

Critique Across Differences

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The task of this session is to theorize issues of reading across differences in educational research. This paper looks at a very specific example of making connections across differences of history, geography, languages, disciplines, identity positions and theoretical investments. My case study is Handel Wright's AERA 01 critique of Cynthia Dillard's "endarkened feminist epistemology" that was noteworthy for its respectful and generous reading of a position quite different from his own. My sense of task is to unpack his critical practices and then attempt to enact such practices in a reading of Patricia Hill Collins (2000) in a way that moves against what Wright terms "racially unmarked but remarkably white feminist epistemologies." Moving toward a sort of "getting lost" as a methodology, I will as well draw on Eve Sedgwick's (1997) idea of "reparative critique" in exploring the implications of such critique for educational research.

An Endarkened Feminist Epistemology? Identity, Difference and the Politics of Representation in Educational Research

Wright's practice of critique includes three basic moves:

1. He uses critique as a help in living the present historically. Unpacking Dillard's concepts to foster understanding on her terms, he names her refusals as strategic and relates them to pop culture in a way that ties them to an enlivened sense of "what's going on" in the culture at large. Situating Dillard's exemplarity in terms of new moves in qualitative research, he announces himself "in solidarity" with her project that he sees as "the next major intervention in the field." Honoring the challenge Dillard represents to the field as an act of refusal, Wright calls for educational research to make room at the table.
2. Wright engages with Dillard's work in away that constructs not competition but parallel conceptualizations. Clear differences remain not as a successor regime but as expansion and multiplication of ways to proceed. Looking at how her notion of an endarkened feminist epistemology, which he finds a "particularly interesting, compelling and expedient example" (p.6), he asks how it might look from a different theoretical perspective. Proliferating versions of an endarkened epistemology, he offers a reformulation where the subject "could be reconceptualized" to take into account difference within blackness. Such a move "could yield interesting results" where racialized identity becomes "a floating signifier" that is "more inclusive and pliant." Offering a messier parallel frame, he uses Stuart Hall to call upon the end of black innocence and neat formulas of black victims and white oppressors.

3. Wright traces his own rethinkings in a generous and admittedly guilty reading of Dillard's project. Reading her through his own investments and experiences, particularly his relationship to "the international phenomenon of black ambivalence" toward the post, he is "tentative and wary" as he puts forward her intervention in discursive terms where standpoint becomes a place from which to begin.

Such practices of critique across differences enlarge both the critic and that which they critique. Like Derrida on Barthes, Wright goes "to what is most living. . . its force and necessity" (2001:36) in Dillard. To explore how such practices might be of use, I turn to an effort to read Patricia Hill Collins across our differences.

Racially Marked White: Reading Patricia Hill Collins' "What's Going On? Black Feminist Thought and the Politics of Postmodernism"

In an effort to foster understanding on her own terms, whatever foundational means these days, Hill-Collins' work is clearly that for academics trying to deal with the experiences and negotiations of US racial formations. In a recent article, Hill-Collins displays the black ambivalence towards "the post" that Handel speaks of. While postmodernism "undercuts African-American women's political activism. . . eschews social policy recommendations," (2000, p. 41) and engages in textual reductionism and other hermeticisms, the deconstructive tools it offers can be put to "good use" by intellectuals from oppressed groups (p. 54). Deconstruction of binaries, however, is a double-edged sword, undercutting authority, yes, but also undercutting the very "modest authority" to speak their own experiences for which black women have struggled (p. 58). Such contradictions, coupled with the excesses of "extreme" postmodernism with its relativism, occlusion of "macro-social-structural variables" (59), and "alienated subjects endlessly deconstructing all truth" (59), create a kind of cultural capital for alienated leftist intellectuals who have lost all hope in a way that works, exactly, to reproduce present power inequities. While applauding the efforts of a "reconstructive postmodernism" toward politically effective theory (65), Hill-Collins as well takes such efforts to task for their "rubric of difference" which, more often than not, trivializes structural inequities, appropriates and commodifies the voices of "others," and feeds a corrosive narcissism and rampant individualism. The result is "diluting differences to the point of meaninglessness" in a way that undercuts forms of cultural politics that work toward group solidarity and a politics of resistance. Holding out the promise of theories of intersectionality, Hill-Collins notes both the legitimizing function of the post in such an effort and its dangers as "the new politics of containment" and "a politics of impotence (p. 66). Black women and other marginalized intellectuals did not need the post in order to challenge authority, but the post, she concludes, offers "a much-needed legitimation" and "powerful analytic tools" to challenge "the rules of the game itself" (p. 67).

