

Autobiographical Analysis

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CHAPTER ONE**THE WALL: WHO GETS IN, WHO STAYS OUT? ISSUES OF ACCESS IN EDUCATION**

"Build that wall! Build that wall! Build that wall!" President-elect Donald Trump during a February 2016 Florida primary rally

I stood with my feet firmly planted on the hardwood floor. Like a tree, I was rooted still, mesmerized by the thousands of brown bodies marching over the Brooklyn Bridge, spilling like rushing water into lower Manhattan. My father encouraged me to watch the television as the Haitians protested an FDA ban against blood donation. Now, we were not only the beleaguered boat people - the refugees flooding America's shores, we were the AIDS people. Stereotypes were not humiliating enough we were now forever stigmatized by a disease that was not yet understood by the masses. In that moment of bearing witness, I was *fyè* or proud. My people were doing something; they were marching against injustice. I was also sad, because I knew that as a collective, we were hurting. This is not my first memory of the intersectionality of race and justice in America, but it is one of the more salient moments, forever etched in my memory.

Now, as a future special educator of America's children, children who have been born here and elsewhere, I am confronted, and at times confounded with the idea of boundaries, symbolized by a wall. Borders are a physical and metaphorical representatives of access. Borders have social, political, economic, religious, and militaristic implications. They are also places where individuals are given the opportunity to confront themselves and determine what they will bring with them, and what they will leave behind. The process of becoming a teacher is allowing me to re-experience my lower school education, with the inquiring lens of a participant observer.

I consider myself bicultural, which I acknowledge through the use of the hyphenated term Haitian-American. Like the students I daily encounter, there is a multiplicity to my reality. Daily, I cross borders, transitioning from home, to teaching placements, to graduate school classes,

moving through space as a daughter, sister, and friend. Acknowledging this multiplicity to my reality allows me to confront the tensions that exist within the spaces that I am in. This tension is further compounded by my knowledge and ways in which I experience immigration, language, race, disability, and gender. Borders are a very real place of conflict. Instead of seeking resolutions, and using revolutions when necessary places of difficulty may cause us to opt to “Build that wall.” My primary goal as an educator is always to make sure that neither a student’s zip code or genetic code be the determinants in the quality of education received, this means that I must be an advocate. In light of this goal, another objective is to build relationships that are meaningful, warm, and in support of student learning. This is not limited to the classroom, but includes teacher to teacher, and administrative, and more importantly familial and community relationships.

Writing in an article that first appeared in *Educational Leadership*, Linda Christensen, states,

As educators, when we talk about building inclusive communities in which all students can learn, we must also examine how our policies and practices continue to shame and exclude students in ways that may not be readily apparent. We signal students from the moment they step into school, whether they belong or whether we see them as trespassers. Everything in school—from the posters on the wall, to the music played at assemblies, to the books in the library—embraces students or pushes them away (2008/2014).

Like a border, a classroom serves as a point of exit and entry into different systems. Who is included? Who is excluded? “Am I engaging in practices that build walls,” I ask myself. Am I inviting my students into a system of oppression or liberty? What is the purpose of schooling? What are my intentions? This is the process of reflective inquiry that social justices must undertake. I do not want to be a teacher who subjugates through the demands for conformity. My objective is not to educate through violence, whether it be overt, for example through the use of oppressive language or seemingly obscure, where one acts in a manner that presumes and/or

perpetuates deficit. Instead, I hope to build bridges of reconciliation that allow all students to have positive experiences in education.

In her book *De Colores Means All of Us*, Elizabeth Martinez writes, "Building alliances calls for us to break down the walls of mutual prejudice that exist. To do so we need to hammer out strong tools. One is simply education: learning about each other's history, current experience and culture, beginning very young" (Espinosa, *as cited in Au*, p. 313).

To build alliances, we must break down walls. In the 1954 Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Justices stated, "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." In her essay, Espinosa describes the unequal things that continue to exist, including access to housing in places like Chicago, Illinois (p. 309). These everyday inequities remind me that in order to be a just and inclusive educator I must be cognizant of how and where students and their families are existing. Many times we are unaware of the impact of living on the margins, due to practices of systematic segregation. As part of my personal and professional development I will continue learning how to practice critical care and consciousness, I find that the students I interact with will share information with me. One day, I noticed that a student, who for the most part is well-behaved and follows school rules, was acting out of character. Her attitude was antagonistic, and she was snapping back at adults. It was later in the day, when she was in a better physical, mental, and emotional space that I asked her, "What's wrong?" She informed me that her family may not be able to find affordable housing, and that she was scared of having to go to a shelter. As someone who lost their home very young, and was displaced to the home of a family friend, without my mom and dad, I remember being scared. The potential of a shared experience positions me to understand, and identify with her fear, there are no walls between us.

