Identity Politics: The Dialectics of Cynicism and Joy and the Movement to Talking Back and Breaking Bread

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The author argues that critical pedagogues can overcome their postmodern cynicism by connecting areas of personal and public narrative to forms of alienation, oppression, and subordination. Whether narrative is about structural elements of schools or society (such as religion) the author argues that to overcome one's own cynicism one has to joyfully and symbolically talk back and break bread – making the enlightenment and modernistic ideals of freedom, justice, and liberation a genuine possibility. The fusion of modernism and postmodernism and cynicism and joy intertwined with personal narrative becomes a "method" to answer the question critical theorists always have to ask in order to remain honest with themselves: To what end do we do what we do?

L'auteur soutient l'idée que les pédagogues critiques peuvent dépasser leur cynisme post-moderne en connectant les domaines de narration personnels et publics aux formes d'aliénation, d'oppression et de subordination. Que la narration relève des éléments structurels des écoles ou de la société (telle que la religion), l'auteur maintient l'idée qu'on ne dépasse son propre cynisme qu'en répondant symboliquement et joyeusement et en partageant -convertissant ainsi l'éclaircissement et les idéaux modernes de liberté, de justice et de libération en une possibilité authentique. La fusion du modernisme, du post-modernisme, du cynisme et de la joie s'entremèle avec la narration personnelle et devient une "méthode" pour répondre à la question à laquelle les théoriciens critiques ont toujours à répondre de manière à rester honnêtes avec eux-mêmes: A quelle fin faisons-nous ce que nous faisons ?

> Testimony is a very hard spirit to convey in a written text ... it struck me that dialogue was one of the ways where the sense of mutual witness and testimony could be made manifest. I link that sense to regular communion service in the Black church at Yale where we would often stand in a collective circle and sing, "Let us Break Bread

> Together on our Knees," and the lines in the song which say, "When I Fall on my Knees with My Face to the Rising Sun, Oh Lord Have Mercy On Me." I liked the combination of the notion of community which is about sharing and breaking bread together, of dialogue as well as mercy because mercy speaks to the need we have for compassion, acceptance, understanding, and empathy. (hooks & West, 1991, p.1).

Introduction

The above quote from hooks & West perhaps adequately describes the struggles one may have in personal and collective testimony. Tied to this struggle is the realization that this form of engagement can be lonely, cynical, or joyful; it can be unified with others. Ultimately, personal testimony is hard as well as deep and committed work. With that in mind, teacher education in general lacks using personal testimony as a form of pedagogical reflection and interrogation. Rather, teacher education has been historically caught up in methodological practices that distance the prospective teacher from the self. In part then, teacher education has helped reproduce a school system that resembles much of the 1950s authoritarian mold of domination and patriarchal control. As a result, teacher education has been heavily criticized for not developing the preservice student's deeper understanding of moral, political, social, and cultural codes (Britzman, 1991). For instance, there is little mention in the teacher education literature which connects identity to faith or religion and how this may impact upon teaching. It seems to me that to be Jewish, or Christian, or Muslim for example may have a powerful impact on how, what, and why one teaches. Of immense concern to me is how this form of identity connection can take on an emancipatory agenda involving the postmodern repositioning of the subject. One's identity can take on testimonial dimensions in many ways – reflection on one's schooling and relationship to teachers as one source. On another level, how the private domain of the home impacts upon a child's education is also fundamentally significant and a departure for deep self reflection. Ultimately, for the critical pedagogist who is searching for an answer to the question, To what end do I do what I do? identity politics can also be contextualized within theological traditions. This was an argument that I made not long ago (Kanpol, 1996, 1998).

