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Paulo Freire and the Politics of Postcolonialism

By: Henry A. Giroux

Yet we have different privileges and different compensations for our positions in the field of power relations. My caution is against a form of theoretical tourism on the part of the first world critic, where the margin becomes a linguistic or critical vacation, a new poetics of the exotic.

Caren Kaplan

The work of Paulo Freire continues to exercise a strong influence on a variety of liberal and radical educators. In some quarters his name has become synonymous with the very concept and practice of critical pedagogy. Increasingly, Freire's work has become the standard reference for engaging in what is often referred to as teaching for critical thinking, dialogical pedagogy, or critical literacy. As Freire's work has passed from the origins of its production in Brazil, through Latin America and Africa to the hybrid borderlands of North America, it has been frequently appropriated by academics, adult educators, and others who inhabit the ideology of the West in ways that often reduce it to a pedagogical technique or method. Of course, the requisite descriptions generally invoke terms like "politically charged," "problem-posing," or the mandatory "education for critical consciousness" and often contradict the use of Freire's work as a revolutionary pedagogical practice.¹ But in such a context, these are terms that speak less to a political project constructed amidst concrete struggles than they do to the insipid and dreary demands for pedagogical recipes dressed up in the jargon of abstracted progressive labels. What has been increasingly lost in the North American and Western appropriation of Freire's work is the profound and radical nature of its theory and practice as an anti-colonial and postcolonial discourse. More specifically, Freire's work is often appropriated and taught "without any consideration of imperialism and its cultural representation. This lacuna itself suggests the continuing ideological dissimulation of imperialism today" (Young 158). This suggests that Freire's work has been appropriated in ways that denude it of some of its most important political insights. Similarly, it testifies to how a politics of location works in the interest of privilege and power to cross cultural, political, and textual borders so as to deny the specificity of the other and to reimpose the discourse and practice of colonial hegemony.

I want to argue that Paulo Freire's work must be read as a postcolonial text and that North Americans, in particular, must engage in a radical form of border crossing in order to reconstruct Freire's work in the specificity of its historical and political construction. Specifically, this means making problematic a politics of location situated in the privilege and power of the West and how engaging the question of the ideological weight of such a position constructs one's specific reading of Freire's work. At the same time, becoming a border crosser engaged in a productive dialogue with others means producing a space in which those dominant social relations, ideologies, and practices that erase the specificity of the voice of the other must be challenged and overcome.

Homelessness and the Border Intellectual

In order to understand Freire's work in terms of its historical and political importance, cultural workers have to become border crossers. This means that teachers and other intellectuals have to take leave of the cultural, theoretical, and ideological borders that enclose them within the safety of "those places and spaces we inherit and occupy, which frame our lives in very specific and concrete ways" (Borsa 36). Being a border crosser

suggests that one has to reinvent traditions not within the discourse of submission, reverence, and repetition, but "as transformation and critique." That is, "One must construct one's discourse as difference in relation to that tradition and this implies at the same time continuities and discontinuities" (Laclau 12). At the same time, border crossing engages intellectual work not only in its specificity and partiality, but also in terms of the intellectual function itself as part of the discourse of invention and construction, rather than a discourse of recognition whose aim is reduced to revealing and transmitting universal truths. In this case, it is important to highlight intellectual work as being forged in the intersection of contingency and history arising not from the "exclusive hunting grounds of an elite [but] from all points of the social fabric" (Laclau 27).

This task becomes all the more difficult with Freire because the borders that define his work have shifted over time in ways that parallel his own exile and movement from Brazil to Chile, Mexico, the United States, Geneva, and back to Brazil. Freire's work not only draws heavily upon European discourses, but also upon the thought and language of theorists in Latin America, Africa, and North America. Freire's ongoing political project raises enormous difficulties for educators who situate Freire's work in the reified language of methodologies and in empty calls that enshrine the practical at the expense of the theoretical and political.

Freire is an exile for whom being home is often tantamount to being "homeless" and for whom his own identity and the identities of others are viewed as sites of struggle over the politics of representation, the exercise of power, and the function of social memory.² It is important to note that the concept of "home" being used here does not refer exclusively to those places in which one sleeps, eats, raises children, and sustains a certain level of comfort. For some, this particular notion of "home" is too mythic, especially for those who literally have no home in this sense; it also becomes a reification when it signifies a place of safety which excludes the lives, identities, and experiences of the other, that is, when it becomes synonymous with the cultural capital of white, middle-class subjects.