CHAPTER TWO

RACE AND ACCESS

I do not want to assume that my student's current situation is directly affected by her race. I do know that she lives in a low-income area in Brooklyn, attends a school that was once failing, where almost 100% of students are eligible for free lunch, and 100% of the children I teach are Black or Hispanic. A question for my practice is how can I as an educator use culturally relevant pedagogy to teach about race and access? A bias I may have would be that I have faced racism, and am sick of it. I have been in situations where I felt oppressed and could not respond because of the position of vulnerability I faced whether as a woman of color, or other imbalances of power. There appears to be a constant aggression towards people of color, that is so insidious that the perpetrators of such offenses do not realize or choose to deliberately ignore their cooperation in upholding a system from which they benefit. How do I work to break down such walls without being called aggressive? How do I help students feel empowered rather than disenfranchised throughout their education?

At what crossroads do the ideas of race and access meet? Am I helping my students obtain a passport to freedom and empowerment, or am I divesting them of the ability to travel successfully within the system of education? A very practical yet purposeful goal is to create an environment that transcends the classroom. I want students to know, and feel, "You are welcome here. This is your home. You belong, and you will not be displaced." As a teacher, I find it easy to care for my students – and not because they are all of color. My status as the child of immigrants, provides unique understanding of the proverbial and ever elusive American dream. As a resident, I find that students are at ease bringing their entire selves into the practice and process of learning in their interactions with me. I believe that expecting the best for and from my students is easy,

because I equate high expectations with practicing critical care. These particular identities have influenced my positionality, and the assumptions I make as an educator.

The recent presidential election, in the United States, illustrates the impact and confluence of racist ideology and hegemony. In particular, the use of the phenotypical features of African-Americans and Hispanics as instruments of denigration, and segregation have been pervasive. The election results illustrate a collective roar of "Build that wall."

During a 1999 speech, the now deceased Asa G. Hilliard III stated, "The ideology of 'race' drives much of what happens in the world and in education. It is like a computer software program that 'runs in the background,' invisible and inaudible. However, our silent and invisible 'racial' software is not benign. It is linked to issues of power and hegemony, the domination of a given group by another. 'Race' thinking has no reason for being except for the establishment of hegemony (Hilliard, *as cited in Au*, p. 28). How do I help my students become or remain critically consciousness towards those who are part of dominant groups in society, whether by race and/or socioeconomic status, especially during moments that John Dewey would describe as "mis-educative?" How can they come to see that race is an abstract construct, that it is not real, when the issues faced are real? Issues surrounding race and access provide many opportunities for me to learn from, and engage with biases I may hold due to the negative experiences I have had as a Black woman in America. It is also an opportunity to use curriculum to bridge the everyday reality of living in a low-income section of Brooklyn to systematic challenges. In making curriculum multicultural Bill Bigelow, curriculum editor of *Rethinking Schools*, challenges teachers to consider using a variety of texts, for establishing differing perspectives (*as cited in Au*, p. 65-75). He grounds his explanation in the myth of Christopher Columbus that has been perpetuated in American history books, texts which ignore the resistance of Native Americans, and highlight the "heroic" qualities of those in positions of hegemonic power. During my residency, it is important that I learn and grow effectively and efficiently, especially as it relates to the Danielson Framework. A goal includes

making valid connections between curriculum and content, and promoting student understanding using culturally relevant pedagogy. It is also important to me that students are engaged and find the material accessible, while promoting their personal and professional growth. Consequently, choosing the right content will allow my students and I to establish a culture of respect. I never want to use content as a way of demonstrating contempt for very real histories. "If you don't take multicultural education or anti-racist education seriously, you are actually promoting a monocultural or racist education. There is no neutral ground on this issue," Enid Lee director of a consultancy group whose mission is to encourage change through anti-racist education. (Lee, as cited in Au,10)

I believe her thoughts connect with what I wrote this week in my student-teaching journal:

During my time as a student, and in addition, as a classroom practitioner, I am interested in what I have heard Dr. Christopher Emdin refer to as a co-generative dialogue. Every week I have the wonderful opportunity of speaking with my students, learning about their goals, academic performance, families, and building a holistic view through a multipronged lens.

