

The Critical Pedagogy of Black Studies

by

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Abstract

Understanding the production and consumption of knowledge by way of the organic and/or the traditional intellectual, I examine the de(construction) of Black Studies within the work of critical pedagogy. This piece particularly focuses on undergraduate Black Studies students at urban public institutions (particularly at the City University), and their disconnect from pursuing the work of organic and traditional Black Studies pedagogy at the graduate level.

“The Climate of deceit that has been created produces misinformation and erases knowledge that might contradict such deception.”
Dr. Joe L. Kincheloe (2006)

Navigating Identity

I was born and raised in Hell's Kitchen, New York City, went to public elementary, junior high and high school in New York City, and went to the City University of New York for my undergraduate degree studies. With this, my acceptance into Columbia University's graduate school of arts and sciences should not have felt any different. As I disembarked from the uptown number one train at the 116th street and Broadway stop, I noticed at that point, all the white people were also getting off. People of color would replace them, as the train went farther into Harlem and then into the Bronx. The campus was something I had only seen on television as replicas, or in real life, passing it on the way to my piano lessons in Sugar Hill. It looked the same then as it does now, with its huge mansion-like iron gates, a security booth guarding the knowledge behind it, a red brick walkway, massive stairs and students with namesake sweatshirts or sweatpants on their bodies. I felt transplanted elsewhere, another century would best describe my transplant-like feeling.

Scouring the campus for Brown and Black faces, I found a handful, but regardless of the difference and diversity in race and gender on campus, everyone shared the same language, the language of the Ivy League. I felt the competitiveness in the air even through its silence and thought this type of environment would match my workaholic attitude at best. Although I was there for graduate study, and attending school in my hometown, unlike so many others on campus, I should not have felt a culture shock. However, this was oddly different, even on the first day. Many of my college "advisors" had advised against obtaining a graduate degree in "ethnic studies." Warnings like "there are no jobs for *that*, post-degree, not even if it comes from Columbia University," were not far and few in between. In fact, they were often followed by many "that's a waste of your time and brain. You will not make money in the long run by studying that." The graduate program itself was brand new, and was just being offered to applicants that September. When at luncheons or get-togethers with friends, some asked whether it was a "real program" or whether it was some "experiment" that the Ivies were trying. Working for corporate America at the time of my application and acceptance to Columbia University, my boss pulled me aside and thought he would offer some critical analysis by asking me whether I was sure this is what I wanted to do with my life. I did not think that graduate study would necessarily be "my life" but I did think it would feel like I was learning something particular and not random, as with other liberal arts program structures. After securing multiple student loans, and assistance from my parents' savings, I was fully registered, working multiple jobs and on my way to something, I had always wanted; an Ivy League experience.

As a woman of color growing up in New York City's Hell's Kitchen, I have always identified myself as biracial, American born, of British Guyanese parents. It seems like a lengthy description to give someone asking "what are you?" but it also seemed to quell inquiries regarding hair texture and other questions that seemed to have some other type of social meaning. For example, identifying myself as a "woman of color" for many was not a suitable answer, as my fluency in Spanish, but not being Latina, left people with questions.

The politics of my own identity added to a feeling of displacement on campus and within several academic departments. For many people, if you are studying “Black Studies” you should also be a member of the representative group. Identifying one’s self as being simply “of color” offers a silent complexity. The other scope of this is what ethnic make-up produces; skin color, hair and accent can also contribute to falling into other racialized categories, and thus not being “Black” but certainly active in a Black Studies discussion might appear as a cultural appropriation. Those who host bicultural and/or biracial identities may find particular struggles in bridging a gap between how they consume existing knowledge, and produce new knowledge on their own. Additionally, one begins to also contemplate how this production and consumption of knowledge is used post-graduate school.