"Home," in the sense I am using it, refers to the cultural, social, and political boundaries that demarcate varying spaces of comfort, suffering, abuse, and security that define an individual's or group's location and positionality. To move away from "home" is to question in historical, semiotic, and structural terms how the boundaries and meanings of "home" are constructed in self-evident ways often outside of criticism. "Home" is about those cultural spaces and social formations which work hegemonically and as sites of resistance. In the first instance, "home" is safe by virtue of its repressive exclusions and hegemonic location of individuals and groups outside of history. In the second case, home becomes a form of "homelessness," a shifting site of identity, resistance, and opposition that enables conditions of self and social formation. JanMohammed captures this distinction quite lucidly:

"Home" comes to be associated with "culture" as an environment, process, and hegemony that determine individuals through complicated mechanisms. Culture is productive of the necessary sense of belonging, of "home"; it attempts to suture . . . collective and individual subjectivity. But culture is also divisive, producing boundaries that distinguish the collectivity and what lies outside it and that define hierarchic organizations within the collectivity. "Homelessness," on the other hand, is . . . an enabling concept . . . associated with . . . the civil and political space that hegemony cannot suture, a space in which alternative acts and alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project can survive. "Homelessness," then, is a situation wherein utopian potentiality can endure. ("Worldliness" 27)

For Freire, the task of being an intellectual has always been forged within the trope of homelessness: between different zones of theoretical and cultural difference; between the borders of non-European and European cultures. In effect, Freire is a border intellectual,³ whose allegiance has not been to a specific class and culture as in Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual; instead, Freire's writings embody a mode of discursive struggle and opposition that not only challenges the oppressive machinery of the State but is also sympathetic to the formation of new cultural subjects and movements engaged in the struggle over the modernist values of freedom, equality, and justice. In part, this explains Freire's interest for educators, feminists, and revolutionaries in Africa, Latin America, and South Africa.

As a border intellectual, Freire ruptures the relationship between individual identity and collective subjectivity. He makes visible a politics that links human suffering with a project of possibility, not as a static plunge into a textuality disembodied from human struggles, but as a politics of literacy forged in the political and material dislocations of regimes that exploit, oppress, expel, maim and ruin human life. As a border intellectual, Freire occupies a terrain of "homelessness" in the postmodern sense that suggests there is little possibility of ideological and hegemonic closure, no relief from the incessant tensions and contradictions that

inform one's own identity, ideological struggles, and project of possibility. It is this sense of "homelessness," this constant crossing over into terrains of otherness, that characterizes both Freire's life and work. It is as an exile, a border being, an intellectual posed between different cultural, epistemological, and spatial borders that Freire has undertaken to situate his own politics of location as a border crosser.

Freire as Border Crosser

It is to Freire's credit as a critical educator and cultural worker that he has always been extremely conscious about the intentions, goals, and effects of crossing borders and how such movements offer the opportunity for new subject positions, identities, and social relations that can produce resistance to and relief from the structures of domination and oppression. While such an insight has continuously invested his work with a healthy "restlessness," it has not meant that Freire's work has developed unproblematically. For example, in his earlier work, Freire attempted to reconcile an emancipatory politics of literacy and a struggle over identity and difference with certain problematic elements of modernism. Freire's incessant attempts to construct a new language, produce new spaces of resistance, imagine new ends and opportunities to reach them were sometimes constrained in totalizing narratives and binarisms that de-emphasized the mutually contradictory and multiple character of domination and struggle. In this sense, Freire's earlier reliance on emancipation as one and the same with class struggle sometimes erased how women were subjected differently to patriarchal structures; similarly, his call for members of the dominating groups to commit class suicide downplayed the complex, multiple, and contradictory nature of human subjectivity. Finally, Freire's reference to the "masses" or oppressed as being inscribed in a culture of silence appeared to be at odds with both the varied forms of domination these groups labored under and Freire's own belief in the diverse ways in which the oppressed struggle and manifest elements of practical and political agency. While it is crucial to acknowledge the theoretical and political brilliance that informed much of this work, it is also necessary to recognize that it bore slight traces of vanguardism. This is evident not only in the binarisms that inform *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* but also in *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, particularly in those sections in which Freire argues that the culture of the masses must develop on the basis of science and that emancipatory pedagogy must be aligned with the struggle for national reconstruction.

