

Deferring Totality: An Anti-Dialectic Theory of Identity

by

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Good morning. My name is David Powell. I am an independent scholar who tends to engage in literary theory, for no other reason than I enjoy the occasional cognitive drubbing. I am not affiliated with a university or organization, and, quite frankly, would not be here if it weren't for my writing partner, Dr. Jana Noel, who, as it happens, is also my partner in being.

Our presentation is entitled ... hmm ... interesting word entitled: to give a person or thing a title, right or claim to something. It doesn't seem like an apropos depiction of our work, since, clearly, it was a corporation (Derrida) that influenced its existence. Not simply because we co-authored the manuscript, but because of all those who came before us, and influenced our ideas, writing styles, patterns of thinking and modes of thought. A small, disconsolate number of these people, who were kind enough to let us use their ideas, and in some cases, even their exact words, are represented at the end of our work, in what appears to be a rather entitled list. Alphabetized, no less.

Notwithstanding, Dr. Noel and I managed tentatively put something together, that in no manner is peremptory, in a process that included much gnashing of teeth, hair-pulling, and, on occasion, a fusillade of flying furniture. We decided to call it, Larry. Well, I decided on Larry; Jana much preferred:

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Dialectics and binary opposition are common ways of thinking in the Western Eurocentric world; to wit, reasoning, philosophy, view of culture, and critical thinking are all highly influenced by the principles of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics. The concept of dialectics, complete with the necessity for confrontation between binary opposites, is a

highly used theoretical and argumentative technique. Indeed, it has much to do with the way in which we interpret literature, society, culture, and ourselves. Ultimately, it is a formula that demands assimilation over difference. In the Anglo-American tradition, society tends to adhere to the tenets that fit the dominant group's particular needs and is quite content to cast off the rest as redundant, unnecessary, and unimportant. These cast-off portions are then relegated to the margins.

Using Derrida's concept of deferring totality; Deleuze's concept of the logic of multiplicities; and Butler's "sliding scale;" this incorporation of the paper presents an anti-dialectic theory of identity, one that recognizes the permanent deferral of the very concept of identity – a non-synthesized, unresolved characterization – that values hybridity over singularity or synthesis. Being over become. Gloria Anzaldua's book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, is an apt example of this theory in practice, approaching the level of theory in and of itself. Ultimately, there are rather pertinent implications for all manner of education as Henry Giroux's (1992, 1994, 2000) work, including his discussions of "border pedagogy," and his "discourse of lived cultures," betokens.

At this time, it becomes necessary to discuss Hegelian dialectics and represent it in a formulaic manner; to wit, *Thesis vs. Antithesis = Synthesis*. A key to this concept is binary opposition, which requires a synthesis of being that reaches totality, arrived at through argumentation. This system of logic pits two disparate arguments against one-another until a terminable synthesis or resolution is attained. If we descry this process further, with the understanding that synthesis is to be reaped, it becomes rather apparent that it can only be achieved through violent means.

Two outcomes are possible. First, if two opposing arguments meet, and, ultimately, are synthesised, then neither argument can pass through the process completely unscathed, because, in order for synthesis to occur, each side of stated arguments must lose some aspects of themselves. These lost aspects, ruptured pieces, are relegated to the margins where they are no longer realized. Proximally, synthesis can occur when one view logically argues the other out of existence, uncompromisingly. In this case one argument would win the conflagration outright.

As this may apply to one's characterization, our vision argues against this version of Hegelian dialectics, which strives for "the totality of social relations as a process that ultimately leads to a unified formation" (Ellrich, p. 464). It argues against a view of identity that needs to be synthesised, resolved, or any other term that presupposes identity can be considered as a singular or societal totality.

Deleuze (1965, 1987) assumed that the Hegelian logic of negation and contradiction was really a logic of identity limited in scope. Under the premise of Hegelianism, the non-rational "other" was too easily subsumed into the rational "same." "What was needed, according to Deleuze, was a philosophy of difference *as* difference, irreducible to the concepts of identity and representation" (Bogue, 1989, p. 3). What was needed was a logic not of identity, but rather a logic of difference, of multiplicity (Baugh, 1992, p. 136; Deleuze, 1994). Deleuze and Guattari (1965) describe the move away from dialectics, away from the assumption of totalities.

We no longer believe in the dull gray outlines of a dreary, colorless dialectic of evolution, aimed at forming a harmonious whole out of heterogeneous bits by rounding off their rough edges. We believe only in totalities that are peripheral.

And if we discover such a totality alongside various separate parts, it is a whole *of* these particular parts but does not totalize them; it is a unity *of* all of these particular parts but does not unify them; rather, it is added to them as a new part fabricated separately. (*Anti-Oedipus*, p. 286)

Best and Kellner (1991) add to the discussion as they borrow Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "schizoanalysis," which "deconstructs modern binaries and breaks with modern theories of the subject, representational modes of thought, and totalizing practices. Schizoanalysis articulates new postmodern positions organized around the concepts of plurality, multiplicity, and decenteredness" (p. 86). They elaborate further on the concept of "authentic multiplicities" in opposition to the idea of a totality, when they write that "the philosophy of authentic multiplicities, which are analyzed without being related to a lost unity or totality" (p. 101).

