, by itself*, eliminate racism? Is the concern that reactive, corrective argumentation often *can* entrench racism? Or, is the worry that it *inevitably* entrenches or worsens racism? Does such argumentation make it *impossible* for us to conceive non-racist alternatives, or, does it only make it *difficult* to envision non-racist alternatives?

With respect to the precise nature of the hindrance posed by argumentation, I take Thompson to be saying that reactive, corrective argumentation, by itself, is highly *unlikely* to be adequate to the task of eliminating racism; that it sometimes, even often, *entrenches* racism, and that it may make it *difficult*, though not necessarily *impossible*, to envision non-racist alternatives. In short, argumentation is not enough.

Second, does Thompson herself think that we can create spaces "outside the premises of racism?" I find a tension in her work on this point. On the one hand she clearly states that we cannot have politics-free spaces, and yet she, like Locke, insists that the metaphor of art is useful precisely because it suggests the creation of spaces outside the existing racist discourses.

But, will successful anti-racist education create, strictly speaking, spaces "outside the premises of racism?" I think the spatial metaphor, used in this way, is somewhat misleading and that with even the best performative art we will not create such spaces. I think this for a number of reasons. First, because, as Thompson herself notes, there can be no politics-free zone. Second, because, as she also notes, we want to avoid utopian discussions and to do that we must inevitably address the existing situation.

If our performances are about the lives of people in the United States of America, in this "highly and historically racialized society,"⁵ then, as Toni Morrison notes in her own study of what racial ideology does to the mind and imagination of masters, we will have to acknowledge that:

Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too [does] the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restrictions.⁶

Morrison states bluntly, and authoritatively, "for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language." Thus, living as we are in "a racially articulated and predicated world,"⁷ we need to carefully attend to know when performance would conspire "in the fabrication of racism" and when it might "explode and undermine it."⁸

The point is that we cannot take it for granted that art or performance will automatically shift us to a new place in racial relations. It can as easily entrench racism or worsen it. Who performs, who the audience is, who directs, and so on, all play a role in framing the experience, in determining its meaning. We must distinguish the potential of art from the success of any given performance. And we must always remain mindful of its dangers. Performances themselves, pedagogical or not, will not *necessarily* be free of racism, just as Thompson notes that art itself is not "innocent," is not necessarily free of racism. Hence, the need, it seems, for reactive and corrective argumentation.⁹

The third ambiguity I find concerns the role of corrective argumentation in anti-racist pedagogy as Thompson conceives it. In particular, with respect to her example, I am unclear about the role of

argumentation in performative debates.

I understand Thompson to be arguing that pedagogy (unlike curricula and texts) can itself be an art, a performative art, which if done well, makes it possible for us to experience and examine hitherto unimagined possibilities in racial relations. And, the crucial point, if I understand her correctly, is that in the *examination* part of this experience we might well draw upon reactive and corrective argumentation. Thus, I take her thesis to be that art is indispensable, and (this may be sheer heresy) *argumentation* is also indispensable.

What further complicates the matter in ways I can only allude to here are suggested by the following questions we need to address, questions that cannot be addressed in the abstract. Is this pedagogy for those who suffer racism or for those who are served by it? What different things might each group need to attend to? We should not assume they will all be the same.

Given the task of trying to change a system that is characterized by "hyperstability" (as the engineers say), that is, a system *resistant* to change; given the variability of the readiness for change among the participants; and in particular, given Gandhi's first law of change: "You must be the change you want to see in the world," I believe that we shall have to draw upon everything, including art, politics, religion, law, etiquette, sport, education, argumentation and humor, and we shall have to do it *artfully* if we are to meet the challenge. Thus, I suggest that what we need to emphasize is not so much the metaphor of *art*, but rather, the idea of *artistry*.

Although I know that the Philosophy of Education Society decries it bad form for commentators to go on about their own views, in closing, I cannot resist adding my own views about *the most* effective means to bring about the sorts of changes Thompson and Locke want.

My own view is that art and argumentation intersect because, as Susanne Langer says of all species of literature, "their separateness is never absolute. They arise from the power of different devices."¹⁰ And I believe in the device of humor.

With Ellen Orleans, the lesbian author of *Can't Keep A Straight Face*, I believe in humor. With her: "I believe in its power; especially in its subversive power. Humor creeps in undetected, going places where a heavy handed approach cannot."

As she says,

I have my own scientific theory about humor. I believe that when people laugh, the blood vessels in their brains enlarge, making them, in effect, more open-minded. It is during this instant of open-mindedness that we can sneak in and place a small piece of information into the cerebrum. It might be a simple message, like "Discrimination is Bad." Or something more complex, such as "Lesbians and gays make good parents." Or possibly, "Homosexuals should be compensated for injustice done to them with very large refunds from the IRS."¹¹

Is this art? Is it a form of argument? Is it propaganda? Is it performance? I would argue that it is all of these. But then its value lies not so much in what we call it. Rather, its value comes, as Thompson suggests, from creating shifts which move us toward deeper understanding and equal democratic relations.

One final word. Locke, I believe, was primarily concerned about anti-racist education for African Americans. The problem Thompson and I face is one of challenging racism from a position privileged by it. In each case, however, what is at stake is the same; as Adrienne Rich reminds us, what is at stake "is not abstract justice; it is integrity and survival."¹²

1. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1984), 2-4.
2. Leslie Roman, "White is a Color! White Defensiveness, Postmodernism, and Anti-Racist Pedagogy," in *Race Identity and Representation in Education*, ed. Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (New York: Routledge, 1993), 81.
3. Roxana Ng, "Sexism and Racism in the University," in *Canadian Women's Studies/Les Cahiers De La Femme* 14, no. 2 (1994): 41.
4. Roman, "White is a Color!" 82.
5. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1992), 4.
6. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 6.
7. Ibid., 15-16.
8. Ibid., 16.
9. There are multiple shifting factors affecting meaning and racism. For example, note that while African American zealous learning and diligence in education might once have been viewed as a threat to white supremacy. It is now, according to Signithia Fordham's work, taken to be a threat to African American identity. See S. Fordham and J. Ogbu, "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the 'Burden of 'Acting White,'" *The Urban Review* 18, no. 3 ([year, month?]): 176-206; S. Fordham, "Racelessness as a Factor in Black Students' School Success: Pragmatic Strategy or Phrrhic Victory?" *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 1 (February 1988): 54-75; S. Forham, "Those Loud Black Girls': (Black) Women, Silence, and Gender 'Passing' in the Academy," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1993): 3-32.
10. Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1953), 304.
11. Ellen Orleans, *Who Cares If It's a Choice?* (Bala Cynwyd, Penn.: Laugh Lines Press, 1994), 12.
12. Adrienne Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W. W. Noton, 1979), 304.

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