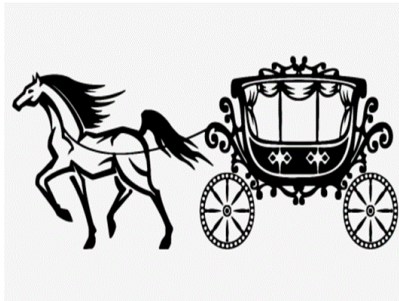


Disrupting the Cinderella Premise: Transforming our Classrooms, Communities, and Global Spaces

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*“I’m no longer accepting the things I cannot change...
I’m changing the things I cannot accept.”*
- Angela Davis

Myers & Twenge (2019) in introducing social psychology in their most current textbook use the well-known folktale of Cinderella, who must contend with oppressive living conditions to make a point that on a deeper level the story demands that we accept the power of the situation. The authors construe that John-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher would have no problem accepting this “Cinderella premise” (p. 2) and included one of his quotes to substantiate



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their deduction. Sartre’s (1946) quote offers, “We humans are first of all beings in a situation. We cannot be distinguished from our situations, for they form us and decide our possibilities” (p. 59). In class I asked my students did they think Sartre’s quote was indeed true and some replied that yes, our situations form us and decide our possibilities. I thought about this for a minute and determined they had a point. But at the same time, I am bound not to leave them in this space, which is a set-up to reproduce oppression and domination, and so I added to the discussion, “oppressive conditions can form us and decide our possibilities, but we have the power to transform situations---and ultimately open up new formations and possibilities”. They nodded their heads in assent---because they were given a different lens to see through, to navigate life. I am intentional to try and not reproduce colonialism ideologies in the classroom. This is important because our classrooms, communities, and global world sit on the precipice of either

engaging in transforming our learning and living spaces or accepting Sartre's Cinderella premise, the power of the situation—and we are facing the results of this acceptance right now. Eddie Glaude Jr. (2020) in *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for our Own* has much to say about the stories we tell and live out. He contends “we have told ourselves a story that secures our virtues and protects us from our vices (p. xxvii)...now we find ourselves facing a moral reckoning of the same magnitude” (p. 202). Glaude's answer to this malaise:

“ours should be a story that begins with those who sought to make real the promise of democracy. Put aside the fairy tale of America as ‘the shining city on the hill’ or the ‘redeemer nation’ and recast the idea of perfecting the Union not as a guarantee of our goodness but a declaration of the ongoing work to address injustice in our midst” (p. 203).

Glaude calls for us think outside of the story, and he does just this by *thinking with* James Baldwin, who called attention to the stories and symbols, the lie being told decades ago and to not just accept the power of the situation. Glaude's thinking *with* James Baldwin is a model to watch, to ponder and pick-up. Why? BIPOC scholar-activists, practitioners, writers, poets, artists, educators, Black and Latinx feminists, liberation psychologists, and others---have lived through the pain, the anguish, and many have died trying *not* to just accept the power of the situation. They have much to say for our current times, from the academe to the global world. White America must start to think *with* those whom they never imagined had something to offer, something to say. Yet, those on the front lines of a war living or dead always have something to say, particularly about justice. In this article I call you to pick up Glaude's model for effecting change and think *with* two other Black scholars, activists, and feminists, Angela Davis and bell hooks. Let us be clear, to think *with* anyone is not to imitate or replicate their thoughts or works,

but to grapple with “the ghosts of history that got us here, that continue to haunt us, and to muster all we can” (p. xxvii) to disrupt and transform the power of the situation.

We do not have to ascribe to Sartre’s viewpoint. For example, Angela Davis, uses the power of language to transform as she sheds part of the mantra of the well-known Serenity Prayer, *accepting things one cannot change* (Niebuhr, 1927) by framing her philosophy in this way, “*I’m no longer accepting the things I cannot change...I’m changing the things I cannot accept*” (Davis, n.d.). hooks give us a new lens in this statement: “Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community (p. 197).

