

A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race

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The following is part of an ongoing dialogue that Donaldo Macedo and Paulo Freire have been having since 1983. As it attempts to address the current criticisms of Freire's work along the lines of gender and race, this dialogue not only challenges the frequent misinterpretations of his leading philosophical ideas by conservative and some liberal educators, but will also embrace contemporary educational issues and discuss what it means to educate for critical citizenry in the ever-increasing multiracial and multicultural world of the twenty-first century.

MACEDO: In their attempt to cut the chains of oppressive educational practices, many North American educators blindly advocate the dialogical model, creating, in turn, a new form of methodological rigidity laced with benevolent oppression — all done under the guise of democracy with the sole excuse that it is for the students' own good. As educators, many of us have witnessed pedagogical contexts in which we are implicitly or explicitly required to speak, to talk about our experiences, as an act of liberation. We all have been at conferences where speakers have been chastised because they failed to locate themselves in history. In other words, the speakers failed to give primacy to their experiences in addressing issues of critical democracy. It does not matter that the speakers had important and insightful things to say. This is tantamount to dismissing Marx because he did not entrance us with his personal, lived experiences. Another form of rigidity manifested in these educational practices modeled on your leading ideas is the process in which teachers relinquish their authority to become what is called a facilitator. Becoming a facilitator signals, in the view of many educators, a democratization of power in the classroom. Can you speak about these issues and perhaps clarify them?

FREIRE Donaldo, let me begin responding by categorically saying that I consider myself a teacher and always a teacher. I have never pretended to be a facilitator. What I want to make clear also is in being a teacher, I always teach to facilitate. I cannot accept the notion of a facilitator who facilitates so as not to teach.

The true comprehension of dialogue must differentiate the role that only facilitates from the role that teaches. When teachers call themselves facilitators and not teachers, they become involved in a distortion of reality. To begin with, in de-emphasizing the teacher's power by claiming to be a facilitator, one is being less than truthful to the extent that the teacher turned facilitator maintains the power institutionally created in the position. That is, while facilitators may veil their power, at any moment they can exercise power as they wish. The facilitator still grades, still has certain control over the curriculum, and to deny these facts is to be disingenuous. I think what creates this need to be a facilitator is the confusion between authoritarianism and authority. What one cannot do in trying to divest of authoritarianism is relinquish one's authority as teacher. In fact, this does not really happen. Teachers maintain a certain level of authority through the depth and breadth of knowledge of the subject matter that they teach. The teacher who claims to be a facilitator and not a teacher is renouncing, for reasons unbeknownst to us, the task of teaching and, hence, the task of dialogue.

Another point worth making is the risk of perceiving facilitators as non-directive. I find this to be a deceitful discourse; that is, a discourse from the perspective of the dominant class. Only in this deceitful discourse can educators talk about a lack of direction in teaching. I do not think that there is real education without direction. To the extent that all educational practice brings with it its own transcendence, it presupposes an objective to be reached. Therefore, practice cannot be nondirective. There is no educational practice that does not point to an objective; this proves that the nature of educational practice has direction. The facilitator who claims that "since I respect students I cannot be directive, and since they are individuals deserving respect, they should determine their own direction," does not deny the directive nature of education that is independent of his own subjectivity. Rather, this facilitator denies himself or herself the pedagogical, political, and epistemological task of assuming the role of a subject of that directive practice. This facilitator refuses to convince his or her learners of what he or she thinks is just. This educator, then, ends up helping the power structure. To avoid reproducing the values of the power structure, the educator must always combat a *laissez-faire* pedagogy, no matter how progressive it may appear to be.

Authoritarian educators are correct, even though they are not always theoretically explicit, when they say that there is no education that is non-directive. I would not disagree with these educators; but, I would say that to claim to be a facilitator is authoritarian to the extent that the facilitators make their own objectives and dreams the directives that they give to learners in their educational practice. Facilitators are authoritarian because, as subjects of the educational practice, they reduce learners to objects of the directives they impose.

While educators divest of an authoritarian educational practice, they should avoid falling prey to a laissez-faire practice under the pretext of facilitating. On the contrary, a better way to proceed is to assume the authority as a teacher whose direction of education includes helping learners get involved in planning education, helping them create the critical capacity to consider and participate in the direction and dreams of education, rather than merely following blindly. The role of an educator who is pedagogically and critically radical is to avoid being indifferent, a characteristic of the facilitator who promotes a laissez-faire education. The radical educator has to be an active presence in educational practice. But, educators should never allow their active and curious presence to transform the learners' presence into a shadow of the educator's presence. Nor can educators be a shadow of their learners. The educator who dares to teach has to stimulate learners to live a critically conscious presence in the pedagogical and historical process.

MACEDO: I believe that to renounce the task of teaching under the guise of facilitating is part and parcel of a paternalistic ideology.

FREIRE: Exactly. The true issue behind the act of facilitating remains veiled because of its ideological nature. In the end, the facilitator is renouncing his or her duty to teach — which is a dialogical duty. In truth, the teacher turned facilitator rejects the fantastic work of placing an object as a mediator between him or her and the students. That is, the facilitator fails to assume his or her role as a dialogical educator who can illustrate the object of study. As a teacher, I have the responsibility to teach, and in order to teach, I always try to facilitate. In the first place, I am convinced that when we speak of dialogue and education, we are speaking, above all, about practices that enable us to approach the object of knowledge. In order to begin to understand the meaning of a dialogical practice, we have to put aside the simplistic understanding of dialogue as a mere technique. Dialogue does not represent a somewhat false path that I attempt to elaborate on and realize in the sense of involving the ingenuity of the other. On the contrary, dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship. Thus, in this sense, dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task. We have to make this point very clear. I engage in dialogue not necessarily because I like the other person. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing.

MACEDO: I could not agree with you more. I am reminded of how educators who embrace your notion of dialogue mechanistically reduce the epistemological relationship of dialogue to a vacuous, feel-good comfort zone. For instance, in a graduate class I taught last semester in which we discussed extensively an anti-racist pedagogy, many White teachers felt uncomfortable when the non-White students made connections between the assigned theoretical readings and their own lived experience with racism. In discussing her feelings of discomfort,

a White teacher remarked that "we should spend at least three weeks getting to know each other so as to become friends before taking on sensitive issues such as racism." In other words, this White teacher failed to recognize her privileged position that enabled her to assume she can negotiate the terms under which classmates from oppressed groups can state their grievances. It is as if in order to be able to speak the truth about racism or to denounce racist structures, non-Whites must first befriend their White classmates. The inability of this White teacher to acknowledge her privileged position in demanding to negotiate her comfort zone before grievances against racism are made makes her unable to realize that, in most instances, certain groups such as African Americans are born and live always without any comfort zone, much less the privilege to assume they can negotiate the appropriate comfort zone within a graduate course.

FREIRE: All of this leads us to consider another dimension that is implicit, but not always clear, in relation to the concept of dialogue. That is to say, the dialogue about which we are now speaking, the dialogue that educators speak about, is not the same as the dialogue about a walk up the street, for example, which becomes no more than the object of mere conversation with friends in a bar. In this case, people are not necessarily engaged in a search for the delimitation of a knowable object. Here I am speaking with respect to dialogue in a strictly epistemological perspective. What then does dialogue require as a *sine qua non* condition?

MACEDO: If in this sense the object of knowledge is the fundamental goal, the dialogue as conversation about individuals' lived experiences does not truly constitute dialogue. In other words, the appropriation of the notion of dialogical teaching as a process of sharing experiences creates a situation in which teaching is reduced to a form of group therapy that focuses on the psychology of the individual. Although some educators may claim that this process creates a pedagogical comfort zone, in my view it does little beyond making the oppressed feel good about their own sense of victimization. Simply put, I do not think that the sharing of experiences should be understood in psychological terms only. It invariably requires a political and ideological analysis as well. That is, the sharing of experiences must always be understood within a social praxis that entails both reflection and political action. In short, dialogue as a process of learning and knowing must always involve a political project with the objective of dismantling oppressive structures and mechanisms prevalent both in education and society.