The production and/or consumption of knowledge plays a role for both the traditional and the organic intellectual. For the traditional intellectual, or rather, one who is traditionally trained by their university’s standards and requirements and simply consumes knowledge, their racialized identity, oftentimes plays less of an important role. In opposition, the organic intellectual is trained to think hermeneutically and thus uses their consumed knowledge and applies it to their lived experience (race) thus, producing new forms of knowledge. In this, the organic intellectual is seen as less “experienced” in the forms of traditional knowledge. Race, gender, socioeconomics and ethnic history is a central part of their learning experiences, particularly at predominantly white institutions. In history classes I took (both at the undergraduate and graduate level), with white professors, Black history was oftentimes related with slavery as a starting point. Being the only woman of color in some of these “ethnic” courses made me feel as though I was carrying the weight of an entire people and our history on my shoulders. The pressure to represent simplifies and begins to deconstruct the humanity of the student. By identifying single students as representatives of a topic and/or subject, educators begin to contribute to the construction of a “native informant” (hooks, 43).

In classrooms heavily populated by white students and professor alike, the weight of singular Black students to represent an idea of “Blackness” or Black identity leads to isolation and perhaps embarrassment, should the topic be less than flattering. For the Black and/or organic intellectual of color, their hermeneutical approach to producing and consuming knowledge is displaced, and unwelcome in many classrooms, unless the focus is Black Studies. Furthermore, Black Studies courses that welcome the organic intellectual and their ability to produce new forms of knowledge, by some standard have representative pedagogues.

In this idea of having representative pedagogues be the directors for both the Black traditional and/or organic intellectual thought and practice, support needs to be issued to the pedagogues themselves as well. At the Ivy League institutions, many of the “affiliated” professors teaching in Black Studies programs have traditional homes likes Sociology, History and/or English, but there are fewer permanent binds to Black Studies directly; in that it is not their home department. Students in Black Studies are quite savvy in understanding that affiliation can be interpreted as “somewhat related” as opposed to having direct influence.

Professors who are sometimes only affiliated and owe courses to various departments do not always have the time, resource or energy to devote themselves solely to one topic. This can increase in students a sense of anxiety as to pursuing graduate degrees in programs and topics that are not majors and that do not have direct faculty representation. Many of the graduate students I went to school with were using the African American Studies program as a stepping-stone towards degree programs in more traditional fields, such as sociology, history and for many, law school as well. I completed my master's degree in two semesters, and as a first graduate of the program, I also obtained the status of magna cum laude. However, academia has a special way of reminding someone that even with all these accolades, if your program is not popular and/or widely recognized, jobs would be slim if any. I applied to jobs everywhere I thought would match my newfound training, and landed myself as the assistant editor of the Malcolm X Digital and Multimedia project at Columbia University.

Research however, does not last forever, and soon after I became fully immersed in research within the field of Black Studies, the project lost its funding, and I lost my job. There were no jobs in sight for an Ivy League graduate in Black Studies. It seemed to reinforce the idea that a grand vocabulary, an Ivy League education, and traditional intellectual training in Black Studies would not be applicable anywhere on or off campus. These reflections of graduate training at a predominantly white institution paved a way for the work that I do today, as an Assistant Professor of Black and Latino/a, and Women Studies at an urban public institution.

Teaching

Teaching at the City University includes a rich population of young, multiracial, multilingual students who all exude an energy for delivery of information, particularly in the field and subject of Black Studies. At City University schools that place a heavy focus in retaining students for Business majors, Black Studies becomes an elective in degree requirements and also in attitude. Here, the divide is wide and deep between the organic and traditional intellectuals and how production and consumption of knowledge is taking place in the classroom and post-graduation. Black students majoring in Business at a City University school place great pressures on themselves as they compete against Ivy League graduates for slimming opportunities in corporate America. The organic intellectual in Black Studies experiences an engaging, dialogic, critical and rigorous environment, where ontologically, their human and lived experiences are centralized.

At various urban and public institutions, Black Studies is offered through a minor or elective study. If students wish to pursue the topic as a major concentration, they are offered the alternative of constructing an ad-hoc major in Black Studies. However, for some ad-hoc majors, students experience anxiety with lack of direction, and fear of being jobless post-graduation.

For many who complete their ad-hoc degrees, they find themselves in employed positions as customer or social service representatives, where the pay is slim and the only connection to Black Studies is through the population of customers they service. By this disconnection between the consumption of knowledge and production of such, Black Studies undergraduates are hesitant in pursuing graduate degrees in the field. Many students that create the ad-hoc Black Studies major have stated that even minoring in Black and/or Latino/a Studies has made their job candidacy appear less competitive to employers. Black Studies is not seen as a serious area of academic scholarship in the corporate arena, and thus students stray away from engaging in such an area of study. Employers who are well informed about the history of the City University, its schools, and their bouts with racism and/or social activism also stray away from hiring students who have majored in Black Studies, as these degrees seem “threatening.”

