Making the Pedagogical (Re)Turn: Henry Giroux’s Insurgent Cultural Pedagogy

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The media exercise an influence on public consciousness. In that respect they are more akin to education than to industry, and their offerings should be as much a matter of public concerns as the quality of our education.

—Michael Parenti

One should not forget why one went to the popular in the first instance. . . . It’s not just an indulgence and an affirmation; it’s a political, intellectual, pedagogical commitment. Everybody now inhabits the popular, whether they like it or not, so that does create a set of common languages. To ignore the pedagogical possibilities of common languages is extremely political.

—Stuart Hall

What [the idea of permanent education] stresses is the educational force of our whole social and cultural experience. It is therefore concerned, not only with continuing education, of a formal or informal kind, but with what the whole environment, its institutions and relationships, actively and profoundly teaches. . . . For who can doubt, looking at television or newspapers, or reading the women’s magazines, that here, centrally, is teaching, and teaching financed and distributed in a much larger way than is formal education.

—Raymond Williams

As these epigraphs suggest, popular culture is one of society’s most effective devices for categorizing our affective and thinking capacities, teaching as it entertains and entertaining as it teaches. The relationship between entertainment and educational capacity suggests that films and other popular cultural media are as pedagogically effective as they are because they entertain. In this context, popular culture is entertainment, but it is not only entertainment. It has extra-entertaining capacities, one of which is its pedagogical and hegemonic capacity to produce what Nelson Goodman calls a “rightness of rendering” (qtd. in Freeland and Wartenberg 3). A “rightness of rendering” refers to media’s pedagogical capacity to normalize representations so that they appear correct and seem consistent with our common sense. Infiltrating the market at near saturation levels, these hegemonic representations severely limit our ability to critically penetrate their implied assumptions about the world and its social, political, and cultural ordering (see Parenti).

A return to a concentration on the pedagogical aspects of popular culture without denying the political and cultural aspects of pedagogy brings us closer to developing pedagogical strategies that encourage social engagement and fuse the affective and intellectual dimensions of learning (see Worsham). Pedagogy, in this discourse, is not relegated to the language of schooling or teaching techniques and strategies. Rather, the scope of pedagogy is extended to include the hegemonic strategies of popular culture specifically and media generally. Relevant here is Antonio Gramsci’s insight concerning the hegemonic function of pedagogy and the pedagogic function of hegemony. In this context, pedagogy indicates a circuit of social and political ordering, and the normalization of that ordering. In other words, we are “schooled” in the logic of dominant formations through a subtle and not so subtle barrage of cultural stimuli. From commercials and sitcoms to Hollywood blockbusters and school curricula, we both learn and acquire the kinds of knowledge that help perpetuate the dominant social order (see Gee). For example, neoliberal hegemony is, in part, a result of pedagogical strategies that mobilize public desire, construct common sense, and constrain our sociological and political imaginations, narrowly defining public life in consumerist terms, just as it relegates the notion of democratic struggle to the periphery of social discourse or criminalizes it in the name of civility (for example, see mainstream media reporting on the Los Angeles uprising and the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund).

In academia, two separate critical processes—cultural studies and critical pedagogy—attempt to understand and disturb this ordering and its effects in terms of ideology, affect, pedagogy, and transformative politics. As separate theoretical entities, they have sometimes struggled on the one hand to link culture and power to a transformative praxis and, on the other hand, to link curricular and pedagogical theories and practices to cultural production, representation, and consumption. By moving cultural studies into the circuit of critical pedagogy, Henry Giroux offers educators and other political workers a decolonizing and insurgent critical process, one
that suggests that radical social transformation is, in large part, a pedagogical issue. As Lynn Worsham writes, the pedagogical turn in cultural and composition studies “arguably represents an effort to change, through the language of critique and empowerment, the emotional constitution of the postmodern subject” (231).