To use her title, what is going on in this essay and how might I use Wright's critical practices to read Hill Collins across our differences in a way that productively addresses its force and necessity?

Critique as a help in living the present historically: Hill-Collins' work is laden with the philosophical and political history of our time. What she marks and influences in such landscapes, including the academy out of which she writes, are the "still open wounds, scars and hopes" of black women that can "teach us about what remains to be heard, read, thought and done" (Derrida 2001:118). What retains an exemplary value for me in her work, the something to be heard here, is a focus on how strategic essentialism is essential for an oppressed people whose individual lives may be markedly different, but who nonetheless suffer from a common form of racial hegemony. This tension around a realist position that mediates the essentialism of identity politics is a mark of postcolonialism in its use of histories of exploitation to foster strategies of resistance (Bhabha, 1990; Spurr, 1999). This is no new news in postcolonial theory (e.g., McBride, 1989), but the promise of Hill-Collins' work lies in how the tensions that never quite resolve themselves, this tension between modernist authenticity and poststructural conceptions of identity and subjectivity, uses ambivalence as a strategy for surviving disappointments.

Critique as an offering of parallel theorizing: It is this ambivalence that I want to put at the heart of my efforts to engage with Hill-Collins from a different theoretical perspective in order to see how such an expansion, multiplication and proliferation might work in solidarity with her. The theory I call on is queer theory, particularly Eve Sedgwick's (1997) idea of reparative critique that calls for a "deroutinizing methodology (3) that shakes out the impacted and overdetermined in moving from truth-value to performative effect. Breaking from the habitual practices of critical theory, Sedgwick urges practices of critique that assemble and confer plenitude on something that can then "give back" toward nurturing resistant culture in way that helps save oneself by extracting sustenance from a culture not very interested in one's sustenance. Sedgwick calls this "a gay alchemy" (34) and draws on the energy of an incompetent reading and its pleasures, discoveries, surprises, and mistakes (p. 25). These are "compromise formations that define life in the closet" (Litvak, 84). They nurture positive affect around abjection and perform how good things can come from bad object choices in terms of something other than blandly routinized relations. Termed a "gift for inversion" (Litvak, 1997:76), such a practice turns abjection into a site of possibility in extracting sustenance from hostile territory. Using queer theory, I offer parallel conceptualizations to Hill-Collins' theorizing about identity and "working the ruins" as a political practice (St. Pierre and Pillow, 2000).

Identity: If postcolonialism teaches us nothing else, its emphasis on the differentiated meaning of subjectivity and agency has driven home how critical antifoundationalism can function as a neoimperialist elitism. What Samir Dayal has termed "pissedcolonialism" (1996, p. 135) cannot be dismissed as poststructuralism's poor second cousin, still mired in a realism that is viewed as "strategic" at best. Essentialism and identity politics might be bad objects from the vantage point of antifoundational theory, but they are often seen as the only if not the best strategy for advancing minority based claims. The desire to self-consciously cultivate a past to fight homogenization and/or invisibility, the desire to combat mainstream racism with a politicized deployment of one's own "difference": such strategies raise questions as to what there is of identity that is not strategy (Radhakrishnan, 1996, p. 2007). Such strategies also construct a kind of melancholy

subject position for the “authentic” native charged with showing how they are bound by that which the dominant has long abjected. What opens up if the problem of authenticity is seen as about relationality, ambivalence and the politics of representation as a way to fight its tendencies to “degenerate into essentialism” (ibid, p. 211)? This entails a sense of both what can be done in the name of identity that is worth hanging on to AND what is made possible by practices that thrive on troubling identity.