By arguing against the Hegelian system of oppositions and ultimate synthesis, Deleuze was free to explore the essence of difference as a cognitive function which could free the mind to form new and multiple philosophical entities – multiplicities – to avoid assimilation into the traditional predominant, polemic norms.

Indeed, Derrida mirrors this transitioning of the philosophical analysis of identity when he proposed that there is no totality of the concept of identity; rather, quite the opposite, reconciliation, resolution, and totality are always deferred. "The boundary of identity is moving; the space for passage between borders is shifting and the event of approaching the border transforms the border itself" (Wang, 2005, p. 48). "Since no final resolution of differences can be expected, both self and the other are continuously transformed while they cannot be fused into one" (Wang, p. 50). According to Derrida's

différance, there is always a “deferral of meaning between signifier and signified,” in that “the name we have for something, for ourselves, for an other, is precisely what fails to capture the referent” (Butler, 2004, pp. 2-3). In other words, one can “never fully be ‘captured’ through social categories or designative names” (Butler, 2004, p. 3).

The notion of “capturing” implies boundaries or borders that need to be permeated. Derrida (1993) describes three types. One, *anthropological* borders, which are artificially determined lines that separate cultures, languages, and territories. Two, a *problematic closure*, which creates *closed discourses* where an established enquiry is expected. And three, a conceptual border, which defines opposites. Derrida further intimates that these borders can overlap, are not fixed, and are capable of exceeding themselves (Wang, 2005, p. 46).

Judith Butler also writes about the non-fixed nature of identity, especially with her concept of gender as a “sliding scale.” Indeed, aspects of identity that some see as natural or final are, on this account, points on a scale that move in, out and along. One is always moving. There is no required point on the scale, or requisite number of characteristics that must be part of an identity. Bruce Baugh (1992) explains, the logic of multiplicities understands that “there is no necessity for a set to have n number of members, it has the number of members that correspond to the quite fortuitous conjunction of circumstances producing actual members of the set” (p. 136).

The multiplicity of one’s identity permeates the border between center and margin so that the boundary is already exceeded, yet this fluidity does not erase the boundary once and for all. Different layers of the self still need to be addressed through the movements toward decentering and demarginalizing, both of which

are temporary configurations of subjectivity that lead to an awareness of the other in opposite directions and thus make the reification of any stable location impossible. (Wang, 2005, p. 57)

Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* (1999) "is the discourse of people who live between different worlds. It speaks against dualism, oversimplification, and essentialism. It is, a discourse, a language, that explains the social conditions of subjects with hybrid identities...It moves beyond binary constructions" (Elenes, 1997, p. 359). For Anzaldúa (1999), a woman, Chicana, lesbian, scholar, poet, theorist, writer; there is no set number of identity states. In writing through history, poetry, narrative, code switching; she illustrates multiplicities. "Like the people whose lives it chronicles, *Borderlands* resists genre boundaries" (Saldivar-Hull, p. 211). The evaluation and acceptance of these diverse, sometimes discordant, aspects of her being is a process which Anzaldúa calls "The New Mestiza.

At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly 'crossing over,' this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an 'alien' consciousness is presently in the making – a new mestiza consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the borderlands. (1999, p. 99)

Within Anzaldúa's work one encounters multiple identity use, multiple histories and multiple languages – multiple, hybrid realities which lead to varied interpretations. This multifaceted perspective is an interpretation which denies the very tenets of dialectical synthesis and resolution. She is not trying to reach a resolution or synthesis.

She is like Nahual, the shape-shifting shaman, who has the ability to travel through worlds (Reuman, 2000). This frees her to interpret herself in vast and various ways. No longer does she have to cast off one aspect of herself for another. No longer do her personas have to be fractured and synthesized. She can be multitudinous. In fact, she can continue to incorporate more, knowing that the possibilities are endless. She states in an interview, “I think that is what evolves, is that you internalize something that becomes an unconscious part of the actions that you take, and that frees up your attention to learn in new ways. And again – I’m repeating the complexity/expansion thing – you graft onto yourself whatever is useful” (Reuman, 2000, p. 9).

Thank you, and with that I shall defer to my more erudite partner.

Educational Implications

My portion of this presentation is to express the educational implications of this work. However, I can’t resist starting with a story.