Part of the reason why many teachers who claim to be Freire-inspired end up promoting a *laissez-faire*, feel-good pedagogy is because many are only exposed to, or interpret, your leading ideas at the level of cliché. By this I mean that many professors who claim to be Freire-inspired present to their students a watered-down translation of your philosophical positions in the form of a lock-step methodology. Seldom do these professors require their students to read your work as a primary source and, in cases where they do read, let's say, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, they often have very little knowledge of other books that you have published. For example, I have been in many educational contexts through-

out the country where students ask me, "Why is it that my professors are always talking about Freire and the dialogical method and yet they never ask us to read Freire?" This point was made poignant some time ago in a workshop when a teacher began the presentation of her project by saying, "My project is Freirean inspired. I'll be talking about Freire even though I haven't read his books yet." Assigning students secondary or tertiary sources is very common within education programs in the United States. The end result is that professors become translators of the primary source's leading ideas. In so doing, they elevate their status by introducing translated materials that students almost blindly consume as innovative and progressive and, in some instances, also begin to identify these translated ideas with the professor-translator and not with the original author. This occurs because students have been cut off from the primary source. On the other hand, the professor-translator assumes falsely that the primary source is too difficult for students, which points to the paternalistic notion that future teachers are not capable of engaging with complex, theoretical readings. This false assumption leads, unfortunately, to the total deskilling of teachers in that it kills epistemological curiosity.

FREIRE: You are absolutely correct. I think that your posture indicates clearly that you understand very well the difference between dialogue as a process of learning and knowing and dialogue as conversation that mechanically focuses on the individual's lived experience, which remains strictly within the psychological sphere.

MACEDO: In the United States, even many educators who like your work mistakenly transform your notion of dialogue into a method, thus losing sight of the fact that the fundamental goal of dialogical teaching is to create a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorizing about the experiences shared in the dialogue process. Unfortunately, some strands of critical pedagogy engage in an overdose of experiential celebration that offers a reductionist view of identity, leading Henry Giroux to point out that such pedagogy leaves identity and experience removed from the problematics of power, agency, and history. By overindulging in the legacy and importance of their respective voices and experiences, these educators often fail to move beyond a notion of difference structured in polarizing binarisms and uncritical appeals to the discourse of experience. I believe that it is for this reason that some of these educators invoke a romantic pedagogical mode that exoticizes discussing lived experiences as a process of coming to voice. At the same time, educators who misinterpret your notion of dialogical teaching also refuse to link experiences to the politics of culture and critical democracy, thus reducing their pedagogy to a form of middle-class narcissism. This creates, on the one hand, the transformation of dialogical teaching into a method invoking conversation that provides participants with a group therapy space for stating their grievances. On the other hand, it offers the teacher as facilitator a safe pedagogical zone to deal with his or her class guilt. It is a process that bell hooks characterizes as nauseating in that it brooks no dissent.

FREIRE: Yes, yes. In the end, what these educators are calling dialogical is a process that hides the true nature of dialogue as a process of learning and knowing. What you have described can provide certain dialogical moments, but, in general, it is a mere conversation overly focused on the individual and removed from the object of knowledge. Understanding dialogue as a process of learning and knowing establishes a previous requirement that always involves an epistemological curiosity about the very elements of the dialogue.

MACEDO: I agree; there has to be a curiosity about the object of knowledge. Otherwise, you end up with dialogue as conversation, where individual lived experiences are given primacy. I have been in many contexts where the over-celebration of one's own location and history often eclipses the possibility of engaging the object of knowledge by refusing to struggle directly, for instance, with the readings, particularly if these readings involve theory.

FREIRE: Yes. Curiosity about the object of knowledge and the willingness and openness to engage theoretical readings and discussions is fundamental. However, I am not suggesting an over-celebration of theory. We must not negate practice for the sake of theory. To do so would reduce theory to pure verbalism or intellectualism. By the same token, to negate theory for the sake of practice, as in the use of dialogue as conversation, is to run the risk of losing oneself in the disconnectedness of practice. It is for this reason that I never advocate either a theoretic elitism or a practice ungrounded in theory, but the unity between theory and practice. In order to achieve this unity, one must have an epistemological curiosity — a curiosity that is often missing in dialogue as conversation.

Returning to my original point, I would like to reiterate that human beings are, by nature, curious beings. They are ontologically curious. In order to be more rigorous, I would venture to say that curiosity is not a phenomenon exclusively human, but exclusively vital. That is, life is curious, without which life cannot survive. Curiosity is as fundamental to our survival as is pain. Without the ability to feel pain, and I am here referring to physical pain and not moral pain, we could possibly jump from a fourth-floor apartment without anticipating the consequences. The same would be true if we put our hands in fire. Pain represents one of the physical limitations on our practices. Thus, dialogue, as a process of learning and knowing, presupposes curiosity. It implies curiosity.

Teachers who engage in an educational practice without curiosity, allowing their students to avoid engagement with critical readings, are not involved in dialogue as a process of learning and knowing. They are involved, instead, in a conversation without the ability to turn the shared experiences and stories into knowledge. What I call epistemological curiosity is the readiness and eagerness of a conscious body that is open to the task of engaging an object of knowledge.

The other curiosity without which we could not live is what I call spontaneous curiosity. That is, along the lines of aesthetics, I may find myself before a beautiful tall building and I spontaneously exclaim its beauty. This curiosity does not have as its fundamental objective the apprehension and the understanding of the *raison d'être* of this beauty. In this case, I am gratuitously curious.

As you pointed out earlier, Donaldo, one of the difficulties often confronted by an educator in assuming an epistemologically curious posture is that, at certain moments, the educator falls prey to the bureaucratization of the mind, becoming a pure methodologist. The bureaucratized educator is the one who assigns time slots for students to take turns speaking in a bureaucratized, if not vulgarized, democracy without any connection with the object of knowledge. In this case, the educator turned facilitator becomes mechanical, mechanizing the entire dialogue as a process of learning and knowing so as to make it a mechanical dialogue as conversation. In a bureaucratized dialogue as conversation, both students and teacher speak and speak, all convinced that they are engaged in a substantive educational practice just because they are all participating in an unknown bureaucratized discourse that is not connected to an object of knowledge. This pattern is not dialogical because you cannot have dialogue without a posture that is epistemologically curious. The educator who wants to be dialogical cannot relinquish his or her authority as a teacher, which requires epistemological curiosity, to become a facilitator who merely orchestrates the participation of students in pure verbalism.

MACEDO: This bureaucratized dialogical process orchestrated by the facilitator who falsely relinquishes his or her authority as teacher ends up being a process that gives rise to politics without content.

FREIRE: In my view, each class is a class through which both students and teachers engage in a search for the knowledge already obtained so they can adopt a dialogical posture as a response to their epistemological inquietude that forces the revision of what is already known so they can know it better. At the same time, it is not easy to be a dialogical teacher because it entails a lot of work. What is easy is to be a pure descriptivist.

MACEDO: You can also have the other extreme: A descriptive dialogue.

FREIRE: Of course you can.