While these pitfalls for students of Black Studies seem to exist at large, registration for Black Studies courses at urban public institutions like Baruch College (where there is no major in the subject) are never lacking. In fact, one of the biggest concerns in this department is the lack of courses offered that can adequately respond to the student population demands. At Baruch College’s Black Studies department, there are more students than there are professors to serve them, and more student demand for new knowledge than there are courses to serve these desperate inquires. Undergraduate students continue to take courses in Black Studies even though, it is only offered as an elective course or part of fulfilling the minor, because it offers a sense of home and familiarity while being rigorous and a place to construct knowledge. It is a place where they can clearly express themselves, and their lived experience(s) and on their terms (which heavily influences course direction by the pedagogues involved in the course). While many critical pedagogues conduct rigorous study, and their pedagogy ever changing and/or evolving, Black Studies courses that offer students a wealth of information that is relative to their lives, also offers a setting where everyone reconstructs the classroom as one that is familial or similar to a family structure. For example, in my Black Studies courses, our goals are always the same, no matter what we are reading, discussing, critiquing, or what the assignment is, the end result is always to engage in collective activism and to affect social change in our current society. Black Studies courses must always be developed in a pedagogical manner that is critical, intellectually demanding, but also allows the student(s) to approach their learning both hermeneutically and ontologically. This aspect to the critical pedagogy within Black Studies, can be seen as a direct understanding of students engaging in revolutionary education, regardless of whether or not they see immediate connections to jobs post-graduation.

The humanist, revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them (Freire, 75).

Understanding the striking contrasts between Black Studies majors at the Ivy League and Black Studies elective and/or ad-hoc majors at schools that give no weight to the field, one must also understand the weight of this “unimportance” falls towards the students. Not offering Black Studies as a major or more than a few elective requirements, students are disempowered, and are driven farther away from this academic field of study. Many of my own City University undergraduates minoring or ad-hoc majoring in Black Studies are undeniably inspired, but are also lacking important starting points of information in the field. Right before declaring their minor, it is disheartening to know that students have not read critical works nor have heard of scholars like bell hooks, Manning Marable, Patricia Hill Collins, Maulana Karenga, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and more contemporary, Robin Kelley. Many are not encouraged to read outside of the class’s framework either, and more unfortunate they are issued and confined to reading a textbook on “Black Studies.” This textbook is used as the cohesive tool for delivery of information regarding the subject. At the Ivy League institution, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels of Black Studies, many students not only know the work of important scholars, but have the opportunity to meet with many of them face to face; and thus engage in a further dialogue about critical issues in Black Studies.

Many urban public undergraduates, like those at the City University schools (that only offer minors in Black Studies) are fully familiar with the work of James Baldwin and Zora Neale Hurston, as authors only. Black authors make an appearance in English courses as their texts are dissected into selections, only to showcase particular examples in Black writing. However, they are not examined as activists and/or central to the work of research in Black Studies. Hence, they do not qualify Black authors as revolutionary leaders and/or thinkers (organic and traditional intellectuals for some), only as writers. This is a similar tactic used by many pedagogues when teaching *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Haley, 1966) to the point of “safe” revolutionary ideological frameworks and activist application. Yet, it is becoming more rare, with time constraints in a single semester, that the entire autobiography is taught as a collective work on transitionism and transnational activism. To rectify the disconnection between production and consumption of knowledge within Black Studies, the autobiography as well as singular Black movements particularly the development of Black Studies programs, could be its own course.

At urban public institutions, one hour and fifteen minutes is allotted twice a week for courses in Black Studies, hardly enough time to produce and consume knowledge in one sitting. This is particularly true at Baruch College where there is no major in the field and the requirements and offerings are of slim pickings. While only three courses are required to complete the minor in Black Studies at this institution, students have no real opportunity to reconstruct themselves as Black Studies intellectuals and future scholars. In this small window of time, many critical pedagogues become overwhelmed and in turn overwhelm students with a claustrophobic syllabus, including every single area they feel students in the field should know and/or study.

