

# *Violent Turbulence* in Curriculum Theory and Practice

JENNA MIN SHIM

*University at Albany: State University of New York*

## Introduction

**I**N THE FILM *Borat* (Cohen, Roach, & Charles, 2006), Borat Sagdiyev, a Kazakhstani television reporter, comes to America to make a documentary about American society and culture. In one scene in which Borat attends a high society dinner party, he excuses himself to use the bathroom. He returns carrying a bag of his feces, causing everyone to squirm with disgust. Borat ultimately gets thrown out of the party by the host. The film's director clearly shows that everyone at the party thought Borat's act was uncivil, ridiculous, and even intolerable. And I would venture to guess that most viewers believe that these reactions to Borat's act were perfectly normal.

Although this scene may be an extreme, even bizarre, example of cultural differences at play, it evokes a set of very serious questions. If it is true that people do not just (re)act but that they (re)act in relation to or against themselves (e.g., Said, 2001), the question of whether or not this "strange" Kazakhstani's behavior was indeed offensive or whether Borat deserved to be ejected from the party are irrelevant for understanding intercultural interactions. More relevant questions would include the following: Who decides who belongs and who does not? On what grounds? Why do we perceive some cultural practices and people from some cultures as inferior, primitive, impolite, and underdeveloped? In relation to what and to whom are such claims made and felt? Why do we react violently to (cultural) differences we experience as strange, uncomfortable, offensive, and intolerable? If we think that someone else's practices are offensive or disgusting, primitive or barbaric, can we really have productive and mutual interactions with them? Why, really, did Borat get ejected from the party?

Because the kinds of judgments, perceptions, reactions, and exclusionary practices represented in *Borat* circulate widely in the public sphere today, investigating the factors that influence our reactions to people and practices from cultures other than our own becomes an ever-pressing need, especially for those of us involved in the field of education in an age characterized by unprecedented global flows of human beings, cultural artifacts, economic capital, media representations, and ideologies. Because understanding is always ultimately self under-

standing (Taylor, 1987/1971), central to addressing this pressing need is the ability to engage in critical self reflexivity, which I argue in this essay is the fundamental basis for mutual, fair, and productive conversations across ethnic and cultural boundaries. More specifically, I explain how our relations with cultural Others<sup>1</sup> are mediated by us (as individuals) but that our actions and reactions (as individuals) cannot be understood apart from understanding many forces that have shaped our epistemological locations and our ontological dispositions, which, according to many social theorists (e.g., Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Heidegger, 1962), are inseparable. In the end, I propose that we must engage in forms of self reflexivity that push far beyond recalling what is readily available in conscious memory or in other psychological recesses or processes that assume that we, human beings, possess the means and the ability to fully understand all that motivates us. Instead, we must seek to understand the biological, historical, social, political, cultural, and economic forces that have shaped our psychologies in the first place—psychologies that dispose us to find particular cultural beliefs and practices normal or strange, pleasant or disgusting, civilized or barbaric. Because the reasons for our dispositions are not context or event specific, because they are not always (or even typically) rational and because they are seldom available to consciousness, such work requires rigorous intellectual reflection and serious engagement with theory.

But learning about the forces that have shaped our selves, our locations, and our dispositions alone is not enough. We must also constantly question, challenge, disrupt, and try to undo the effects of the various forces that mediate how we react to the beliefs and practices of cultural Others. I call this serious work, which far exceeds comfortable and non-threatening tinkering, *violent turbulence*. I argue that, if we are at all serious about engaging in work in education that has any hope of transforming anything, we need both (a) to *understand* the various forces that have shaped us and dispose us to think and act in particular ways and (b) to create *violent turbulence* in relation to these dispositions. This dual process is necessary because without *understanding* the external forces that have shaped us—that are indeed inscribed on our minds, hearts, and bodies—our efforts at self reflexivity risk being mere gestures of “false modesty” (Barenboim & Said, 2002, p. 171), interesting but ineffective psychological exercises that are primarily self-serving. And without creating *violent turbulence* in relation to these forces, engaging in intellectual reflection and “doing theory” might be exhilarating but risks having no praxis value whatsoever and thus would be primarily self-serving as well.

