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The Difference Difference *Might Make*

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In his essay “Enough About You” (2007), NBC journalist and nightly news anchor Brian Williams worries about the “celebration of self” inspired by user-generated media of Web 2.0 embodied in blogs, social networks, and YouTube and the thinking it produces. An informal poll of the students in my writing classes revealed that many of them spend an inordinate amount of time (as much as three hours a day) on Web 2.0, a place where users can post “news” and video for anyone to see; more importantly, they can tune in to only what they *want* to see and hear, often disregarding the limitations of these sources. This new media “clutter,” as pervasive and arguably useful as it may be, tends to isolate people’s thinking to a culture of the same and fails to challenge it. Thus, students can limit their exposure to difference and the cognitive dissonance and subsequent learning it may produce.

In a society as diverse as ours, the unwillingness or inability to confront and accommodate ideas that are different may dangerously impair learning and the continuing development of our democracy, a worry that has been reinforced in recent days by the spectacle of people’s incivility to those whose ideas (or physical being) differ from their own. In fact, I have noted among students, in both the writing and English teacher preparation courses I teach, a remarkable inclination to avoid such confrontation and a lack of knowing how to do so, both in discussion and in writing when the occasion arises. So, I have wondered how to overcome my students’ resistance to tackling ideas and representations different from what they think they know (race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, for example), information that may contain the capacity to upset the relative comfort of the status quo, help them become more open to difference, and develop their ability to deal with it in civil ways.

What is at stake for our students and, arguably, for our democracy is the capacity of information that is *different* to interrupt the repetition of the same and unsettle the “reality” it constructs. This situation is uncomfortable because students sense that such information has the capacity to transform *what is* into a projection of *what could be*, revealing, as Michel Foucault wrote, other orders of consciousness, which modernist notions of certainty, universal truth, logic, and scientific forms of knowing seek to contain within the order of the same (288). (Note: I use “scientific” to mean “turning over our consciousness to scientific thought and method,” so it’s different from *scientific*.) Students may regard the uncertainty of this transformation as dangerous because it has the capacity to make them uncomfortable with what they think they know and put them at odds with authority figures important in their lives. It can upset “reality” and call into question matters they believe are “settled.” So, in the courses I teach, I use fiction to tap into the uncertainty that exposure to *difference* produces. Because it is not *real*, fiction creates a space in which students can become more open and self-conscious, willing to think more critically and willing to question, thereby increasing the potential for learning.

My purpose here is, first, to examine how ideologies work to maintain sameness and the hold they have on us and, then, to show how I have used a fictional work in my teaching practice to create the possible and necessary space for students to learn to confront and accommodate difference and to interact with others different from them to promote productive dialogue.

The Difficulty and Discomfort of Confronting Difference

A particular scene in Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* illustrates the difficulty of unsettling and, perhaps, overturning ideological beliefs, especially when dialogue about these matters is absent. The scene I have in mind portrays an encounter between Amon Goeth, the commandant of the concentration camp, and Helen Hirsch, the young Jewish woman he had selected for his servant. Those who have seen the film

may remember it because of its extraordinary enactment of a violence that is both insidiously subtle and mercilessly overt, a manifestation of Goeth's attempt to work out his "love/hate" feelings for Helen.

In this scene, Goeth surprises Helen in her bleak basement quarters as she is attempting to bathe herself. Seeing him, she comes "to attention," beads of water fresh upon her face and dripping from her hair, the slender outlines of her shivering body visible through the frail slip she is wearing. As he speaks to her, she looks straight ahead as if focusing on some distant object or memory to distract her from the fear (evident in her eyes) that she feels in his presence. Goeth begins, "So this is where you come to hide from me." Ironically, given her circumstances, he claims that he has come to tell her what a really good servant she is and that, if she needs a reference after the war, he would be willing to give her one. But his menacing presence, as he circles the trembling Helen, belies his words, and she does not respond. "It must be lonely down here," he continues anyway, fixing her in his gaze like an animal he has caught in the headlights of his automobile. "Is it? You can answer." But, without giving her a chance to do so, he says, "What is the right answer? That's what you're thinking. What does he want to hear?" Then, he answers himself, "The truth, Helen, is always the right answer."

