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SHIFTING RELATIONS:  
MULTICULTURALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

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This paper argues that recent work in multicultural education over-emphasizes the development of individual identity and thus neglects the critical importance of seeing relations of difference. As I recount the privileging of the disconnected individual in education on social issues, I examine the use of empathy and compassion as problematic approaches that only appear to centralize on relations. Instead, I argue that instead of emphasizing the development of relations among people, they emphasize the individual feelings of students about relations in which they are actually not engaged. By inviting students to become empathetic and sympathetic about others, instead of with others, individual feeling becomes more important than the experiences of others that provide the occasion for feeling. I will suggest that we reconfigure multicultural education as primarily relational and examine relations of difference, not relations of self to self-identity. Multicultural education that encourages students to their connectedness within discourses and practices of difference sets the groundwork for their ability to see their ethical connections with others.

I will briefly chart what I see as a trend in multicultural education that highlights the individual feelings and interests over social relations. While many of these examples are attempts to work around student reluctance to challenge their understandings of race, class, gender, sexuality (which, by the way, is never referenced in any of the main texts on multiculturalism), and other relations of unequal power, pedagogical strategies that re-center the individual only serve to reinforce student intransigence in examining the social relations in which they are situated. In other words, tailoring multicultural education to the needs of dissenting dominant students short circuits the project of exploring how relations of difference are already there. Because students in dominant groups experience their dominance partially through their ability to ignore how their identity constitutes others and vice versa, they are more easily able to absent themselves from consideration of other identities. While multiculturalism has attempted to overcome this reluctance to see relations by encouraging all students to develop a sense of their identity, it has too often encouraged the formation of a disconnected form of identity, one whose inhabitants can learn to know about others through empathy and learn to appropriate the feelings of others through compassion, but cannot account for their own place within relations of difference. Rather than encouraging an examination of relations of power, this strategy only encourages the status quo.

## LIMITS ON RELATIONS

What the emphasis on relations does not do, is as important as what it does. Emphasis on relations and understandings formed through common projects do not fully address what it means to be on either side of the boundaries of identities and cultures engaged in the project. In other words, this is not a fusion of horizons, it is a potential meeting and experience that is still felt, understood, and experienced at a distance, because these experiences are formed through previous experiences mediated by participants' backgrounds, practices, identities, etc. Further, the social distance that frames relationships also continues despite relationships. In other words, the space and time of relationships are bounded, uncertain, and temporary.

The formation of relationships across differences does, however, introduce movement into experience. I recommend two sentences with this next part of the sentence revised, as in Dewey's understanding of becoming experienced, that is, able to be open to experiences that are new, different, and challenging. And perhaps most importantly for thinking about multicultural experiences, getting used to the limitations of one's own judgment and experience is crucial to becoming used to being in those spaces of discomfort and disconnection that may precede and characterize engagements with diverse others. While I will argue that something changes in these engagements, I do not want to build a version of multicultural engagement in which all participants give up their backgrounds to enter into a space of liberal engagement, particularly not the space of liberal engagement that claims to be neutral when it is, in fact, already raced, classed and gendered. Nor do I want to build a notion of engagement in which participants fully give up their sense of their background in order to meet others, even though engagement across differences and all education are processes of change.

Further, because all categories of difference are not created in the same ways, balancing them as if they were misunderstands the meaning of the categories and the meaning of the relations that may ensue. If we stress relations in order to dislocate both the majority partner and the minority partner (or either partner in terms of their status, since the easy presumption that one person is always and in every category a member of the majority, is of course, false), we neglect to see that different partners in any relation are already dislocated in ways that we may not want to exacerbate. While we may, for instance, ask white suburban students to fight against their tendency to know everything and to judge Latina/o culture from their white tendency toward cosmopolitan superiority,<sup>2</sup> the asymmetries of cultural power mean that we cannot challenge students' culture or identity in quite the same way.