However, this clutter of information, and super-accelerated form of instructional delivery is oftentimes lost on the student not well-prepared for such intensive study. Completing only three classes to qualify for a minor, heightens the idea of Black Studies as a “quick accolade” to a transcript and/or resume, while reducing the likelihood that students will pursue graduate degrees in the field.

With the strengthening of work and support for Black Studies, students will begin to create their futures as related to interests in the field. While in the case of Baruch College being a “Business School,” students who take courses in Black Studies whether as a minor or as an elective, should be supported and have a variety of possibilities post-graduation offered to them. A simple introduction to options post-graduation is a small but important element to both the organic and traditional student’s intellectual development. When students present themselves as interested in various topics within Black Studies, and their work reflects as such, they should be given access to information on furthering this interest, perhaps at the graduate level. They have to be given an experience that will lead them to understanding that reading scholarship in the field should not just inspire, but also induce aspirations to become scholars themselves, with examples of possibilities.

On “career day” at various City University schools, current students and graduates are slammed in the face with vendor tables from corporate companies, branches of the military, along with the New York City Police Department. At Ivy League institutions such as Columbia University, it is rare to find any type of law and/or military recruiters on campus. What message is sent to students by this form of representation as post-graduation opportunities? After such intensive study in some very traditional academic areas, why should a student exchange that training for law enforcement, as there is no clear link between the two? Additionally, students hover around and flood the corporate recruitment tables, but here there is a direct connection between the academic work and job application. For the traditional and/or organic intellectual, that has a minor in Black Studies, or has worked individually to create their own Black Studies major, there are no small or large recruitment tables for them at these fairs. Graduate work in Black Studies does not make an appearance, and thus does not present itself as a career just as the other forms of “work” do. Students are not buzzing the crowded hallways explaining to friends what the advisor of a Black Studies graduate degree program told them, rather they are exchanging corporate recruiter business cards.

A great example of the disparity between studying and working in Black Studies comes from my experience with an undergraduate student at the City University. He was close to graduating with a bachelor’s degree in Marketing, supporting his dream to recreate the way African Americans and Latino/as were/are perceived and received in the media. He ultimately landed a job with a beer company. His job was to market and promote this particular product in a Spanish-speaking community in New York City. He found himself in a neighborhood highly populated with bodegas selling cheap malt liquor and other vices, and with a very high rate of alcoholism as indicated by all the community centers offering alcoholics anonymous programs.

He worked with the company for three years, still pushing the beer product into the community, until his own father developed a life-threatening illness from his own bouts with alcohol. The example here, is not used to dissuade students from pursuing these types of jobs, or academic areas of studies, but rather to indicate how his dreams inspired by his Black Studies classes of affecting social change were misguided because of ill-preparation and lack of representation in the field.

There is a more serious and correlating debt that all of us must pay upon re-entry to the real world. When we leave academia with our degrees safely tucked under our arms, we should realize that our accumulated skills and our individual concern can change the lives of a community or a child (Owens, 42).

Ideally, the student could have pursued a graduate degree in Black Studies, and as a result, become a successful scholar in the field. However, word of mouth encouragement and slim examples without actual and accurate representation of success in Black Studies, helped to harbor the attitude that economics trumps the production of knowledge.

For the groups of students who have created a self-designed degree program in Black Studies, they find absolutely no representation on campus during “career day” or campus “career fairs.” As for the teacher as researcher in Black Studies, who teaches her students to think critically, write even more critically, and how to produce critical research, they come to a hurdle when the pedagogical tools, are not implemented properly and without fervor. These pedagogues can spend twice a week at four-month intervals for years, attempting to deliver necessary information with no follow through, or follow up of actual ontological application. In addition, many ad-hoc Black Studies majors have expressed a sense of loneliness in their academic achievement, as there is no real “home” for them on campus. Since there is no such major on the campus where they take most of their classes, there is no one real place where they return to with questions. They depend on a select number of professors in a department that offers a minor in Black Studies, to perhaps continue a conversation about race and/or culture. They also experience a sense of disconnection from classmates, as the ad-hoc major students, essentially have to take an abundance of their Black Studies courses at other campuses. Urban public colleges that only offer a minor in Black Studies, alongside an entirely too small department to house this work, will staff a very small number of faculty and even smaller varieties of courses offered. How can it be expected that students in this type of undergraduate Black Studies setting will want or be able to pursue Black Studies at the graduate level, when there is no such representation on their own campus?

