

On Reading African-American Philosophy: Theory, Politics, and Pedagogy

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I deeply appreciate the opportunity this response has afforded me to read some of Professor Gordon's work, and this essay in particular. There is much to think about, but, for obvious reasons, I will try in my brief remarks to frame my response within the context of what has passed for most of this century as philosophy of education and, also, what I do, which is different from this in important respects, as an educational theorist. So, first a brief set-up of the problem in educational theory, as I see it, and then how many of Professor Gordon's themes and concerns are enabling resources for this kind of work.

The distinguishing feature of twentieth century educational study is the problem of the school. Within the normative consensus and rationality of what Lawrence Cremin called a metropolitan civilization, in which the school is the primary purveyor of symbolic knowledge and the central mediator of the interrelationships of a wide range of nonformal educational agencies and institutions, the idea of a public education became identified with public schooling. This identification provided the ideological, economic, cultural, and institutional background for a genuine social movement and, just as importantly, for a set of hegemonic intellectual practices which circumscribed educational study. The Philosophy of Education Society took shape against this background and, while there have always been outliers and dissenters, still largely operates within the ideological and intellectual consensus of the metropolitan configuration and public school movement.

There are, however, many signs that this consensus is unraveling, partly, to be sure, because of its own failures and partly, as always, because of a systematic siege on the very idea of any public institutions by forces of capital. But just as importantly, I believe, we need to understand the dissolution of the public school movement as part of another configurational shift in which the very idea of what it means to be educated is at stake. In my view, the educational policy debates of the last fifteen or so years are all species of "cusp" talk, end of cycle salvage operations on a fading set of institutions, practices, and norms. There is much important work to be done here. Some, probably most, of this talk is pernicious and oppressive; some is moved by authentic regard for learning, children, and community, and as Professor Gordon writes, pedagogical and intellectual nihilism, however much grounded in lived experience, is a form of bad faith.

Still, this work must be accompanied by the kinds of serious thought and practice which can help direct the creation of a new configuration of education in which the school might well play an important, though limited and different, role, and in which the mission of attainment will be integrated with a substantive idea of public, rather than individual or symbolic, achievement. When I read in a recent poll that the support for school vouchers among African Americans between the ages of

26 and 35 is 86%, while I know it is a complicated story, it is also clear that the once secure ideological lines around which the public school debate, which was a marker for the public education debate, was framed are now increasingly blurred and in many respects irrelevant.

For me, this is evidence of the need for a recovery of educational theory. The philosophy of education community can no longer operate within the paradigmatic core of a discipline, a configuration of institutions, or a set of delivered problems. In short, in my view, the most significant and lovely problem before us at century's end is the need for a theory or theories of public education. Where might we turn for help?

Professor Gordon mentions Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey, familiar sources to us all. But while we read these texts as educational classics, their very participation in the creation and justification of forms of domination weighs inexorably. As I have thought about and taught educational classics, it has seemed to me more enabling to begin with the view that an educational classic is one in which some fundamental idea of difference is asserted and valorized and a path, arc, or journey of transition between is proposed. As Professor Gordon writes,

pedagogical and intellectual nihilism emerges from teachers and knowledge producers denying their abilities to teach and produce knowledge. Such attitudes are clearly forms of bad faith. What is the point of such efforts if not to make a difference in the unfolding drama of humankind?"

While this idea of "making a difference" is central, of course, the kinds of differences, their qualities, their hierarchies, and the "doings" that go into "making" the difference are the stuff of educational theory. And here, Professor Gordon's discussion of three central themes of African-American philosophy, what he terms 1) problems of identity; 2) problems of liberation; and 3) problems of self-reflexive incompleteness, help us to enter into an inquiry over "doings" and "differences" with a more insistent gaze across a wider field of possibilities.

For example, like Professor Gordon, I read W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* as a text of educational theory. There are obvious reasons for this, of course, such as the specific context of the work in an educational debate with Booker T. Washington and DuBois's own statement in the Forethought that "I have sketched in swift outline the two worlds within and without the Veil, and thus have come to the central problem of training men for life."¹ However, beyond these explicit signifiers, I read DuBois as a theorist grounded in a concrete, historically situated sense of his subject matter, that is "the problem of the color line [and]...the spiritual world in which ten thousand thousand Americans live and strive," yet one who stakes a claim on the possibilities of, in Professor Gordon's words, identification without identity.² The claim that one can be of a people, perhaps of all people, and yet other, perhaps even to oneself, is the central expression of DuBois's inquiry on liberation as incompleteness and the most poignant drama of his educational theory.