As I work on establishing multiple perspectives or understandings, the question becomes, how do I enact a co-generative dialogue in my classroom? How do I invite conversation that is beneficial to personal and professional development? In what ways am I safe? In what ways are certain people and places unsafe to establishing dialogue. Good pedagogy requires the mediation of many factors. In what ways have I experienced dialogue? In my experiences, how have dialogues been influenced by hierarchies, and other systems and structures of power? How are my students experiencing the discourse of education? How am I experiencing the multiple discourses that take place about education? What narrative have I constructed about my students? What narrative have they constructed about me? Do I construct what Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie calls, "The single story"? These are all important questions.

What is it that students hear about themselves? What is it that I hear about myself: in the silence, in the noise, verbally, nonverbally, in the places, positions, and spaces I have come to occupy? What are students extricating from their interactions with me. In what ways can I help them and others, develop a perspective contrary to deficit-based narratives that may be circulating?

CHAPTER THREE***LANGUAGE AS LIBERTY***

“Language,” says Dr. Wayne Au, an Associate Professor of Education, at the University of Washington, Bothell in the *First Edition of Rethinking Multicultural Education*, “is central to culture, and how we understand and treat language in our classrooms speaks to issues of power both inside and outside of education” (2009). Language is discourse. Language is political. Growing up, I wanted to become a journalist to give a voice to the voiceless. I recognized the need for education in the issues that are of critical importance, including healthcare, poverty, and government. To be a journalist you must be diligent, enthusiastic, and effective; these qualities are also necessary in teaching. As I transfer my skills from one arena into another, I am learning about children needing education that will allow them to communicate effectively, and collaboratively. Yet, unfortunately, many students are continuously silenced as they exist within hegemonic hierarchies.

Since language and its use is a critical issue that emerges for me as a theme in education, I hope to become an educator who greatly helps students become literate across languages – oral, digital, and spatial. Teaching literacy is an act of social justice. Recently, I found myself saying of a student who understood a concept in a social studies classroom, but was unable to express it, “She doesn’t have the words.” Students need access to language. This leads me to think of the very real expressive and receptive communication disorders faced by students, in particular those in Special Education. The inability to articulate or comprehend may prevent access to certain spaces. How many of our students have not “learned to talk,” and why are they silent?

I think of the time which I like to describe as my “head-first capitulation into the whirlwind known as high school.” It was Mr. Franklin, my specialized science teacher who

noticed that I did not speak much. “Why don’t you ever speak up Martha,” he asked. “Because, I do not understand how it all works,” was my frustrated teenage response. “How what works,” he responded. “High school,” was my timid reply. He noticed that I was picked on, being made fun of because I did not fit in – he saw that I needed language, a way to express myself. He noticed that I did not have the proper receptors for understanding the majority of students around me, therefore he pushed me to get involved. It was a slow and steady evolution. I did not just need science, I needed a space in which I was given instruction in the “language” of being a student in a large NYC public school. This was a practice in culturally relevant pedagogy. When students are shy, or marginalized as I was, teachers like Mr. Franklin are needed to provide “scaffolded interventions” that led to my effective instruction in the language of high school. This is form of guided practice is something that I will seek to provide for my students. I wonder, what are the multilevel approaches that I can use in and outside of the classroom, to ensure the personal, professional, and academic progress of my students?

When I think of language, I also think of liberty. Consideration of liberty, leads me to reflect on having the ability to read. Author of three autobiographies, abolitionist Frederick Douglass stated, “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.” Learning the alphabet at the age of 12, allowed him to later learn how to read from his mistress. He so recognized the importance of reading that he would trade bread for lessons with white children living nearby. This year, I met a girl who is 17, and in middle school. Her diminutive size allows her to blend seamlessly with the crowds of sixth through eighth graders. She is illiterate. At school, she has a reputation to maintain. The other students do not know that she cannot read, and I understand her need to never let them know. To be illiterate is not in itself shameful, but it can be isolating.

Throughout my residency I have seen the isolation caused by illiteracy. There is isolation from classmates, and certain types of knowledge. It is a form of confinement. This particular situation has caused me to reflect about students in schools who lack reading ability. As an educator this has caused me to examine the ways in which I can be a teacher who is non-judgmental, striving to work alongside students such as this young woman, because I know her life can teach me, as much as I would like to teach her. Such students help me to care more not only about the classes which I teach, but also to consider the paths that students have traversed that have led to their now. Though I am being certified in 7-12 education, I care now more than ever about the instruction students are receiving in elementary school. One of my goals is therefore to stay connected with teachers who are in elementary schools, to understand the practices of teaching younger students, and learn from available research.

