"IT HAS SADDENED ME NOT TO HAVE HEARD YOUR VOICE": RETHINKING SILENCE AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT: Critical pedagogy, largely grown out of Paulo Freire's theory, has great impacts on the U.S. literacy research and education. While advocates of critical pedagogy attempt to empower students from being silenced or oppressed, and to raise students' awareness of Western hegemony and social injustice through a language of critique, feminist educational critics argue that critical pedagogy ignores feminist perspectives of the pedagogy, and essentializes personal "voice" This essay provides feminist critiques of "silence", "personal voice", and "empowerment" under the discourse of critical pedagogy. I suggest that a postcolonial feminist theory should be included to complement critical pedagogy for students' empowerment and for addressing the conflicts between people of the marginalized group and the Western dominant culture.

KEYWORDS: Critical pedagogy; Feminist critics; Postcolonial feminist theory.

"ENTRISTECEU-ME NÃO TER OUVIDO SUA VOZ": REPENSANDO O SILÊNCIO E A PEDAGOGIA CRÍTICA

RESUMO: A Pedagogia Crítica, amplamente desenvolvida pelas teorias de Paulo Freire, tem grande impacto na pesquisa e educação norte-americana. Enquanto defensores da pedagogia crítica tentam impedir os estudantes de serem silenciados e oprimidos e buscam elevar a consciência dos estudantes acerca da hegemonia ocidental e das injustiças sociais através de uma linguagem crítica, os críticos da educacional feministas discutem que a pedagogia crítica ignora as perspectivas da pedagogia e essencializa uma "voz" pessoal. Esta pesquisa fornece críticas feministas de "silêncio",

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"voz pessoal" e "crescimento" permeando o discurso da pedagogia crítica. Eu sugiro que a teoria crítica feminista pós-colonial deveria ser incluída para complementar a pedagogia crítica e assim sustentar o crescimento dos estudantes, direcionando-os aos conflitos entre pessoas de grupos marginalizados e da cultura ocidental dominante.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Pedagogia crítica; Críticos feministas; Teoria pós-colonial feminista.

> I need you to **promise** me to participate and speak in the class because I know that a lot of Asian female students don't talk in class. (*A promise, Spring 2002)*.
>
> Do you remember that when I signed you in this class, I **made you promise** that you would make every effort to participate? I know it is a struggle and yet it has saddened me **not to have heard your voice** this semester. Now especially, in reading your journal, I am aware of how much **you have held back**, and how much **you have denied all of us by not having heard your voice** […] We have missed much by not hearing the thoughts you speak here and **I think you have missed much** also. (*Failed promise, the end semester of Spring 2002)*

This was a plea from an instructor who was teaching a course entitled "Diversity: Social and Cultural Context", and who believed in "voice" as a source of empowerment. Unfortunately, I failed to keep the promise to her, a promise she required from me based on her assumption about Asian female students and her mission to change "us". The note she wrote in response to my journal writing assignment compelled me to consider: Was her assumption that Asian female students do not speak in class justified? Did her note imply that "voice" as an empowering tool can only be actualized through oral expression, whereas silence is read as not empowering and therefore is not acceptable in the U.S. educational system.

As a Taiwanese female graduate student of English Education in the U.S., I have undergone not only a cultural, but also an ideological change. Sharing thoughts and engaging in a critical dialogue with U.S.

instructors in class are expected and valued. In contrast, classroom practice in Taiwan requires students to be respectful to their instructors as "authoritative" figures in the classroom. On that account, quietly listening to the instructor's lecture and taking notes are acknowledged as ways of showing respect and learning. Nevertheless, the American instructor had interpreted my silence in class discussion differently from the way I did, as a measure of respect. Here was an American instructor teaching a course on how to recognize and tolerate differences in the U.S. who, nonetheless, could not stop herself from making a generalization about Asian female students. In addition, she assumed that not having expressed my "voice" in class was an indicator of "denial" to everyone in the class and an unfortunate loss to me.

A "denial", in her observation, resulted from "how much [I] have held back" and from "not having heard [my] voice". This white female instructor's interpretation of my being silent as a "denial" or as negligence has compelled me to ponder the underlying assumption of silence and voice. Since then, several related questions have become of concern to me: Is "silence" in the U.S. classroom an expression of "denial" or resistance to the mainstream value? Is sharing "voice" in terms of oral expression the only way of learning? What did I miss from the class as a result of my "silence"? Is my writing not considered another form of "voice"? Is the "voice" in my writing represented separately from the actual speech? After all, considering myself as a "privileged" middle-class female educator in Taiwan, have I turned into an "unprivileged", powerless, and voiceless minority in the U.S.?