MACEDO: This is what happens a lot with those teachers who relinquish their authority in order to become facilitators and, in the process, impose their bureaucratized dialogical method in a rigid manner that may require, for example, that all students must speak even if they choose not to do so. This rigidity transforms dialogical teaching, not into a search for the object of knowledge, but into a superficial form of democracy in which all students must forcefully participate in a turn-taking task of "blah-blah-blah." I have had the experience of students suggesting to me that I should monitor the length of time students talk in class in order to insure equal participation for all students. In most instances, these suggestions are raised without any concern that the turn-at-talk be related to the assigned readings. In fact, in many cases, students go through great lengths to over-emphasize the process of turn-taking while de-emphasizing the critical apprehension of the object of knowledge. In the end, their concerns attempt to reduce dialogue to a pure technique. I want to make it clear that in criticizing

the mechanization of turn-at-talk I do not intend to ignore the voices that have been silenced by the inflexible, traditional method of lecturing. What is important to keep in mind is not to develop a context whereby the assignment of turn-taking to give voice to students results in a new form of rigid imposition. Instead, it is important to create pedagogical structures that foster critical engagement as the only way for the students to come to voice. The uncritical license to take equal turns speaking in a rigid fashion gives rise to a "blah-blah-blah" dialogue resulting in a form of silencing while speaking. Critical educators should avoid at all costs the blind embracing of approaches that pay lip-service to democracy and should always be open to multiple and varied approaches that will enhance the possibility for epistemological curiosity with the object of knowledge. The facile and uncritical acceptance of any methodology regardless of its progressive promise can easily be transformed into a new form of methodological rigidity that constitutes, in my view, a form of methodological terrorism. A vacuous dialogue for conversation only is pernicious to the extent that it deskills students by not creating pedagogical spaces for epistemological curiosity, critical consciousness, and agency, which is the only way through which one can transcend valorized experience to embrace new knowledge in order to universalize one's own experience.

FREIRE: Exactly. This is where dialogical teaching ceases to be a true process of learning and knowing to become, instead, pure formalism; everything but dialogue. It represents a process to bureaucratize the mind. The educator who is really dialogical has a tiring task to the extent that he or she has to 1) remain epistemologically curious, and 2) practice in a way that involves epistemological curiosity that facilitates his or her process of learning and knowing. The problem lies in the fact that students often have not sufficiently developed such habits. It is for this reason that many students end up reading only mechanically and can easily spend an entire semester doing so because they were not able to transcend the spontaneity of curiosity you spoke of earlier so as to engage the epistemological curiosity that involves methodological rigor. Students today find it difficult to engage in this type of educational rigor precisely because they are often not challenged to engage in a rigorous process of learning and knowing. The end result is that they often remain at the periphery of the object of knowledge. Their curiosity has not yet been awakened in the epistemological sense. It is for this reason that we now witness more and more a disequilibrium between chronological age and epistemological curiosity. In many cases, epistemological curiosity remains truncated, giving rise to students who are intellectually immature.

What dialogical educators must do is to maintain, on the one hand, their epistemological curiosity and, on the other hand, always attempt to increase their critical reflection in the process of creating pedagogical spaces where students become apprentices in the rigors of exploration. Without an increased level of epistemological curiosity and the necessary apprenticeship in a new body of knowledge, students cannot truly be engaged in a dialogue.

MACEDO: I think this is a very important point that needs to be highlighted. That is, when students lack both the necessary epistemological curiosity and a certain conviviality with the object of knowledge under study, it is difficult to create conditions that increase their epistemological curiosity so as to develop the necessary intellectual tools that will enable them to apprehend and comprehend the object of knowledge. If students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing. In truth, how can you dialogue without any prior apprenticeship with the object of knowledge and without any epistemological curiosity? For example, how can you dialogue about linguistics if the teacher refuses to create the pedagogical conditions that will apprentice students into the new body of knowledge? By this I do not mean that the apprenticeship process should be reduced to the authoritarian tradition of lecturing without student input and discussion.

FREIRE: As you can see, Donaldo, my pedagogical posture always implies rigor, and never a laissez-faire dialogue as conversation orchestrated by facilitators. A mere appearance does not transform itself into the concreteness and substantiality of the actual object. Then, you cannot realistically have a dialogue by simply thinking that dialogue is a kind of verbal ping-pong about one's historical location and lived experiences.

MACEDO: Unfortunately, that is what happens too frequently.

FREIRE: The problem that is posed concerning the question of location is important. I do not think that anyone can seriously engage in a search for new knowledge without using his or her point of view and historical location as a point of departure. This does not mean, however, that I should remain frozen in that location, but, rather, that I should seek to universalize it. The task of epistemological curiosity is to help students gain a rigorous understanding of their historical location so they can turn this understanding into knowledge, thus transcending and universalizing it. If one remains stuck in his or her historical location, he or she runs the risk of fossilizing his or her world disconnected from other realities.

MACEDO: I agree. We need to avoid making our historical, locational experience into barriers that impede the universalization of the object of knowledge. This object of knowledge needs to be generalizable.

Paulo, let me turn to criticism of your pedagogical proposals. You are criticized not only by conservative educators for what they characterize as your "radical ties," but some liberals also feel uncomfortable with your critical perspectives. For example, Gregory Jay and Gerald Graff have argued that your proposal, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to move students toward "a critical perception of the world" — which "implies a correct method of approaching reality" so they can get "a comprehension of total reality" — assumes that you already know the identity of the oppressed. As Jay and Graff point out, "Freire assumes that we

know from the outset the identity of the 'oppressed' and their 'oppressors.' Who the oppressors and the oppressed are is conceived not as an open question that teachers and students might disagree about, but as a given of Freirean pedagogy."¹ Can you address these criticisms?

FREIRE: Over the years I have been the object of much criticism concerning my pedagogical proposals. The criticism that you just mentioned was made more frequently during the seventies than today. However, as you have attested, the same criticism appears and reappears every so often. In my recent book, *Pedagogy of Hope*, published in 1994, I address these criticisms by making my pedagogical position very clear so as to leave less room for individuals like Gerald Graff not only to misread and misinterpret my philosophical ideas concerning a pedagogy of the oppressed, but also to reflect critically on some of the concrete pedagogical proposals I have been making over the years. The problem with some of these individuals is that they have read my work fragmentally. That is, they continually refer to my book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which I published over twenty years ago, without making any reference to my later works, including *Reading the Word and the World*, which I coauthored with you, *The Politics of Education*, and *Pedagogy of Hope*, among others. Critics often treat my work as if I had only published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and that I have not done anything for the past twenty years.

MACEDO: I agree with you. Even many progressive educators who have embraced and been inspired by your work have only read it fragmentally. Thus, they also, sometimes, fall prey to misinterpretations of your ideas.

FREIRE: But, Donaldo, I am surprised that someone like Gerald Graff, who I think considers himself an honest intellectual, would have difficulty identifying oppressive conditions and fall prey to a form of misguided relativism. I do not think it is difficult to identify the thirty-three million people in my country who are in constant danger of dying of hunger as belonging to the oppressed group. Even in the very rich United States, as my good friend Jonathan Kozol so succinctly shows in his book *Savage Inequalities*, it is not very difficult to identify oppressed people. For example, would Graff have difficulty identifying the oppressive conditions in East St. Louis, as documented by my friend Kozol?

East St. Louis . . . has some of the sickest children in America. Of 66 cities in Illinois, East St. Louis ranks first in fetal death, first in premature birth, and third in infant death. Among negative factors listed by the city's health directory are the sewage running in the streets, air that has been fouled by the local plants, the high lead levels noted in the soil, poverty, lack of education, crime, dilapidated housing, insufficient health care, unemployment.²

If Graff has difficulty identifying the oppressive conditions described above, he fits very well within the framework presented in your new book, *Literacies of*

¹ Gregory Jay and Gerald Graff, "A Critique of Critical Pedagogy," in *Higher Education Under Fire*, ed. Michael Berube and Gary Nelson (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 203.

² Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown, 1991), p. 20.