Queer theory’s contesting of good object/bad object distinctions trouble that which is legitimated and authorize the bad as having something good to offer. Drag, for example, whether of the queens or kings variant, denaturalizes gender construction in pleasurable ways. The exclusions upon which consolidated identity are based become apparent in such practices, as well as the policing and hierarchy of the good and the bad. This is a necessary and productive persistent troubling that keeps the normative from setting up shop. What I suggest is that such practices are a sort of “working the ruins” of identity that might have something to offer in terms of the (in)essential base of solidarity that is both within and against the intersectionality that Hill-Collins advances.

“Working the ruins” as a political practice: What I offer, perhaps, to both Hill-Collins and myself, is to welcome decentering one’s discourse via the othernesses that always confront us, the “irreducible strangenesses” involved in other othernesses. My example here is a sort of queering of my parallel theorizing of Hill-Collins, a thinking that opens to other others. Situating both her and I as world citizens perpetually renewing meanings toward new structures of knowledge, such a position asks what can come about, be let to come about, in our being exposed to the other in a way that “dislocates. . . in the space of what relates us to ourselves. . . by getting over, by ourselves, the mourning of ourselves” (Derrida, 2001:160-161). What lets her in me is “the mourning of the absolute of force.” Here essentialism and experience as a ground of truth claims are situated as both good and bad objects, as is also situated what Coco Fusco calls “the many-headed monster that the backlash against identity politics has become” (2001, p. xvi). To urge a troubling of the closures and sometimes pieties of both identity politics, standpoint theories and experience based knowledge AND the backlash against identity politics is not to try to close this openness but to keep us moving in order to produce and learn from ruptures, failures, breaks, refusals. Given that the task is to find a way to work on in the face of the loss of legitimating metanarratives, always already swept up in language games that constantly undo themselves, we are all a little lost in finding our way into research practices that open to the irreducible heterogeneity of the other as we face the problems of doing research in this historical time.

This is a gay science, both Nietzschean and in excess of Nietzsche, that is something other to the “hip defeatism” that Hill-Collins worries about.¹ Recovering from exhaustion in order to perceive the world freshly, such critique works toward a sort of reenchantment

¹ Hill-Collins’ charges parallel Martha Nussbaum’s complaint of “hip defeatism” against Judith Butler in her 1999 *New Republic* review of Butler’s four books on sex and gender. By turning away from the materiality of oppression and reform via legislation and public policy, Butler is accused of undercutting feminist activism. See Turner, 2000, for a critique of the liberal politics undergirding Nussbaum’s critique of Butler (pp. 6-7).

that is not so much about losing interest as about using ambivalence as a strategy for surviving disappointments. Instead of the relentless unmasking and engrossing demystification of standard critical moves, it is about extracting nourishment from what is bad for you by having failed to deliver. Newly desired in its contemptability, this is the hom(e)pathy of a gay science where the path to an opening is via ambivalence in working the mediating power of cultural difference. Here, to risk thinking otherwise is not to find an innocent place, but to use the tensions as a way of learning how to live in de-authorized space.

Whatever the post means, the frame of our present has shifted out of changed material circumstances. Basic political categories that have defined and animated Left oppositional discourse have lost their political purchase. Enlightenment categories of rationality, individual autonomy, revolution, socialism, proletarian democracy, all these and more are under suspicion. Terms such as post-ethnic and post-feminism are everywhere, troubling our efforts to read history as a story of progress toward emancipation. How to deal with such losses without nostalgia is, I am arguing, exactly a politics of working the ruins. Here accepting loss becomes the very force of learning and the promise of thinking and doing otherwise, within and against Enlightenment categories of voice, identity, agency and experience so troubled by incommensurability, historical trauma and the crisis of representation.