### Interlude: Paradoxes and Caveats

The ultimate goal of this essay is to contribute productively to theory, research, and practice in the domain of multicultural and intercultural education. This goal involves several paradoxes. First, I view productive contributions as ones that simultaneously work against hierarchy and domination but acknowledge that ethnic and cultural differences do (and will always) exist, tensions between and among different cultural groups do (and will always) exist, dissensus does (and will always) exist, and unequal power dynamics do (and will always) exist. Second, although I focus on the individual (teacher, researcher, theorist), I realize that the major problems facing multicultural and intercultural education are historical, social, and systemic. Indeed, the relationship between the individual and society is always paradoxical. As Johnson (2001) noted:

Gandhi once said nothing we do as individuals matters, but that it's vitally important to do it anyway. . . . Imagine, for example, that social systems are trees and we are the

leaves. No individual leaf on the tree matters; whether it lives or dies has no effect on much of anything. But collectively, the leaves are essential to the whole tree because they photosynthesize the sugar that feeds it. Without leaves, the tree dies. So leaves matter and they don't, just as we matter and we don't. (p. 146)

Third, and related to the second paradox, I focus largely on self reflexivity in this essay, yet I insist throughout this essay that this process is largely a matter of interrogating not just our psychologies but also the social, cultural, and political structures and forces that constitute their conditions of possibility. In other words, we must start with our selves and end with our selves, but to know ourselves better requires engaging in analyses of our historically constituted social, cultural, and political conditions using tools of critical social theory. Fourth, even though problems of inequality and oppression are usually not caused by something one of us did, we are inevitably constructed within and complicit with the very the structures of power within which inequality and oppression exist and sometimes flourish. Yet, even though inequality and oppression are effects of systemic social conditions, if change is going to occur, it will be largely a function of how we as individuals act (or don't act) in relation to each other. In sum, to forge effective anti-oppressive, decolonizing pedagogies in the 21<sup>st</sup> requires that we dwell constantly in the ambivalent, messy, and uncomfortable spaces that are these paradoxes.

The remainder of this essay is organized in the following way. First, I outline what I see as several key problems facing multicultural and intercultural education today. Second, I introduce the construct of *violent turbulence*, a construct I believe can realistically help us work toward increased self-reflexivity, which is required for building more emancipatory schools and ultimately a more just society. Third, drawing on several theoretical traditions, I map three forces (sites) upon which *violent turbulence* must be enacted. These forces constitute fundamental dimensions of human existence that are crucial for understanding why we think, perceive, act, and react to people and practices from cultures other than our own in the ways that we do. Finally, I return to the issue of multicultural and intercultural education and explain how and why I think *violent turbulence* is a requirement (and not an option) for developing anti-oppressive, decolonizing pedagogies with both political and pragmatic teeth.

Before continuing, I would like to point out an organizational conundrum that plagued me the entire time I was writing this essay. Because the essay is fundamentally about self reflexivity, and because I propose *violent turbulence* as a genuine and absolutely necessary form of self reflexivity, I wanted to introduce, define, and unpack this term right away. However, to really understand the necessity, power, and promise of *violent turbulence* seemed to require discussing the problems facing multicultural and intercultural education today that *violent turbulence* might help us chip away at. So, in the end, I opted to discuss these problems before defining and elaborating on the construct of *violent turbulence*.

### Locating the Problem: History Matters

Citing Brian Fay, Patti Lather (1992) defines a critical social science as “a science intended to empower those involved to *change* as well as to *understand* the world” (pp. 87–88, italics in original). Educational researchers committed to multiculturalism,<sup>2</sup> diversity, and intercultural scholarship must be critical social scientists. Importantly, *change* is predicated on (though never guaranteed by) *understanding* the social, political, and economic organization of the world, which is always mediated by individual selves who are located within the world in specific ways.

Furthermore, no matter how massive the world may seem, because it is constituted by individuals, participating in change efforts is also always predicated on first changing ourselves. Bourdieu (e.g., 1992, 1998) also noted in this regard that changing the self is the prerequisite for all change and that reflexivity makes doing social science research both more *realistic* and more *responsible* (1992, p. 194).