In what follows, I will argue that Giroux’s insurgent cultural pedagogy offers a unique opportunity to enliven the classroom and relieve both teachers and students from the intellectual shallowness and social irrelevancy that standardized curricula and high-stakes testing often promote and enforce (see Miner). Additionally, it provides an oppositional discourse that challenges standardization’s advocates, who in their drive for excellence often dismiss the “very real obstacles such as racism, poverty, fear of crime, low teacher salaries, inadequate facilities, and language barriers” that limit the learning opportunities of linguistic and cultural minority populations by focusing on “standards of outcome rather than standards of opportunity” (Kohn 60). Giroux’s insurgent cultural pedagogy orients cultural studies toward the interventionist project of critical pedagogy, making the theory and practice of articulation—the “methodological” practice of cultural studies—more than a banal exercise in linking “texts” normally observed and understood as disconnected (Downing 191). It also liberates theories and practices of teaching and learning from the burdensome legacy of “practicality,” a code word that implies the sublimation of theory to the instrumentalization of teaching through the privileging of methodologies, techniques, and practices. Lastly, it draws theoretical validity and social relevance by accepting the intrinsic partialities of knowledge and experience without denying the “broader features of social organization and conflicts” (Best and Kellner 259). As such, Giroux’s insurgent cultural pedagogy recognizes, as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner put it, “that while it is impossible to produce a fixed set and exhaustive knowledge of a constantly changing complex of social processes, it is possible to map the fundamental domains, structures, practices, and discourses of a society, and how they are constituted and interact” (259).

In this article, I will first discuss the theoretical and political foundations of Giroux’s project, drawing on his recent critique of *Fight Club* as an illustration of what I have been calling his insurgent cultural pedagogy. I will then discuss, by example, the influence his project has had on my own pedagogical approaches to teaching critical literacy to “developmental” readers in Penn State’s College Assistant Migrant Program (CAMP). I will conclude by discussing, more generally, how the utopian elements of insurgency have the capacity to work pedagogically and politically to open up new spaces of democratic possibility.

**The Turn to Pedagogy or the Pedagogical Return: Giroux’s Insurgent Cultural Project**

To understand Giroux’s work, one must first recognize the importance he places on establishing a “project.” A project, in his lexicon, is a critical practice that is determined and responsive to present political conditions and that attempts to bring into being a more democratic and just system of social and political ordering. Giroux’s project is born out theoretically, in part, from the convergence of cultural studies and critical pedagogy, two critical traditions that “rarely speak to each other” (*Impure* 127–28). He writes,

> At the risk of overgeneralizing: both cultural-studies theorists and critical educators engage in forms of cultural work that locate politics in the interplay among symbolic representations, everyday life, and material relations of power; both engage cultural politics, as “the site of the production and struggle over power,” and learning as the outcome of diverse struggles rather than as the passive reception of information. In addition, both traditions have emphasized what I call a performative pedagogy reflected in what such theorists as Lawrence Grossberg call “the act of doing,” the importance of understanding theory as the grounded basis for “intervening into contexts and power . . . in order to enable people to act more strategically in ways that may change their context for the better.” Moreover, theorists working in both fields have argued for the primacy of the political in their diverse attempts to produce critical public spaces, regardless of how fleeting they may be, in which “popular cultural resistance is explored as a form of political resistance.” (127–28)