Anticipating her silence and answering again what he believes is her unspoken thought, he continues, "Yes, you're right. Sometimes we're both lonely. I would like so much to reach out and touch you in your loneliness. What would that be like? What would be wrong with that?" He reaches out cautiously to caress her breast through the thin slip, but quickly pulls his hand back to re-convince himself, "I realize that you're not a 'person' in the strictest sense of the word." Then, he continues once again as if she has responded, "Maybe you're right about that, too . . . what's wrong is not us. It's this!" He gestures in the air to something more compelling that he believes motivates both of them. Helen stares straight ahead, shivering silently as he continues, "You...you make a good point. When they compare you to vermin, rodents, lice, I just..." He examines her face intently, "Is this the face of a rat? Are these the eyes of a rat? Hath not a Jew eyes?" He moves close to her face as if to kiss her, drawing back only at the

last possible moment and returning to his conviction, "No, I don't think so. You're a Jewish bitch, and you talked me into it, didn't you!" Unable to manage the feelings he has for her as another human being, feelings that conflict with his ideology and threaten to overturn it, he acts out the hate he has for her as a Jew (a "non-person," an inferior other), slapping her and beating her with his fists, tearing the room apart, and toppling its contents upon her as if to bury her.

In the wake of Goeth's behavior, Helen confesses to Schindler her fear that he will one day shoot her as arbitrarily as he shot a woman who had had the misfortune to simply walk by his patio one day. Schindler points out that Goeth "enjoys" her too much to shoot her and that he won't even let her wear the "star" because "he doesn't want anyone to know that it is a Jew that he is enjoying. He killed the other woman," Schindler tells Helen, "because she meant nothing to him." He suggests that Helen means something to Goeth even if it is something only vaguely subconscious that he cannot identify.

In addition to illustrating the difficulty of unsettling people's beliefs, this scene led me to wonder if what Goeth both "enjoys" and hates (has been taught to hate) is Helen's difference, her "otherness," which he secretly desires but which he cannot possess or touch (and desperately wants to deny he desires). Her difference—not just that she is a woman, but that she is a Jew—seems to both attract and repulse him. His attraction to her difference wants him to disturb the status quo (what is), but his ideology (what he has been taught to believe) will not permit it. Goeth seems to experience a curiosity about Helen, akin to what Laura Mulvey (cited by Diane Brunner in *Between the Masks*) describes as "a compulsive desire to see and know" what has been forbidden, to know "something that is concealed so strongly that it is experienced like a drive, leading to the [transgression of a prohibition]" (10).

This act of transgression opens up a space in which *knowledge can be revised*. Spielberg "catches" Goeth in this scene twisting between curiosity and fetishism, which Mulvey says, "is born out of a refusal to see, a refusal to know, and a refusal to accept...difference." This scene between Goeth and Helen presents an extreme example of the dialectic of inside/outside that Brunner speaks of as "a special function in status quo ideology that perpetuates the politics of essentialism...[that]

renders sameness 'natural' and difference transgressive" (10). In this case, Goeth comes up to the threshold of an opening, but his ideology prevents him from entering it to check things out for himself. His rage, though it is directed at Helen, is for his desire to know difference, which remains unsatisfied.

This connection between desire and difference, the desire to know difference, is what interests me and what eventually led to my use of fiction as a way to introduce difference as a mechanism for learning to students in the courses I teach. What does this connection suggest? And, how does the ability (or the refusal) to satisfy the desire to know difference affect human behavior?

Derrida suggests that the principle of difference underlies all language and the way language constructs "reality" and our place in it by determining what can be perceived (or not) and by determining what counts as meaningful. Language participates in the interplay between the individual and the word where identity is an effect of difference and where individuals at an intersection with others position themselves to be "like" them or "different" from them. Language wants to continually transform them into categories of meaning according to Michel de Certeau, "eager to have or be a name," eager to "tell the code"

(148-149). Much of the bizarre behavior so common today may result from the desire of people to escape the structure of language where each word as separate conceptual category forces people, in the very act of perceiving, to separate themselves and draw distinctions between themselves and others, perhaps to determine how they "measure up."

Maybe that's the "threat" of difference: it continually upsets whatever order has been established. Awareness or self-consciousness arises from multiple individual perceptions as we come into contact with "otherness" or difference. If nothing in our perception of experience disturbs "the way things are," we remain unaware. But, our awareness notices difference as information that may threaten ideology (the way things are), the foundation of core truths that stands against the perceived "chaos" of the unknown. A colleague told me once that human beings are

always trying "to order things to bring themselves to order to find comfort in a disorderly world." Difference disturbs that order and interrupts its repetition.