Yet, when examined historically, it is clear that deliberately transforming our ways of being in the world and troubling that which seems natural to us are much more difficult than most of us typically acknowledge. This social fact provokes anger and even desperation in many of us because it threatens the Western idealist sense that we are *creators* of ourselves, that we are always in control of our intentions and our acts, and that we willfully construct our lives (e.g., Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). However uncomfortably it may be, keeping in mind the limits and limitations of our agency is crucial for curriculum theory work with/in/across ethnic and cultural differences in the early 21st century because we live in a time (a) when our lives are impossibly entangled with the lives of cultural Others in increasingly intense and complex ways (e.g., Ang, 2005; Papastergiadis, 2000), (b) when our classrooms and spaces of scholarship are situated within increasingly complex, entangled, and diverse human conditions, (c) when our nation is experiencing more racial segregation than ever (e.g., Kozol, 2005), and (d) when pluralism and transnationality hardly translate to equality (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1999) because colonialism persists in increasingly invisible and pernicious ways (e.g., Said, 1994a). This last issue is particularly important for monitoring the solidifying consensus in the field about the urgency of social transformation designed to produce *co-existence-in-difference* (as opposed to domination/oppression) (Said, 1994a).

Considering the current intersection of globalization, the histories of race and racism, and the noble but potentially dangerous tendency toward romanticism/utopianism (e.g., Spivak, 2001, p. 14) in curriculum theorizing especially in relation to multiculturalism, we need to develop curricular strategies that respond critically and responsibly to increased diversity and pluralism in a world that remains painfully hegemonic, riddled with vestiges of colonialism. Doing so requires that we move beyond the popular belief that connections across ethnic cultural differences can be built if only we teach/learn enough about other cultures and beyond the companion belief that the more knowledge we have about cultural ways of cultural Others, the better we can all get along. Such positions seem to assume that we are somehow capable of understanding other cultures objectively and that our renderings of them constitute the truth (e.g., Jones, 2001). They also seem to assume that we don't have to risk giving up anything in the process (e.g., our ideologies, our liberal identities, our comfortable life styles) but that we simply need to make these social goods more widely available. And perhaps most crucially, the effect of such positions is a depoliticization of issues that are clearly political, a refusal to take seriously inescapable power dynamics that must be disrupted if democratizing social change is ever to occur.

Ironically, objectivism is not only impossible, but it also inevitably constrains cultural Others in accordance with narrow and often wrong views of them perpetuated in and through dominant ideologies. Even more alarming is the fact that problems of difference/diversity are not caused by what we do not know; they are caused by what we do know (or think we know). For instance, the fact that a white person might be uncomfortable or even frightened when sitting across from a person of color on an empty train is not because he or she does not know enough about that person but because of what he or she imagines that that person might do (Johnson, 2001).

In working with students (and colleagues) from culturally different backgrounds, many of us tend to be overly concerned with *getting over problems* and *measuring* the extent to which we

(and our students) have changed without first understanding the complexity of those problems (i.e., without understanding the nature and effects of their durable social, political, and economic histories). Indeed, our academic journals are increasingly filled with what I consider romanticized, overly optimistic accounts of multicultural education curricula that claim, for example, that teacher certification candidates' identities were transformed in the context of a single class on multiculturalism or that students of color were empowered because their teacher got to know something about their out-of-school lives. That the tendency toward romantic/utopian responses to multiculturalism seems to be largely rooted in wishful fulfillment and the illusion of freedom (i.e., a free subject who can intentionally and consciously act and position herself in a world *unmediated* by social, economic, material, and political forces beyond her control). Further, this romantic/utopian tendency in multiculturalism seems to have reached epic proportions as evidenced by, among other things, five or ten year cycles of *solution fads* in multicultural educational curricula. Every five or ten years, a new multicultural curriculum is proposed that claims it will "solve" all problems of inequity and injustice. Besides usually being "old wine in new bottles," these curricula prove to be ineffective and are typically discarded or fade away. This is hardly surprising because racism, xenophobia, inequality, and oppression are deeply rooted in long histories and cannot be resolved by superficial quick fixes. Worse than this, many of these proposed solutions are neocolonial gestures—technologies of power masquerading as technologies of liberation that do little more than further empower those already in power and reinforce the very conditions of inequality they were designed to fight against (e.g., Bhabha, 1999, 2005; West & Olson, 1999).