My student Gema, spelled G E M A, lived in the borderlands in rural, agricultural California, where her double consciousness was formed. She lived with others who shared a Mexican-American consciousness, language, and culture, while at the same time participating in the life of the mainstream through being a consumer of mainstream cultural commodities. Her borderlands were a source of strength for her, while at the same time they served as a border that she hoped to cross as she entered early adolescence. This all ended when her family left the town and moved into a new set of

borderlands in urban Sacramento. This created new borders to negotiate and cross, beginning at age 12, when, as Gema explains, “I lost my name. I lost my name when my teachers could not pronounce Gema. Heema? Jeema? They would ask, all the while I was screaming (in my head), “Why don’t you know my name. It is beautiful. It is a song.” Gema had left Anzaldua’s Napanla, a “land of the middle, a land of multiple ways of knowing, of positive and negative coexistence” (Burciaga, AERA presentation, 2010). She had entered what Derrida describes as a “problematic border,” one which creates closed discourses where an established inquiry is expected. As Wang (2005) writes, “The multiplicity, alterity, and hybridity of an individual person’s identity call into question any essential definition of self. Attaching any individual person to a social category imposes a preestablished identity and ignores the capacity of the self to go beyond social constraints” (p. 54) Gema did not re-gain her name until she re-entered the borderlands through her high school bilingual education program, where she was able to recollect her double consciousness.

Now – back to the educational implications of our work, which can be found in Giroux’s concepts of “border pedagogy” and the “discourse of lived cultures,” complemented with Wang’s examination of multicultural education through a Derridean lens.

For the purposes of border pedagogy, Giroux defines borderlands, in which “the interrelationship of different cultures and identities become...sites of crossing, negotiation, translation, and dialogue” (1992, p. 181). For Giroux (2002),

Border pedagogy is attentive to developing a democratic public philosophy that respects the notion of difference as part of a common struggle to extend the

quality of public life. It presupposes not merely an acknowledgment of the shifting borders that both undermine and reterritorialize different configurations of culture, power, and knowledge. It also links the notions of schooling and the broader category of education to a more substantive struggle for a radical democratic society. (p. 20)

Within border pedagogy, obviously, there are borders, borders that beg for crossing. Thus, Giroux's (2002) first step in border pedagogy is the denotation of the border that "signals forms of transgression in which existing borders forged in domination can be challenged and redefined" (p. 20). And we would add that center and margin are also concepts that call for challenge and redefinition. As Wang (2005) writes, "Located in history and culture, the dynamics of center and margin are contextualized differently for different people" (p. 57). David and I heard about a repositioning of center and margin earlier at this conference, when we attended the session titled "Dear Mr. Kozol...: Four African American Women Scholars and the Reauthoring of *Savage Inequalities*. These four women, who were children in the East St. Louis schools so decontextualized by Jonathan Kozol in his efforts to describe the magnitude of poverty in the community, described the community's strengths that were overlooked in Kozol's report. In providing the deeper community perspective overlooked in Kozol's use of terms like wasteland, they described family, community, networks of resources, activities, and a push for children to receive their education. As Dr. Raquel Farmer-Hinton described, "We're from a place that people marginalize, but we think is the center of our universe...we consistently transgress."

Second, border pedagogy “also speaks to the need to create pedagogical conditions in which students become border crossers in order to understand otherness in its own terms” (Giroux, 2002, p. 20). As Wang (2005) explains, “The creativity of the self in his or her movement is preconditioned by openness to the other” (p. 55). A border pedagogy creates spaces for discourses within and across boundaries, opening space for new understandings and new multiplicities and hybridities of identities.

Third, according to Giroux (2002), “border pedagogy makes visible the historically and socially constructed strengths and limitations of those places and borders we inherit and that frame our discourses and social identities” (p. 20). As emphasized by the scholars from East St. Louis mentioned previously, theories of community capital, such as the theory of “community cultural wealth” by Yosso (2005), stress the strengths within socially marginalized communities that are often devalued by the mainstream of education. Community cultural wealth includes the ability to maintain hopes and dreams in the face of real and perceived barriers, the cultural knowledges that carry a sense of history and memory, and the social networks of people and community resources that help to navigate through society’s institutions. This is the set of marginalized knowledge and strengths present within the borderlands.

And finally Giroux (1997) offers an additional concept that can help educators and students and communities reposition borders while creating multiple identities. The concept of “the discourse of lived cultures” presents a practice for bringing the non-dialectic theory of identity into schools. Giroux describes the discourse of lived cultures as “an understanding of how [people] give meaning to their lives through complex historical, cultural, and political forms that they both embody and produce” (p. 140). Any

opportunity to engage in border crossing needs to come through a true discourse on how “members of dominant and subordinate groups offer accounts of who they are in their different readings of the world” (p. 140).

Conclusion

It is our hope that with our work we can contribute to providing a theoretical foundation for the concept of a non-totalizing theory of identity, one that values and encourages multiplicity and hybridity, one that both values and problematizes the double or triple consciousness that comes from living in the borderlands. We join others in proposing to rid the educational system of “the violence of master narratives formed in the language of binary oppositions” (Giroux, 2002, p. 15). We hope to offer what Giroux (2002) calls a “theoretical language” for a non-totalizing identity and knowledge, one in which

knowledge forms emanating from the margins can be used to redefine the complex, multiple, heterogeneous realities that constitute those relations of difference that make up the experiences of students who often find it impossible to define their identities through the cultural and political codes that characterize the dominant culture. (p. 24)

THANK YOU!

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