As pedagogues in the field, we too come from a variety of academic backgrounds, and many of us do not have doctorates in Black Studies either. We teach Black Studies, from a Black perspective (whether gendered or not), and make a case for why these programs are important, but some are lacking in accurate examples that actually prove graduate study as a viable option after college graduation. For many who pursue the doctorate, and ultimately full time teaching positions at various institutions, pedagogy oftentimes comes second to publishing “research.” In addition, this “research” is usually just a compilation of technical facts and statistics far removed from the reality of the students that we teach. The disconnect leads them further into thinking perhaps the field of Black Studies has turned into a framework that is less about revolution and social activism, and more about scientific interpretations about race and sometimes gender as well. Some would even consider that Black Studies today, is not what its pioneers were fighting for. It would seem as though, many educators in the field, pursue research topics that are more geared towards their own academic “traditional” training, and not directly related to the population they are teaching. With this, educators in the field, strip from our Black Studies undergraduates, an interest in pursuing, continuing the consumption and ultimately producing new knowledge in the field of Black Studies as related to themselves.

Pedagogy and Race

At many urban and public undergraduate institutions (particularly at the City University), the presentation of the professor is of utmost importance to many of the students. Before my classes became “popular,” my surname would throw people off. They were expecting an older, white female, as per their own remarks they were, “pleasantly surprised.” Some would wonder whether or not it really matters who is teaching the course, as long as they have a command of the material, a genuine expertise and/or interest in the field. Many Black and Latino/a City University students explain that Black Studies courses are “personal” to them, and learning from someone who represents the subject makes the experience more “authentic.” This is in direct contrast to the Black student sitting in a classroom full of white students, and the Black student bearing the entire weight of native informant. These same students have gone even further stating that they would not be comfortable taking Black Studies courses at a predominantly white institution because the authenticity of the material would be lost in the mechanical approach to pedagogy (from what they have come to stereotype as Ivy League education and its educators). For these students, white professors regardless of gender (which is important in other areas of study) would have to then “prove” themselves and again prove that they actually care about the subject, in order to get student attention in the classroom, and be classified as “authentic.”

It is not uncommon to find many young white instructors and/or professors teaching courses in Black Studies, but their pursuit in having an open and communicative dialogue about Black Studies falls on stereotypes that s/he may be appropriating a culture. Using their savvy cognition as mentioned earlier in this piece, students begin to recognize the “affiliated” characteristics of many of their educators and reduce their pedagogy to the fulfillment of a contractual teaching agreement. At private and Ivy League institutions in New York City, more so than at public colleges, one is more likely to encounter white professors in Black Studies, and they are more readily accepted by their population (also largely white). A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* reviewed two white professors, a veteran and a newcomer to the field of Black Studies, and each understands their position as “members of the majority [...] in a profession where [he’s] the minority” (Trice, 20). Both professors are from private institutions. Students at the City University, have gone on to explain that it would be harder for a white professor to fail them (Black and Latino/a students), because they cannot gauge the experiences talked about in the classroom, unless all pedagogy is strictly textbook. According to them, having a professor who represents the discussed population in many ways adds to their learning experience, and also adds difficulty in any attempt to slack. Students associate race, and sometimes gender as well, to the relationship they have to Black Studies and the professor who is in charge of information delivery. At best, they want the educator to be of the traditional intellectual population, but still have many of the organic intellectual qualities in order to relate better to the students themselves.

In many instances, students have decided that blackness, publication of some kind dealing with the black experience regardless of its nature and quality, loud and uncompromising allegiance to the black revolution as they understand it, and willingness to serve exclusively the needs of the black student population are the basic qualifications. These students insist that no white person is qualified to teach any subject dealing with the black experience (Ford, 591).

The point here is to indicate that this understanding of the structure of Black Studies leaves these students with a sense of needing and still wanting. Without accurate representation in the class, of the professor, at the university-level, and post-graduation, they continue to simply “just pass” their Black Studies classes with a short-term interest. Retaining and re-using information through the production of “indigenous knowledge” (Kincheloe, 3) in a classroom that does not elaborate on hermeneutical approaches or ontological frameworks of learning, Black and Latino/a students decrease their want to pursue the topic any further.