Voices such as Davis’ and hooks may just have the language, framing, and strategies we are looking for to effect transformation. Their voices, among so many other BIPOC deserve our attention if we are to transform. This article, then, seeks to raise the voices of Davis and hooks, who I believe are particularly relevant for this current time and in this space. I provide two frameworks that are by no means exhaustive or complete in what they wrote about. However, I give you a lens that might intrigue you to look further. You should note that both Davis and hooks have written books that encapsulate the concept of “freedom”. Let us now think *with* them on what freedom means for our classrooms, our communities, and our global world.

Framework One: Teaching to Transgress-Education and the Practice of Freedom

In the classroom we might look to bell hooks and think *with* her for answers to transformation. In 1994 bell hooks wrote *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Many of you may have read hooks work in this space, but I encourage you to pull it

out again. In hooks's unveiling of her work in the university she begins with her awakening where she realized that her past teachers, particularly Black teachers were "enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial" and in essence, her teachers were on a mission. For black folks, she proclaimed, teaching, educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in the antiracist struggle. Learning to hooks was revolutionary (p.11). However, as times changed with racial integration, schools to hooks were no longer about transforming minds and beings, but more about amassing knowledge only as information. It had no connection to real life---rather being bussed to white schools---students learning obedience was what was expected (p. 12). Further, bell explains integrated schools illustrated "the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination" (p. 13). The bedrock that education was the practice of freedom stayed with hooks and she gives us essays that we can draw on now, in our times of needing to transform situations. I have identified several themes from hook's work where we can possibly find guidance and new lenses:

(1) Education should be the practice of freedom, not the reproduction of domination.

To enter classroom spaces in colleges and universities with the will to share excitement, desire, and pleasure, is to transgress. This requires movement beyond accepted boundaries, movement beyond the status quo, movement beyond accepting the power of the situation. hooks argues that there can never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Rather, there must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources and used positively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community (p.7).

(2) Theorizing as liberatory practice

Using the story of how she came to theory because she was in pain, hooks used theory to make sense of her inner and outer life. The lived experience of critical thinking, reflection, and analysis was cathartic for hooks. What if theory could be used as a healing space? If this is to be then those theories must resonate with everyone in the classroom, not just White students. The process of theorizing should lead to rethinking and new theories that speak to the prevailing social issues of our day. Theory must enable practice---so it becomes praxis—there should be a reciprocal dance—not a tension of push and pull. Overall, hooks pointed out, theory is not inherently healing. It only fulfills this function when we ask it to do so, and we direct our theorizing to this end (p. 70). When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice (p. 69).

(3) On language and power

hooks shared, “I know that it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize. Gloria Anzaldua reminds us of this pain in *Borderlands/ La Frontera* when she asserts, “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language” (p. 167).

(4) The classroom as a location of possibility

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we could labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and

heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress (p. 204).

Framework Two: The Meaning of Freedom

In the landscapes of our community and social worlds, we might look to Angela Davis and think *with* her for answers to addressing the crisis Eddie Glaude (2020) refers to as a time of moral reckoning. Davis argues that America is in a ‘crisis of historical consciousness’. Such a consciousness Davis purports in *The Meaning of Freedom* (2012) points to a recognition that our victories attained by freedom movements are never etched in stone:

...what we view under one set of historical conditions as triumphs of mass struggle can later come back to haunt us if we do not continually reconfigure the terms and transform the terrain of our struggle. The struggle must go on. Transformed circumstances require new theories and practices” (p. 19).

I propose that this is the type of framing that is needed in the classroom, our communities and global world. The circumstances within our socio-political environment have seriously shifted and thus our theories and practices must align with this new space. Davis gives us a range of considerations which I have include here that are part of a much larger framework. For more of her thoughts, I implore you to read her book. Forget about what you think you know about her and think *with* her.