Emphasis on multicultural relations also does not mean fetishizing what we think a culture or identity means to its practitioners and members either. As

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I argue for asymmetry of relations, I am not arguing that minority cultures are themselves completely unchanging and non-reflective. All identities are incomplete, in process, and so on, the difficulty of fusion of horizons in a context of unequal power resides in the differential ability of one partner to back up their challenge to the other with unequal social power. One need only read scads of accounts of white feminists attempting to engage in “dialogue” with black feminists by questioning black feminists on their strategies, politics, and background, in short, monopolizing the “dialogue” with demands for knowledge and critique of what they heard. We likely all have examples of this in classrooms where white students, in midst of wanting to know students of color and/or lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender students and/or working class students frame questions in terms of judgments: why do you people do x? Meaning, why do you people do these things that irritate or inconvenience me?

#### TEXTBOOK PROBLEMS

So let us turn to some problems in notions of identity and culture in a few of the major multiculturalism textbooks in teacher education. In one text, the author explains:

Teachers often fear that tuning into students’ cultural differences is an indication of being prejudiced and racist. This fear is related to the misconception that equates color consciousness with racism. It also stems from feelings that differences are bad or inferior, and from the mistaken notion that recognition of differences means we must imitate or adopt these differences. Many cultural awareness and human relations workshops have failed because these basic concerns of the participants were not dealt with. On the other hand, most teachers do believe in individualizing or personalizing their instruction.<sup>3</sup>

Granting that introductions are difficult things to write, the introduction is more interested in reassuring readers that their concerns will be addressed here, even if those concerns are based in ignorance about what difference means. The audience, not the cultural context of inequality, is the issue. Further, by linking understandings of culture to personalized instruction (a good bridge when you think about how to address particular kinds of teachers), cultural differences are personalized matters. The book then turns to case studies of six separate students, each representing a culture: a Navajo man, a Jewish woman, a rural white man, an urban black young man, a white young woman attending a black school, and a bilingual Puerto Rican child.<sup>4</sup> While they have differing ideas about themselves, the point of the stories is to show teachers how they might become more culturally sensitive and culturally competent in their teaching. Another book begins by situating itself within democratic discourse, “Our teachers will need to understand that to treat their students respectfully as individuals, they must learn about the

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relevant social groups in their students' lives."<sup>5</sup> But this text also offers, instead of a cultural competence and stage theories of identity, "ethnic and cultural self-disclosure" which requires "at least five ingredients" that remain unclear but from a list in the appendix appear to be some sort of ethnicity and class inventory.<sup>6</sup> Another text stresses a "case studies approach" to facilitate getting to know people one unfamiliar to one.<sup>7</sup> The themes of competence and skills developed through research are developed in all the texts. One fears it will be chastised for its idealism, another for its altruism, and while at one point or another, all texts point to difficulties associated with diversity, they remain, as they doubtless must in order to continue to vie for a market share, profoundly idealistic. They are, after all, even with the finest political intention, marketing a concept to a balky audience.

Because they are textbooks, their purpose is to make difficult situations appear easy to describe in text and easy to alter in practice. For example, they invite readers to negotiate their own identity development or to track the "development" of students' identities or cultural competencies—both of which are very difficult things to do—and make it sound relatively easy. While filling out a chart and engaging in an examination of when my relatives arrived in the U. S. or interviewing a child from a cultural group with which I am unfamiliar may make the meaning of my identity and culture clearer to me. Perhaps they will, but as a colleague and I have found in talking to former students who are now teaching, the difficulties of engaging with diverse others in an institutional setting goes far beyond the relatively quiet, if idealistic, dreams of textbook writers. Another harder problem is to get teachers and the rest of us to see that these difficulties should not recentralize ourselves as individual teachers or learners. The challenge of multiculturalism and anti-bias pedagogy is, I think, to set individuals off-center and to re-center what it means to engage, find oneself disengaged, and still want to engage again.

#### PROBLEMATIC NON-RELATIONS

The main challenge in educating for relations is to avoid returning again and again to an analysis of one's own feelings outside the space of engagement. In other words, it is difficult to avoid the fallback position of self-analysis, even though that position directs one away from relations. Even where the development of dominant group identity is not explicit in writings about multicultural pedagogy, individualist plans of instruction show through in the emphasis on certain strategies. Attempting to encourage empathy toward others has been a major feature of multicultural education. While the intent of this approach is to find ways to build relationships, its emphasis on the one empathizing can easily slide into focus on the effect a relationship has on only one party to that relationship. Indeed, empathy, in its worst form, does not require another person except as an object.