In this regard, West (1999, 2000) rightly notes that the tendency to avoid or ignore history is central to this problem. "To be American is to downplay history in the name of hope, to ignore memory in the cause of possibility" (1999, p. xix). To focus on "what is to come, what is not yet as opposed to what is and what has been often degenerates into an infantile, sentimental or melodramatic propensity toward happy endings" (1999, p. xix). "Without confronting history, there is very little or no hope of any public conversation in which an exchange of arguments and perspectives can take place" (2000, p. 43). We, human beings, are products of multiple histories—histories that constitute the unconscious parts of ourselves, histories that are so deeply rooted within us that we do not even feel their influences, but also histories that are active and that constitute the epistemological and ontological ground from which we understand the world today (e.g., Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Summing up the arguments of West and Bourdieu, we must remind ourselves over and over again that forgetting history and not trying to access our unconscious (which is forgotten history) is detrimental to social science research because these practices allow the conditions we are so desperately trying to change to blossom and flourish.

Returning to the scene from *Borat* with which I opened this essay, construing Borat's behavior as primitive and barbaric had less to do with his actual behaviors than with complex histories of racism and xenophobia that shaped the perceptions and ways of being in the world of the people who ejected him from the party. More generally, diversity and multiculturalism are not problems because people differ from one another. They are problems because these differences are rooted in complex cultural, social, and political histories that dispose people to *use* difference strategically (albeit also tacitly)—to include or exclude, to value or devalue, to privilege or oppress (e.g., Bhabha, 1999, 2005).

Embracing West's version of critical race theory and reacting against popular romantic/utopian impulses in multicultural education that suggest we can just move beyond racism and



xenophobia, I argue that genuine (dare I say radical) social change—change that affords fair exchange (without dominance) across ethnic and cultural differences—is incredibly difficult and requires a tremendous amount of political work on the ground because (neo) imperialism/colonialism remains firmly in place, naturalized and legitimized by histories that are long, deep, and relatively intractable. Thus, imagining and enacting genuine change demands that we struggle constantly to understand these histories and their effects and that we remain self-reflexive about the ways we are implicated in and complicit with these histories because our ways of perceiving, re-presenting, reacting to, and judging ethnic and cultural Others in both “backstage” and “frontstage”<sup>3</sup> arenas are constructed in and through these histories. To go forward to enact change, as most of us educators earnestly desire to do, we must first go backward and interrogate the conditions that created the dispositions that each of us brings to intercultural contact zones in the first place. I call this backward arc of interrogation/action/reflexivity *violent turbulence*.

## Violent Turbulence

As a construct, *violent turbulence* represents a fusion of Frantz Fanon’s theory of violence (cited in Martin, 1999) and Nikos Papastergiadis’ concept of turbulence (2000). In his critical social theory of race and racism, Fanon argues that because colonialism is the incarnation of violence, the only way to enact decolonization and to pursue “real freedom” is by making a clean break with colonialism, which also requires violence of some kind. Papastergiadis’ concept of turbulence was developed as a way to counter mechanistic models for explaining population migration. For him, turbulence is a metaphor for theorizing the interconnection and interdependency between the various forces that are in play in the modern world.

In the absence of structured patterns of global migration, with direct causes and effects, turbulence is the best formulation for the mobile processes of complex self-organization that are now occurring. These movements may appear chaotic, but there is a logic and order within them. (Papastergiadis, 2000, p. 4)

Fanon’s theory of violence is particularly useful because it conveys the kinds and degrees of reflexivity and interrogation necessary for challenging the effects of colonialism and neocolonialism that, though naturalized and rendered largely invisible, remain firmly in place in education today. Papastergiadis’ concept of turbulence is equally useful because even though our increasingly globalized, technologized world may seem entirely self-organizing, it shows us how the world’s ever increasing flows of people, technologies, capital, representations, and ideologies are not random but governed by largely invisible logics.

Drawing together these insights from Fanon and Papastergiadis, I developed the notion of *violent turbulence* to name a rigorous process whereby we might deconstruct the naturalized idea that our actions and reactions in relation to cultural Others are a matter of conscious intent by coming to better understand the powerful though largely invisible forces that motivate them, which is a precondition for working consciously and forcefully against what is counterproductive in them. My fusion of Fanon’s notion of violence and Papastergiadis’ notion of turbulence involves four conceptual moves. First, I draw upon critical social theories in ways that make *violent turbulence* relevant to sociologically grounded theories of experience. Second, based on Fanon’s insistence on the necessity of violence, I re-imagine Papastergiadis’ turbulence strategi-

