

*Roots, Routes and Double Consciousness: Agency and Activism in the Educational
Contact Zone*

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In my opening comments in Umoja II this past March I said

If it looks like a movement,
If it dreams and hopes like a movement,
If it speaks like a movement,
It must be UMOJA II...

To that earlier offering I add:

If it's the only state wide "calling of the community" that can
bring together 53 (50%) of California's community colleges for
the sole purpose of "Stepping UP Success for All African
American Students" ... *It must be a UMOJA revolution.*

My gratitude to the Umoja leadership for the privilege of being asked
to speak to educational leaders, scholars and activists dedicated to
supporting the educational success of African American students. For in the

¹ Dear reader, should you wish to reproduce or distribute any part of this paper please request prior approval. I can be reached at 909-652-6501 or ali.rahmani@chaffey.edu.

final analysis, as Vincent Tinto recently observed, “access without support is not opportunity.”

In the African tradition of calling on ancestors and community elders – thank you Jackie Boboye - and in particular the calling of the spirit of Dr. Asa Hilliard whose presence and encouragement I feel, I ask for permission to speak the truth as I know it - May I speak this morning?

I want to incite a “revolution in thinking” – as Dr. Edward Bush passionately asserted in his introductory “calling of the UMOJA community” yesterday morning.

Certainly, it goes without saying that as scholar/activists a *revolution in content* is critical to “Stepping Up Success for all African American Students,” i.e. Basic Skills Transformation. But this morning, I am interested in privileging and voicing something more. I call today for a *revolution in context*. I am not here to “sedate” you, rather to have an “intellectual engagement” with you - to use Dr. Shawn Ginwright’s words and insights from yesterday’s keynote. I want to challenge, provoke, and complicate.

I’d like to begin by expanding on themes introduced in UMOJA II, first through an extended meditation on bell hooks and then, through a series of riffs to work towards theorizing educational institutions as “contact zones.”

I began my talk last march by invoking bell hooks's "*Teaching to Transgress*"² as a pathway through which educational activism, supportive of African American students can be motivated. I would like to linger on hooks's theoretically potent "emphasis on education as necessary for liberation..."³ and "education as the practice of freedom."⁴

hooks insists that the act of teaching *is* to liberate; and argues that our work "is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students..."⁵ Teaching to liberate involves, in hooks's worldview, the "questing for a union of mind, body, and spirit."⁶ A libratory vision that integrates mind/body/spirit is both revolutionary and emancipatory because it refuses dualisms, dichotomies, and binaries rooted in racist and colonialist ideologies. And hooks refuses to be colonized. She self consciously disrupts the "mind/body split..."⁷ and does so as an identity in resistance.

U.S. third world feminists seem particularly attuned to subverting the mind/body split that ensnares rather than liberates. Alice Walker who introduced us to the term *Womanism* is in conversation with hooks when she defines the term as "...Committed to survival and wholeness of entire

² hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.

³ hooks 1994: 51

⁴ hooks 1994: 51

⁵ hooks 1994: 13

⁶ hooks 1994: 16

⁷ hooks 1994: 16

people, male and female. Not a separatist [movement]...” Or, consider how Gloria Anzaldua subverts and refuses binaries: “You say my name is Ambivalence: Not so. Only your labels split me.”⁸ This as she points us towards a ‘mestiza consciousness’⁹ intent on “...break[ing] down dualities,”¹⁰ binaries and compartmentalization.

Motivating my own views through hooks, Walker and Anzaldua, I argued last March that as educational scholars and activists we must complicate the category student by accounting for their histories, to make students whole-beings, to make their subjectivities and humanity accessible and imaginable **before** they enter our educational institutions. Our students, I argued, are not ahistorical beings becoming visible and imaginable only after entering the institutional gaze.

By urging us to *teach to liberate* and calling on fellow activists to refuse dualities, to integrate mind/body/spirit, hooks stakes her claim to a movement rooted in the *decolonization of identity* – or as Angela Davis phrases it “psychic emancipation.” I’d like to expand on hooks’s project of decolonization, which she enters as an identity-in-resistance, because it has significance for our work.

⁸ Sandoval 2000: 193,4. In *Methodology of the Oppressed*.

⁹ Anzaldua 1999: 5. Sonia Saldivar-Hull in “Introduction to the Second Edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*.”

¹⁰ Anzaldua 1999: 5. Sonia Saldivar-Hull in “Introduction to the Second Edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*.”