With the above in mind, when I stand in front of my undergraduate and graduate education foundations classes, I usually tell my students that education is invariably about who you are and what you believe in. It is, in short, about one's identity. Concurrently, I elaborate on the importance

of personal narrative as a starting point to scrutinize what education means in the large community picture, as a commencement to interrogate different dimensions of personal identity. There is no doubt in my mind, that a part of this personal narrative is reaching deep down into the gut of one's personal faith (or in some cases, no faith) in order to answer these particular questions: Is, or can, my faith be connected to the everyday life world of teaching and learning? If so, how do I keep true to both my faith and a rapidly changing postmodern world? In short, I ask students at least implicitly to think about their particular testimony and identity as it relates to multiple social, cultural, religious, and moral formations of the everyday life-world. I make it clear to students that being vulnerable is part of opening up to one's history, beliefs, and prejudices. This is explicitly what I believe one of the roles of the critical pedagogist is when they teach courses to in- and pre-service teachers. Not to be vulnerable and elaborate on personal narrative or at least a part of my testimony, would be an injustice to myself and to the students I teach every semester. With that in mind, in this essay I will quickly summarize critical theory models as being couched within what I call a politics of cynicism and joy. I then relate personal identity narrative experiences as a child and as an adult that connect directly to my Jewish experiences. I analyze these experiences in light of the theoretical framework developed in the first section. Finally, I conclude with the ramifications of the identity issues raised and the theoretical frameworks analyzed for the practice of an enlightened teacher education.

Identity Politics, Cynicism, and Joy

I have argued at length elsewhere (Kanpol, 1996) that the educational left, particularly those aligned with what has now become commonly thought of as the critical pedagogy movement[1] have yet to develop a language that speaks to and with multiple sets of audiences. Mired in postmodern critique, I have also argued that jumping on the postmodern bandwagon has simply become another avenue for one-upmanship and rush to publication (Kanpol, 1998), a form, I would argue, of academic nihilism. In short, more of the same old academic jostling for position and resultant political games. Frankly, I have become rather bored with all of this.

In my mind, the time has come for the educational left, particularly those involved with critical pedagogy, to come to terms with the profound theological possibilities and implications of its work. With the advent of Kozol's (1991, 1994) devastating descriptions and critique of inner-city schools in the United States, critical pedagogues in the educational arena

have offered much deconstructive analysis of structural school issues concerning race, class, and gender, most of which have suggested social, cultural, and structural hopelessness and despair. Ultimately, to ask the question that I alluded to earlier, *to what end* is all this deconstruction needed, has to be continuously and reflectively asked for social justice to be served.

In the larger theoretical frameworks, educational postmodernists have negated Truth and have concentrated on the particular (Lyotard, 1984; Peters, 1994). Within this value of difference and the particular as a marker, a lot of good has happened in critical educational circles. We view ourselves as pioneers in a new educational movement, a rallying call for "critical multiculturalism" (Kanpol & McLaren, 1995), feminism and its multiple formations (Stone, 1994), as well as "gay" rights (Snyder, 1996; Wilson, 1996) and other claims to personal and public space involving the marginalized and oppressed (Giroux, 1997). While critical educational history is too cumbersome to go into detail here, if I were to describe where it is leading us, I would encapsulate the postmodern "stuff" as both *cynical* and *catch 22*, yet necessary for an emancipatory agenda and part of the most emancipatory form of modernism (Kanpol, 1992) and what being Jewish promises for me.

It is important to note that critical theorists in general, myself included, have carried an air of cynicism into their work for many years now. For me, cynicism or the cynic, is one who is inclined to investigate the sincerity and goodness of people's motives and actions, or the value of living – one who highly questions the material interests of individuals. Let me be clear here. I am *not* arguing that cynicism, as defined above is necessarily a bad or evil thing. Critical theorists in education have known for some time that there are good reasons to be cynical of a society whose institutions like schools claim democratic virtues, yet in the everyday life-world espouse a contradictory capitalistic market logic rationality (Shapiro, 1990) resulting in race, class, and gender inequities (Apple, 1986, 1996).

Theoretically, the cynicism I am talking about grows out of a catch 22 logic that educational theory in general has found itself in. Put in a different way, how does one escape the dialectic? This was highly questioned in Willis's (1977) now notorious work in education, where the inevitability of cultural reproduction weighed heavily against the backdrop of the culturally productive aspects of counter-hegemony within a capitalistic framework. Unable to escape this dialectic, educators have since grappled with this predetermined logic (Anyon, 1980; Shapiro, 1990; Giroux, 1983; Kanpol, 1988). For instance, in my educational