In my view, nowhere are the conflicted meanings and possibilities of identity, liberation, and incompleteness, and with this the conflicted meanings and possibilities of education, better expressed than in Chapter XIII, "Of the Coming of John,"

popularly know as the “Two Johns” chapter. It is a story too sad and beautiful to be summarized neatly, but the central narrative revolves around a young Southern Black man who is sent away from his home in the country to the city for schooling. There, despite or perhaps because of the new and confusing ways in which he feels the stigmata of racism, he studies the classics of the Western intellectual tradition. While his community and kin await his return, the schooled John travels home to, in his words, “help settle the Negro problem.” The excitement and anticipation soon fade as all understand that the John who comes home is different. A church service at which John speaks of Enlightenment ideas of reason, equality, and universal brotherhood ends with a denunciation of John as a heretic. John’s efforts to teach at the Negro school are ended by the white officials who insist that he “teach the darkies to be faithful servants and labourers as your fathers were.” Connected to the “universal” through his schooling, yet invisible in that world, and disconnected from his community through schooling, yet identified, John turns in the end to nature, to love, to freedom unrealized. As the final events unfold, the tragedy is complicated by the serenity and courage with which John takes responsibility for his past, present, and future. In Professor Gordon’s terms, in the midst of concrete oppression, violence, and a closed world, an adult morality is required. For my purposes what is most important is that this morality is learned; John’s agency, our agency, is forged against the press of canon, church, and community. As Professor Gordon writes and Du Bois’s story of the coming of John gives expression, this education in adult morality “recognizes the tragedy, humor, pathos, and struggles of human reality; it recognizes that at times we will fail, but failure is part of learning, and the value of the struggle is such that we must persevere.” This is the language of the quest, rather than the conquest, and as such falls squarely within the discourse of educational theory.

Professor Gordon also addresses the particular contribution African-American philosophy can make to educational theory in the analysis of forms of invisibility, which he accurately characterizes as “conceptions of borders that need to be crossed.” This particular border, of course, has a long history in philosophy of education, from Plato’s cave to contemporary critical pedagogy, and its expression takes many forms around the core differences of seen and unseen, light and dark, and black and white. I think a case can be made that this difference has special problematic status in modernist societies in which knowledge is stored in symbols. A symbol *qua* symbol is not the “real” thing, and thus an education rooted in the transmission of symbols immediately raises questions of meaning, interpretation, and power.

For example, I read Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as text of educational theory from this perspective. Ellison’s invisibility is certainly about race, but just as importantly in my view about modernity. When Ellison writes, “Invisibility touches anyone who lives in a big metropolis,” he is not only referring to bigness but as well to the way in which metropolitan cultures are metaphorically blind and thus how anonymity is our identity. For Ellison, a metropolitan culture educates us, albeit it in different ways, into invisibility, and relies on this education in order to persist. For Ellison, in a classic existential stance, one escapes invisibility not by being visible,

but by choosing invisibility and its responsibilities. The Invisible Man lives within borders of plan and accident, light and day, black and white, and certainty and chaos in an attempt to outline a moral anatomy of confusion. Every representation of order turns into chaos; the graduation speech and the battle royale, the veteran and the Golden Day, the factory and the explosion, the brotherhood and the riot. He carries the symbols of all these orders in his briefcase, which he ultimately must burn to seize his own invisibility, as he is educated into the understanding that recognition must not be confused with identity. His quest for identity is through writing, putting invisibility “down in black and white,” as he burns the symbols of his education and becomes literate.³ Like John, he learns that the writing itself is a disarming, a recognition that our symbol systems always fail us, but also that they can keep us awake to our failures, the failures of our assemblies, and our responsibility for our freedom and the moral and existential imperative to continue to play, to re-create, “in the face of certain defeat.”⁴

There are many more possibilities like these, but I hope I have given some sense of how much I learned from Professor Gordon’s presentation on African-American philosophy, politics, and pedagogy; how central I think the themes he raises are to the work of contemporary educational theorists; and that I have honored his text in my interpretations. On the border of a new meaning of what it means to be educated, I agree completely with Professor Gordon when he writes that “fused with the project of the teacher, the intellectual, and the student, who becomes one day both teacher and creator, the message is clear: The future’s meaning and thus the future itself are in our hands.”

1. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1989), xxxi

2. Ibid.

3. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 14.

4. Ibid.