Critical Pedagogy & Black Studies

So how to use critical pedagogy to merge undergraduate training into graduate training, while producing new knowledge in the field of Black Studies? Extremely crucial and central to the work as an “ethnic studies” professor, are the works of critical pedagogues Paulo Freire and Joe L. Kincheloe, as a starting point. Pedagogy as a practice of freedom is essential to one’s learning and understanding, and thus practical application in any future environment. Understanding that knowledge is freedom for many, or a gateway for social access for others, learning to be an effective pedagogue is pivotal. Black Studies, has been long set within the context and construction of social and political activism. In Bill Owens’ keynote address at the National Council for Black Studies in 1978, reflecting on the 1960s movement towards Black Studies programs, he stated, “those were exuberant, exhilarating times, unique times not likely to be duplicated any time soon” (Owens, 1). Some forty years later, his observations may still be spot on. Continuing to work in the field of undergraduate Black Studies, calls upon a reflection of our own graduate training into the development of critical pedagogy. It is my hope that graduate programs in Black Studies will continue to reignite, inspire social activism while continuing to be academically rigorous and competitive and hermeneutical in their approach.

For many urban undergraduate students in Black Studies, these areas of study present an introduction to an opportunity to work on areas they may never get the chance to otherwise. This is particularly true for undergraduates who may choose or have no option to major in the field. Students walk into a sea of people, sit down, identified by social security number or student identification number, all the while hoping to be inspired. While a presumptuous workload may dissuade a student, if the topic is related to them in some way (particularly true again for Black Studies), they should be continuously encouraged to work on anything and everything with examples of further study. However, while individualism is always prevalent and competition surpasses any type of bond that students are willing to find with one another, critical pedagogues bind themselves to their population. Multitudes of race, ethnic history and Diaspora-related knowledge must be included in order to represent the diverse populations that pedagogues serve, especially in an urban and public institution and/or environment. Textual examples or pedagogy from a textbook is simply not enough, and is doing more damage than affecting change. Faculty cannot continue to identify themselves as segregated in that they are housed in a traditional department, and affiliated with all other organic environments by chance. Black Studies courses must retain educators who are dedicated to their population of students and will carry out the tradition of teacher as researcher by way of a constant and evolving pedagogy. Both the traditional and the organic intellectual in the Black Studies classroom must be inspired and encouraged to produce new forms of knowledge. The lack of integration produces a sense of anxiety, and sets tones for what should be considered success and/or failure. Furthermore, organic intellectualism as a characteristic, coupled with Black Studies as solely a minor will always be recognized as non-competitive in academia.

Pedagogy in Black Studies has to be inclusive, and so do its educators, and cultural workers. Keeping learning experiences segregated and showcasing jointly appointed faculty members will continue to deem Black Studies as non-competitive productions of knowledge, and helps to deter students from becoming thinkers as opposed to just workers. As life would have it, I ended up at a department not directly affiliated with my doctoral degree but encompassing both Black and Latino/a studies in one house. I am one of three fully appointed faculty members with no other house but Black and Latino/a to call my own. As a fully appointed faculty member, I am able to dedicate all my pedagogy and my research to this one particular area, and in return give all of my students all of my academic attention. Through my delivery of information, and their consumption of it, together we produce new ways of thinking, while keeping it organic, hermeneutical and ontological. Being fully appointed however does come with another weight of representation. It is our job to create new courses for our long-standing students, recruit new students with particular interests, inspire further study in the field of Black Studies, all while teaching extremely large loads of courses for populations that oftentimes only have one student majoring in the field. If we have done anything deviating from a dedication to our small population, we have failed both the student and the field of Black Studies at large. As pedagogues, there has to be a call to action to sustain Black Studies as a breeding ground for new information to be produced both by the student and the educator. Conversations must be continuous and offer outlets for furthering this conversation when we ourselves can no longer. Production and consumption of knowledge in Black Studies must be seen as evolving and current, whether we are teaching topics from a historical perspective or not. To disconnect ourselves from the learning experience(s) of our Black Studies students depletes our purpose as pedagogues in the field, and thus we run the risk as we did back in the 1960s of non-existence.