His work is informed in part by the Frankfurt School’s critical theory generally and Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s work on the culture industry specifically; Michel Foucault’s work on the relationship between power and knowledge; Paulo Freire’s work on liberatory pedagogies; Erich Fromm’s radical psychology, work that linked personal and psychic experiences to our social relationship to freedom, authority, and power; Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony; and the cultural studies work of Lawrence Grossberg, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams.
His present project responded to the corporate domination of media, and the threat such domination poses to democracy through its hegemonic control of popular culture (see McChesney). Remembering Gramsci’s maxim concerning the pedagogical dimension of hegemony, Giroux sees popular culture as a “teaching machine,” hegemonic in its ability to suture common sense into the folds of entertainment (see The Mouse). As such, the pedagogical capacities of popular culture are to be understood through their articulatory relationships to larger formations of power. By recognizing that “pedagogy”—both in its affective and ideological capacities—functions as the copula of indeterminancy between popular culture and its consumption, Giroux reinscribes popular culture in Gramscian as opposed to Baudrillardian or orthodox Marxian terms; that is, he recognizes that popular culture teaches and cannot be thought to be simply an imitative, “reflective,” or reproductive text. Rather, its pedagogical capacities must be understood, employed, and, when appropriate, taught against. As he states regarding his recent critique of Fight Club, “I am less interested in moralizing about the politics of Fincher’s film than I am in reading it as a form of public pedagogy that offers an opportunity to engage and understand its politics of representation as part of a broader commentary on the intersection of consumerism, masculinity, violence, politics, and gender relations” (“Private” 6).

His insurgent cultural pedagogy de-reifies popular culture, while respecting its power to teach, just as it provides a theoretical framework for interrogating popular culture as a “commodity that must be examined as a source and effect of supra-individual relations” (Sholle 151). In this way, integrating cultural material into the curriculum offers the teacher an opportunity to use his or her authority to link cultural “artifacts” with social formations of power, while constructing oppositional knowledge that challenges the moral legitimacy of dominant social formations. For example, what might it mean to link the production of gansta rap to white, corporate America without denying the resistant function rap sometimes plays in urban life? How does thinking about popular films and other modes of cultural production as “teaching machines” present teachers and students with the challenge of asking what, how, and why they teach us what they do? By respecting the power of these teaching machines to mobilize desire, instigate such emotions as anger and lust, whitewash history, and validate certain ways of being in the world, teachers can begin to make learning meaningful while they disrupt hegemonic representations without totally dismantling a student’s power investments in popular culture.

To illustrate this project, we can look to Giroux’s recent critique of Fight Club, in which he sees the film as articulating with the “politics, ideology, and culture of neoliberalism” (“Private” 1). As such, he argues that the film is driven by an investment in individualism, a construction of masculinity that relies on violence and misogyny for its sense of agency, and a total disregard for “social, public, and collective” responses to the increasing callousness and alienation of market-driven social policies (1). Posing as a socially engaged film, Fight Club ends up “reproducing the very problems” it attempts to address (5–6). By employing a transgressive aesthetic, films such as Fight Club romanticize violence, racism, and sexual abuse (among other anti-democratic practices) in the name of creative freedom, progressive politics, and entertainment. Generally denying any relationship between entertainment and public pedagogy, Hollywood mystifies the role it plays in encouraging the affective investments we make, our occupation of narrowly conceived subject positions, and our individual and collective attitudes and behaviors toward difference.

Demystifying Hollywood’s discourse of innocence and entertainment, Giroux critiques a film’s public pedagogy by mapping its sociopolitical “lessons” to larger public discourses. In the context of Fight Club, the paradoxical relationship between its transgressive aesthetics on the one hand and its conservative politics on the other is exposed by taking a detour through the film’s public pedagogy. Because teaching is never divorced from the context in which it occurs, a focus on the film’s teaching strategies and capacities and the lessons it promotes leads to an engagement with the sociopolitical context of the film. As such, a film’s pedagogy takes on a relevance outside the limited scope of the film itself. In the case of Fight Club, once its transgressions are articulated to the discourse of neoliberalism, they are, in fact, no longer transgressive. Rather, the film’s transgressions are employed in the service of a highly conservative discourse, one that critiques consumerism along misogynistic lines, just as it advances a construction of masculinity and agency through an appeal to violence, atomization, and social eruption.