foundations classes, inservice teachers in particular are at pains to counter the damning oppressive structural constraints imposed on them by the state-mandated curriculum, intensification of labor, deskilling, and so on. At the same time these teachers see emancipatory hope, and counter-hegemonic forms raise their ugly heads, thus constraining and forcing them into some other form of oppressive conformity. Because of this one-step forward, two-step backward syndrome, teachers become cynical. They find little confidence in ways out of the cultural nightmares they find themselves in. No less can be said of those critics who argue that it becomes impossible to become the *Other* – those who are marginalized and oppressed (Ellsworth, 1989). This dualistic and often oppositional logic, also cynical, while authentic in intention, and often but not always correct in the everyday life world (Kanpol, 1990), denies the theoretical and practical possibility for fusion with the Other in an intercommunicative dialogue of emancipatory struggle and possibility. To me, cynicism, then, becomes *a necessary but not sufficient* condition for social transformation. Its positive and emancipatory intent is often contradicted by the logic of opposition and excessive competition and is thus constraining and accommodative to dominant and oppressive ideological forms. As a response to this confusion, I have in the past fused modern and postmodern constructs as a possibility out of this theoretical web. This has been attempted by others as well (Kanpol, 1992) and will be alluded to later in my analysis of my particular Jewish narrative.

There is another side to critical educational theory that is often left by the wayside. To me, social transformation must be inclusive of *joy* both as a spiritual and philosophical position and in the world of the everyday. Joy can be connected to a politics of alliance and liberation. For Michael Lerner joy is politically loaded to mean alliance, commonality, and what he also describes in his own work as "renewal." He comments, more spiritually, connecting joy to ethics:

> Reclaiming a sense of celebration and joy at the wonders of creation is another sense of Jewish renewal ... what is unique about Judaism is that it entwines this sense of awe, wonder, amazement, and this spiritual reality that surrounds us, with a vision of God who not only created the universe but also the force that makes possible an ethically guided universe. (Lerner, 1994, p. 96)

For Lerner and West (1995) joy connects ethically to renewal as a form of Politics of Meaning in which liberation from oppressive social forces becomes a guiding motif – this despite their differences in faith. Joy, thus understood, is a healing process or *Tikkun*, which in Hebrew means to

repair or heal. The bond of commonality entered by Lerner and West, as an act of solidarity has immense philosophical connotations when related to joy.

The way I am using cynicism and joy should not be seen as a static dialectic. As a process of common democratic struggle, joy must be seen within cynicism and growing out of cynicism as a necessary condition for human liberation. For example, in his book on Deleuze, philosopher Michael Hardt (1993) argues for commonality or community struggle and solidarity as a basic form of joy. He relates how Deleuze interprets workers in the novel by Nanni Balestrini *Vogliamo tutto* (We want Everything): "They arrive at a moment when they are able to go beyond, to discover a terrain of creation and joy beyond the worker (Hardt, 1993, p. 47). Hardt also emphasizes that workers in this novel recognize their commonality and,

> their expression in collective action takes the form of a spatial or social synthesis, composing an expansive and coherent body of desire. As the body of workers expands, their will and power grow. The synthesis involved in the workers' collectivity is an internal return of the will ... precisely when the workers actualize their critique, then they pass into action in the factory and in the streets, they achieve the constructive moment of joy and creation. The actualization of the workers is a practice of joy. (p. 47)

Hardt's central point here, I believe, is to locate a philosophy of joy which is tied directly to a philosophy of practice, a suggestive argument linking commonness or common behavior and a common desire to practice joy. Commonness can and should also be related to what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) term, a "democratic imaginary." Here, political struggles and antagonisms are connected by their commonness to end various forms of alienation, subordination, and oppression. Cynicism that leads to joy as commonness and solidarity, is only a part of this philosophical treatise.