As a decolonizing and liberation text, *Teaching to Transgress* is in intimate conversation with Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.¹¹ In fourteen sweet pages, Gloria Watkins (bell hooks's birth name) interviews bell hooks (Gloria Watkins writing voice) about Freire's influence on hooks. Within these pages hooks posits "the construction of an identity in resistance,"¹² hanging on to Freire's "revolutionary mantra" that "We cannot enter the struggle as *objects* in order later to become *subjects*"¹³ [my emphasis]. hooks insists on asserting her full agency (a term I will explore more fully later in my talk) by entering *the struggle* as an identity in resistance refusing "the colonizing process-the colonizing mind-set."¹⁴ Defining "the process of decolonization" as "that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstances"¹⁵ she embeds liberation and emancipation as a political awakening.

By lingering on hooks's - her notion of the "construction of an identity in resistance; the process of decolonization; and "education as the practice of freedom"¹⁶ - I am gesturing towards a wider and more treacherous landscape. I am gesturing towards *the curriculum* where the

¹¹ Freire 1973

¹² hooks 1994: 46

¹³ hooks 1994: 46

¹⁴ hooks 1994: 46

¹⁵ hooks 1994: 47

¹⁶ Hooks 1994: 51

stakes are high, the terms of engagement deeply contested, and our task ever more urgent.

Curricular Decolonization: A Central Front in Our Arsenal

Listen to Toni Morrison as she speaks to us in her brilliant essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature:”¹⁷

We can agree...that invisible things are not necessarily “not-there”; that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum...certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves...like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them. Looking at the scope of American literature, I can’t help thinking that the question should never have been “Why am I, an Afro-American, absent from it?” It is not a particularly interesting query. The spectacularly interesting question is “What intellectual feats had to be performed...to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?” What are the strategies of escape from knowledge?¹⁸

While Morrison’s analytic site is American literature, the stakes are not narrow. When it comes to decolonizing the curriculum those who transgress, those who dare to enter the fray, must remember Morrison’s admonition that “[c]anon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense.” Why should curricular decolonization form one central

¹⁷ Morrison 1989: 1-34 from Michigan Quarterly Review, vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 1989)

¹⁸ Morrison 1989: 11-12

front in the arsenal of African American student success? What are the stakes? How is this particular challenge linked to earlier themes of liberation, emancipation, integration of mind/body/spirit? How is decolonization linked to Dr. Asa Hilliard's provocative notion of "mis-education"?

For a partial response perhaps Angela Davis and Teshome Gabriel can prove illuminating. Angela Davis, urging us towards a "decolonizing [of] the imagination"¹⁹ and insisting on "psychic emancipation"²⁰ suggests "there can be no decolonization of the mind without a *return to memory and the past.*" Teshome Gabriel, UCLA professor of Critical Theory, Cinema and Transnational film and author of *Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and Black Independent Cinema* theorizes that "memory is history read backward."²¹ Davis and Gabriel speaking from within the same discourse argue that "[t]he need to tell our stories remains the powerful imperative of a powerful form of resistance."²² To look backward, to invoke and evoke "a return to memory and the past" – to remember and to [re]member ourselves – is saturated, in the words of Walter Benjamin, with "hidden political significance."

¹⁹ Sandoval 2000: xii, xiii. In *Methodology of the Oppressed.*

²⁰ Sandoval 2000: xii, xiii. In *Methodology of the Oppressed.*

²¹ Gabriel 1999: 80

²² Smith 1999: 35

There is an urgent need to remember, to return to memory, the past and to re-member histories. Why? Frantz Fanon offers a compelling argument still relevant today: “by a kind of perverted logic [colonization] turns the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.” Our past does matter and [re]membering ourselves and our histories must be a central front of the task to which we are committed. Nowhere is this task more urgent than in transgressing the borders and defenses of cannon and curriculum. Despite the “intellectual feats” to justify erasure, to marginalize, to make silent histories and memories “from a society [in Toni Morrison’s words] seething with my presence...,” a commitment to an incursion into curriculum and cannon is crucial. The battle lines are intense and not for the feint of heart but as Morrison points out “as far as the future is concerned, when one writes, as critic or as author [or as an educational activist], all necks are on the line.”²³

The Institution as “Contact Zone”

Morrison’s provocative use of ‘empire building’ and ‘national defense’ as tropes of cannon and curriculum; and hooks’s thoroughly persuasive call to resist the decolonizing process and the decolonizing mindset provides me a clearing to explore the notion of the *institution* – our

²³ Morrison 1989: 34 from Michigan Quarterly Review, vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 1989)

educational centers - as “contact zones.” And here I will launch into an extended riff with Morrison and hooks as pulsating baselines. I am intentionally making the institution the *object of gaze* to interrupt its privileged standing, since the exercise of power depends on its invisibility, preferring to remain unmarked and un-remarked.

