

Toward a Pedagogy for Embracing Ambiguity

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Jennifer Logue's critical examination of varied forms of ignorance challenges the widespread assumption that truth seeking is the key to dispelling ignorance at both individual and collective levels. To Logue, transformative pedagogy for social justice cannot dwell on cultivating a strong and unyielding will to truth. Rather, transformative pedagogy must inquire into the complex and dynamic interrelations between the will to truth and the will to ignorance. It is noted that while the cultivation of blissful ignorance can be effortless or even rewarding, unmasking willful ignorance requires scrupulous pedagogical maneuvering. In recognition of the power of willful ignorance, Logue cogently points out that transformative pedagogy can neither hold truth to be self-evident, nor assume that emotionless reasoning will pave the way to "the mountaintop." Instead, she invites us to create "a pedagogical space of dynamic uncertainty wherein the interplay between knowledge and affective investments of forms of ignorance can be explored."

Logue's thoughtful analysis of willful ignorance heightens our awareness of the limits of binary thinking, for instance, knowledge versus ignorance, psychology versus epistemology. At the same time, Logue appears to elevate the volitional power of the will and cast doubt on the desirability of truth. In response to Logue's reevaluation of ignorance, this essay inquires into the following interrelated questions: Will unmasking willful ignorance facilitate a full recognition of one grand monolithic truth, or simply a plodding exposure to the multiplicity of truth? Might creating "a pedagogical space of dynamic uncertainty" justify inaction for social justice?

Both Nietzsche and Logue appear to cast doubt on the desirability of truth. However, neither Nietzsche nor Logue calls truth into question. In other words, one's resistance to execute "the will to truth" does not necessarily suggest that one is incapable of recognizing and comprehending truth. To a large extent, Logue's efforts to unmask willful ignorance seem to coincide with her commitment to antiracist/antibias pedagogy that embodies moral truth claims such as those of justice and equality. Logue acknowledges that moral truth can be "difficult knowledge" that not only confronts one's conscience but also threatens to undermine one's given privilege. Still, Logue seems to believe that the prospect of antiracist/antibias pedagogy lies in one's ethical competence to uphold truth and in one's potential "affective investment" in truth seeking. Thus, she urges us to think of responsible agency "as a balancing act between the desire to know and the desire to remain ignorant."

But how does one undertake such a balancing act, and for what purpose? To match the desire to know with the desire to remain ignorant so that the desire to know does not overpower the desire to remain ignorant, and vice versa? There are problems with keeping the desire to know and the desire to remain ignorant at

equilibrium. More specifically, while Logue calls for developing a better taxonomy of ignorance, her version of truth appears to be monolithic and universalistic in nature. Such universalistic and monolithic moral truth certainly has merits. To illustrate, ancient and modern philosophical thinkers have been eager to delineate a methodical (yet surreal) blueprint for building a just society. “The just society,” as envisioned in Plato’s *Republic*, the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, enables both the privileged and the subaltern to expose and critique “a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunction,” existing in the perpetually unjust and imperfect society.¹ As a matter of fact, it was such a universalistic and monolithic version of truth that empowered Martin Luther King Jr. to charge that “America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’” and to refuse “to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt.”²

Nevertheless, forty years later, the bank of justice in a modern democratic society such as the United States has yet to acquire sufficient funds to honor its promise of justice for all. Why? Following Logue’s argument, one can attribute the bankruptcy to the power elite’s willful ignorance of “insufficient funds.” At the same time, the subaltern’s strategic ignorance, while empowering the subaltern to see through the bankruptcy of justice, has also failed to overhaul the failing banking regulations. In fact, Audre Lorde reminds us that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”³ As a result, keeping the power elite’s willful ignorance and the subaltern’s strategic ignorance at equilibrium appears to sanction a racial stalemate as described in Barack Obama’s recent speech, “A More Perfect Union.”⁴ Should we, therefore, cast doubt on the desirability of truth claims such as that there is or can be “justice for all”? Such a grand monolithic and universalistic version of truth at best can only serve as a regulative ideal toward establishing “a perfect union” (or even “a more perfect union”), and at worst represents an unrealistic blueprint for a perfect union that exists only in one’s dreams.

On the other hand, one’s willful ignorance of truth should not consequentially call the desirability of truth into question. Nor should one’s willful ignorance of truth be equated with one’s wholesale rejection of truth. Metaphorically speaking, truth is like an onion with countless layers. Undoubtedly, peeling a truth onion is not required for facilitating a comprehensive appreciation of truth. However, despite pain and “tearing,” peeling the truth onion does enable us to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and multiplicity of truth. Hence, developing a better taxonomy of various forms of ignorance requires a conjoint effort to develop a better taxonomy of various layers of truth. Above all, one’s subject position more or less affects one’s cognitive and affective understanding of various forms of ignorance and truth. Clifford Geertz notes that human beings are “incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish themselves through culture — and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it.”⁵ Depending upon one’s subject position and cultural upbringing, difficult knowledge can mean different things. A perceived “difficulty” can be attributed to preserving one’s privilege or the status quo, or to confronting others’ privilege or the status quo.

Although Geertz's anthropological insights still hold true, ongoing globalization has entailed endless interactive cultural hybridization. Transformative pedagogy must foster a cultivation of "a new disposition through our encounters with difficult knowledge," as suggested by Logue. Thus, in view of resistance to the multicultural education movement, it is critical to rethink the approach that excludes "exclusive" religious, moral, and philosophical doctrines. Undoubtedly, including exclusive doctrines in circumscribed public realms such as public school settings can ignite heated debates. But, it is unrealistic to expect that a "conflict-free" multicultural curriculum can resolve cultural conflicts outside its circumscribed public realm. After all, the process of attaining overlapping consensus on the political conception of justice demands unlimited dialogical interactions. Public schools as a circumscribed public realm thus should become open to more intercultural and even interfaith dialogues.

All in all, Logue's analysis shows that ignorance can be instructive and transformative. Jürgen Habermas notes that "The democratic constitutional state does not represent a finished structure but is a delicate and above all a fallible and revisable undertaking."⁶ The fallibility of a liberal democratic system also reflects "reasonable" people's willful ignorance of unjust cultural practices. Yet, ordinary people's moral capacity can also command the moral courage to amend a democratic constitutional state. Hence, an ethical vision of a just and equal society can be reinscribed as a corrective device to redress the contradictions between political reality and ethical ideal. It follows that developing better taxonomies of ignorance must coincide with a recognition of the multiplicities of truth. Echoing Logue's call for "renouncing our pedagogical investment in certainty," I conclude that transformative pedagogy must embrace the ambiguity surrounding truth, ignorance, and identity formation.

1. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.

2. Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream" (speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C., August 28, 1963). See also, King, *The Peaceful Warrior* (New York: Pocket Books, 1968).

3. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, eds. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden (New York: Routledge, 2000), 53–5.

4. Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," *The Huffington Post*, March 18, 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-t_n_92077.html.

5. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 49.

6. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 464, quoted in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 377.