Without adequately addressing the contradictions these issues raise between the objectives of the state, the discourse of everyday life, and the potential for pedagogical violence being done in the name of political correctness, Freire's work is open to the charge made by some leftist theorists of being overly totalizing. But this can be read less as a reductive critique of Freire's work than as an indication of the need to subject it and all forms of social criticism to analyses that engage its strengths and limitations as part of a wider dialogue in the service of an emancipatory politics. The contradictions raised in Freire's work offer a number of questions that need to be addressed by critical educators about not only Freire's earlier work but also about their own. For instance, what happens when the language of the educator is not the same as that of the oppressed? How is it possible to be vigilant against taking up a notion of language, politics, and rationality that undermines recognizing one's own partiality and the voices and experiences of others? How does one explore the contradiction between validating certain forms of "correct" thinking and the pedagogical task of helping students assume rather than simply follow the dictates of authority, regardless of how radical the project informed by such authority. Of course, it cannot be forgotten that the strength of Freire's early discourse rests, in part, with its making visible not merely the ideological struggle against domination and colonialism but also the material substance of human suffering, pain, and imperialism. Forged in the heat of life-and-death struggles, Freire's recourse to binarisms such as the oppressed vs. the oppressor, problem-solving vs. problem-posing, science vs. magic, raged bravely against dominant languages and configurations of power that refused to address their own politics by appealing to the imperatives of politeness, objectivity, and neutrality. Here Freire strides the boundary between modernist and anti-colonialist discourse; he struggles against colonialism, but in doing so he often reverses rather than ruptures its basic problematic. Benita Parry locates a similar problem in the work of Frantz Fanon: "What happens is that heterogeneity is repressed in the monolithic figures and stereotypes of colonialist representations. . . . [But] the founding concepts of the problematic must be refused" (28).

In his later work, particularly in his work with Donaldo Macedo, in his numerous interviews, and in his talking books with authors such as Ira Shor, Antonio Faundez, and Myles Horton, Freire undertakes a form of social criticism and cultural politics that pushes against those boundaries that invoke the discourse of the unified, humanist subject, universal historical agents, and Enlightenment rationality. Refusing the privilege of home as a border intellectual situated in the shifting and ever-changing universe of struggle, Freire invokes and constructs elements of a social criticism that shares an affinity with emancipatory strands of postmodern discourse. That is, in his refusal of a transcendent ethics, epistemological foundationalism, and political

teleology, he further develops a provisional ethical and political discourse subject to the play of history, culture, and power. As a border intellectual, he constantly reexamines and raises questions about what kind of borders are being crossed and revisited, what kind of identities are being remade and refigured within new historical, social, and political borderlands, and what effects such crossings have for redefining pedagogical practice. For Freire, pedagogy is seen as a cultural practice and politics that takes place not only in schools but in all cultural spheres. In this instance, all cultural work is pedagogical, and cultural workers inhabit a number of sites that include but are not limited to schools. Most recently in a dialogue with Antonio Faundez, Freire talks about his own self-formation as an exile and border crosser. He writes,

It was by travelling all over the world, it was by travelling through Africa, it was by travelling through Asia, through Australia and New Zealand, and through the islands of the South Pacific, it was by travelling through the whole of Latin America, the Caribbean, North America and Europe--it was by passing through all these different parts of the world as an exile that I came to understand my own country better. It was by seeing it from a distance, it was by standing back from it, that I came to understand myself better. It was by being confronted with another self that I discovered more easily my own identity. And thus I overcame the risk which exiles sometimes run of being too remote in their work as intellectuals from the most real, most concrete experiences, and of being somewhat lost, and even somewhat contented, because they are lost in a game of words, what I usually rather humorously call "specializing in the ballet of concepts." (13)

It is here that we get further indications of some of the principles that inform Freire as a revolutionary. It is in this work and his work with Donaldo Macedo, Ira Shor and others that we see traces, images, and representations of a political project inextricably linked to Freire's own self-formation. It is here that Freire is at his most prescient in unraveling and dismantling ideologies and structures of domination as they emerge in his confrontation with the ongoing exigencies of daily life as manifested differently in the tensions, suffering, and hope between the diverse margins and centers of power that have come to characterize a postmodern/postcolonial world.

Reading Freire's work for the last fifteen years has drawn me closer to Adorno's insight that, "It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home" (qtd. in Said, "Reflections" 365). Adorno was also an exile, raging against the horror and evil of another era, but he was also insistent that it was the role of intellectuals, in part, to challenge those places bounded by terror, exploitation, and human suffering. He also called for intellectuals to refuse and transgress those systems of standardization, commodification, and administration pressed into the service of an ideology and language of "home" that occupied or were complicitous with oppressive centers of power. Freire differs from Adorno in that there is a more profound sense of rupture, transgression, and hope, intellectually and politically, in his work. This is evident in his call for educators, social critics, and cultural workers to fashion a notion of politics and pedagogy outside of established disciplinary borders; outside of the division between high and popular culture; outside of "stable notions of self and identity . . . based on exclusion and secured by terror" (Martin and Mohanty 197); outside of homogeneous public spheres; and outside of boundaries that separate desire from rationality, body from mind.