Giroux’s insurgent cultural pedagogy is unique in the field of cultural criticism because he not only deals with the pedagogical aspects of popular culture, he engages and wants to transform the political structures that are given purpose in part through a highly refined system of public pedagogies. Recognizing the historical importance of other work, Giroux nevertheless distinguishes himself from other social critics, such as the
deconstructionists or those that read films diagnostically. Giroux’s interpretive practices reflect a concern with how films “function as public discourses that address or at least resonate with broader issues in the historical and sociopolitical context in which they are situated” (“Private” 21). As such, the natural slip and struggle over textual meanings, although never stopped, is significantly shaped given how dominant discourses inform and limit our choices and imaginations. For example, Fight Club could easily be taken up diagnostically—that is, taught against the grain of its politics. This interpretive/pedagogical practice, like the method of deconstruction, is not without its benefits, but it often reproduces a decontextualized method of interpretation that shies away from an engagement with systems, institutions, and discourses of pedagogical and political consequence. In other words, although deconstruction and diagnostic approaches to film and other cultural practices have offered a great deal of important interpretive insights into the organization of “signs,” they have generally shied away from engaging the political apparatuses in which those texts are situated. While these strategies are not wrong per se, on an important level they miss the point of an insurgent pedagogy.

Never claiming that his critiques are the “last word,” Giroux does want to engage the public pedagogy of films and other cultural practices in order to “shed critical light on how such texts work pedagogically to legitimize some meanings, invite particular desires, and exclude others” (“Private” 24). For educators and other social critics, this means mapping “discourses, everyday life, and the machineries of power” and attempting to democratically transform oppressive geographies of power through an understanding of these maps (Grossberg 68).

Because Giroux works between the borders of modern and postmodern discourses, his critical practices are, on the one hand, often criticized (by the postmodernists) for being too overdetermined, while on the other hand they are criticized (by the modernists) for being too susceptible to a politics of indeterminancy. In response to both positions, it is important to reiterate Best and Kellner’s theoretical mediation between the modern and postmodern. Recognizing the postmodern insight about the indeterminancy of meanings and knowledges, is it not still possible (and socially responsible), at the same time, to map the political, sociological, and pedagogical transactions and implications of structures of power and their cultural and economic practices? And is it not our ethical responsibility, once relations of power have been mapped, to intervene in and transform oppressive geographies of power? Giroux believes it is.

The Political Registers of Insurgency

Undergirding Giroux’s insurgent cultural pedagogy are five organizing axioms. First, traditional academic disciplines “cannot account for the great diversity of cultural and social phenomena that has come to characterize an increasingly hybridized, post-industrial world” (“Doing” 299). By making students more attentive to popular culture as a site of pedagogical and political struggle, we can address the epistemological demands of a multicultural community, just as we attempt to disrupt those commonsense “representations of the real” that draw their legitimacy from hegemonic formations of power (“Private” 24).

Second, culture and power are key concepts in understanding the dynamic political processes of daily life. Not only has this concern with culture and power shed light on the relationships between “knowledge and authority, the meaning of canonicity, and the historical and social contexts that deliberately shape students’ understanding of accounts of the past, present, and future,” but it has also disrupted the commonsense understanding that the only texts that deserve critical attention are books (“Doing” 299). As such, research on films, advertising, television, and other visual texts has proliferated in the academy, drawing scorn from academics on both the left and the right. This is not to suggest that books are not important and valuable artifacts, but that it is vital to understand their axiomatic and symptomatic relationship—both in form and content—to power and knowledge.

Third, political insurgency must be informed by a commitment to, in Stuart Hall’s words, “the vocation of the intellectual life” (qtd. in Giroux, “Doing” 300). The vocation of the intellectual life, as Giroux understands it, suggests four separate but interrelated points. Pedagogically, it suggests a rejection of the banking philosophy of education, where intellectuals make deposits of what they consider vital information into passively awaiting students. Ethically, it suggests that “intellectual work is incomplete unless it self-consciously assumes responsibility for its effects in the larger public culture while simultaneously addressing the most profoundly and deeply inhumane problems of the societies in which we live” (“Doing” 300). Politically, it points to the issue of the redistribution of power both within and outside the schools. Strategically, it implies a dialectical as well as a dialectical consideration of the teaching-learning rubric. This means that a teacher who is committed to the vocation of the intellectual life must take seriously “how dialogue is constructed in the classroom about other cultures and voices by critically addressing both the position of the theorists and the institutions in which such dialogues
are produced” (“Doing” 300–01). A dialectical awareness of the teaching-learning rubric exposes the partiality of knowledge without giving up the political effectiveness that provisional closures afford. As such, dialogic exchanges, in order to be critical, must also be, in part, dialectical.