Critique as a tracing of rethinkings: Finally, I come to my own re-thinkings as I engage with Hill-Collins across our different investments of privilege and struggle. I think here of a recent trip to South Africa where I was one of three US academics brought in to foster a research culture in a historically disadvantaged university. Such a brief brought me face to face with the contradictions of white expertise and the necessary complicities and forms of dominance involved in addressing someone as subaltern. Losing my voice at the end of an intense week, my title for anything I write, I joked, must be: “White woman goes to Africa and loses her voice.” This was not at all because I was unheard in a Spivakian “can the subaltern speak” sort of way but quite the opposite: I talked so much and so loudly, over the excitement in the room, I like to think, that for the first time in my life, I was unable to speak. Hill-Collins helps me think “what’s going on here” where, as a white woman, I live in a perpetually strange time where I am always “writing/speaking something that will have been wrong.” Here whatever authority I have is grounded in the prejudices of the historical context and, whether my recognition of this strange time authorizes or de-authorizes me, its danger is to claim the present as a state of knowing the difference in a way that allays the anxiety fostered in any interruption of the progress narrative.²

² From a February 15, 2002 talk at OSU by Elizabeth Povinelli, based on her forthcoming book, The cunning of recognition: Indigenous alterity and the making of Australian multiculturalism (Duke University Press) where she explores how multicultural forms of recognition work to reinforce liberal regimes rather than open them up to alternative social imaginaries. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Australian indigenous people, she argues that the multicultural legacy of colonialism perpetuates unequal systems of power, not by demanding that colonized subjects identify with their colonizers but by demanding that they identify with an impossible standard of authentic traditional culture, producing in the process a new melancholic form of indigenous citizenship.

In this lived experience of what Derrida refers to as the future anterior tense, words that I begin to hear otherwise in my reading of Hill-Collins include my call to a methodology of “getting lost.” Perhaps my addressee here is usefully constrained to those who have privileges to unlearn along lines of the sort of “scrupulously differentiated politics” for which Spivak calls (1999, p. 193). Rather than some angst of displacement, this might be the effacement that I have been trying to track across Derrida for years. This is a demastering: “a work without force, a work that would have to work at renouncing force, its own force, a work that would have to work at failure, and thus at mourning and getting over force, a work working at its own unproductivity, absolutely, working to absolve or to absolve itself of whatever might be absolute about ‘force’” (2001:144).

This is a getting lost as a way to move out of commanding, controlling, mastery discourses and into a knowledge that recognizes the inevitable blind spots of our knowing. Here the trajectory is from the unknown to the known, with an inversion that returns to the unknown (Bataille, 1988/1954, pp. 110-11). Derrida (1995) argues that knowledge that interrupts or derails absolute knowledge is knowledge that loses itself, “gets off the track” in order to expose itself to chance, “as if to the being lost” (p. 289) in order “to learn by heart,” knowledge from and of the other, thanks to the other.

Performance artist and critical theorist, Coco Fusco, argues that 1995-2000 was a time of “sweeping changes in the approach to otherness,” a time of “normalized diversity” (2001, p. xv). Noting the importance of practices of “see[ing] ourselves as ‘other than the other,’” (xiv) she writes both against how ethnicizing oneself can become a box (34) and for the ambivalence that undercuts “ideal antiracist” normative subjectivities. She also takes much to task the backlash against identity politics. Troubling Derrida’s perhaps too easy evocation of some “other,” the very other that Hill Collins worries about as commodification and dilution, Fusco puts ambivalence to work in the necessarily incompletely thinkable conditions and potential of given arrangements. Is it helpful to think of all of us, Fusco, Hill-Collins, Wright, Dillard, and Derrida and Sedgwick too, as all a little lost, caught in enabling aporias that move us toward practices that produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently? What reading Hill-Collins through the prism of Wright’s practices of critique has taught me is to ask, who is this us, white girl, and how does an investment in reading for “scrupulously differentiated” positionalities affect methodological practices.