The scene from *Schindler's List* I described above presents Amon Goeth in his struggle, contending not only with the desire already present in language but also with the operation of his own ideology. In *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, Henry Giroux observes that human behavior and thought is "rooted in a nexus of structural needs, common sense, and critical consciousness" where ideology calls forth multifold subjectivities and produces certain perceptions of the world and everyday life (77). Ideology, in limiting what appears reasonable, credible, or "right" helps people make

sense of their experience. At its best, it provides them with a framework of being in the world and acting efficiently in ways that seem "natural." Thus, people can make decisions regarding how to be without having to think each of them through each time. At its worst, it functions as "social reproduction," working on individuals to get them to go along with cultural practices (even if it is not in their best interest to do so) because it discourages critical thinking. Because people acquire ideology effortlessly, they forget that the "categories" that condition

their experience are "constructed" and can, therefore, be constructed differently. The certainty ideology produces permits, and even encourages, oppression (and sometimes, the outright destruction) of those excluded as "abnormal" or "different," as was the case in Hitler's "final solution." Goeth reacts instinctively not to upset the status quo—he has too much to lose. Challenging the certain knowledge of the dominant discourse is sometimes downright dangerous. Doing so turns out to be too great a risk for him despite his desire to really know Helen, check out his doubts, and find himself in a position different from the one his ideology permits.

The stampede is, perhaps, a useful metaphor for thinking about the effects of ideology. In a stampede all the individuals form a group that becomes unified in its action. Then, in a wild headlong rush of blind panic, members of the group put their heads down and thoughtlessly follow

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their leaders—sometimes right over a cliff. In a sense, that is what happened to Goeth. In the end, although he hangs for it, he remained loyal—blindly obedient—to his ideology. The “structure” of the stampede permits nothing else.

Turning Aside a Stampede

My central argument, then, is that teachers, when possible, ought to practice critical pedagogies that challenge the forces of sameness that want to replicate themselves. Using fiction in the way I describe below may be one of these pedagogies. It is challenging work, however, that will not always be successful as the following example illustrates.

In an essay in *Dangerous Territories* entitled “Denial and Disclosure: An Analysis of Selective Reality in the Feminist Classroom,” Patricia Elliot explores the relationship between fear and critique for her students in a course in gender and society. Her students both refused to engage with the materials of the course and denied the knowledge suggested by their own personal experiences because they “believed” that gender equality had already been achieved. Elliot perceived her students’ resistance and hostility as a *defense against new insights*. The desire for the knowledge an examination of the issues of gender might reveal put students in the uncomfortable position of disrupting the status quo of the selective reality they had constructed. Thus, a desire for “prohibited knowledge” was trumped by their fears of upsetting the status quo. One of Elliot’s graduate assistants noted that the students actually seemed to *reject critical thinking* teachers asked them to do because they sensed it as “political action” that had the potential to challenge the social, economic, and political identities with which they were comfortable. They saw it as the classic “slippery slope” into the abyss. This position is one that students find themselves in as teachers ask them to confront and accommodate difference in the classroom.

Recent declarations that the era of racism in this country is over, and the election of the first black president, have created a similar ideology. But, the important thing to note about racism is that it is less about the color of the skin than the *practice of privilege and one-upsmanship*. To be born white has meant to be born entitled, never *other*. Whiteness has existed as an “invisible presence,” as the uninterrogated standard or normative ideal against which

all other pigments can only fail to “measure up.” In his essay “Stranger in the Village,” James Baldwin describes his own experience with this phenomenon:

From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came...I remain as much of a stranger today as I was the day I first arrived...I thought of white men arriving for the first time in an African village, strangers there, as I am a stranger here, and tried to imagine the astounded populace touching their hair and marveling at the color of their skin. But there is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by Whites. The white man takes the astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned; whereas I, without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even, in a sense created me, people who have cost me more in anguish and rage than they will ever know. (159, 161, 164)

According to Alex Callinicos (cited in McLaren’s *Revolutionary Multiculturalism*), on New World colonial plantations where slave labor was necessary, “The ‘natural inferiority’ of Africans was used by whites to justify enslaving them” (264). And, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison argues that we “should not be surprised that the Enlightenment could accommodate slavery: we should be surprised if it had not. The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlights freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery....For in the construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free, but also the not-me” (38). Peter McLaren suggests that, in the case of racism, it is not enough to “put our initiatives behind inclusions of minorities.” It is not enough to simply remember Martin Luther King, Jr., or celebrate Black History month once a year. It may be necessary to actually unsettle white identity—a more difficult task likely to meet

with a great deal of resistance. David Roedinger (cited in McLaren) describes whiteness as “the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity on what one isn’t and on whom one can hold back” (10) based on the scarcity mentality of the zero-sum game. Those who are white, thus, have a stake in maintaining a status quo in which they are “winners” at the expense of those who are not.