Fourth, society’s representations signal a register of social, economic, and political health. Representations help construct our social and political reality and as such must be taken seriously. For Giroux’s current project, this means paying close attention to how media plays, as Hall puts it, “a part in the formation, in the constitution, of the things they reflect. It is not that there is a world outside, ‘out there,’ which exists free of the discourse of representation. What is ‘out there’ is, in part, constituted by how it is represented” (qtd. in Giroux, “Doing” 301). Not content simply to acknowledge that the world is “socially constructed,” Giroux pushes the hermeneutical envelope by asking what the pedagogical and political implications of those constructions might be and who or what is to be held accountable for the material and psychic effects of those constructions.

Fifth, theoretical work, or theorizing, is part of the critical and transformative process. Breaking away from education’s fetishism with practice, where methodological issues are abstracted from their ideological contexts and consequently ignore what Donaldo Macedo calls “the interrelationship between the sociopolitical structures of a society and the act of reading and learning,” Giroux believes that theory can provide a link between social formations, knowledge/power, and the practices of education and teaching (21). Moreover, theoretical work is understood as doing something. I like to call this process a pragmatics of theorizing; that is, a practice of doing theory, in which the act of theorizing is understood as real work. I believe Macedo is correct in arguing that the subordination of theory to the pragmatics of method obscures the interconnection of social formations and knowledge. To avoid this problem, theory should be taken up, or “de-subordinated,” in a way that utilizes its ability to create linkages between what we do, why we do it, and the future possibilities that we hope to create through our pedagogical practices. At the same time, our practices must not be thought of as disconnected from the social formations of which they are inevitably a part.

In what follows, I will discuss the implications of Giroux’s insurgent cultural pedagogy for a developmental literacy class I taught under the direction of the College Assistant Migrant Program. I did not take up Giroux’s work as a methodological approach to popular culture and the sociology of schooling; rather, his work, as I have been discussing it, provided me with a theoretical framework that encouraged asking certain questions and being cognizant of certain formations and relationships of power and knowledge. As such, I was able to be responsive to my students’ needs and experiences without giving up the responsibility of my authority.

Implications for the “Developmental” Classroom
As universities feel the pressure to provide remedial classes to students who are ill prepared to begin regular classes, they are at the same time being asked to adopt high-stakes testing and conservative measures of standardization. Given that many students in need of remediation are economically disenfranchised and/or linguistic and cultural minorities, this approach to remediation makes little sense. As Miner’s research has shown, standardized curricula and high-stakes testing often exacerbate economic and social inequities. As an alternative to this approach to remediation, I have employed Giroux’s insurgent cultural pedagogy as a matrix of decolonization that attempts to, as Worsham writes, “change the terms of recognition” (238). More significant than simply changing the terms of the debate, changing the terms of recognition responds to both the affective and psychological components of learning and social transformation. In my developmental literacy classes, this meant addressing popular texts in a way that not only linked them to larger social formations, but that also used them to break into the commonsense notions that popular culture both defends and defines.