Of course, this is not to suggest that intellectuals have to go into exile to take up Freire's work, but it does suggest that in becoming border crossers it is not uncommon for many of them to engage his work as an act of bad faith. Refusing to negotiate or deconstruct the borders that define their own politics of location, they have little sense of moving into an "imagined space," a positionality from which they can unsettle, disrupt, and "illuminate that which is no longer home-like, heimlich, about one's home" (Becker 1). From the comforting perspective of the colonizing gaze, such theorists often appropriate Freire's work without engaging its historical specificity and ongoing political project. The gaze in this case becomes self-serving and self-referential, its principles shaped by technical and methodological considerations. Its perspective, in spite of itself, is largely "panoptic and thus dominating" (JanMohamed, "Worldliness" 10). To be sure, such intellectuals cross borders less as exiles than as colonialists. Hence, they often refuse to hold up to critical scrutiny their own complicity in producing and maintaining specific injustices, practices, and forms of oppression that deeply inscribe the legacy and heritage of colonialism. Edward Said captures the tension between exile and critic, home and "homelessness" in his comment on Adorno, though it is just as applicable to Paulo Freire:

To follow Adorno is to stand away from "home" in order to look at it with the exile's detachment. For there is considerable merit in the practice of noting the discrepancies between various concepts and ideas and what they actually produce. We take home and language for granted; they become nature and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy. The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which

enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience. ("Reflections" 365)

Of course, intellectuals from the First World, especially white academics, run the risk of acting in bad faith when they appropriate the work of a Third World intellectual such as Freire without "mapping the politics of their forays into other cultures," theoretical discourses, and historical experiences (JanMohamed, "Worldliness" 3). It is truly disconcerting that First World educators rarely articulate the politics and privileges of their own location, in this case, so at the very least to be self-conscious about not repeating the type of appropriations that inform the legacy of what Said calls "Orientalist" scholarship (Orientalism).

Freire and Postcolonial Discourse

I want to conclude by raising some issues regarding what it might mean for cultural workers to resist the recuperation of Freire's work as an academic commodity, a recipe for all times and places. Similarly, I want to offer some broad considerations for reinventing the radicality of Freire's work within the emergence of a postcolonial discourse informed by what Cornel West terms the "decolonization of the Third World," and characterized by "the exercise of . . . agency and the [production of] new . . . subjectivities and identities put forward by those persons who had been degraded, devalued, hunted, and harassed, exploited and oppressed by the European maritime empires" (4). The challenge presented by Freire and other postcolonial critics offers new theoretical possibilities to address the authority and discourses of those practices wedded to the legacy of a colonialism that either directly constructs or is implicated in social relations that keep privilege and oppression alive as active constituting forces of daily life within the centers and margins of power.

Postcolonial discourses have made clear that the old legacies of the political left, center, and right can no longer be so easily defined. Indeed, postcolonial critics have gone further and provided important theoretical insights into how such discourses either actively construct colonial relations or are implicated in their construction. From this perspective, Robert Young argues that postcolonialism is a dislocating discourse that raises theoretical questions regarding how dominant and radical theories "have themselves been implicated in the long history of European colonialism--and, above all, the extent to which [they] continue to determine both the institutional conditions of knowledge as well as the terms of contemporary institutional practices--practices which extend beyond the limits of the academic institution" (viii). This is especially true for many of the theorists in a variety of social movements who have taken up the language of difference and a concern for the politics of the other. In many instances, theorists within these new social movements have addressed political and pedagogical issues through the construction of binary oppositions that not only contain traces of racism and theoretical vanguardism but also fall into the trap of simply reversing the old colonial legacy and problematic of oppressed vs. oppressor. In doing so, they have often unwittingly imitated the colonial model of erasing the complexity, complicity, diverse agents, and multiple situations that constitute the enclaves of colonial/hegemonic discourse and practice.⁴

Postcolonial discourses have both extended and moved beyond the parameters of this debate in a number of ways. First, postcolonial critics have argued that the history and politics of difference are often informed by a legacy of colonialism that warrants analyzing the exclusions and repressions that allow specific forms of privilege to remain unacknowledged in the language of Western educators and cultural workers. At stake here is the task of demystifying and deconstructing forms of privilege that benefit maleness, whiteness, and property as well as those conditions that have disabled others to speak in places where those who are privileged by virtue of the legacy of colonial power assume authority and the conditions for human agency. This suggests, as Gayatri Spivak has pointed out, that more is at stake than problematizing discourse. More importantly, educators and cultural workers must be engaged in "the unlearning of one's own privilege. So that, not only does one become able to listen to that other constituency, but one learns to speak in such a way that one will be taken seriously by that other constituency" (42). In this instance, postcolonial discourse extends the radical implications of difference and location by making such concepts attentive to providing the grounds for forms of self-representation and collective knowledge in which the subject and object of European culture are problematized.⁵