(1) The complexities of social constructs

One of the major challenges Davis points out occurring in BIPOC communities is the need to develop a more popular consciousness of the complexities of racism, class, gender, and sexuality. In both scholarly and activist circles, for more than a decade, we have engaged in

public discourse around the interrelatedness of these methods of oppression, but the policies facing BIPOC continues to be driven by outmoded discourses and conceptions (p. 31).

(2) What does freedom, democracy, and multiculturalism mean?

Davis proposes we should ask ourselves the question of why have the official meanings of freedom and democracy and multiculturalism become increasingly restrictive? Why have these terms become so restrictive, she asks, that it is so difficult to disentangle their official meanings from the meaning of capitalism? Increasingly freedom and democracy are envisioned by the government as exportable commodities, commodities that can be sold or imposed on entire populations whose resistances are aggressively suppressed by the military (p. 89).

(3) Social meanings and the perils of individualism

Social meanings are always socially constructed, but we cannot leave it up to the state to produce these meanings, because we are always encouraged to conceptualize change only as it affects individuals. This individualism can be dangerous in that it is not unrelated to the possessive individualism of capitalism. This moves us into a space where we forget about structural change (p. 132).

(4) On the production of knowledge

Importantly, Davis offers, we should be thinking about producing knowledge that makes a difference. We should be interested not in race and gender, class, sexuality, and disability or any other socially constructed identification in and by themselves, but primarily that they have been acknowledged as conditions for hierarchies of power. Instead, these concepts must be transformed into interwoven paths of struggles for freedom. When we discuss concepts such as feminism, we are looking at new epistemologies, new ways of producing knowledge and transforming social relations. As scholars-activists and activists we realize that categorical

labeling always falls short of the social realities they attempt to represent, and social realities always supersede the categories that attempt to contain them. Herein is why we pay attention to language (p. 197).

These highlights included in this article may be redundant to others you have read. Davis notes that yes, we fight the same battles repeatedly, but this is perfectly okay. She argues, battles are never won for eternity, but in the process of struggling together, in community, we learn how to glimpse new possibilities that otherwise we might miss. It is this process that we expand and enlarge our conceptions of freedom (p. 198). We do not have to accept the power of the situation.

Conclusion

A standing project in my diversity course is I have students complete early in class is a one-to-two-page paper on reflecting and identifying their worldviews. I do this so they know how *they* navigate life—so they know whether they act from accepting the power of the situation, or whether the situation can be transformed by their power---their voices. Our worldviews, Dr. Kellerman (2007) shares makes a world of difference in our lives, especially when our fallen world falls on us (p. 213). When our spaces from our classrooms to our global world are struggling, we all face a crisis. Yet, the answer should not come in the form of philosophies that ask us to “accept the power of the situation”. I argue that this way of life is the same as reproducing colonialism. It is parallel to silence, which is complicity. No, the answer rest in engaging in spaces we have never thought to do so before. For some of us, it might be picking up a book and reading the thoughts, ideas and lived experiences of BIPOC. This makes perfect sense when who better to offer strategies for change than those who have suffered and died for freedom? Let us not let these voices go silent if freedom and justice is our real goal. Glaude (2020) speaks to this moment with clarity:

This requires an imaginative leap beyond the limits of our present lives. We cannot let the current political moment strangle our imaginations. We hear politicians and pundits recoiling from bold visions: “No big ideas about healthcare, no revolutionary ideas about education or about living wage for workers”. They say: “Don’t press the issue of white supremacy...You’ll alienate white voters. Don’t overreach” (p. 209). *Accept the power of the situation.*

As community psychologists, allies, and co-conspirators, I believe we have a responsibility to not accept the power of the situation. Isn’t that the reason community psychology was established, to counter the status quo in psychology? If this is so, then let us, together, disrupt and dismantle the lies. Our time is now. Sartre’s time is past. The horse and carriage are gone.

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