For example, because African Americans and Hispanics are often portrayed in films, television, and videos as criminals, the commonsense assumption is that most African Americans and Hispanics are criminals. In my class, a Hispanic male student argued that this portrayal was accurate; after all, he reasoned, if you rounded up the drug dealers he knew in New York City, they would be primarily black and Hispanic men. For him, the representations that he saw in the media were reflective and not constructive of a reality that he knew all too well. But more to the point, his critique failed to consider that the representations and their immediate source constituted a network of cultural practices that are “always linked together with specific social formations and have specific effects” (Gunster 245). As Carl Boggs writes, using data from the Sentencing Project, “While blacks constitute only 13 percent of the total population and 13 percent of regular drug users, they account for 35 percent of those arrested for possession, 55 percent of those convicted, and 74 percent of those jailed. . . . As Diana Gordon argues, U.S. drug policy is at heart an attack
on poor urban minorities . . . ” (55–56). My response was that he should measure the percentage of media representations of African Americans and Hispanics as criminals against those that are not portrayed as criminals, and the percentage of the African-American and Hispanic population in New York City that are drug dealers against those that are not. Pedagogically this intervention is meant to interrogate a political economy of representations that focuses not just on what we see, but (maybe more importantly) on what we do not see, why we do not see, and the political, social, corporeal, and pedagogical implications of those absences. Moreover, it is vital that students begin to interrogate how representations help to exacerbate the “attack on poor urban minorities,” exemplified by the recent exposure of the practice of racial profiling by a number of law enforcement agencies. As Hall remarks in the quotation I cited earlier, “What is ‘out there’ is, in part, constituted by how it is represented.”

I believe that it is pedagogically important that my students understand how the production, distribution, and consumption of images and representations often devalue the cultural capital of certain groups in society and how this devaluation affects youths’ political agency and their sense of social entitlement. Often misunderstood by those on the right, the insurgent project is not to censor the images and representations we see, but to complicate, democratize, and make more representative those representations. In this context, censoring is what gives rise to the limited number of representations that we do get, not the other way around. In light of this, here are some questions that I ask my literacy students to consider: How does the absence of a complex accounting of social, political, and economic life derail the democratic project? What does it mean in the context of teaching and learning when, for example, a Hispanic student must find power in disempowering and anti-democratic images? What does it mean to our own sense of political agency when the majority of the representations we see of ourselves are violent, stigmatic, and stereotypical on the one hand, and/or aesthetically transgressive in the service of a neoliberal agenda on the other?

Another example of how Giroux’s insurgent cultural pedagogy helped theoretically frame my class can be seen in an assignment on race. I gave my students an article from Newsweek entitled the “The New Face of Race” (Meacham). After a week of discussion, I gave them an article from the Nation by Jack Geiger entitled “The Real World of Race.” In retrospect, I should have assigned the articles together because they so explicitly present two different ideological perspectives about race and power in America. The Newsweek article argues that we are in an “Age of Color” and that the “ancient divisions of black and white” are no longer relevant in a time when an entire generation of youth of color has “grown up in prosperity, attended schools with people of mixed backgrounds and set out to work in the New Economy, where there are few walls and little hierarchy” (40). The implication, of course, is that we are in a state of integration in which opportunity does not discriminate, power is perfunctory, and “old dualities have given way to a multiplicity of ethnic forces,” even though “there is no question that African-Americans still bear heavy burdens, disproportionately suffering from poverty, imprisonment, and racial profiling” (40). The article seems to suggest that multiculturalism has replaced the white/black dichotomy, and, as such, power can no longer be delineated in racial terms. Power is not mentioned in the article, but the implication is that it now runs along multiple trajectories of color, deflecting attention away from the unequal power whites have over all other ethnic minorities. What the article does on the one hand is make whiteness invisible, declaring a laissez-faire multiculturalism in which opportunity exists outside the sphere of power, while, on the other, it admits to racial struggles within the ranks of ethnic minorities. This strategy is effective in a pedagogical (and racist) sense because it addresses the visibility of the multicultural “other” in the New Economy, while making invisible the formations of white power that limit the opportunities for the “other.”

