Teaching In/For the Enunciative Present

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It is clear from this original and thoughtful piece that Natasha Levinson is committed to pedagogical practices that "create the conditions" to set the world right. Just how these conditions are created, and by whom, is not altogether clear, particularly at this "moment of transit where spaces and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion."[1] But Levinson offers us a way to think about the problematic, a problematic many of us doing multicultural education have faced as we study difference.

Disturbed by Gloria Anzaldua's description of her "US Women-of Color" class at The University of California at Santa Cruz, in which racism is confronted directly, Levinson re-appropriates Hannah Arendt's concept of "the gap between past and future" in the hope that it will offer teachers, especially those engaged in identity politics-pedagogy, "the possibility of interrupting social processes that appear fixed and inevitable." Levinson is troubled by what she sees as the "fixed and inevitable" positions in Anzaldua's pedagogical situation, including the "frustration and exhaustion — 'the hundred years weariness'-with which Anzaldua allies herself," and the "cycle of recrimination and defensiveness" that the students seem to be caught up in.

For Levinson, Arendt's gap is a "provocative space," one that invites both teachers and students to understand the world *as it is* so they may then act to make it *as it should be*. But in order for this space to be educative, it must, according to Arendt, "preserve newness." That is, it must acknowledge that human society "continuously renews itself through birth, through the arrival of new human beings...newcomers."[2] Levinson is reminded of the difficulty of preserving this frail natality when reflecting on Anzaldua's class, for she does not think that these students see themselves or others in their "newness." In fact, she suggests that many must feel like "latecomers," weighted down by their "belatedness." Levinson brings us this concept of "belatedness" from Frantz Fanon, as interpreted through Homi Bhabha. You see, Arendt isn't the only theorist re-appropriated for Levinson's ends. In a deft move she juxtaposes the "conservative"[3] educational theory of a post WWII European Jewish intellectual refugee with the cultural analysis of Homi Bhabha, arguably one of the leading post-colonial theorists now writing. His cultural interpretations, especially those building on the work of Fanon, provide for a rich inter-textuality between the modern and postmodern, the colonial and the post-colonial, when positioned alongside Arendt. Both Bhabha and Arendt offer parallel concepts that are inventively taken up by Levinson in her attempt to deal with the tensions of classroom identity politics and pedagogy, and her hope for a transformative educational experience.

Bhabha and Fanon recognize the "crucial importance, for subordinated peoples, of asserting their indigenous cultural traditions and retrieving their repressed histories."[4] At the same time, they are "aware of the dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures."[5] Bhabha suggests that there are "in-between spaces," new "terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood."[6] Like Arendt, he offers his own version of the "gap." He speaks of a "time-lag," but it is a "*postcolonial* time lag."[7] It is time/space for the "enunciative present" to "disrupt" and "displace" the Western narrative.[8] According to Bhabha, "the enunciation of cultural differences problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity."[9] This enunciative, discursive space is a site of ambivalence and contradiction: it is a space of arbitrary closure as identities are made, as well as a "cultural space for opening up new forms of identification."[10] It is a site of/for "newness," that which "is not part of the continuum of past and present."[11]

Fanon's *specific* form of "belatedness" as a black man becomes a *general trope* for Levinson to elaborate Arendt's concept of natality. Newcomer, latecomer. Latecomer, belated. Related? Perhaps. But as Bhabha makes clear, Fanon is talking about *post-colonial* belatedness: "Fanon uses the fact of blackness, of belatedness, to destroy the binary structure of power and identity."[12] In so doing, according to Bhabha, he opens up a "space of being that is wrought from the interruptive, interrogative, tragic experience of blackness, of discrimination, of despair."[13]

It is this "interruptive, interrogative space," this "enunciative space" that I return to here, for as Bhabha says, "the enunciatory present [is] a liberatory discursive strategy [through which] emergent cultural identifications are articulated."[14] In Anzaldua's class, as Levinson makes clear from the start, racism was confronted in its "enunciative present." But what has happened to that space in Levinson's text? Has it been erased? Has it been moved to the margins as she makes room for a more "inclusive" discourse that allows for *everyone's* belatedness, albeit *differentially* distributed? I know that Levinson does not want to postpone a confrontation with racism, to smooth over the "tragic experience" of racial discrimination, but what happens to the women of color, the subjects/objects of the course? If as Arendt wants us to do, we introduce the world *as it is*, how might a teacher use the discursive space created in Anzaluda's class to do just that? Is it not possible to take up racism directly, *regardless* of the expressed feelings of frustration, anger or despair? One could argue that we *must* do so, *in spite of* those feelings, for aren't they part of how the world *is*, at this moment? Perhaps by focusing so much on *individual feelings* — on discomfort and despair — Levinson flirts with a psychological reductionism that undermines the power of her analysis. Perhaps this reflects her uneasy perch between the discourse of the modern/humanist subject and discursively produced subjectivities of the postmodern.

Although somewhat sympathetic to Levinson's reading of Anzaldua's class, I think another reading is possible. I would resist recuperating identity politics and its concomitant set of "feelings," and not focus on "interrupting the cycle of recrimination and defensiveness." Instead, I would take a look at the discursive production of subjectivities in that class, the "emergent cultural identifications that are articulated." Rather than asking the students, "Who are you?" they could be asked, "how has it become possible that you speak as you do?" "What are the conditions, the power effects, that have produced you as subjects in this situation?" By employing a "genealogy of the present," perhaps the students and teachers in this classroom could move beyond the personal, beyond the blame and guilt, toward a more critical understanding of how it is they have produced and *been produced by* various discursive practices, especially in this case, racism.

Like Levinson, I want all those involved to be open to the "newness" of their situations, of their subjectivities. I too want them, as Maxine Greene might say, to be "wide-awake" to their fixity. But I am wary of relying on an individualistic, volitional notion of "perceiving" their "newcomer" status, their "social positionings." And I am wary of "reconfigur[ing] the weariness" Anzaldua embraces through an appropriation of post-colonial concepts such as Bhabha's time-lag and Fanon's belatedness, particularly when these concepts are meant to disrupt the taken-for-granted narratives of the dominant culture.

At the same time, I think Levinson wants what both Fanon and Bhabha want: she wants to avoid "fixity" in identity and location; she wants to create a new, "Third space of enunciation" that ensures that "meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity."[15] But, is she prepared for the disruption, for the discomfort of this powerfully productive space? I am not sure she is. Perhaps I am not either. Nevertheless, that should not end the conversation. We, she and I, need to ask how *we have come to construct* and *be constructed by* such disruptions, such interrogations, such displacements. We also need to ask some questions posed by Bhabha:

> How are subjects formed "in-between," or in excess of, the sum of the "parts" of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable?"[16]

Of course, Levinson *is* wrestling with these questions, particularly in terms of their relevance for education and teaching. Through this wrestling, she reaffirms her commitment to "setting right" the world.

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1. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

2. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* (1954: reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 185.

3. Arendt says in her essay, "The Crisis in Education," (193) that "Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world."

4. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 9.

5. Ibid., 9.
6. Ibid., 1.
7. Ibid., 238.
8. Ibid., 37.
9. Ibid., 35.
10. Ibid., 179.
11. Ibid., 7.
12. Ibid., 237.
13. Ibid., 238.
14. Ibid., 178-79.
15. Ibid., 37.
16. Ibid., 2.