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There are two central difficulties with empathy, the first is its impossibility and the second the great potential for appropriating of the feelings of the other. Because literally feeling as another does is impossible, empathy sets a high experiential bar that can easily be refused. Further, because social distances among race, classes, and sexualities mean that students do not have experiences that even tempt them to try to know people different from themselves, empathy seems to great an undertaking. Not unreasonably, students may say, “I can never feel what it feels like to be a Chicano child ignored by an educational institution.” The implications of the impossibility of empathy are that if one cannot feel as another does, one cannot in any way ameliorate the other’s difficulties. When the failure of empathy prompts a refusal to consider how all of our experiences are constructed through race, class, gender, sexual orientation and so on, students are not refusing the high bar of empathy, instead they are refusing to examine the relations that make empathy impossible. Even as I argue for a relational pedagogy, I have no problem ceding the distinctiveness of the feelings and experiences that come from a point in the relational web. Indeed, I find it perplexing that feeling as if one were another is even necessary to grant that others experience injustice in ways that oneself may not. Finitude, in other words, seems sufficient to explain why others may have a different experience than I do and I hardly need to go to the trouble, even if I could, to feel exactly what they feel in order to accept their difference. Any Levinasian would tell you I couldn’t anyway and in attempting to do so, I would be violating the otherness of the other.

Megan Boler associates empathy with Foucault’s confession, arguing that empathy functions in a way that levels difference and appropriates the experience of the other. Boler found that students claim to understand the full experience of Holocaust through their reading of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, because they have deeply identified with characters in his narrative. Boler is concerned that this too quick embrace of empathy empties the Holocaust of its specific social and historical context. She argues that empathy slides into the practice of confession of how the individual students *feel* about their experience of the Holocaust, but not into an examination of the event for those involved. “Confession allows the isolation of the individual, in this case allowing one story to represent an entire historical sensibility. Confessional reading encourages moral judgment within a fixed moral code, and leaves unquestioned relations of power between reader and text and dominant and marginal culture as this relation defines what and how we choose to see and not see.”<sup>8</sup> Boler argues that empathy too easily becomes appropriation, obscuring the more political goal of obligation to others.<sup>9</sup>

Elizabeth Spelman is further concerned that as much as appropriation can be dangerous, so too can a limited imagination about similarities. She calls this problem the “paradox of appropriation.” As she analyzes nineteenth century white feminist parallels of their experience with the experience of black enslaved

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women, Spelman argues, “while the self-interested appropriation by white women of the experience of black women was and is noxious, so surely would be a failure or refusal by white women to find or make anything in common with black women.”<sup>10</sup> While Spelman wants to preserve the possibility of empathy, she nonetheless highlights the problem with the kinds of empathy that centralize the one empathizing and indeed, may not require an actual other to empathize with at all. A fully self-involved empathetic person may eventually dispense with the other altogether, concentrating instead on his or her experience of what it might be to feel as that other and so to imagine him or herself to be the other. In other words, empathy risks a complete consumption of the other, in one’s own image.<sup>11</sup>

As Alison Jones observes, the demand for the presence and stories of the other is not something the other enjoys. As she details the student responses from classes where Maori and Pakeha students were separated, she finds that Maori students were overjoyed at the possibility of being in classes where they could be together with other brown people and where they would not have to answer stupid questions or listen to ignorant speech from Pakeha students. She points out that diversity education has been overwhelmingly interested in opening dialogue but has missed “resistance to speaking” on the part of subaltern students.<sup>12</sup> Paralleling Boler’s and Spelman’s points, Jones suggests that majority students are most often interested not only in the stories of minority students, but in absolution from minority students. Thus the occasion of the presence and speech of minority students becomes the occasion not to focus on how one might engage in improving race relations, but rather an occasion for requests for forgiveness that redirect conversation back to majority students and their feelings. But enough about your oppression, how do you feel about how badly I feel about the gap between us or good I am for feeling so badly? Further, when the desire for absolution is frustrated, Jones notes that majority response is strongly emotional, bereft at the loss of opportunity to know yet another thing completely and dislocated because they were no longer the “center of knowing.”<sup>13</sup> As Jones puts it, Pakeha students did not want to learn about the oppressed, “the demand to hear the voice of the subaltern—is a demand for pedagogy *by* the other.”<sup>14</sup> In this case, multicultural relations are themselves the site of struggles over power, with Pakeha students demanding transparent and willing access to Maori culture and Maori students refusing another incursion into their culture that is the gift that keeps on giving energy to Pakeha students.