First, let’s define the term “contact zone”²⁴ by entering into conversation with Clifford who appropriated it from Mary Louise Pratt. In her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation* Pratt defined²⁵ “contact zone”²⁶ as

the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.²⁷

Riffing off of Pratt, Clifford theorizes museums as “contact zones” - an appropriation I find particularly useful to educational settings. Listen to how Clifford defines it:

²⁴ Clifford 1997: 188-219. In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*.

²⁵ Clifford uses the definition offered by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation* (6-7).

²⁶ Clifford 1997: 188-219. In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*.

²⁷ Clifford 1997: 192

The notion of a contact zone...can be extended to include cultural relations within the same state, region, or city – in the centers rather than the frontiers of nations and empires. The distances at issue here are more social than geographic. For most inhabitants of a poor neighborhood, located perhaps just blocks or a short bus ride from a fine-arts museum, the museum might as well be on another continent. Contact perspectives recognize that “natural” social distances and segregations are historically/political products: apartheid was a relationship.²⁸

Clifford goes on to suggest that “contact zones” “become borders” and that border “crossings are never “free.””²⁹ He asks the question “[c]an museums claim political neutrality”?³⁰

What I am suggesting is that educational institutions and centers, like Clifford’s “museums,” are indeed “contact zones.” We need to keep in mind that equal access to the borders and gateways of our institutions does not necessarily entitle one to equal access to its socio-political economy; nor does it provide value-free socio-spatial access; nor curricular, vernacular, or aesthetic access. It would be an act of denial - a veiling, a mystification - to suggest that educational institutions are somehow immunized “contact zones.” I, too, like Clifford, ask the question “[c]an our [educational] institutions claim political neutrality”?³¹

²⁸ Clifford 1997: 204

²⁹ Clifford 1997: 204

³⁰ Clifford 1997: 205-206

³¹ Clifford 1997: 205-206

For most inhabitants of poor neighborhoods, for those who live in poverty, for those whose lives have been formed and informed by the disjunctures and asymmetries of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, our educational institutions and centers are indeed contact zones. For many of the students, even if they live just blocks away – or a short bus ride – college might as well be, in Clifford’s words, “another continent.”

As Clifford has argued border “crossings are never “free””³² and pretenses of “political neutrality” places disproportionate burden on marginalized students – in particular African American and Latino students. By theorizing colleges as contact zones, by placing the institution at the center of my gaze I am transferring privilege elsewhere. A transfer intended to decolonize educational space and to move from margin to center!

Imagining the institution as “neutral” space occludes the institutions incessant gaze, including the power to speak for and about students – not students as subjects but students as objects. A gaze that pathologizes students, turns them into problems to be solved. Colleges as contact zones turns the institutions laser guided gaze towards its own mechanisms of coercion and inequality embedded into its structures and systems. Utilizing a vast discursive arsenal and equally fortified disciplining mechanisms – and I

³² Clifford 1997: 204

would add agents - the institution reserves for itself the task of re-scripting and re-writing the bodies and voices of our students; including what they wear; their vernacular, their aesthetic heritage, the places they congregate, their music, their moves and movements, until students are barely able to recognize themselves while in the contact zone.

Disenfranchised students, already marginalized before their border crossing into our colleges, are disenfranchised and marginalized again in the contact zone. Rather than transforming lives through “emancipatory knowledge,” to use Dr. Shawn Ginwright’s productive phrase, the institution assumes for itself the task of policing student bodies and voices, and minds. In full view, colleges rehearse the very categories Dr. Ginwright took newspapers to task on: African American students as problems – pathologized - and to be policed through prevention. W.E.B. Dubois’s question still resonates in our colleges: “How does it feel to be the problem to be solved?”³³

What I would like to suggest is that our activism involves nothing less than adopting a “contact perspective”³⁴ a mission to do “*contact work*.” To help our institutions see themselves – in Clifford’s words - “as specific places of transit, intercultural borders, contexts of struggle and

³³ W.E.B. DuBois from his book *The Souls of Black Folk*.

³⁴ Clifford 1997: 213

communication between discrepant communities...[and] to grapple with the real difficulties of dialogue, alliance, inequality, and translation.”³⁵

Appropriating a “contact perspective” is not an end in itself; rather it is a hinge, a pivot that allows a more interesting conversation.

Student Agency and the Promise of the “Contact Zone”

Here I would like to make another pivot and introduce the notion of student agency. More appropriately, I would like to argue for the transfer of *agency* to students as they border cross into “contact zones.” The transfer of agency to students is central to hooks’s insistence on decolonization; the construction of identities in resistance; and education as emancipation.