In his review of David Shipler’s A Country of Strangers, Geiger begins by outlining the right-wing ideology of reactionary intellectuals like Dinesh D’Souza and Jim Sleeper, who announce, resonating with the dominant public discourse on race, “Racism is dead!” Rhetorically responding to this conservative declaration and the one ostensibly articulated in the Newsweek article, Geiger asks, “How, then, to explain the overwhelming realities of desperate inner cities, soaring black unemployment, crumbling housing, failing schools, increasing segregation and family disintegration, crime and drugs if white racism is not their root cause?” Geiger quotes Julian Bond’s rendition of the right’s response: “Black people did it, did it to the country, did it to themselves. Black behavior, not white racism, became the reason why Blacks and whites lived in separate worlds. . . . The failure of the lesser breeds to enjoy society’s fruits became their fault alone” (27). At the heart of Geiger’s review of Shipler’s book is the notion that “true integration means power sharing,” an absence in our present multicultural conjunction, often ignored by the right and one that should define the struggle of the left.
Because they read the *Newsweek* article by itself, my students had no language to differentiate this perspective from any other, and therefore they had no language of ideological critique to interrogate the parameters of power that informed such a reading of the world. When I gave them the *Nation* article, and even before our discussion of the left and right, they not only recognized a difference of perspective, but almost all of the students were excited about the perspective itself. One woman who had not yet spoken in class enthusiastically spoke up when I asked what they thought of Geiger’s article. She said that she liked it much better than the *Newsweek* article because it described the way she had experienced race in America. In short, when the students were provided with an opposing text, they not only began to read intertextually, they began to conceptualize what it means to make distinctions between texts.

Moving beyond the texts toward an engagement with the political and social formations in which these texts articulated was a small step. Concrete examples taken from the material of the urban landscape provided sufficient illustrations for the students to begin forming questions as to the truth claims of both texts. Questions that dug at the roots of poverty by beginning in the projects of North Philadelphia shed light on how *Newsweek*’s portrayal of race and ethnicity victimized the victims of poverty and racism by failing to consider how “social power and transforming discourses, institutions, and social practices of privilege” normalize whiteness in a “liberal swirl of diversity” (McLaren 282). As Geiger asks rhetorically, how else to explain overwhelming poverty and urban decay in minority alcoves if one does not consider formative structures of racism and oppression but instead blames those who live there? My students began to understand that reading and writing were cultural practices always already tied to formations of knowledge and power.

Coming full circle, my students began to make more complex connections between the politics of the *Newsweek* piece and their personal experiences with racism. If everyone is equal and opportunity has nothing to do with resources, if integration rightly means diversity and not the democratization of power, then how do we explain inequality, poverty, and racism? The explanation, of course, is that minorities are incapable of succeeding without help due to their own individual problems or character traits and not that we live in a racist, sexist, classist society in which the distribution of wealth is unequal, and power and white male privilege are made invisible. As Geiger writes, “Affirmative action is such a threat because it challenges unseen and unacknowledged privileges of whiteness,” thereby exposing the symbolic violence of “white” male power in the form of a pedagogy of invisibility and normalization (29).

**Conclusion**

These examples provide an interesting account of what it means to engage Giroux’s insurgent cultural pedagogy without reducing it to a method of interpretation or a teaching recipe. My experiences in the literacy class have led me to theorize the relationship between curriculum and social engagement in a way that suggests that educators can actively create new conditions of hope through both institution of oppositional social and cultural forms, the interrogation of popular cultural forms, and the production of cultural forms that reflect a new hegemony, one based in democratic ideals and insurgent political lessons. From music and film to poetry and dance, the innovation of cultural forms as well as the resurrection of “dissident understandings of past and present political realities” help revitalize our social and political imaginary (Long 19). Through new cultural formations, we can reclaim histories, memories, and knowledges, while upsetting exclusionary traditions.

When insurgent cultural practices offer representations that link up to oppositional social formations, they have initiated a process of (re)cognition. No longer reinforcing our sense of what is, these productions challenge us to think about what could be. But this is not a call for a flighty utopianism divorced from the struggles of everyday life or for abstraction and transgression for their own sake. Rather, it is a utopianism born out of Freire’s axiom that we are conditioned and not determined and that we therefore have the ability (and responsibility) to transform ourselves and the world.