This lesson and this apprenticeship must come, however, from the oppressed themselves and from those who are truly in solidarity with them. As individuals or as peoples, by fighting for the restoration of their humanity they will be attempting the restoration of true generosity. Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. And this fight, because of the purpose given it by the oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors' violence, lovelessness even when clothed in false generosity (Freire, 133).

To present the possibility of helping students to produce new knowledge while consuming existing knowledge and as a result, inspiring students to continue the Black Studies conversation through hermeneutics and ontology, I offer the following pedagogical examples. Infusing the work of Freire and Kincheloe in my own pedagogy, I begin each semester with an assignment titled "The Personal Narrative."

Students are required to compose an essay or letter written to me, indicating, who they are and how they would like me to know them. They can compose a poem, a rap, a rock song, a letter, or a series of random thoughts in either English or Spanish, as long as they are telling me in the particular written piece “this is who I am.” What I have gotten back, are intellectually-sound, socially stimulating, and provocative pieces that say to me as an instructor, “Know me more than just by my student identification or social security number.” These initial writings force students to reflect on their lived experiences, and later in the semester, they are incorporated within our class construction and directly into our deliberations. Using the Freire and Kincheloe approach to pedagogy as freedom, I create an environment that is collectively competitive. Both organic and traditional intellectual bout for the same goal, but are allowed to use their traditions of intellectualism as they wish, learning from their opponent’s qualities and characteristics.

Every semester we have a theme within Black and/or Latino/a topics (under the construct of Black Studies). My undergraduates are required to work on multimedia projects throughout the semester that leads them to discovering the possibility of becoming documentarians that work to provide a socially just perspective into their lived experiences. These documentaries expose how students within the field of Black Studies have come to understand their work, and how they can expose the community’s involvement in its progress or the lack thereof and its detriment. However, multimedia is not the only requirement, they are required to read critical texts by a variety of well-known and lesser known academic scholars and authors within the field of Black Studies. In addition, I have chosen to require readings written by white academics and authors as well, but when reading and engaging with the students over these pieces, we critique the text in terms of the students’ own questioning of Black Studies, and its cultural and academic workers. This approach while quite similar to their previous test of white professors in Black Studies classrooms, is not solely based on the race of the writer or simple examples of proving authenticity.

What happens throughout this process is the development of a classroom that represents their consumption of existing knowledge by displaying their production of new knowledge in Black Studies, through a lens that permits the lived experience to be seen as an equal to learning. In all of the projects, the goal is always the same and common across the board for my students, we must engage in social activism, and in some way inspire social change in the world around us, while proving that Black Studies is competitive and is ultimately thriving at the City University. While some academics might find this to be quite idealistic in its approach, it cannot be denied that it is possible. In fact, there are many classrooms doing similar work. Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) described the “Student Efficacy Training” that she witnessed in Boston as:

In an effort to improve academic achievement, the school introduced a program, known as Student Efficacy Training (SET) that allowed Boston students to meet each day as a group with two staff members. Instead of being in physical education or home economics or study hall, they were meeting, talking about homework difficulties, social issues, and encounters with racism (Tatum, 71).

The faculty under the SET program interpreted the program as a form of “intervention” (Tatum, 72) as opposed to a method that requires singling out students of color from the general population. Some have found this program’s concept as faulty as it may appear to create resentment against the students involved, in that they perhaps are receiving some type of “special treatment.” On the other hand, many students have found this type of extraction from general classes to be a form of “escape” in that they are able to escape traditional methods of learning, and in return, they are allowed to be themselves on campus for a block of time.