Within the context of Western dominance, critical pedagogy has developed a discourse that aims to "empower" a silenced minority to resist its oppressive hegemony and to seek social justice and emancipation (BURBULES; BERK, 1999). In that sense, I wonder if the silenced minority students in Western mainstream education are really empowered. Borrowing a famous phrase from Spivak (1988), "can the subaltern speak"? If not, why can't they speak? Is there a gap between "voice" and "silence"? If so, what is the gap? In answering these questions, I suggest the need for a reexamination of the assumption of "silence/voice" in the discourse of critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy, in the name of emancipation and empowerment, still falls into essentializing and regulating the notion of "student voice", which is reduced to "unique, fixed and coherent" self (WEEDON apud ORNER, 1992, p. 79), and thus aggravates gender oppression. Although feminist

poststructuralist frameworks have challenged the discourse of critical pedagogy as "male authorship of theory" and the "standpoint of male experience" (LUKE; GORE, 1992, p. 29) and have provided their perspectives of working against the binary assumption of "silence/voice" (ELLSWORTH, 1992; ORNER, 1992; KAMLER, 2001), a postcolonial feminist approach to reconceptualizing the core assumptions of critical pedagogy can provide a deeper understanding of why Asian female students, like me, do not speak in the U.S. mainstream educational setting. First, I will outline the assumptions of critical pedagogy, and then provide feminist critiques of the underlying assumptions of critical pedagogy. Lastly, I conclude with a postcolonial feminist approach to complement critical pedagogy.

Historically, U. S. educational attitudes and policies on immigrants have shifted from seclusion, to assimilation into the mainstream, to tolerance, and finally to embracing cultural diversities. In recent years, many educators have moved their beliefs beyond recognizing and tolerating multicultural backgrounds to advocating a pedagogy of "empowerment", a critical pedagogy largely grown out of Paulo Freire's theory and practice that "affirm[s] the experiences and lived histories of the students, their families, and the communities in which they live" (MCLAREN; GIROUX, 1990, p. 157). This critical pedagogy endeavors to emancipate the silenced, oppressed "voice" and empower the oppressed to speak, to critique, and to act against masculine ideology in educational settings and discourses (LUKE; GORE, 1992). In other words, the discourse of critical pedagogy is political. As the American instructor of the "Diversity" course mentioned earlier was teaching about critical pedagogy and Freire's theory, such a concept of political educational practice is essential in the curriculum of critical pedagogy.

> [It] examines schools in their historical context as well as part of the existing social and political fabric that characterizes the dominant society. It is fundamentally concerned with how politics and power function in the school community. Its objective is to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequities and injustices. It is based on the essential recognition that schooling is a resolutely political act. Learning and action are undertaken in solidarity with marginal and oppressed groups.' (from the class handout Understanding Critical Pedagogy and Paulo Freire (1984)).

As a result, this American instructor's goal was to investigate theoretical positions on institutional politics and racism, and the effects and influences they bring to bear on the ideologies of our school and our thinking about teachers and students throughout the course.

In doing so, one of the essential tools the instructor uses is to have us reflect on and explore our own multiple social locations and identities, and how they affect us in the classroom and in our future profession as teachers. On the one hand, she aimed at a pedagogy which speaks to "marginal and oppressed groups" by encouraging students to examine critically social, political and ideological assumptions underlying Western institutions while simultaneously giving voice to students of difference and diversity. On the other hand, she failed to recognize her own "unearned privilege" which allows her to decide who is to be empowered and what voice is to be heard. Peggy McIntosh discussed "white privilege" as an "invisible package" that "maintain[s] the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. […] and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of [the power] already." (MCINTOSH, 1998, p. 144). Predominantly, within Western institutional discourse, advocates of critical pedagogy claim to recognize, tolerate, or embrace all the differences of the immigrants in the U.S., and yet, I have not seen them attempting to internalize fully what constitutes individual differences, historically or ideologically.

Several key assumptions underlying this discourse need to be reexamined. The notions of empowerment and oppression have already assumed a binary opposition between the oppressor/oppressed, subject/object or the empowered/powerless. Within this binary opposition, someone needs to be empowered or freed from the oppression, and according to Freire (1984, p. 44), the oppressors who "oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both". However, despite aiming to empower the oppressed group, advocates of Freire's theory overlook the problem that there might be different forms of oppressions for different individuals. Therefore, when acknowledging the "voice" or narratives of lived experiences of the marginal, the forms of their experiences may have been universalized or stereotyped. As Bell Hooks (2000, p. 134) cautions us, there is an implication that "women share a common lot, that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc., do not create a diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be

an oppressive force in the lives of individual women". She refuses the presumption that "all women are oppressed," which has grown out of Western hegemonic discourse. For Hooks (2000, p. 144), women of diverse backgrounds may have different experiences and oppression, and thus understanding the interconnectivity of race, class and gender, and their ability perpetuate systems of oppression, and domination shapes their lived experience and perspectives.