Power: What Americans Are Not Allowed to Know, which characterizes intellectuals who engage in the social construction of not seeing. As you point out, if you cannot see it, you cannot name it, which results in what you have categorized as a "discourse of not naming it," proving the old proverb, "The eyes do not see; they only record while the mind sees."

MACEDO: This is the real issue. To the extent that the mind can be ideologically controlled, it filters in order to transform what the eyes record, as is perhaps the case with Gerald Graff's reluctance to identify the oppressed and their oppressors. Graff's relativistic posture concerning the identity of the oppressed versus the oppressor eclipses the possibility for students to critically understand "the multiple experiences of identity by both historicizing it and revealing its partiality and incompleteness [and that] its limits are realized in the material nature of experience as it marks the body through the specificity of place, space and history."³ This is very much in line with John Fiske's notion that "there is a material experience of homelessness that is of a different order from the cultural meanings of homelessness . . . but the boundary between the two cannot be drawn sharply. Material conditions are inescapably saturated with culture and, equally, cultural conditions are inescapably experienced as material."⁴ As suggested by Fiske, the ideological and material conditions that produce oppression cannot be hidden blindly by the refusal to name the oppressor. The existence of oppression does not depend on the refusal or willingness to simply name it. Such oppression instead must be seen as part of the politics of representation that engages a particular project, and for you, Paulo, is defined by the ongoing struggle to promote and expand democratic social relations. The virtue of a radical democratic project is that it provides an ethical referent both for engaging in a critique of its own authority and as part of a wider expression of authority. In my view, what needs to be pedagogically engaged is not merely who is really oppressed, but the social, economic, and cultural conditions that lead to the creation of savage inequalities in East St. Louis and in the human misery of ghetto life, where African Americans and other oppressed groups materially experience the loss of their dignity, the denial of human citizenship, and, in many cases, outright violent and criminal acts committed by those institutions responsible for implementing the law, as we vividly witnessed in the beating of Rodney King by members of the Los Angeles police force. Those who materially experience oppression have little difficulty identifying their oppressors. The adoption of a relativistic posture concerning the oppressed and the oppressor not only points to Graff's privileged position that enables him to intellectualize oppression so as to make it abstract, but is also not unlike those individuals who attempt to rewrite the history of oppression as mere narratives. I believe that to be suspicious of one's own politics should not be an excuse to attempt to understand and address how power can work to oppress and exploit.

³ Henry Giroux, "Transgression of Difference," Series introduction to *Culture and Difference: Critical Perspectives on Bicultural Experience* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, in press).

⁴ John Fiske, *Power Plays, Power Works* (London: Verso Press, 1994), p. 13.

FREIRE: The issues that you just raised, Donaldo, are at the heart of the critical posture I call for in my educational proposals. As you can see, the criticism that my work proposes to know a priori what the oppressed peasants should know and what is best for them indicates that the individuals who critique me were, at best, able to read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* mechanistically, thus superficially, and, at worst, they misread my book. Let me try to address some of the issues that they have raised, even though I may repeat what I clearly discussed in the *Pedagogy of Hope*.

As usual, I never deal with themes directly. I always do what I have been referring to as an epistemological approximation to the object of knowledge. I sometimes leave the linearity of my inquiry, so as to develop a global grasp of the object of knowledge in order to apprehend the total essence before I can learn it. Now, for example, in attempting to put myself critically in front of Graff's critique of my work, I would begin by saying that as men and women we are cultural beings endowed with the option to choose. We are also cultural beings who can make our own decisions and, for this reason, we are cultural beings endowed with the ability to rupture. It is impossible to decide without rupturing. It is not possible to opt without choosing one over the other. Then, we can conclude that we are innately programmed to choose, to make decisions, and to take positions in the world. We are born programmed to learn. Thus, we are programmed to learn, to teach, and, in doing so, our human agency cannot be reduced to any form of determinism. Because we are programmed to learn, to know, and to teach, we are born also with an undefined curiosity. It is for this reason that I consider the death of curiosity that sometimes happens in schools, a form of ontological violence, because curiosity is part of human ontology.

If what I have just said is true, why should the educator hide his or her option, including his or her political position? On the other hand, it is not the role of the educator to impose his or her position. This is what has been said of my work. I have never advanced any pedagogical proposal that called for teachers to impose their political perspective. On the contrary, I have always fought against any form of imposition, any form of anti-democratic practice, and any form of social injustice. However, in doing so, I have never had the need to hide or the fear of hiding my political beliefs. Making my beliefs bare does not constitute, in my view, a form of imposition.

MACEDO: I agree. I think the courage to make your beliefs known, particularly your political ideals, does not point to any form of imposition. In my view, it is plain honesty. Unfortunately, we are living in a culture, particularly an academic culture, that requires courage in order to speak the truth. Our conviviality with the lie is not only rewarded, but is astutely veiled under the guise of objectivity, a form of lie in itself. What we need to understand is that the very claim of objectivity necessarily involves a dimension of subjectivity. Thus, it is dialectical.

FREIRE: Certainly. I think what constitutes an imposition is to engage with the oppressed educationally without providing them with the critical tools to understand their world, the tools that they were denied by not giving them access to education, to literacy, so they can read the word as well as the world. The edu-

cator who pretends to be objective and, in doing so, denies the oppressed the pedagogical space to develop a critical posture towards the world, particularly the world that has reduced them to a half-human object, exploited and dehumanized, is an educator who is complicit with the ideology of the oppressor. If objectivity means omission of historical truths that may prevent the oppressed from critically exercising their innate ability to opt, to decide, then objectivity and non-directivity in education is, in some real sense, a form of imposition. In other words, by not engaging the oppressed critically so they can understand the veiled ideology that continually dehumanizes them, the educator is in complicity with the oppressor. To do so is to be indifferent towards the plight of the oppressed who have been violated in terms of their capacity to opt and to decide. In the face of the denial to educate the oppressed and the ever-present violence perpetrated against their humanity, to not create pedagogical structures where the educator can make it feasible for the oppressed to retake what has been denied them, including the ability to think critically and the option to act on their world as subjects of history and not objects, constitutes a veiled imposition of the oppressive conditions that have been responsible for their subordinated status to begin with. For example, illiteracy is not something that the peasants in Brazil created for themselves. It was imposed on them so as to deny them the ability to understand their historical conditions. This imposed illiteracy is, in my view, a violence against the peasants' human rights. To work with peasants in order to put an end to this violence and crime against humanity is not an imposition, but an act of courage that should lead to liberation.

If we are cultural beings with the capacity to learn and to opt, to discover knowledge, then we create because we discover, since, for human beings, to discover is to create. If all of this is true, the education of human beings should never be restricted to a true intellectual training that limits itself to merely exposing students to what Graff calls a pedagogy of conflict — as if all existed on an equal basis — without creating conditions that will enable students to understand the nature of the ideologies that created the conflicts in the first place. But, even if education were merely an intellectual training, it would have to exert itself so as to enable people to become conscious beings, conscious of their world and, for this reason, it could never remain at a pure technical posture. Even if education were purely technical intellectual training it would eventually transcend the pure training and respond to our innate programming to learn and to know and to be curious. What technical training sometimes does, and with some success, is to constrain our human nature as knowing beings. Thus, education involves a globalizing practice. It is a practice that does not only involve technical knowledge, but also world knowledge. Therefore, the oppressed need to develop the necessary critical tools that will enable them to read their world so they can apprehend the globality of their reality and choose what world they want for themselves.

MACEDO: This is precisely what some of your critics claim, that you propose to know what world the oppressed want to be in. What if the oppressed do not want the world that you may have in mind for them?