cally as a radical mode of self-reflexivity and self-transformation (at least potentially) grounded in a commitment that requires intense and prolonged battling against what we experience as obvious or natural. Third, I argue that the strategic deployment of *violent turbulence* within one's own thinking, feeling, and acting is a fundamental (perhaps the most fundamental) ingredient of/for social change. *Violent turbulence* involves questioning and challenging what seem self-evident, talking back to power, going against social norms, and risking social capital (e.g., power, status) because social/historical systems of dominance/oppression seductively shape the choices people make, reward those who take paths of least resistance, and punish those who take different paths. Finally, I underscore the difficulty, pain, nausea, fear, and ambivalence involved in practicing *violent turbulence* by thinking analogically about airplane turbulence that occurs when flying through violent and dangerous weather conditions, because both experiences involve facing an uncomfortable and even sometimes extraordinarily frightening unknown. Together, these four conceptual moves should make it clear that engaging in *violent turbulence* is no small task, not something for the weak of heart.

### Constitutive Forces/Sites for Enacting Violent Turbulence

Distilling out ideas from psychoanalytic theories (e.g., Lacan, 1977), poststructuralist theories (e.g., Foucault, 1979), postcolonial theories (e.g., Said, 2003/1979), and sociological theories of practice (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990), at least three forces that constitute fundamental dimensions of human existence emerge as crucial for understanding the dispositions that shape our thinking, perceptions, and reactions to people and practices from cultures other than our own. One force is psychological. A second is social-historical. A third force is epistemological. Understanding the nature and effects of these forces is critical if we are ever to become more aware of and to work against (by creating *violent turbulence*) our seemingly self-evident dispositions in relation to other culture and cultural Others—practices that are essential for any productive and non-coercive form of *co-existence-in-difference* (Said, 1994a). In the following few paragraphs, I outline three forces and some of the key insights I have drawn from these various theoretical traditions and constructs and how they help to constitute the personal and political effectivity of *violent turbulence*.<sup>4</sup>

#### *The Unconscious Desires for Recognition, Wholeness, and Stability*

Perhaps one of the fundamentally strong forces that govern all human actions, interactions, and relations is the natural human desire for recognition, wholeness, and stability (e.g., Bracher, 2006; Derrida 1976, 1982; LaCocque, Ricoeur, & Pellauer, 1998). These desires are not necessarily socially constructed but biological (Bowie, 1991, p. 134). They operate largely outside of conscious awareness. And the desires constantly get converted into demands (e.g., Freud, 1949; Lacan, 1977). When desire is translated into demand, it affects how we think, behave, and act. In other words, desire is not a specific act of wishing, but it is “a continuous force” that inevitably and constantly intrudes upon one's conscious life (Peters & Appel, 1996), including the domain of intercultural human relations and interactions. When these desires are not met, we get frustrated, angry, and even violent.

The human desire for wholeness (and completeness) is situated within a Hegelian model of a unitary knowledge in which the idea of uncertainty or the idea of the not-known is understood in terms of the “still-to-be-known” or the “potentially-knowable” (Jones, 2001). Implicit in this way of thinking/desiring is a compulsion “to know everything” (Jones, 2001, pp. 285–287). This

desire presupposes the possibility of a self that is fully conscious of itself, coherent, determinate, and entirely rational. Thus, the desire for wholeness disposes us to think that our knowledge of cultural Others could be complete and whole and that, if it were, we could readily solve problems of intercultural understanding and relations. However, as we learned from many scholars (e.g., Heidegger, 1962; Polanyi, 1969), human understanding is always partial.

Moreover, the largely unconscious human desire for recognition, wholeness, and stability is hugely problematic with respect to dealing with the *uncomfortable unknown* that is central to interactions in intercultural contact zones (e.g., Bhabha, 2005; Jones, 2001, 2007). For example, the desire to be unconditionally recognized and liked is an impossibility in all human relationships, whether between babies and their mothers or western selves and non-western Others. Similarly, the desire for complete knowledge of the Other is also an impossibility in all human relationships and becomes doubly impossible in social contexts such as those created by colonialism and postcolonialism where dominants feel entitled to such knowledge and demand it from the dominated (Jones, 1999, 2001). Moreover, these desires urge us to avoid conflict, dissensus, and difference so that we can continue to believe what we want to believe. Yet, conflict, dissensus, and difference are necessary if we want to move beyond our assumptions and toward imagining productive, reciprocal conversations without hierarchy across racial and cultural boundaries. These desires also dispose us to accept naturalized ideologies and practices. They encourage us to value grand narratives and to fear (even loathe) both counter-narratives and ambivalence. They incline us toward proposing premature (usually politically correct, romanticized) solutions and to take paths of least resistance even when these paths are not productive or even possible. Unless we trace, acknowledge, and work against the desires and dispositions that generate our resistances, our attempts to understand the complexity of other subject(s) and other culture(s) and their interconnectedness—no matter how well we know poststructuralist theories or post-colonialist theories or any other theories—will remain mere intellectual musing. Therefore, we must constantly work to understand these unconscious desires and to create *violent turbulence* in relation to them—even while it is part of the function of these desires to resist such work.<sup>5</sup> Without such effort, we will always unconsciously gravitate toward satisfying these desires.