How Fiction Can Create the Space for Transformation

My idea is that if fiction can create and perpetuate an invisible ideology of whiteness, perhaps it can also undermine and unsettle it, creating the space for students to think differently about race. So, in the courses I teach, I have used the fiction of Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* to help students examine the difference difference makes and struggle with the idea that everything they think they know may work differently in a different place. As James Baldwin suggests, confident in their innate superiority, white men have always set out to prove that they are superior and to show people of color what they do not know. What happens in *The Poisonwood Bible* upsets this confidence.

Nathan Price, the thoughtless, self-righteous, and stubborn Baptist missionary of the novel, came to Africa in 1959 with his wife and four daughters determined to “civilize” and convert the black heathens of the Belgian Congo. But, as his oldest daughter Rachel says near the end of the book, “You can’t just sashay into the jungle aiming to change it all over to the Christian style without expecting the jungle to change you right back.” She had seen it repeated over and over again, she says, “Some fellow thinks he’s going to be the master of Africa and winds up with his nice European-tailored suit rumpled in a corner and his wits half cracked from the *filaires* itching under his skin” (515). And, everything that happened to the Price family confirmed this lesson.

One strategy I use is to ask my students to assume the identity of one member of the Price family as they read the book and examine the situations both she or he and the family face. Examining these situations in this way upsets the thinking of most of my students as they discuss and write about difference and find themselves forced to revise what they think they know and to admit

that they might have something to learn from others who see the world differently.

For example, these students learn that the garden Nathan had planted with seeds the family brought with them from America failed for two reasons. First, insisting he knew better, Nathan refused to take the advice of the natives (who tried to teach him) to plant the seeds in mounds, insisting instead on setting them in rows that washed out with the first hard rain. Second, he failed to realize that the African insects would not recognize foreign plants and pollinate them. Thus, while his plants grew lush and flowered, they never bore fruit. Students come to see the story of the garden and the failure of Nathan’s mission as a cautionary tale for white folks who need to prove their superiority and validate their whiteness at the expense of different others. For many of them, it is a “duh” moment.

In the course of the novel, Leah, one of Nathan’s daughters, relates the story of the Portuguese explorers, who saw that “the well-dressed, articulate people of Kongo did not buy or sell or transport their crops”—the tropical climate and the land would not support this. So, they “merely lived in place and ate what they had, like the beasts of the forest,” like the Biblical lilies of the field. At the same time the Portuguese were marveling at how efficiently the Kingdom of Kongo managed its society and had known its own bible by heart for hundreds of years, they refused to learn from its achievements. Leah notes, “In spite of poetry and beautiful clothes,” the Portuguese could not imagine such people...these “people were surely not fully human—were primitive...a word [the Portuguese] must have used to salve their conscience for what was to come. Soon the priests were holding mass baptisms on shore and marching their converts onto ships for sugar plantations in Brazil, slaves to the higher god of commodity agriculture” (522).

My students learn from Leah that the Portuguese dismissed the achievements of Kongo for its “lack of cash crops,” and unable to imagine a *reasonable* society failing to take this step, they sold the people of the kingdom of Kongo into slavery. The parallels to American history are difficult for students to dismiss. Leah points out that it was hard for people living in a temperate climate to imagine: To grow “fields of waving grain...year after year without dread of flood or plague, in soil that offers up green stems that bend to the scythe again and again, bread from a bottomless basket, seems the most

natural thing in the world” (524). But, my students learn that in the context of the Congo such thinking is not *natural* at all.

Through interaction with situations in the novel, students begin to see Nathan Price’s mission as doomed by his unwillingness to compromise, to rethink his purpose in the context of the Congo and the lives of the people of Kilanga, and to learn from their differences and the wisdom they had developed over the thousands of years of engagement with their habitat.

Most students see Nathan’s failure to learn the Kikongo language either before he came or after he arrived as especially costly, leading to the serious misunderstanding of his sermons and his intentions. “Tata Jesus is *bangala*!” he shouted at the end of his sermons, oblivious to the fact that Kikongo words had so many different meanings. *Bangala* could, for example, mean *most precious* and *most insufferable* but also *poisonwood*. Students see that his lack of knowledge brought down his sermons every time when he shouted, “Jesus is poisonwood.” Further, his stated intention to baptize the children in the river was misinterpreted because he failed to understand what everyone else knew, the very real danger of the crocodiles living in the river attacking small children or anyone else who ventured in.