FREIRE: I think that those who say this about me and my pedagogical proposals have totally misunderstood my work. In the first place, I cannot propose to the oppressed the world that I believe would be best for them. Obviously I can't. On the other hand, I cannot hide from the oppressed what I think about their situation as oppressed people nor refuse to talk with them about ways in which their lives could be improved. I have, as an educator, the right to think and dream about a world that is less oppressive and more humane toward the oppressed, just as the poet has the right to write and to dream about a utopian world. This does not mean that I am going to incarnate Picasso's art, but he had all the right to see the world the way he saw it. I would be imposing if I had the power to tell the oppressed the following: you either opt for liberation or be killed. What I do in my pedagogical proposal is to present them with possibilities to opt for an alternative. Should they reject the choice to opt for an alternative, then there is little that I can do as an educator. Imposition is when one willfully refuses to present alternatives and multiple points of reference.

MACEDO: That is what the conservative right does, in fact, by denying students opportunities to juxtapose historical events and facts so as to relate these events in order to have a global reading of reality.

FREIRE: Exactly. Conservative educators have the right to propose their view of the world. And as a student, I also have the right to reject this conservative position. What educators cannot do is to impose their view. What educators must do is to never fail to debate various positions without imposing any. Then, any pedagogical proposal is to challenge students around various hypotheses. However, these proposals must be dealt with from a concrete reality. Without anchoring these hypotheses in a concrete reality, the educator runs the risk of erasing the framework within which the tools for critical understanding of reality can be developed. For example, how can I teach peasants in Brazil without helping them understand the reasons why thirty-three million of them are dying of hunger? What I would have to tell these thirty-three million peasants is that to die from hunger is not a predetermined destiny. I would have to share with them that to die from hunger is a social anomaly. It is not a biological issue. It is a crime that is practiced by the capitalist economy of Brazil against thirty-three million peasants. I need to also share with them that the Brazilian economy is not an autonomous entity. It is a social production, a social production that is amoral and diabolical and should be considered a crime against humanity. What I cannot do as a teacher is to tell them not to discuss hunger but to think of it only as a phenomenon. I think teaching peasants how to read the word hunger and to look it up in the dictionary is not sufficient. They also need to know the reasons behind their experience of hunger. It is not sufficient only to discuss hunger. The peasants need also to understand those ideological elements that generate and maintain the hunger that is killing them and their children daily. As they study and discuss the *raison d'être* of hunger, they will begin to see the asymmetrical social and economic distribution of wealth that contributes to their misery.

MACEDO: If you don't mind, let me interrupt you. What if these peasants do not want to know the reasons behind hunger and the asymmetrical distribution of wealth? Your insistence on this form of analysis may be viewed as an imposition.

FREIRE: I think that the issue is not purely pedagogical. It requires an ethical posture. I would ask the educator who criticizes my pedagogy as a form of imposition the following: If one day after class a student waits and, after all the other students leave, approaches the teacher and says, "I am thinking of committing suicide right here in front of you. I think I am going to kill myself now," does the teacher allow the student to kill himself because it is his wish to do so, or does he try to intervene ethically to try to prevent a tragedy? As you see, Donald, by not intervening so as not to impose, the teacher commits an ethical error. I think it is an ethical duty for educators to intervene in challenging students to critically engage with their world so they can act upon it and on it. I do not accept the present philosophical posture in which truth is relative and lies and truths are merely narratives. They have the right to say so. They also have the right to say, as some thinkers have been saying, that with the fall of communism we have reached the end of history. They have all the right to propose what they want to propose, as I also have the right to reject their proposals. I would have to point out that history continues, and I cannot remain silent before an error. By the same token, if a student wants to kill himself in front of me in my class, I cannot remain neutral. I must intervene, as I must intervene in teaching the peasants that their hunger is socially constructed and work with them to help identify those responsible for this social construction, which is, in my view, a crime against humanity.

MACEDO: I agree with the need to intervene, not only pedagogically but also ethically. However, before any intervention, an educator must have political clarity — a posture that makes many liberals like Graff very uncomfortable to the degree that he considers "Radical educational theorists like [you], Henry Giroux, and Stanley Aronowitz . . . [as having a] tunnel-vision style of . . . writing . . . which speaks of but never to those who oppose its premises."⁵ The assumption that you, Giroux, and Aronowitz engage in a "tunnel-vision style of . . . writing" is not only false, but also points to a distorted notion that there is an *a priori* agreed upon style of writing that is monolithic, available to all, and "free of jargon." This blind and facile call for writing clarity represents a pernicious mechanism used by academic liberals who suffocate discourses different from their own. Such a call often ignores how language is being used to make social inequality invisible. It also assumes that the only way to deconstruct ideologies of oppression is through a discourse that involves what these academics characterize as a language of clarity.

When I was working with you on the book *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, I asked a colleague who I considered to be politically progressive and to

⁵ Gerald Graff, "Academic Writing and the Uses of Bad Publicity," in *Eloquent Obsessions*, ed. Mariana Torgornick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 215.

have a keen understanding of your work to read the manuscript. Yet, during a discussion we had of our book, she asked me, a bit irritably, "Why do you and Paulo insist on using this Marxist jargon? Many readers who may enjoy reading Paulo may be put off by the jargon." I was at first taken aback, but proceeded to explain calmly to her that the equation of Marxism with jargon did not fully capture the richness of your analysis. In fact, I reminded her that your language was the only means through which you could have done justice to the complexity of the various concepts dealing with oppression. For one thing, I reminded her, "Imagine that instead of writing the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* you had written the *Pedagogy of the Disenfranchised*." The first title utilized a discourse that names the oppressor, whereas the second fails to do so. If you have "oppressed," you must have "oppressor." What would be the counterpart of disenfranchised? The *Pedagogy of the Disenfranchised* dislodges the agent of the action while leaving in doubt who bears the responsibility for such action. This leaves the ground wide open for blaming the victim of disenfranchisement for his or her own disenfranchisement. This example is a clear case in which the object of oppression can also be understood as the subject of oppression. Language such as this distorts reality.

And yet, mainstream academics like Graff seldom object to these linguistic distortions that disfigure reality. I seldom hear academics on a crusade for "language clarity" equate mainstream terms such as "disenfranchised" or "ethnic cleansing," for example, to jargon status. On the one hand, they readily accept "ethnic cleansing," a euphemism for genocide, while, on the other hand, they will, with certain automatism, point to the jargon quality of terms such as "oppression," "subordination," and "praxis." If we were to deconstruct the term "ethnic cleansing" we would see that it prevents us from becoming horrified by Serbian brutality and horrendous crimes against Bosnian Muslims. The mass killing of women, children, and the elderly and the rape of women and girls as young as five years old take on the positive attribute of "cleansing," which leads us to conjure a reality of "purification" of the ethnic "filth" ascribed to Bosnian Muslims, in particular, and to Muslims the world over, in general.

I also seldom heard any real protest from these same academics who want "language clarity" when, during the Gulf War, the horrific blood bath of the battlefield became a "theater of operation," and the violent killing of over one hundred thousand Iraqis, including innocent women, children, and the elderly by our "smart bombs," was sanitized into a technical term, "collateral damage." I can go on and on giving such examples to point out how academics who argue for language clarity not only seldom object to language that obfuscates reality, but often use the same language as part of the general acceptance that the "standard" discourse is a given and should remain unproblematic. Although these academics accept the dominant standard discourse, they aggressively object to any discourse that both fractures the dominant language and bares the veiled reality in order to name it. Thus, a discourse that names it becomes, in their view, imprecise and unclear, and wholesale euphemisms such as "disadvantaged," "disenfranchised," "educational mortality," "theater of operation," "collateral damage," and "ethnic cleansing" remain unchallenged since they are part

of the dominant social construction of images that are treated as unproblematic and clear.

I am often amazed to hear academics complain about the complexity of a particular discourse because of its alleged lack of clarity. It is as if they have assumed that there is a monodiscourse that is characterized by its clarity and is also equally available to all. If one begins to probe the issue of clarity, we soon realize that it is class specific, thus favoring those of that class in the meaning-making process.