Agency broadly defined is the transfer of meaning making from the observer to the observed. Agency gives voice to the experiences of those within a culture/subculture. Agency transfers power and meaning-making to the subject. This is the essence of adopting a “contact perspective.” Students as agents, the transfer of meaning making to students in the contact zone disrupts existing power relations and offers new lines of inquiry as well as new opportunities and challenges. From Dubois’s “How does it feel to be the problem to be solved?”³⁶ to partners in meaning making. This is the basis of hooks’s *Teaching to Transgress* – students as co-creators of their living and

³⁵ Clifford 1997: 213

³⁶ W.E.B. DuBois from his book *The Souls of Black Folk*.

learning environments. Students as fully integrated minds/bodies/spirits who can teach us, the institution, and each other.

Students as agents enter campuses as subjects. They do not enter the struggle – in hooks’s words – as objects later to become subjects! Agency opens up space for students to enter contact zones as identities in resistance and equally important as identities in process and transition.

Student Agency: Doing the Work of the Imagination

Our students do not attempt complex border-crossing-journeys into contact zones as fixed identities. While they make take these journeys as identities in resistance it is equally the case that they are identities in transition. Journeys, Hamid Naficy reminds us, “are not just physical and territorial...”³⁷ they are psychological as well. The most important journeys “are journeys of identity, in the course of which old identities are sometimes shed and new ones refashioned.”³⁸ Identity “is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming...”³⁹

The transfer of agency to students in the contact zone draws attention to what Hebdige describes as the “subversive implications of style...[and] the idea of style as a form of Refusal...”⁴⁰ This notion of style as subversive

³⁷ Naficy 2001: 6

³⁸ Naficy 2001: 6

³⁹ Naficy 2001: 6

⁴⁰ Hebdige 1979: 2; in *the meaning of style*

and as refusal is, for many of our students, is a triple move/ment: 1) It is a transgression that disrupts the centers gaze – I am here, deal with it. 2) It militates against feelings of displacement and unbelonging. Resistance through the “subversive implications of style” manifested on the bodies and ritual behaviors of our students rehearses their authorial voice. It is a performance of identity through which sovereignty is asserted under conditions of dislocation and displacement in contact zones. Finally, third and paradoxically, students in the contact zone both “resist and support existing systems of power.”⁴¹ After all, our students chose to enter the contact zone. This triple movem/ment – marked by resistance and refusal while simultaneously supporting their education is perhaps the most productive. For it suggests the desire for liberation, upward mobility, social and political emancipation and economic advancement; no matter how transgressive, subversive or aesthetically challenging their “identity in resistance” appears to the policing gaze and taste of institutional elite.

Theorizing a Diasporic Consciousness in the Contact Zone

I would like to conclude my comments by noting that I see this talk as unfinished. Indeed, this talk should be seen as the second in a series of three conversations that first began last March in UMOJA II.

⁴¹ I owe this insight into the paradoxes of movements and resistances to Lila Abu-Lughod in her edited book *Remaking Women*. The quote is taken from Mankekar 1999: 29 in *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*.

The original title of this presentation was “Roots, Routs and Double Consciousness: Activism at the Razors Edge/Living on the Barbwire.” I had intended to explore educational activism in the context of institutions as ‘contact zones,’ rooted in black diasporic, nomadic, and transnational consciousness; entering into conversation with Paul Gilroy’s monumental work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*; and Edwards’s equally potent *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. I had intended to link their work to notions of educational institutions as “contact zones,” in particular their relevance to our work as educational activists. For I am persuaded that a revolution in thinking cannot be fully realized – particularly in the context of “stepping up success for all African American students” - without a robust commitment to a revolution in *context*. One that informs and is integrated into an equally robust “revolution in *content*.”

This talk, then, sets the stakes for an extended meditation on the “roots *and routes*,” to use Paul Gilroy’s phrase, of the activism to which we are committed. Perhaps this closing paragraph can serve as the opening preface towards that extended meditation:

As educational activists dedicated to the success of African American students we live life “on the borders and in margins...”⁴² Our work defined not by borders but “border culture[s].”⁴³ This is how Anzaldua imagines it: “[B]orders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge.”⁴⁴ But a borderland consciousness “...is a vague and undetermined place...the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.”⁴⁵ To embody the borderland is to leave “...the familiar and safe homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain.”⁴⁶ Literally to live on barbwire...

“This is her/[his] home
this thin edge of
barbwire.”⁴⁷

Thank you!

⁴² Anzaldua 1999: 19

⁴³ Ibid: 25

⁴⁴ Ibid: 25

⁴⁵ Ibid: 25

⁴⁶ Ibid: 35

⁴⁷ Ibid: 35