#### FROM “SOOO SAD”<sup>15</sup> TO COLLABORATION

I now turn to what I see is a way to conceive of multicultural relations that, while it certainly has all the characteristics of problematic relations, may move us toward challenging some of those problems. The situation I describe involves pre-service teacher elementary education students working and playing

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with Latina/o public school students (mostly elementary students, but also middle and high school students) at an inner city Latin American Community Center. The pre-service elementary education students noticed that kids sometimes got bored because there were no tasks that continued on to a distinct goal and decided to organize a talent show where kids could sing, dance, show art work, and perform poetry. I concentrate on what happened here because the students started building their relationships with kids based on judgments of the kids' behavior based in the students' experience and wound up getting so involved in working together with the kids that their judgment and practice began to slide more firmly into relation with the kids (sometimes pitted against adults that the students had previously identified with). While their relationship was by no means perfect, I think it gives a sense of the combination of action with others that enables better forms of understanding than the demand for narrative yields, the relationship built was also one of advocacy, where complete understanding or empathy was no longer the goal, but rather a desire to see that the kids got the best possible attention and support for their work.

Initially many of the students voiced a concern that they did not know enough about the kids, couldn't speak Spanish, and were worried that their "sheltered" upbringing would keep them distant from the kids. When some students first encountered kids practicing dancing, much consternation erupted on the class webtalk. The conversation got started with, "Last week Stacey and I were in the dance room with two girls who wanted to choreograph a dance for the show. We sat and watched as they showed us dance moves and danced to numerous different songs and I started realizing something. The young girls seem very beyond their age in the way that they dance. It almost seemed like something you would see at a type of club we would go to as college students. Maybe it's me being old fashioned or whatever, but if I had kids as young as these girls there is NO way they would be allowed to learn to dance that suggestively." Discussion ranged back and forth between blaming American pop culture and MTV or Latino culture, one student posted, "My mouth pretty much dropped to the floor seeing how these girls were dancing, girls that couldn't have been more than ten years old. I don't think I even dance as provocatively as some of these girls were displaying. I think the difference may be in our upbringings and also our culture." Another reinforced the role music selection had on the girls' moves, pointing again away from Latina/o culture, "At one point there was about 5 girls- the oldest only 10- dancing to HOT IN HERE. 3 of them were literally st[r]ipping. i couldn't believe it... my mouth dropped... even though i knew they were just having fun and didn't mean anything by it i was still so shocked with some of the dances moves they were doing!" Another student was also concerned with "cussing," posting under the heading "Really Shocking," the title that followed the string for weeks, "there were 6 year olds

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singing “ass” at the top of their lungs! I just thought this was soo shocking and kind of sad.”

What I hope is striking in each of these postings is that students are engaged in judging the kids, not in forming relations that move beyond centering their judgment. Of course, part of the process of engagement is sticking to one’s own horizon and trying to make sense of what one has encountered. But the distance between the students judging and the kids dancing is quite palpable. Indeed other minor crises around the distance our students were keeping cropped up during this time. Older boys and young men at the center noticed our students avoiding them and/or made comments and gestures that exacerbated the distance between the two groups. Quite a lot of discussion went on among the students about whether this was sexual harassment or not. They didn’t feel “harassed” so much as irked. Discussions with the young men and boys also showed that they were curious about our students, mostly intent on having some contact with these older women. Because our students were mostly quite young and the young men were not that far away in age, the anxieties that each shared about the other, though complicated by race and class, were also quite readily understandable to each. So conversation about the situation proceeded fairly openly.