Hardt argues that for Spinozian practice, joy must be entwined with a speculation that leads to an *affirmation* in order for an ethic of "democratic political practice" (Hardt, 1993, p. 122) to be established. It is joy within affirmation and vice versa that leads Hardt to argue that indeed a critical political practice is an ethic that includes "the affirmation of speculation and the joy of practice" (p. 59). It is my contention that the movement from speculation to practice, and from affirmation to joy is a political moment that includes critique or cynicism of the existing structures in which we as cultural workers work and which in essence furthers the democratic imaginary that commonly bonds social actors attempting to end various forms of alienation, subordination, and

oppression. Put another way, cynicism as a necessary condition for social transformation cannot endure alone without affirmation and joy as part of the common transformation process. I might add, that despite the problematic of commonness (note the constant bashing of critical pedagogues upon each other) joyful passions are embedded within a common critical design. This commonness is an affirmation of joy. The leap from cynic to joy as a body-being-politic, implies that commonness is sought across distance and time as well as locally if possible. This leap also suggests that "the passage for passive joy to active joy involves substituting an internal cause for an external cause; or, more precisely, it involves enveloping or comprehending the cause within the encounter itself" (Hardt, 1993, p. 98).

The above short theoretical treatise has suggested that cynicism and joy are part and parcel of a critical educational stance. There is also no doubt in my mind that my own politics have been informed by my particular history, ultimately my personal multifarious identity. With that in mind, I want to turn to narrative as a way in which to bridge my history to the theory discussed in the first section.

Some Personal Narrative

An important function for any critical theorist is a personal understanding of the oppressive social and cultural structures formerly or presently lived in. As a critical pedagogist, I too have a micro narrative – a life story replete with instances where I could feel forms of personal alienation, oppression, and subordination that I was subjected to and subjected others to. These instances, in some part, form a cornerstone of my politics, a part of my construction of a critical pedagogical position, my identity, and a political response to the conditions of everyday experiences and the values that embody me and the culture I live in. With that in mind, this section will focus on areas of my own narrative. I do this, in part, to share some of my history vulnerably so that others may begin to either understand or empathize with a critical position. Perhaps therapeutically I can then better understand the dialectic of cynicism and joy I earlier theorized about.

I was born to two very proper folks, in Melbourne, Australia. My father was and is an extremely hard working man. My mother, a devoted wife. She was always around when I needed her, invested in my daily activities which included school work and outside interests such as my sporting concerns. She was raised within an Orthodox Jewish tradition, while my father grew up as a Zionist, still respecting and holding to

Jewish traditions. My mother's Jewish lineage consisted of the conservative religious sort. I often recall at her mother's house – the rigid Saturday rituals – no lights or TV on Saturday, a clear understanding of which dishes to use (milk or meat), and which side of the sink to use to clean dishes, hands, and so on. As I grew up, the division of labor in my home was very clearly divided gender inflicted. My parents seemed content with that lifestyle. It was predictable and I felt safe in both their particular and social set-up.

Both Mum and Dad had found their ways to Australia differently. In short, Dad had come through China (by way of Russian parents) and Mum through Poland. For various reasons they were both in Israel when they met, Dad through the Israeli Independence war and Mum on a personal visit. They found each other and eventually, their way to Australia where they lived for 20 years. As Zionists they returned to Israel in 1973, with two children, and continue to live there.

Growing up in Australia was easy. While my parents struggled financially, particularly early in their marriage, through discipline, motivation, desire, and a little luck, my father became an entrepreneur and moved into the middle class. I never felt materialistically in need. If my parents struggled financially or personally, I never knew about it. I grew up with that privilege, recalling fleeting times when Dad would be upset when business wasn't going well, as is the case today.

My childhood could be divided into two significant areas: School and Religion. I vividly recall attending a private Jewish day school. Two pronounced things happened to me during that time. School was boring but very competitive. There was no substantive vision as to why we were to receive an education, only that it would land students a more prestigious job one day, thus providing upward social mobility. I have described elsewhere in detail how this process was one of hegemonic control (Kanpol, 1994). But, there is another part to this story about schools for me that has been left out publicly, which also has serious ramifications. Even though I grew up in a traditional Jewish home (which Mum always tried ritualistically to maintain with Friday night candles, observance of High Holidays, Kosher food, and more) little mention was made of this impact on my life, particularly as it relates to everyday experiences. I can recall many instances of my Jewish upbringing that remain profoundly with me today. *In part*, this forms a cornerstone of my identity politics – of who I am in the present educational context.