Furthermore, contrary to critical pedagogy theorists who seek to empower students from being silenced or oppressed, and to challenge the ideological, socially institutionalized discourse and inequalities through a language of critique, feminist pedagogy critics argue that the discourse of critical pedagogy overlooks the issues of gender and power relations of teachers, naturalizes personal "voice", and fails to question the metanarratives of "voice" (ELLSWORTH, 1992; KAMLER, 2001; ORNER, 1992). Stemming from the feminist poststructuralist framework, Mimi Orner (1992, p. 77) urges educators to scrutinize assumptions about their "often unexamined power to legitimate and perpetuate unjust relations in the name of student empowerment". According to Orner (1992), discourse on students' voice in the name of their own liberation and empowerment has been inadequately associated with the essentializing of the binary oppositions such as subject/object, teacher/student, oppressor/oppressed, and voice/silence. There are a number of questions which need to be scrutinized:

> Why must the 'oppressed' speak? For whose benefit do we/do they speak? How is the speaking received, interpreted, controlled, limited, disciplined and stylized by the speakers, the listeners, the historical moment, the context? What use is made of the "people's voice" after it is heard? (ORNER, 1992, p. 76).

Finally, Orner (1992) suggests that it is important to analyze whose interests are served when students speak, and what happens when students are silent in the mainstream classroom through the feminist poststructuralist perspectives.

The debate of silence and voice is further explored by Ellsworth (1992), in her article "Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy". As Ellsworth (1992) points out,

the risk of critical pedagogy lies in its underlying assumptions that experiences and knowledge of different diverse groups can be actually shared and understood by others, and thereby neglects the gap between knowing the experience and acquiring it. Given her own teaching experience of the course "Media and Anti-Racist Pedagogies," Ellsworth (1992, p. 100) was aware of the constant existence of the imbalanced power relationship between herself and her students, even though she had strived for the incorporation of critical pedagogy by attempting to maintain a non-hierarchical, more democratic and cooperative classroom. This means, through the ways in which she put effort into grappling with the concept of "empowerment", she could not resist finding herself as an "emancipatory authority," and realized that the assumptions of "democracy," "equality," and "justice," remain "unattainable". She further argues that the personal "voice" or "sharing" of lived experiences are only selective and partial, constituted in particular spaces at particular times for particular audiences, and they are potentially ideological as well as full of contradictions (ELLSWORTH, 1992, p. 103). Such contradictions also arise from the question of who gets to decide the "authentic voice", and the assumption of silence in classrooms as being "lost voice," "voiceless," or "declining/ refusing to talk" (ELLSWORTH, 1992, p. 104). She provides several reasons behind the meaning of silence, including

> fear of being misunderstood and/or disclosing too much and becoming too vulnerable; memories of bad experiences in other contexts of speaking out; resentment that other oppressions (sexism, heterosexism, fat oppression, classism, anti-Semitism) were being marginalized in the name of addressing racism—and guilt for feeling such resentment; confusion about levels of trust and commitment surrounding those who were allies to another group's struggles; resentment by some students of color for feeling that they were expected to disclose 'more' and once again take the burden of doing the pedagogical work of educating White students/professor about the consequences of White middle-class privilege; and resentment by White students for feeling that they had to prove they were not the enemy (ELLSWORTH, 1992, p. 107-108).

Thus, within this kind of context, the pluralizing concept as "voices" does not guarantee a safe place for speaking out or talking back about their oppressions.

On the face of Ellsworth's analysis of silence, the meaning of silence is still interpreted through the discourse of Western colonization in which silence as the object of study is seen as subordinated to "voice" as subject. By understanding why some of her students of white, colored, and international backgrounds in her anti-racism course did not talk in class, Ellsworth attributed their silence to fear, resentment by students of color as well as white students, confusion or struggles. The language for silence only characterizes Ellsworth's students as victims. However, Ellsworth fails to explore the politics of silence from multiple perspectives, or historically. Nothing about the accessibility to the "culture of silence" is mentioned. For instance, can silence denote non-Western students' unawareness of the Western mainstream culture of power? In that silence is acceptable in one culture but not in the West, how does one approach his/her identity, historical complicity, and social location in the discourse of Western values?