The following two examples will bring the point home: Henry Giroux and I gave a speech at Massasoit Community College in Massachusetts to approximately three hundred unwed mothers who were part of a GED program. The director of this program later informed us that most of the students were considered functionally illiterate. After Henry's speech, during the question and answer period, a woman got up and eloquently said, "Professor Giroux, all my life I have felt the things you talked about. I just didn't have a language to express what I have felt. Today I have come to realize that I do have a language. Thank you." And you, Paulo, told me this story of what happened to you at the time you were preparing the English translation of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Remember, you gave an African American student at Harvard a chapter of the book to read to see how she would receive it. A few days later, when you asked the woman if she had read it, she enthusiastically responded, "Yes. Not only did I read it, but I gave it to my sixteen-year-old son to read. He read the whole chapter that night and in the morning said, 'I want to meet the man who wrote this. He is talking about me.'" The question that I have for all those "highly literate" academics who find Giroux's and your discourse so difficult to understand is, Why is it that a sixteen-year-old boy and a poor, "semiliterate" woman could so easily understand and connect with the complexity of both Giroux's and your language and ideas, and the academics, who are the most literate, find the language incomprehensible?

I believe that the answer has little to do with language and everything to do with ideology. That is, people often identify with representations that they are either comfortable with or that help deepen their understanding of themselves. The call for language clarity is an ideological issue, not merely a linguistic one. The sixteen-year-old and the semiliterate poor woman could readily connect with your ideology, whereas the highly literate academics are "put off" by some dimensions of the same ideology. It is, perhaps, for this reason that a university professor I know failed to include your work in a graduate course on literacy she taught. When I raised the issue with her, she explained that students often find your writing too difficult and cumbersome. It could also be the reason why although the Divinity School at Harvard University offers a course entitled "Education for Liberation," where students study you and James Cone extensively, no such opportunities are available at Harvard's School of Education.

For me, the mundane call for language simplicity and clarity represents yet another mechanism to dismiss the complexity of theoretical issues, particularly if these theoretical constructs interrogate the prevailing dominant ideology. It

is for this very reason that Gayatri Spivak correctly pointed out that the call for "plain prose cheats." I would go a step further and say, "The call for plain prose not only cheats, it also bleaches."

For me, it is not only plain prose that bleaches. Graff's pedagogy of "teaching the conflict" also bleaches to the extent that it robs students of the opportunity to access the critical discourses that will enable them not only to deconstruct the colonial and hegemonic paradigms, but will also help them realize that one cannot teach the conflict as if, all of a sudden, it fell from the sky. The conflict must be anchored in those competing histories and ideologies that generated the conflict in the first place. David Goldberg captures this problem when he argues that Graff's suggestion

presupposes that educators — even the humanists of Graff's address — occupy a neutral position, or at least can suspend their prejudices, in presenting the conflicts, and that the conflicts are fixed and immobile. One cannot teach the conflicts (or anything else, for that matter) by assuming this neutral "view from nowhere," for it is no view at all. In other words, the Assumption of a View from Nowhere is the projection of local values as neutrally universal ones, the globalizing of ethnocentric values, as Stam and Shohat put it.⁶

The problem with the teaching of the conflict is that the only referent for engaging authority is a methodological one. As a result, Graff demeans the ability of oppressed people to name their oppression as a pedagogical necessity and, at the same time, he dismisses the politics of pedagogy that "could empower 'minorities' and build on privileged students' minimal experience of otherization to help them imagine alternative subject positions and divergent social designs."⁷

FREIRE: As you can see, Donaldo, in criticizing my educational proposal as being too directive, these educators are also directive. There is no neutral education. All education is directive.

MACEDO: Paulo, if you don't mind, I would like to turn at this point to what I believe to be one of the most pressing educational challenges we face as we approach the end of this century. I would like to turn to the issue of multiculturalism. You mentioned to me a talk you gave in Jamaica where you stressed the need to find unity in diversity. How do you propose to achieve this noble goal when multicultural conflicts are intensifying everywhere?

FREIRE: A very first step is to understand the nature of multicultural coexistence so as to minimize the glaring ignorance of the cultural other. Part of this understanding implies a thorough understanding of the history that engenders these cultural differences. We need to understand that: a) there are intercultural dif-

⁶ David Theo Goldberg, "Introduction," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Oxford, Eng.: Blackwell, 1994), p. 19.

⁷ Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, "Contested Histories: Eurocentrism, Multiculturalism, and the Media," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Oxford, Eng.: Blackwell, 1994), p. 320.

ferences that exist due to the presence of such factors as class, race, and gender and, as an extension of these, you have national differences; and b) these differences generate ideologies that, on the one hand, support discriminatory practices and, on the other hand, create resistance.

The culture that is discriminated against does not generate the discriminatory ideology. Discrimination is generally generated by the hegemonic culture. The discriminated culture may give rise to an ideology of resistance that, as a function of its experience with struggle, adopts cultural behavior patterns that are more or less pacifist. In other instances, resistance is manifested in rebellious forms that are more or less indiscriminately violent. However, sometimes resistance emerges as a critical reflection leading toward the re-creation of the world. There is an important point that needs to be underlined: to the extent that these relations between these ideologies are dialectical, they interpenetrate each other. These relations do not take place in pure form and they can change from person to person. For example, I can be a man as I am and not necessarily be a *machista*. I can be Black, but in defending my economic interests, I might become complicit with White discrimination.

MACEDO: This is absolutely correct: Clarence Thomas, President Bush's Supreme Court appointee, represents an example of the interface between class and race ideologies par excellence. In his case, race is not a guarantee that the interests of millions of oppressed African Americans who have not yet broken loose from the yoke of White racism will be protected. Clarence Thomas's class interests override his race position. Thus, we cannot lump the many factors that cut across cultural difference into one monolithic cultural entity.

FREIRE: It is impossible to understand these differences without an analysis of ideologies and their relations between power and lack of power. These ideologies, whether discriminatory or resistant, embody themselves in special forms of social or individual behavior that vary from context to context. These ideologies express themselves in language — in the syntax and the semantics — and also in concrete forms of acting, of choosing, of valuing, of dressing, and even in the way one says hello on the street. These relations are dialectical. The level of these relations, their contents, their maximum dose of power revealed in the superior air one demonstrates, the distance, the coldness with which those in power treat those without power, the greater or lesser degree of accommodation or rebellion with which the dominated people respond to oppression — all of these are fundamental in the sense of overcoming the discriminatory ideologies so we can live in utopia; no more discrimination, no more rebelliousness or accommodation, but Unity in Diversity.

It is impossible to think, however, of overcoming oppression, discrimination, passivity, or pure rebellion without first acquiring a critical comprehension of history in which these intercultural relations take place in a dialectical form. Thus, they are contradictory and part of a historical process. Second, we cannot think of overcoming oppression without political pedagogical projects that point to the transformation or the reinvention of the world.

Let's speak a little about the first question, the comprehension of the history that we have. As historical beings, our actions are not merely historical, but also are historically conditioned. Sometimes, without wanting to, in acting we are consciously clear with respect to the conception of history that defines us. Hence, I recognize the importance of discussions in courses of teacher preparation concerning the different ways we comprehend history that makes us as we make it.