Implications for Qualitative Research: Theorizing Issues of Reading Across Differences

I was thus read, I said to myself, and staged by what I read.
(Derrida, 2001:161)

For several years, I have been writing about the concept of coloring epistemologies (Scheurich and Young, 1997) in a way that attempts to not reinscribe successor regimes or “one-best” arguments. Increasingly drawn to the helpfulness of situating this work as always already wrong, I began with a call for epistemological distinctions via a delineation of the cultural specificities of methodological practices, a mistake that a

Foucauldian move to discursive formations got me out of. A year or so ago, I referred to such efforts as a useful disciplinary mistake that is other to the other of correct, borrowing from Spivak's (1999) situating of the concept of "native informant" in white anthropology. Now, following Wright's move of parallel theorizing, I situate my efforts as expanding and multiplying possibilities toward a gay science, a science toward surviving and thriving in hostile territory. What do the critical practices I have put to work in this paper suggest in terms of issues of positionality, methodology and epistemology in qualitative research?

1. Cultural epistemologies construct a site from which to speak knowledge within racial formations where racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed. Within such formations, ways of speaking about race change via incorporation of new and old racialized languages. These are not about essence so much as positioning toward the development of transformative, decolonizing, survival research agendas (Tyson, 1998; Tuhawai-Smith, 1999).
2. Research methodologies arise out of these complex maneuvers of identity and relational mediations toward activating praxis. Articulation of "diasporic methodologies" (Subedi, in process) grows out of theorizing strategic operations of a "stable" identity to both disrupt dominance and register alternative practices within the "tensions of empire" (Willinsky, 1998). Working toward non-essentialist indigenous identities that are fluid yet political and non-coercive while enabling pragmatic, transformative practices is to ask, like Foucault, what can identities do?
3. Working ambivalence as a strategy for surviving disappointment in transcendental promises cuts across both mainstream and counter discourses, including what Spivak terms the "new new" of "the indigenous dominant" (1999, pp. 67-68). Across the different disavowals and disidentifications of differently positioned researchers, varying tensions arise regarding modernist and postmodernist identity formations and deconstructive tendencies to appropriate difference to the same. In such "scrupulously differentiated" spaces, our very not-knowing becomes a productive space to move from transcendental to social grounds, historical grounds in exploring (post)emancipation discourses as limit and resource (Spivak, 1999, p. 55).
4. Out of this, across broken and uneven spaces, we have a chance to "unlearn more in the field" (Subedi, in process) by reading against ourselves in presuming not understanding but ourselves as incompetent readers reading for difference rather than sameness in order to be unsettled by otherness (Lather 2000). Courting a more uncontainable excess than that of intersectionality, a sort of multiplicities without end, this is working multiple othernesses as a way to keep moving against tendencies to settle into the various dogmas and reductionisms that await us once we think we have arrived.

Conclusion

This panel is part of “answering the call” to address issues of race, racism and power in educational research.³ My effort, situated on the “interventionist, critical edge of deconstruction” (Niranjana, 1992:161) follows Barthes in his “desperate resistance to any reductive system” where whenever the language begins to harden, “I would gently leave it and seek elsewhere: I began to speak differently” (quoted in Derrida, 2001:53). Exceeded, interrupted and dislocated in transcultural space, I have attempted to (un)learn from Wright, Dillard, Hill-Collins and other others in order to move toward a practice of critique that is racially marked and generative of research approaches that are responsible to the struggle for voice, the possibilities and limits of connecting across difference, and the productivity of simultaneous tension and reparation in solidarity efforts.

³ See Tyson (1998); Dillard (2000); Subedi (in-process); Scheurich and Young (1997); Pillow (in press; 2001); Hermes, 1998; Ladson-Billings (2000); Parker and Lynn (2002). See also special issue of Qualitative Inquiry on “Critical Race Theory and Qualitative Research,” 8(1), 2002, edited by Marvin Lynn, Tara Yosso, Daniel Solorzano, and Laurence Parker.

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