Eventually, the group of students who were involved in talent show preparations began to have a more relational response to the situation than students who observed for the sake of observation. They tended to accept that kids danced differently, but felt that kids and cussing was pretty universal, “As a little girl I was exposed to a lot of different kinds of music and could sing every word to any song played at the skating rink, even the curse words. It is just part of life, if the kids aren’t exposed to it through music, than they’ll hear it from somewhere else.” As rehearsals went on, our students did a little less observing and got drawn into trying to do what the kids were doing. The kids got excited at trying to teach our students and were pleased that our students occasionally proved inept. As one later put it, “I liked the fact that the kids showed us what they can do instead of us always showing them what we can do.” And because the students got to see the work and practice that went into forms of dance that other students thought was sad, they also started emphasizing the values that kids were learning by sticking to things and working out more difficult moves or learning to watch one another’s moves to stay together.

As time for the actual performance got closer, our students voiced frustration that the kids didn’t have enough time alone in the dance room. Complaints that the dancers made too much noise meant that the youth coordinator closed the room on some afternoons, further frustrating the kids and students. Students who had earlier wondered if they would ever find any cultural connection were strongly in sync with the anxieties of the kids getting ready for the talent show. While this all starts to sound like a triumphant, after

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school special, that is not my point. Cultural differences, class differences, and power inequalities were all still part of the discussion about the after school program, but the students, especially those involved in the process of organizing the kids were less and less involved in justifying their own backgrounds or criticizing the kids' practices. On the night of the performance, when one group of kids tried to do their dance routine to one of the songs the youth coordinator had banned but had the CD player jam and couldn't do it anyway, all conversation in class switched from the inappropriateness of the lyrics to how hard the girls had practiced and what a shame it was the CD player jammed. Two of the students from southern part of the state did their own performance, prefacing it with the introduction, "We don't do the same kind of dances, but we want to show you what it's like below the canal" and segued into a cheerleading routine to the startled delight of all present. The same students who had been afraid of Latina/o parents (and, by their own accounts, all parents) were mingling with parents, explaining the special strengths of each kid after the performance. There are plenty of problems with tendency to link cultural meetings with food and entertainment and I do not want this minimize any of those critiques. But the ability of our students to move beyond engaging with the kids on our students' cultural terms to encouraging and building a performance with the kids minimized their tendency for judgment and heightened their interest in advocacy.

The biggest challenge, though, remains. Will our students be able to maintain their ability to negotiate relations in the midst of challenges that make those relationships difficult, temporary, and bounded? Though they were able to form relations, these were never without gaps, misunderstandings, and other troubles. Although many of our students became adept at living within the trouble of relationships, much of their teacher training encourages them to control trouble. Within relations, however, trouble comes from all directions and indeed, being able to control one's own troubles can often mean an unwillingness to actually engage in the messier negotiations among gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and so on. Therefore, we need to stress educational and political potential of relationship trouble and the attendant good that comes from moving beyond the self as spectator to selves as mutually constituted through relationally engaged pedagogy.

#### NOTES

1. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1938).
  2. For instance, classroom discussion among white privileged students' personal experience with diversity often centers around their experience of driving through neighborhoods of color on the way to museums or other field trip destinations. In other words, their experience with diversity is literally in passing through from one fairly racially segregated location to another.
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3. Christine I. Bennett, *Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory and Practice*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999): xii-xiii.
  4. Bennett, *Multicultural Education*, 2.
  5. Leonard Davidman and Patricia T. Davidman, *Teaching with a Multicultural Perspective: A Practical Guide*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 2001), xii.
  6. Davidman and Davidman, *Teaching with a Multicultural Perspective*, 3.
  7. Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, (New York: Longman, 2000), 13.
  8. Megan Boler, "The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism's Gaze," in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Michael S. Katz, [http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EP/PE/yearbook/94\\_docs/BOLER.HTM](http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EP/PE/yearbook/94_docs/BOLER.HTM), 1994, [cited 5 September, 2003].
  9. Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotion and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 164.
  10. Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Changing the Subject: Studies in the Appropriation of Pain," in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, ed. Linda A. Bell and David Blumenfeld (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 181-196, 183.
  11. Spelman, "Changing the Subject," 192.
  12. Alison Jones, "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Pedagogy, Desire, and Absolution in the Classroom," *Educational Theory* 49, no.3 (Summer 1990): 299.
  13. Jones, "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue," 311.
  14. Jones, "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue," 312.
  15. This and all quotes that follow are from webpostings made by students in a multicultural education class for pre-service teachers at the University of Delaware in fall semester, 2002. While the postings were not made anonymously, I have preserved student anonymity in this essay.
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