CONCLUSION

FREEDOM AS FLIGHT: A MOVEMENT ACROSS THE BORDER

At the start of my student teaching experience, in thinking about the role of literacy, I positioned myself in the role of learner, to better understand at the micro level the meaning of literacy for students of color. This sentiment was captured at the Harvard Graduate School of Education 2016 convocation exercises, when Donovan Livingston, Ed.M '16, as the student speaker quoted Horace Mann saying, "Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men (1848)." In lyrical form he continued, "At the time of his remarks I couldn't read — couldn't write. Any attempt to do so, punishable by death."

"Literacy is currency," I tweeted, during a NTCE Twitter chat, in response to the question, "Why do Black girls' literacies matter in today's society," posed by Teachers College professor Detra Price-Dennis. "Currency=Power," I continued, "It's important to know about linguistic and

cultural diversity in literacy.” This year I have struggled with very specific ideas and ideals regarding literacy. This is directly impacted by my strong association with my “child of immigrants” identity. I find myself negotiating what is meant by “literacy,” and what it means to be “literate.” In particular, I wonder about the representation of this term in reference to being a student in urban public schools. Over the course of 2016, I have heard many arguments asking that we consider the literacies, other than the Common Core Standard expectation of reading and writing, of students: the literacy of aesthetics, the ability to speak effectively, the literacy of song, etcetera. I think about Ebonics, and the merits of opposing sides of the debate.

“What do you think about Ebonics? Are you for it or against it?” My answer must be neither. I can be neither for Ebonics or against Ebonics any more than I can be for or against air. It exists. It is the language spoken by many of our African American children. It is the language they heard as their mothers nursed them and changed their diapers and played peek-a-boo with them. It is the language through which they first encountered love, nurturance, and joy (Delpit, 1998/2014).

Literacy is more than reading, it is a line of demarcation between the land of freedom and the land of slavery.

I'll meet you in the morning
when you reach the promised land
on the other side of the Jordan
for I'm bound for the promised land (African-American Spiritual).

This song, which is a non-traditional text is representative of the resistance of African-Americans in the fight for freedom. They fought to read, they fought to own their bodies, they fought to expand their opportunities. They understood that the ability to read is also the ability to explore other metaphorical territories. Douglass understood this writing,

The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would

follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. it opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. in moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Anything, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound and seen in everything. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.

If education is currency, we must remember the economic principle which states that value or cost lies in an object's scarcity. When there is enough or a surplus of an item, the item is devalued. As an educator, who grew up Black and poor in New York, I am therefore forced to question, "Who benefits when resources are withheld, or the quality of resources made available are inferior?" Without the currency of being able to read and by extension write well, students, especially those of color, are limited in their opportunities. Students must have the correct "documents" in the form of reading and writing, in order to cross borders. As a social justice oriented educator, I see a need for educators who are willing to engage courageously with current pedagogy that confines certain students to existence on the margins of society. "Injustice is telling them education is the key, while you continue to change the locks," Livingston went on to say in his speech entitled, *Lift Off* (2016). Freedom must therefore be an active process and practice.

This leads me to conclude on the idea that may be related to the idea of borders: hindrance. Merriam-Webster defines hindrance as, "the act of making it difficult for someone to act or for something to be done." Hindrances are obstacles that prevent progress. When I think of students who are being served in urban areas, particularly those in NYC at Title I schools, I am reminded that if you are not given the access, opportunity, the social network and connections, or mis-

educated by not learning how to read, the road towards advancement in scholarship will be long and arduous. Is it true that our expectations or lack thereof are positioning certain students, particularly those of color to remain at the margins of society? For students of color, I ask, "In what ways is our (the United States) system of education setting them up to fail or succeed, and is our education system doing all it can to leave certain kids behind or move them forward?" My job is to not hinder, but to open doors. I am not a savior, but I am a teacher.

My work is to find the practices, structures, and organizational methods that support the personal and professional growth of my students. My objective is to always keep in mind the politics of education, and committing to a strengths-based perspective about my students, their families, and communities. Teaching challenges me to identify my biases and the biases of the systems in which I operate, and interact appropriately. This may require my saying "Take down that wall." If so, I pray to have the courage of my convictions.

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