Second, postcolonial discourse rewrites the relationship between the margin and the center by deconstructing the colonialist and imperialist ideologies that structure Western knowledge, texts, and social practices. In this case, there is an attempt to demonstrate how European culture and colonialism "are deeply implicated in each other" (Young 119). This suggests more that rewriting or recovering the repressed stories and social memories of the other; it means understanding and rendering visible how Western knowledge is encased in historical and

institutional structures that both privilege and exclude particular readings, particular voices, certain aesthetics, forms of authority, specific representations, and modes of sociality. The West and otherness relate not as polarities or binarisms in postcolonial discourse but in ways in which both are complicitous and resistant, victim and accomplice. In this instance, criticism of the dominating other returns as a form of self criticism. Linda Hutcheon captures the importance of this issue with her question: "How do we construct a discourse which displaces the effects of the colonizing gaze while we are still under its influence" (176).

While it cannot be forgotten that the legacy of colonialism has meant large-scale death and destruction as well as cultural imperialism for the other, the other is not merely the opposite of Western colonialism, nor is the West a homogeneous trope of imperialism. This suggests a third rupture provided by postcolonial discourses. The current concern with the "death of the subject" cannot be confused with the necessity of affirming the complex and contradictory character of human agency. Postcolonial discourse reminds us that it is ideologically convenient and politically suspect for Western intellectuals to talk about the disappearance of the speaking subject from within institutions of privilege and power. This is not to suggest that postcolonial theorists accept the humanist notion of the subject as a unified and static identity. On the contrary, postcolonial discourse agrees that the speaking subject must be decentered, but this does not mean that all notions of human agency and social change must be dismissed. Understood in these terms, the postmodernist notion of the subject must be accepted and modified in order to extend rather than erase the possibility for creating the enabling conditions for human agency. At the very least, this would mean coming to understand the strengths and limits of practical reason, the importance of affective investments, the discourse of ethics as a resource for social vision, and the availability of multiple discourses and cultural resources that provide the very grounds and necessity for agency.⁶

Of course, while the burden of engaging these postcolonial concerns must be taken up by those who appropriate Freire's work, it is also necessary for Freire to be more specific about the politics of his own location and what the emerging discourses of postmodernism and postcolonialism mean for self-reflectively engaging both his own work and his current location as an intellectual aligned with the State (Brazil). If Freire has the right to draw upon his own experiences, how do these get reinvented so as to prevent their incorporation by First World theorists within colonialist rather than decolonizing terms and practices? But in raising that question, I want to emphasize that what makes Freire's work important is that it doesn't stand still. It is not a text for but against cultural monumentalism, one that offers itself up to different readings, audiences, and contexts. Moreover, Freire's work has to be read in its totality to gain a sense of how it has engaged the postcolonial age. Freire's work cannot be separated from either its history or its author, but it also cannot be reduced to the specificity of intentions or historical location.

Maybe the power and forcefulness of Freire's works are to be found in the tension, poetry, and politics that make it a project for border crossers, those who read history as a way of reclaiming power and identity by rewriting the space and practice of cultural and political resistance. Freire's work represents a textual borderland where poetry slips into politics, and solidarity becomes a song for the present begun in the past while waiting to be heard in the future.⁷

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Notes

¹See Stygall for an excellent analysis of this problem among Freire's followers.

²My use of the terms "exile" and "homelessness" have been deeply influenced by essays by Becker, JanMohamed ("Worldliness"), Said, Martin and Mohanty, and Kaplan. See also selected essays in Bell Hooks' *Talking Back* and *Yearning*.

³I have taken this term from JanMohamed, "Worldliness."

⁴For an excellent discussion of these issues as they specifically relate to postcolonial theory, see Parry, JanMohamed (Manichean), Spivak, Young, and Bhabha. The ways in which binary oppositions can trap a particular author into the most essentialist arguments can be seen in a recent work by Patti Lather. What is so unusual about this text is that its call for openness, partiality, and multiple perspectives is badly undermined by the binarisms which structure around a simple gendered relation of truth to illusion.

⁵This position is explored in Tiffin.

⁶I explore this issue in *Border Crossings*.

⁷This essay will appear in revised form in McLaren and Leonard.

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