In order to challenge and transform what for many is an oppressive social condition, performance artist and intellectual Guillermo Gómez-Peña suggests that we begin by imagining more “enlightened cartographies: a map of the Americas with no borders; a map turned upside down; or one in which the countries have borders that are organically drawn by geography, culture, and immigration, and not by the capricious hands of economic domination and political bravado” (6). Strategically utopian, political practices of the imagination force cynicism to the margins of political discourse. By redrawing the borders of possibility, we can move closer to a “Fourth World,” a “conceptual place where the indigenous peoples meet with the diasporic communities. In the Fourth World, there is very little place for static identities, fixed nationalities, ‘pure’ lan-
guages, or sacred cultural traditions. The members of the Fourth World live between and across various cultures, communities, and countries. And our identities are constantly being reshaped by this kaleidoscopic experience” (7). I like to call what Gómez-Peña is doing “concrete dreaming.” It is a thought process with provocative pedagogical and political implications, a praxis of possibility that stays fully aware of the struggles and realities of the present moment and involves a dimension of “escape”—not from, but toward. It remains an aspect of the political by representing a dimension of “knowing” and “being” not yet known.

It is meant to be suggestive of a teaching-learning project that considers what it might mean to go beyond knowledge and knowing as it is generally envisioned in the West. From shamanism to Taoism, western educators have much to learn from traditions that extend back much earlier than Socrates and Plato. Part of this project means engaging the different ways that other cultures have understood knowledge, power, hope, spirit, and energy. In this sense, insurgent educators have a responsibility not simply to teach against the grain, but to make the pedagogical an acknowledged force in how we have come to recognize our capacities and powers. As humans we are, as Freire has commented, in a “permanent process of searching” and our being in the world is “far more than just ‘being’”; it is a “presence” that is “relational to the world and to others” (23, 25). Concrete dreaming represents an insurgent praxis of possibility that takes into account this presence; it is the existence we live out beyond the horizon of pure reason and toward the aspiration of collective freedom.

The desire for collective freedom is a democratic hope rooted in the belief that through the political organization of public space we can create the kind of social environment that is conducive to agonistic struggles, pedagogical interventions, and a transformation of recognition. It is a freedom that works within the parameters of democratic authority, striving to balance liberty, equality, and justice with individual desire, social autonomy, and collective responsibility. It is a freedom that must struggle to institute social formations that support the democratization of power. It is a freedom that, in the end, must no longer be considered a noun but a verb! As such, it signifies not a thing but a way of being. Freedom as a verb suggests a principled set of democratic practices that must guide the governing of our individual and collective needs. From citizenship education and the structuring of public spaces free from the incursion of corporate influence to a political economy of representations and the redistribution of power, “doing freedom” is the convergence of political struggle and personal power. In a democratic context, it must be insurgency’s weapon of choice.

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Notes

1. Giroux’s work is often overlooked in cultural studies and education. One of the reasons why might be that it does not fit easily into the theoretical framework of postmodernism or modernism. I would argue that working within the intersections of different theoretical paradigms has the potential to go beyond the limits that a strict adherence to a particular paradigm enforces. Unfortunately, given the push in academia for paradigmatic loyalty, the audiences for such work are sometimes difficult to locate.

2. The phrase “doing theory” comes from Paul Youngquist, who taught a graduate class at Penn State titled “Doing Theory.”

3. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley triggered my thoughts concerning the relationship between imagination, dreaming, culture, and politics. During a lecture he gave at Penn State University on March 23, 2000, he spoke powerfully about the need to think politics beyond the traditional registers of “action,” “organization,” and “participation.” Never suggesting that these were not vital in the face of the New Right’s regressive social policies, he nonetheless espoused “culture as a space of dreaming.” By this he meant that in cultural invention (such as music, art, and literature) we find an imagined future very different from what we have now. This imaginative process, he argued, is vital if society is to be transformed. It is not enough to simply “put out fires.” Rather, we must also recognize the art of dreaming through cultural activity as a political moment, not simply as an aesthetic or empty utopian sign.

Works Cited


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