Many colleges, if not all, have student organizations and clubs with great social presence on campus. Organizations oftentimes take the name of a racialized focus, such as “Black Student Organization,” thus instilling a sense of pride and race-based recruitment for their fellow student participants and/or members. Their student clubroom walls are adorned with African or West Indian flags, and students find themselves drawn to the room and its members because of a commonality, race. However, race alone cannot inspire future work in the field of Black Studies. Although many of the organizations, like a “Black Student Organization” has a faculty mentor, their campus presence, in terms of academic progress is low, budgets even lower, and club-related activities quite in opposition to intellectually stimulating and definitely not revolutionary. For example, the highest budget allotment to a student organization at Baruch College has been distributed towards the production of an end-of-the-semester fashion show that represents itself as cultural (on marketing materials) but hosts the parading of young women of color in bikinis. Sure, many of the club members gather together during their allotted meeting times and talk about their Black Studies classes, but they are usually critiquing classmates and their unprepared professor, while failing to critique the readings and/or the topic in the class itself. The exchange of ideas becomes heated, when an “outsider” (someone white) in the class makes a comment that they find to be offensive. However, it still is not enough as there is no careful guidance as to what to do next, and whether or not that same “heat” they have for particular forms of ideas and theories can work itself towards and ultimately into graduate research in Black Studies.

Whether Black, or not, as long as it is a Black Studies course, it might be prove a helpful suggestion to assign Tatum’s book or selections of, which generally inspires many of the students in the course to pursue an examination of their own racialized identity as related to Black Studies post-class. Since many schools do not have a SET program, I, as an example, have used my office as a breeding ground to continue the conversation about Black Studies.

At any given time, when not in class, but on campus, my office can be found with hordes of students on the floor, in chairs, sitting on the windowsill, atop my file cabinets, all of us examining the future, their future and the future of Black Studies. Each of them with their own battle program for Black Studies, whether this battle is short-term at the three course requirement minor level, or a production of knowledge that will lead them to graduate study in the field. Some students want the name of our academic department changed to encompass all Black and Brown people, some want more courses, some want different educators, and some want a major in the field of study, and others want some information on graduate programs in Black Studies. Indicating that all these desires take work, we sit together each week and work out their concerns, well after class has ended, but still the graduate study in the field does not seem possible for them as the elementary rules of researching possible schools, seems slim to none. Not every educator is doing this in Black Studies departments, and thus one or two classes alone cannot bear the weight of this responsibility and still execute multiple successors. The possibilities and examples need revamping, and we as educators must serve in this role of presenting future opportunities and delivery of information post-graduation, should the campuses we are on not aid in this.

At Columbia University, many undergraduate students sit at the same table as graduate students, and are fully registered for these graduate courses just like their graduate school counterparts. They are as immersed in the conversation as their graduate student counterpart(s), and while they receive some deviation of the assignments, they are interacting with an advanced population, and exchanging information with those who have been where they are academically. The idea here is that they are being immediately exposed to a world of furthering their research interests, one that possibly connected to them on a personal level. At many urban institutions in New York City, students are limited to taking courses in Black Studies at other schools, but still and only at the undergraduate level. Their graduate training would have to take place at a new school, in a new city and town, far away from home and the environment they have come to feel safe in, with no previous knowledge or experience of how to understand and connect to graduate-level work. And schools nearby like the University of Pennsylvania and their Africana Studies doctoral program are not readily accessible options for many of my students who do dream to pursue graduate training in Black Studies, but are frightened by tuition and standardized tests and its scores.

Recognizing that graduate work may mean a lifetime of research, sets apart those who want to study who they themselves are (their personal narratives and lived experiences), and those who want to study other people. These types of undergraduate courses seem to be dismal and fail to introduce the students to work that hones in on this duality of one's social existence, which produces hermeneutical and ontological productions of new knowledge. The disparity comes with graduate work that is turned simply into plots of research production, without any connection to lived experiences and without collective dialogue.

This disconnect between what goes on in the urban college classroom, and what is stereotyped as “graduate study,” particularly at an Ivy League institution or private college, leaves many urban undergraduates minoring in Black Studies, less than hopeful at obtaining a graduate degree in the field. While professors in the field, regardless of the field they originally came from, are under the gun, and against the clock to turn around research production, we fail to be inclusive in that perhaps our very own students can be part of the work we need to produce. Additionally, this production of knowledge can be inspirational for the future of one’s academic lifetime. Students in Black Studies, both undergraduate and graduate, want to see change and they want to be part of that change, but for many of them, they do not see it happening, and would agree with Bill Owens that activism as it was in the 1960s and 1970s has been lost, perhaps forever. Unless we as pedagogues take the time to re-revolutionize and reignite the way Black Studies hosts its strong presence on all varieties of campuses and within the walls of academia, we will continue to lose students and their presence in graduate programs.

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