Much like some religious schools (McLaren, 1993), I felt at the time that religion was forced upon me through prayer and ritual. I recall having

to recite certain prayers every morning and to attend Hebrew classes twice daily. I distinctly remember my Hebrew teacher of grades 2, 3, and 4. While I do not recall whether she liked me, I remember being put off by the endless vocabulary lists that hounded me through sixth grade. After the sixth grade, Hebrew classes became a big joke. I rebelled in school and, along with other male conspirators, we made it a point to try and make our Hebrew teachers cry. We were not going to be forced to learn an alien language, especially if it had no relevance to our daily lived experiences. At least, this is why I rebelled. Yes, I was resentful of anything that was authoritatively taught and denied me the freedom of thoughtful expression.

Despite my personal struggles in this Jewish school, being forced to learn the Bar mitzvah rituals was still rather enjoyable. I wanted to make my parents proud of me and I to showcase my talents. And, I did. To this day, my Bar mitzvah remains etched in my memory in a number of ways. I fondly recall the week-end celebrations, where I was the center of attention, with family and friends gathered from all over the country. I guess entrance into Jewish manhood was a big deal. So, I played on, although I was never told why this was important, only that it was. I was the good kid and acquiesced to what was required of me, even though I disliked the methods of forced Hebrew instruction in my school. And, despite the centrality of the Bar mitzvah to Jewish experiences in the community, I was bogged down personally with academic requirements, to the point where I had to lie before my Bar mitzvah about the grade I received on a test and even about the fact that I had taken a test two days earlier. Despite the glory and symbolic significance of this Jewish ritual I wondered even then, if a part of the ritual included fear of performance, testing, and living up to expectations. Who was I chanting in the synagogue for? I didn't understand what I was singing even though the Rabbi made a point of telling the congregation that "Barry sang as if he knew what every word meant." When he said that, I knew I had good acting qualities in me! It was after the Bar mitzvah, that I suddenly shot up in height and as it was also a time of adolescence and I began to think seriously about my role as a member of society. Personal identity was being questioned, particularly with my impending immigration to Israel.

Going to synagogue grew to be a forced commitment which I began to resent, particularly after my entrance into Jewish manhood. While I was growing up, I realized that the synagogue symbolized not only a place of prayer and worship, but more specifically, social mobility and a social outlet. While I have fond memories of synagogue, particularly when, as a six year old I played with my grandfather and received personal attention,

in the long run I attended synagogue to meet friends, to socialize by talking football with my "mates," and to see girls who seemed interested in me. Eventually, I attended synagogue rarely, mainly only on the high holidays. And, it was a chore. While I lived in Israel for 10 years, the times I attended synagogue could be counted on one hand. I was told that since I was Jewish and lived in Israel, a Jewish homeland, not attending would be OK. What a distortion of spiritual life! In general, it seemed weird to be told to pray two or three times a year for forgiveness of one's sins, particularly on Yom Kipper (Day of Atonement). Why should I atone – I felt I was being shafted in a system where I was categorized by the principal in the Australian school I attended as a failure who should be a "barber" and was falsely accused of "smoking drugs and womanizing all the time" – despite my sporting prowess and virginity. So, while I may have personally "sinned" (although I did not know what the sins were, and didn't know why or what I was atoning for), so did the institution I was living with. What about the other 364 days of the year? I would think to myself as I do now. And at the time, when I attended synagogue I didn't understand the Hebrew or the hymns sung even though they were repetitively drummed into me over the years. Actually, I couldn't wait to sing the hymns – they signified the end of services! Thus, little sense was made concerning the mandatory services.

I really don't want to remain cynical. For not all is that negative. I warmly recall reading Old Testament Bible stories late into the night before dozing off. I would read these stories over and again – stories of Creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, Miriam, Pharaoh, David, Saul, Jonathan, Samson, and Ruth. I learned what miracles in the desert were, a covenant, yes, God's promises, and so on. I believed it all. I was fascinated. Would I ever have a personal covenant like Abraham and Moses? Could I ever be like those Biblical heroes? They were larger than life figures! Today, I often reflect on how those stories brought me safety and joy, and to some degree still do. Especially to a then troubled child spirit and to a questioning present. As I write now, I can remember the smell of the pages those stories were written on. They are etched in my memory forever, even though the encyclopedia I read them out of seemed ancient. When visiting my parents in Israel, I often return to those stories and muse through them nostalgically recalling fond memories of childhood!