Let's talk succinctly of some different ways we reflect on our presence in the world and in which we find ourselves. One way of seeing ourselves is as spiritual beings, endowed with reason and the ability to make judgements, capable of distinguishing between good and bad, marked by original sin, thus needing to avoid at all costs falling into sin. From this perspective, falling into sin is viewed as always being preceded by strong temptations and the search for the road to salvation. Here sin and its negation become such that the former signals absolute weakness and the latter a facile cry of victory, in which human existence, reduced to this struggle, ends up almost losing itself in the fear of freedom or in the Puritanical hypocrisy that is a form of staying with the ugliness and rejecting the beauty of purity. History, in truth, is the history of the search for the beauty of purity, the salvation of the soul through the escape from sin. The prayers, the penitences, and promises are the principal arms and fundamental methods of action for those who idealistically experiment with this conception of history. Liberation theology signifies a radical rupture with this magical-mystical religiosity discussed above and, by putting its roots in the concrete context of experiences of women and men, God's people, it speaks of another comprehension of history that is, in reality, made by us. According to this interpretation of history, God is a presence. However, his presence does not prevent people from making their own history. On the contrary, God pushes people not only to make history, but to do so without negating the rights of others just because they are different from us.

With relation to the future, I would like to highlight two other comprehensions of history. Both are immobilizing and deterministic. The first has in the future a mere repetition of the present. In general, this is how the dominant class thinks. The tomorrow for them is always their present, as dominance is reproduced only with adverbial alterations. There is no place in this historical conception for a substantive overcoming of racial, sexual, linguistic, and cultural discrimination.

Blacks continue to be considered inferior, but now they can sit anywhere on the bus. . . . Latin Americans are good people, but they are not practical. . . . Maria is an excellent young woman; she is Black *but* she is intelligent. . . . In the three examples, the adversative co-function *but* is impregnated with ideology that is authoritarily racist and discriminatory.

Another conception of history is, just as much as the others, at very least conditioned by practices regardless of the area. The cultural, educational, and economic relations among nations, and the environmental, scientific, technological, artistic, and communication areas reduce the tomorrow to a given fact.

The future is predetermined, a type of fate, of destiny. The future is not problematic. On the contrary, it is unyielding. The dialectic that this vision of history reclaims, and has its origin in a certain Marxist dogmatism, is the domesticated dialectics. We know synthesis before we experience the dialectical collision between thesis and antithesis.

Another way of understanding history is to submit it to the caprice of individual will. The individual, from whom the social is dependent, is the subject of history. His or her conscience is the arbitrary maker of history. For this reason, the better education shapes individuals, that much better are their hearts, that much more will they who are full of beauty make the ugly world become beautiful. According to this vision of history, the role of women and men in the world is to take care of their hearts, leaving out, untouched, the social structures.

I see history exactly as do the liberation theologians, among whom I feel very good, and am in total disagreement with the other comprehensions of history I have discussed. For me, history represents a time of possibilities and not determinism. And if it is a time of possibilities, the first consequence that comes to the fore is that history does not only exist, but also requires freedom. To struggle for freedom is possible when we insert ourselves in history so as to make ourselves equally possible. Instead of being the constant persecutor of sin in order to be saved, we need to view history as possibility so we can both liberate and save ourselves. This is possible only through a historical perspective in which men and women are capable of assuming themselves, as both objects and subjects of history, capable of reinventing the world in an ethical and aesthetic mold beyond the cultural patterns that exist. This makes sense when we discuss communication as a new phase of continuous change and innovation. This, then, necessitates the recognition of the political nature of this struggle.

To think of history as possibility is to recognize education as possibility. It is to recognize that if education cannot do everything, it can achieve some things. Its strength, as I usually say, resides in its weakness. One of our challenges as educators is to discover what historically is possible in the sense of contributing toward the transformation of the world, giving rise to a world that is rounder, less angular, more humane, and in which one prepares the materialization of the great Utopia: Unity in Diversity.

MACEDO: After your public lecture at Harvard University in November of 1994, an African American woman talked impatiently to me inquiring why it is that your work on liberation struggles does not ever address the race issue in general, and the African American plight in particular. Can you address this criticism and attempt to clarify how your pedagogy takes on the role of race in liberation struggles?

FREIRE: In the first place, when I wrote the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I tried to understand and analyze the phenomenon of oppression with respect to its social, existential, and individual tendencies. In doing so, I did not focus specifically on oppression marked by specificities such as color, gender, race, and so forth. I was extremely more preoccupied with the oppressed as a social class. But this,

in my view, does not at all mean that I was ignoring the racial oppression that I have denounced always and struggled against even as a child. My mother used to tell me that when I was a child, I used to react aggressively, not physically, but linguistically, against any manifestation of racial discrimination. Throughout my life, I have worked against all forms of racial oppression, which is in keeping with my desire and need to maintain coherence with my political posture. I could not write on the defense of the oppressed while being a racist, just as I could not be a *machista* either.

In the second place, I would like to point out that today I have spoken and written a great deal about the question of race in my deep quest to fight against any form of discrimination. You need to keep in mind that my work is not limited to the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and that all my writings are not available in English. It is exactly because of my growing awareness over the years concerning the specificities of oppression along the lines of language, race, gender, and ethnicity that I have been defending the fundamental thesis of Unity in Diversity, so that the various oppressed groups can become more effective in their collective struggle against all forms of oppression. To the extent that each specificity of oppression contains itself within its historical location and accepts the profile that was created by the oppressor, it becomes that much more difficult to launch an effective fight that will lead to victory. For example, when the oppressors speak of the minorities, in this process they hide the basic element of oppression. The label "minority" distorts and falsifies the reality if we keep in mind that the so-called minorities actually constitute the majority, while the oppressors generally represent the dominant ideology of a minority.

MACEDO: This is how language is used to distort reality so as to make social discrimination invisible. The same ideological mechanisms operate with the label *people of color*, which has even been embraced by many racial and ethnic groups to designate themselves. By calling non-White racial and ethnic groups "people of color," one is proposing that white is not a color, even though colorless white as a proposition is a semantic impossibility. Ideologically, "people of color" functions as a mechanism to make "White" as an ideological category invisible. However, it is precisely through this invisibility that the dominant White supremacy makes the ideological distinction against which all non-White groups are measured so as to be devalued and denigrated. This process facilitates the continued dance with bigotry without having to take responsibility for the poisonous effects of racism.

FREIRE: You are absolutely right. That is why I argue that the oppressed groups cannot and should not accept the dominant class's categorization of them as "minority" and, in the process, remain divided along race, class, gender, language, and ethnicity lines. Such divisions may lead not only to a form of essentialism, but also make it more difficult for these groups to dismantle the oppressive structures that rob them of their humanity. By noting this, I do not want to minimize the specific historical location of oppression. In fact, it is only through one's historical location that one is able to develop the critical tools to under-

stand the globality of oppression. What I want to make very clear to all oppressed groups, including racial, gender, linguistic, and ethnic groups, is that I maintain a great solidarity with their struggles against their oppressive conditions and that I have been expressing this more and more explicitly in my work.

MACEDO: You and I have talked extensively about the racial issue in other discussions we have had. Without wanting to press you on this question, I think it is important to address each aspect of the criticism leveled against your work concerning race. Therefore, I think it is important to clarify your position even if you have to repeat yourself.

Some educators in North America also point out that your theory of oppression does not speak directly to the issue of race. They argue that you have failed to assign the appropriate weight to race as a fundamental factor of oppression. In their view, your class analysis oversimplifies the role of race and its historical location of oppression. Can you discuss your views on this issue?

FREIRE: I became keenly aware during the decade of the twenties of the cruel symbolic and material violence perpetrated against Blacks in my country, even though some Brazilians like to think that there is no racism in Brazil. Even our own language contradicts this ignorant but never innocent position, given the verbal violence that Blacks endure in their day-to-day struggle for survival. Like the issue of gender, race as an ideological category did not feature predominantly, as I mentioned before in this discussion, in my early work, particularly in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. However, once again as mentioned earlier, my critics should not use *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as the only measure to evaluate my solidarity with subordinate racial groups, particularly Africans and African Americans.