In this regard, Luke's (1994) essay entitled "Women in the Academy: the politics of speech and silence" reconceptualizes the issue of silence and takes on the politics of feminine voice and silence in academy through a discussion of historical and research evidence. Beginning with the theoretical underpinnings of feminine voice and silence, Luke (1994) points out that women's silence in classroom contexts is often stereotyped as a "classic" representation of femininity, such as "women's allegedly more passive, reticent and non-aggressive verbal and bodily habitus" (LUKE, 1994, p. 218). As a result, it is fraught with political consequences that pedagogues of "empowerment" claim to grant voice to women in academy. This assumes that women are expected to speak when being given voice. Luke (1994, p. 212) argues that such an assumption may be "pedagogically desirable but has potentially silencing effects" because some women may be silent for reasons of emotional fear or guilt, or for strategic resistance, and some may position themselves as listeners or lack the requisite lived experience (LUKE, 1994, p. 223). In short, according to Luke, though it is desirable to include women's experiences in classroom contexts, women should not be forced into speech. Yet, what constitutes silence and in what way silence shapes or is shaped by women's subjectivity or experiences need to be included and reinterpreted.

The incorporation of critical pedagogy in the classroom has been critically examined and has proven to be more problematic than first thought by

feminist pedagogy theorists. Many of them, through a poststructuralist framework, have argued that critical pedagogy does not adequately address issues of female subjectivity and voices, ignores feminist perspectives, and oversimplifies knowledge and power relations in classroom praxis. Overall, the feminist poststructuralist approach to interpreting women's experiences and silence has fundamentally contributed to redefining female subjectivity. Its critique requires individuals' self-consciousness and self-reflexivity of the impact of Western domination. Insofar as both critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy reflect the profound plurality of Western academy, I am not rejecting one approach over the other. However, speaking as a Taiwanese, often mistaken as Chinese, middle-class woman, daughter, graduate student in the U.S. (consciously fearful of being mislabeled or not included), I do not find some feminist perspectives useful to justify my experiences or "belonging".

With the influence of globalization, the global economy, and the world status of English and its popular culture, I would say that not only Third World people, but also people from non-English-speaking countries are consciously and subconsciously influenced by Western imperialism. As Spivak (1988, p. 285) puts it,

> [f]or the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual.

In other words, the question is not whether the subaltern can speak for or represent themselves, but rather, whether her "voice" is ever truly captured and heard by the Western imperialist. Spivak blames not only the "epistemic violence of imperialism and the international division of labor" (1988, p. 289) for the subaltern's inability to speak, but she also condemns the notion that "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (SPIVAK, 1988, p. 296) for the obviously biased assumption that Third World women need to be emancipated by the Western culture from their own barbaric Third World culture.

To sum up, critical/feminist pedagogies are insufficient to explain the ways in which individual indifferences from non-English speaking countries

respond to silence or articulate their voices. In what way can we know the silenced or marginal group? What do "empowerment," "silence," and "voices" in academic contexts mean to students from non-Western culture? What does it mean to them to interpret these terms within the context of Western ideology? In such a sense, I suggest that a more critical lens to postcolonial feminist framework needs to be brought into critical literacy teaching to strengthen the theory of critical pedagogy. Metaphorically, Taiwan is colonized by American culture and English language in ways that the Western culture and ideology have tremendous impacts on Taiwanese people's identity. I believe that the postcolonial feminist approach can still contribute to addressing the conflicts among people of the colonized culture, exploitation of capitalism and Western cultural colonization, as well as the question of what has been marginalized through whose discourse, Western culture or the colonized one. As a believer in critical literacy, I am aware of how different social contexts and political agendas may impact language learning and teaching. Critical literacy teaching should not only reject the essentializing dichotomy of differences and silences, but also constantly challenge the dominant values and the "unseen" or "unspeakable" silence. Luke (1992, p. 48) suggests that a feminist approach which "grounds its epistemology on a foundation of difference" should be included to complement the pedagogical strategy for students' empowerment or for claiming their own subjectivity.

To that end, I would like to draw on Asher's (2002) call for a 'hybrid consciousness,' on the basis of Gloria Anzaldua's (1987 apud ASHER, 2002, p. 82) *mestiza* consciousness, which "allows us to engage our own implicatedness in the very structures of oppression we are attempting to change" and "such engagement with difference can allow us to understand more fully not only the 'other' but also the 'self'. In the praxis of engendering a hybrid consciousness,

> [all] identities are located at the intersections of race, class, gender/sexuality, culture, history and geography. *All* identities, cultures, representations are hybrid, dynamic, context-specific and negotiated. And encounters with difference, different others, influence/have implications for the self (ANZALDUA'S, 1987 apud ASHER, 2002, p. 90).

In the context of globalization, women living in the era of "hybridity" have developed a plurality of subjectivities across national boundaries.

Therefore, they need to be redefined and understood differently without normalizing or categorizing them in certain ways. Summing up, it is not that being an Asian female student has made me silent or made me speak less in class, but what has composed my experiences has contributed to my silence. In turn, such silence, perhaps negative or positive in different contexts, has contributed to the formulation and proliferation of "I".

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