Peter McLaren suggests that whiteness “offers coherence and stability in a world in which capital produces regimes of desire linked to commodity utopias where fantasies of omnipotence must find a stable home...the ‘them’ is always located within the ‘us’...The marginal are always foundational to the stability of the central actors (270). The “threat” of difference—of being forced to consider alternatives to the established order and challenges to one’s social, economic, and political identity—can be profoundly disturbing precisely because it opens up the space for countless other alternatives (beyond race and ethnicity). Leah’s twin sister Adah believes that we construct our lives around such errors of thought, misunderstandings where “illusions taken for truth are the pavement under our feet...what we call civilization” (532). Moreover, she gives new meaning to the word *civilization* for most of my students.

Through *The Poisonwood Bible* students also confront difference as it embodied in Adah herself. For the early part of her life Adah had been lame, an accident of birth. Later, after her lameness is “cured,” she found she had lost the

“crooked self” which allowed her to see the world differently. How can I explain,” she asks, “that my two halves used to add up to more than one self?” She accuses Western civilization of having “a cheerful, simple, morality” that desires a perfection it can only imagine and “reviles the missed mark” (491). Although lameness may not be anyone’s fault, she points out, “One still [is expected] to show the good manners to act ashamed. ...The arrogance of the able-bodied is staggering,” she declares. “Yes, maybe we’d like to be able to get places quickly, and carry things in both hands, but *only because* we have to keep up with the rest of you, or get The Verse. We would rather be just like *us* and have that be all right” (491). My students are confronted with the idea that, indeed, we are all different, and *that* ought to be all right.

In page after page of the book, my students confront the difference difference makes. And, I think, because the work is a fiction and because they have assumed a “role,” they seem more willing to let it unsettle their thinking. We don’t examine the book as literature per se although Kingsolver’s writing is certainly beautiful and engaging. We examine the book for situations like those mentioned above that call long-held beliefs into question and provide “food” for critical thinking, discussion, and writing.

What I am suggesting is that teachers ought to deliberately select works of fiction appropriate to the age of the students they teach to serve the purpose I have described here and, in so doing, provide students with the possibility of imagining themselves in the shoes of others and seeing through their eyes.

Although Kingsolver’s novel provides many opportunities for exposing students to difference beyond race alone (gender, religion, ethnicity, and disability, among others), I don’t mean to suggest that *The Poisonwood Bible* is the only work of fiction that teachers can use in the way I have described. There are many works of fiction (books, films, and other media), appropriate to a variety of ages from kindergarten to college, that can serve the purpose of exposing students to differences of different kinds and opening space for civil discussion

and critical thinking and writing. What I am suggesting is that teachers ought to *deliberately* select works of fiction appropriate to the age of the students they teach to serve the purpose I have described here and, in so doing, provide students with the possibility of imagining themselves in the shoes of others and seeing through their eyes. Teachers need to use the openings fiction provides to help their students see beyond the limiting sameness of resources that may currently inform their understandings, enable them to confront and accommodate difference, and learn from it what they might not otherwise be able to learn.

Henry Giroux recognizes that students must understand how they participate in ideology through their own experiences and desires and that these experiences and desires must then be made problematic to provide a basis for change for themselves and for the larger society. Additionally, James Berlin argues that, to help students develop the intellectual skills and critical habits of mind necessary for this task, teachers need to put forward a program of critical literacy both to prepare people's voices to be heard and to enable agency (*Rhetoric* 101). He believes that teachers are critical to this process and ought to be committed "to teaching reading and writing as inescapably political acts, the working out of contested codes affecting every feature of experience" (131). The simple and perhaps obvious act of using fiction to accomplish this work *might* open the space in which students may see difference as important to the knowledge they are building and learn to think critically—before they follow the stampede right over the cliff.

In *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture*, Richard Kearney suggests that there is a "libratory power" in imagining a world otherwise and seeking alternatives in an ethical and caring relationship with others. Fiction provides "a carnival of possibilities," he suggests, "where everything is permitted, nothing censored. It is the willingness to imagine oneself in the other person's skin, to see things *as if* one were, momentarily at least, another" (368). An invaluable lesson.

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