My involvement with literacy campaigns in various African countries, particularly Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe, speak of my commitment and my fight against all racial oppression and my admiration for the courage of Black people in Africa in throwing out the colonizers. Obviously, the race situation in Africa is somewhat different than that of the United States and we should — and I am becoming more and more aware of this — always take into consideration both the historical specificity and the different forms of oppression. In other words, in Africa, the vast majority of the population is Black, while the White colonizers represented only a small minority. The challenge for me in Africa, as I pointed out in *Letters to Guinea-Bissau: Pedagogy in Process*, was to be cautious always and aware of my role as an outsider who had been invited to provide some help with the transformation of the inherited colonial educational structure. In many discussions, as well as in many letters I wrote to my colleagues in Guinea-Bissau, I always stressed the importance of a thorough analysis of culture in the development of a liberatory educational plan. In fact, the importance of culture was not my idea, since their leader Amílcar Cabral understood extremely well the role of culture in the struggle for liberation. As I have said to you in our many discussions, Donaldo, I learned immense amounts from Cabral's insights, particularly from his analysis of culture.

The issue of race in Guinea-Bissau, as well as in other African countries where I worked, is different, in my view, from that of the United States. The challenge for the liberators and educators was to understand how race as an ideological category served to legitimize the colonizers' exploitation and domination. When colonizers used the pretext of racial inferiority to dehumanize Africans, relegating them to subhuman status, as I said before, almost animal-like creatures, the anti-colonialist struggle had to take race as a determinant factor in their condemnation of colonialism. At least, in my denunciation of colonialism, I always felt revolted by the raw racism of the colonialist ideology. My collaboration in the fight against colonialism invariably involved a fight against racism. All anti-colonialist leaders and intellectuals fighting to break their countries from the yoke of colonialism were very clear about the colonizers' violent racism. From Amílcar Cabral to Franz Fanon you find brilliant analyses of the cruel and tragic history of racist imperialism.

MACEDO: Albert Memmi's work is a prime example of a penetrating analysis of racism as the mainstay of colonialism. For Memmi, "it is significant that racism is part of colonialism throughout the world: and it is not coincidence. Racism sums up and symbolizes the fundamental relation which unites colonialists and colonized."⁸ Paulo, we need however, to understand what has happened to the role of race once the colonialists were defeated and expelled from the colonized countries.

FREIRE: Yes. Here is where we need to understand how culture is cut across by race, gender, class, ethnicity, and languages. In the post-independence reconstruction of these African nations, where the population is all Black, other factors may play a more significant role. For example, take Guinea-Bissau with its multiple cultural, linguistic, and ethnic groups. The challenge during post-independence is to understand how to reconcile the historical specificities of these differences and successfully achieve national unity. In this complex analysis, we cannot underestimate the role of class.

MACEDO: This is an important factor. The understanding of class as an ideological category becomes important so as to prevent the generalization that reduces all analysis to race. For instance, the petit bourgeois class of African functionaries who assimilated to the colonial cultural values is part of the same racial entity, but has a very different ideological orientation and aspiration for the new nation. I think what we need to avoid is a framework of analysis that collapses all of these factors into one monolithic entity of race. The same is true, to a degree, of African Americans in the United States. It would be a big mistake to view all African Americans as one monolithic cultural group without marked differences. Although U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas is Black, there is a tremendous gulf between him and, let us say, our friend bell hooks, even though they share the same race and class positions. They differ, however, significantly

⁸ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), pp. 69-70.

in their ideological orientations and on gender issues. Similar gulfs exist between the vast mass of African Americans who remain subordinated and reduced to ghettos and middle-class African Americans who, in some sense, have also partly abandoned the subordinated mass of African Americans. I am reminded of a discussion I had with a personal friend of Martin Luther King Jr., who had joined him in the important struggle to end Black segregation and oppression during the sixties. During our discussion, King's friend remarked, "Donaldo, you are right. We are using unreflexively the dominant discourse based on euphemisms such as 'economically marginal' and avoid more pointed terms such as 'oppression.' I confess that I often feel uneasy when I am invited to discuss at institutions issues pertaining to the community. In reality, I haven't been there in over twenty years." Having achieved great personal success and having moved to a middle-class reality, this African American gentleman began to experience a distance from other African Americans who remain abandoned in ghettos.

In a recent discussion with a group of students, a young African American man who attends an Ivy League university told me that his parents usually vote with the White middle-class, even if, in the long run, their vote is detrimental to Black people. Thus we see again that race, itself, is not necessarily a unifying force.

FREIRE: You see, Donaldo, things have not changed much with respect to those who work for anti-racist and anti-sexist movements, but oppose the presence of class in a comprehensive social analysis. You remember the discussion we had in Boston with my wife Nita and an African American friend who is a college professor who refused to accept class as a significant factor in social analysis of the African American reality. You remember that we tried to point out to her that while one cannot reduce the analysis of racism to social class, we cannot understand racism fully without a class analysis, for to do one at the expense of the other is to fall into a sectarianist position, which is as despicable as the racism that we need to reject.

MACEDO: Paulo, we also need to keep in mind that the level of violent racism in the United States gives primacy to race in most contexts. For instance, a recent discussion I had with a taxi driver in Washington, DC, highlights this point. During our conversation, the taxi driver told me that he was from Ghana and he showed me pictures of his wife and his son who were still there. I asked him if they were going to join him in the United States, and he quickly responded, "Oh, no! I don't want to expose my son to the racism I have to deal with. You see, I got a master's degree in business administration five years ago and the only job I was able to get is driving this taxi. Back home, I am somebody; here, I'm just a nigger."

I think what is important is to approach race analysis through a convergent framework where race is cut across by such factors as class, gender, culture, language, and ethnicity. The brilliant work of bell hooks that unmasks African American male sexist orientation brings home the point that these historical specificities, even within the same race, give rise to multiple identities that

should never be collapsed into one monolithic entity. However, it would also be a major mistake to give class primacy so as to diminish the urgency of analyses concerning racism. This would be a mechanism that would play to the White supremacists, who prefer to keep the ideological structure of racism unexamined. We have to always bear in mind that in a society that is so violently racist, a movement into a middle-class reality does little for African Americans when they are outside their professional contexts. They are still followed in stores, not because they are being rendered great service, but because they are Black. Being a renowned intellectual did little for Cornel West, who watched nine taxis go by, all refusing to pick him up as a passenger in the streets of New York just because of the color of his skin. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s prominence as a scholar did not lessen the racism he had to face at Duke University. bell hooks's eminence as a major feminist scholar does not lessen the pain of racism coupled with sexism that she endures. Having written eight highly acclaimed feminist books still does not provide her access to the media and magazines, as enjoyed by many White feminists such as Naomi Wolf. bell hooks recently noted:

I have written eight feminist books. None of the magazines that have talked about your book, Naomi, have ever talked about my books at all. Now, that's not because there aren't ideas in my books that have universal appeal. It's because the issue that you raised in *The Beauty Myth* is still about beauty. We have to acknowledge that all of us do not have equal access.⁹

For me, the real issue is never to fall into a false dichotomy between race and class. The fundamental challenge is to accept Derrick Bell's "continuing quest for new directions in our struggle for racial justice, a struggle we must continue even if . . . racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society."¹⁰

FREIRE: Absolutely. It is the work of African Americans, such as our friends bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Cornel West, Manning Marable, and Derrick Bell, among many others, that will help point us to a pedagogy of hope, born from the painful experiences of dehumanizing racism.

⁹ bell hooks, Gloria Steinem, Uruashi Vaid, and Naomi Wolf, "Get Real about Feminism: The Myths, the Backlash, the Movement," *Ms. Magazine*, September/October 1993, p. 41.

¹⁰ Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. xiii.