I joyfully recall Passover and the Jewish New Year, and even the various rituals celebrated with my family. Even though I wasn't taught much about what the profound symbolic ramifications of the rituals were, they were nonetheless the stuff that held families together, and I

appreciated them then, as I do now. What really fascinated me were stories of escape, justice, freedom, martyrdom, and commitment to a "promised land." Perhaps that is why my parents are in Israel today. And, perhaps that is why I am in the field that I'm in today – justice, freedom, escape, and so on.

Very sadly, I met with a fair amount of anti-Semitism as a child growing up. "Dirty Jew" and "Jew boy" were often flung at me in discriminating and humiliating ways. Playing competitive sports for non-Jewish teams was never easy because I often felt left out, different, and at times "less than," despite personal success. I would try to hide my identity. And, while I didn't go out of my way to tell my non-Jewish friends who I was, everyone still found out that I was Jewish. But in addition, and *just as important*, I grew up in a closed Jewish community that *also* discriminated against non-Jews. I would often hear the words "those Goyim (Non-Jews)" as a statement of Jewish retaliation to "those Jews or dirty Jew," particularly by my parent's friends. And, in the street where I lived from eight to seventeen years of age, many people didn't speak to me, and many kids weren't allowed to play with me because of my Jewish background. Today I *despise both forms of discrimination* – Jewish and non-Jewish. Sadly, I grew up feeling guilt and shame at being Jewish – an interesting dualism, since I was always taught to be proud of my Jewish heritage. I would often walk to synagogue on the Day of Atonement and have to pass a public school. I would see kids staring at me; at my suit and tie. Or was I paranoid? I quickly learned to walk across the street from the school to avoid feeling more shame. My hiding had deeper ramifications, which are still very difficult to make sense of.

As I grew up through my formative years, I learned that *Truth* was supposedly a Jewish thing. There was no mention of meaning beyond the Old Testament. I grew up unaware of the possibility of a Part Two to the Bible. I grew up not knowing the difference between Jew, Gentile, or Christian, or about the appreciation of difference in general. Joy and love were supposedly Jewish things which, according to my personal experiences, were remote given the realities of forced religion, authoritarian school structure, the discrimination of Jews and non-Jews that I experienced (as the discriminated and discriminator), and the feelings of guilt and shame that I felt. I would inwardly retort, Who needed this stuff!

Since those days, life's experiences have had a way of humbling me. A struggling immigrant in Israel for 10 years (more forced Hebrew and illiterate in the dominant language), a failed marriage, and eventually a career that sits entrenched in theoretical nihilism and despair (given many

of the postmodern viewpoints I have often adopted) have sometimes rendered me quite sarcastic, hopeless, and sorry in the face of social and cultural structural nightmares. This despite my privileged social position! My identity politics have often been confusing. No wonder! Despite postmodern theoretical suavities, I have often wondered what meaning I can take from my youth and present life that makes story telling so powerful, so profound, and so real, so that the politics of hope *can* rear its head. I feel that I *must* take those biblical stories of joy and seek every emancipatory moment from of them. And, I must challenge traditional Jewish ways as I did as a boy and read the New Testament as well, again to etch out emancipatory possibilities. I cannot be discriminatory toward others' view of the Bible otherwise I will be guilty of the same discrimination I grew up with. These culminating experiences and thoughts are part of what Sharon Welch (1990, pp. 103-180) describes as "dangerous memories" – instances that rear liberation hopes in the face of some personal oppression, alienation, and subordination.

Talking Back and Breaking Bread

In a recent publication (Kanpol, 1998) I argue that in order for the educational left to make inroads into the dominant culture, a new language would have to be developed which would be more inclusive of the dominant culture. I openly admit that the left (critical pedagogy in particular) was bereft of a spiritual language, lost in its social causes and general state of cynicism and despair. To what end do we critique? And, while this question may seem repetitive, it is nonetheless a question that must be asked again and again, to check where it is that we are headed and why we are going there. It is our moral obligation as educators to constantly reflect on this question, as well as to attempt to answer it.

Some of my history narrated above, begs the question: How does one build alliances within difference that has as its core a normative "modernistic" platform of a personal and social emancipatory nature? Feeling at times personally alienated, either because of my "Jewishness" or where I was living at a particular moment (Australia, Israel, and the United States) critical pedagogy has also meant a method by which to reclaim, challenge, alter, and move within one's historically constructed identity. Given the miscellaneous forms of discrimination by both Jewish and non-Jewish people which I encountered as a child and still do as an adult, in various ways critical pedagogy has meant struggling to build the modernist ideals of enlightenment that I read "into" the Bible as a kid growing up and making a meaning that can forever be postmodernistically

deconstructed! More importantly perhaps, critical pedagogy has a personal meaning for me, one which Giroux describes as "border crossings" (1992), but more profoundly a spiritual border crossing in the name of a progressive politics of alliance. Thus, the imagery of *talking back and breaking bread* symbolizes the ability to challenge forms of oppression and dialogue over emancipatory possibilities.

A lucid example of talking back and breaking bread is the book by Lerner and West, *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin* (1995). They come together across religious and spiritual differences, to etch out similarities in history related to alienation, oppression, and subordination. The authors comment:

> Yet, this is a perfect moment for an alliance of Blacks and Jews to advocate a Politics of Meaning that explicitly takes seriously the most fundamental "traditional value:" Love your neighbor as yourself. A Progressive Politics of Meaning would reclaim the biblical value of caring for others that was central both to the Torah and to Jesus. In fact, these biblical ethics stand in sharp contrast to the ethos of selfishness, enshrined in the politics of Newt Gingrich, Rush Limbaugh, and the very *Un-Christian* Christian right .... It is precisely because both our communities already have a foundation for this alternative way of thinking, In the Torah, in the New Testament, and in some more humanistic trends of Islam, that it becomes possible to imagine a real working together that is neither patriotizing nor self-negating. (Lerner & West, 1995, pp. 272-273)

As a child, I was never taught to "talk back" or "break bread," despite the Passover imagery and breaking bread together as a family. It is only today that I realize I am talking back by challenging oppressive structures.

In their book *Breaking Bread* (1991) bell hooks and Cornel West take on the imagery of sitting together and dialoging across differences, much like West and Lerner. West and hooks bond in a spirit and compassion as well as in testimony and solidarity. In their conversation, hooks and West inform readers of the power of faith; for them, Black and Christian. For them breaking bread also images "serious talk about coming together, sharing, participating, creating bonds of solidarity ... linking some sense of faith, religious faith, political faith, to the struggle for freedom" (hooks & West, 1991, p. 34).

Personally, breaking bread first brings to mind the image of the Jewish festival of Passover, celebrated by Jews in solidarity throughout the world. In breaking the traditional Passover bread, Jewish people are reminded that a central message of Passover is one of freedom, hope, and humility of a God that helped free a nation from slavery. Second, the image of

breaking bread takes me back to Jesus in the New Testament. He broke bread with his disciples in an appropriation of solidarity, a unified understanding about freedom, in this case, a freedom of and belief in a savior. No matter the interpretation, a simple and profound message is clear. To break bread is to be humble. To "dialogue across difference" (Burbules & Rice, 1991) is to concede and understand, incorporate borders of theoretical knowledge into a common moral and faithful vision for freedom and democracy *with* our non-Jewish brothers and sisters. To some, this may mean understanding what Paul's struggle in the New Testament was about – jailed because of his belief of the highest moral and faithful order, or what Martin Luther King's message of "I have a dream" meant, or falling back to Romans 12, 2 when connecting spiritual sides of faith to political transformation: "And be ye not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the Renewing of your mind." An appreciation of such transformation may be viewed by Abraham's rejection of his father's idolatress life (note a sense of rejecting excessive materialism here) or a deep appreciation of what sacrifice may have meant with Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son because of his belief and conviction to a higher order. It is as if Abraham, in his rejection of his father's values, was as bell hooks decries in *Talking Back*:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side as gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice. (hooks, 1989, p. 8)

Personally, that liberated voice moves between the dialectic of cynicism and joy. Breaking bread and talking back metaphorically signifies a breakdown of the cynic and a movement to joyful possibilities as a starting point to understand how social and cultural transformation may be viewed, how borders of theoretical understanding may be negotiated with this end in mind: A vision of moral and ethical responsibility that seeks an emancipatory and common framework, despite historically constructed faith differences.

The above utopian vision (perhaps modernistic here) suggests a sovereign of possibility. In part, my Jewishness has meant a deeper understanding of dialectical thinking (cynicism and joy) with an emancipatory common struggle that hopefully travels beyond Jewish boundaries for survival. Theoretical, spiritual, and practical borders of difference that centers on what Purpel and other liberation theologists

(Purpel, 1989; West, 1993; Griffin, Beardslee & Holland, 1989) describe as a search for a vision of possibility that has its roots in connection with a higher belief in Spirit or God must be sought as an alternative to *but not negation of* difference. For West, this struggle for meaning and ultimately democracy, "is an ethical implication of the Christian conception of what it means to be human, how we understand democracy, what is its content, its substance" (West, 1993, p. 225). For hooks and West, the struggle is rooted in faith and commitment to a higher moral vision, tied to a belief in God that "is understood in relation to a particular context, to specific circumstances" (1991, p. 9) and a commitment to enduring one's faith despite the suffering one might occur within that belief, or the particular circumstances one may find themselves in. Jewishness too, with all its history of oppression and alienation has personally meant an understanding of the Other and the common bond of joy to be that Other, concurrently being cynical of how that Other has been oppressed as well as co-opted into the dominant culture.

Stories are humbling. They remind me of the complex world we live in. While I personally believe in many of the postmodern arguments, I am still led and driven to interrogate the moral fabric of many nihilistic postmodern theorists who lack a unified vision for a common good, a vision of faith, or a vision of order to repair or represent the common hopes and dreams of ordinary people. These hopes are entwined within the stories we tell and the profound symbolic meaning we attach to them. It is here where the cynic and joyful Jew I represent can be found, still deeply struggling over meaning and interpretation of how personal and general faith can be connected within a postmodern world to an enlightened modernistic set of ideals and ethics.

Conclusions: Implications for Teacher Education

I do not stand in front of my classes and force the relationship of faith to social practice "down student's throats," even though this has become a major issue in policy decision making (note the harsh and sometimes volatile debate over Outcomes Based Education – OBE – between the extreme Christian Right and those who support OBE) and is vitally important to me. But, I do tell my story. I do relate to my students those areas of cynicism and joy that have engulfed my life. My students in turn tell me their stories, their narratives (as much as they choose). I do believe that faith is connected to social practice *not* in the evangelical sense that some would be led to believe, but rather, connected to social and cultural emancipation.

Indeed, to speak the language of the dominant culture is to find a language that speaks to and with others. Thus, as a critical pedagogist, it is my duty to eke out emancipatory possibilities by talking the language of the dominant culture, using imagery of the dominant culture, even if that imagery is biblical. That means, viewing teacher education as possessing a prophetic mission, where teaching is connected to immense possibilities, to the miracles, the wonder and awe of life. Thus, one could also talk of teachers as prophets. I ask students to envision themselves as prophetic figures with a moral mission. One could ask students to think of their classroom as holy. What does a holy classroom look like? Education could be referred to as a sacred ideal. What a sacred education looks like is something my students have to grapple with. Additionally, education could be viewed as creating a fusion of spirit and practice. What does a spiritual classroom look like? I appeal to the good sense of in- and pre-service students, their ethical nature, and their initial desires relating to why they became teachers in the first place. In short, I appeal to teachers to talk back and break bread! This is far more beneficial in my mind than preparing teachers to become mechanical robots of the state only, devoid of the immenseness of their humanity. Contextually, in telling my personal story in various snippets during the semester, I invite students to bond dialectically in cynicism and joy within a postmodern world, with the sincere modernistic quest to achieve human emancipation as an end in itself. Thus, the connection of my Jewish identity and identity politics to practice is an answer to the question: To what end do I do what I do?

NOTES

1. The critical pedagogy movement is loosely termed here to mean those areas in education and the wider culture where there is a direct challenge to forms of oppression, alienation, and subordination. Regarding education in particular, struggles against race, class, and gender reproduction as well as against structural inequities that reproduce tracking and other forms of discrimination are part of the critical pedagogical critique. There is no one set definition for critical pedagogy though. Given the postmodern notion of multiple differences and realities, what oppression, alienation, and subordination look like will vary according to the context and site of the action.

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