### *Socialization Histories and Their Durable Effects*

Another force that disposes us to act and think in particular ways in relation to other cultures and cultural Others is our socialization histories. To engage in what I am calling *violent turbulence* with respect to our socialization histories is extraordinarily difficult to do for several reasons. We are not the sole authors of our perceptions, thoughts, reactions, and actions (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977, 1990) because we are all inescapably constituted within a variety of historically constituted social and political discourses (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977, 1998; Foucault, 1972, 1979). Furthermore, these discourses are not consciously mastered but deeply internalized—“a second nature”<sup>6</sup>—through everyday practices. They thus falsely appear to be self-evident and objective facts (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Foucault, 1979). They dispose us to take particular actions or make particular choices in ways that are neither entirely conscious nor intentional. So, for example, when we perceive something or someone as outlandish, disgusting, or primitive, we usually do so without conscious intent or purpose, indeed with little or no sense of what motivated these dispositions. The fact that one might consider someone from France as more sophisticated than someone from Ethiopia is deep-rooted, internalized assumptions (i.e., dispositions) about the distribution of “culture” across the globe. These invisible but sustaining dispositions



exert powerful effects on us and how we act and react to ethnic/cultural Others. Unfortunately, though, they are often neglected in multicultural theory, research, and curricula, especially by scholars with more psychological orientations.

Among other things, our inevitable rooted-ness in our socialization histories means that whatever agency we have—the ability to act in particular, goal-oriented ways—is less a matter of *will* than a matter of living out historically constituted conditions of possibility. However, we seldom think of agency in this way, and we almost never think that our voices and our actions might largely be effects of internalized social histories. Instead, we often embrace an Enlightenment view of agency even as we talk a good poststructuralist game and lead ourselves to a misplaced belief in “illusory freedom” (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For example, there are many accounts in education journals based on descriptive analyses of narrow data sets (e.g., a few snippets of transcript from classroom talk) that argue that students from diverse backgrounds became agents who actively constructed themselves and their social worlds (through poems, stories, and photographs, for instance). Although such approaches are well intended, they entirely overlook the fact that “the structure[s] of those worlds [are] already predefined by broader racial, gender, and class relations” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 144), and that “there exist, within the social world itself . . . objective structures independent of the consciousness and will of agents, which are capable of guiding and constraining their practices of their representations” (1989, p. 1). Thus, the students who live within these predefined structures have relatively little agency with respect to their own empowerment. Worse than this, to suggest to students that they can combat the histories of racism and xenophobia sedimented in these predefined structures through a few relatively minor discursive acts seems pedagogically irresponsible and even disabling.

Intercultural relations and encounters are never individual-to-individual relationships; thus problems with intercultural understanding or relations cannot and must not be understood or investigated solely at the level of micro-level social interactions (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977). They are always intersections of complex and usually conflictual social and political histories that we have internalized and that operate “behind our backs.” Even though all human relations, including intercultural relations, are always changing, each person’s socialization histories and sedimented dispositions never entirely disappear or become neutralized. In relation to this point, I agree with poststructuralist scholars (e.g., Foucault, 1979, 1980) that agency is possible. I also agree with Bourdieu (e.g., 1992, 1998) that agency is not pre-given, that it is a collective conquest, and that only by understanding the sources of our dispositions can we have an “awakening of consciousness” and can we prevent ourselves from unknowingly perpetuating the past that is inscribed in us. Therefore, no matter how desperate we might be to make change (in ourselves or in the world), our ability to enact these changes is always predicated on enacting *violent turbulence* in relation to the conditions of possibility that created our desires and dispositions in the first place. And, importantly, the extent to which we can actually do this is never guaranteed in advance.

### *Epistemologies: Power/Knowledge*

Our epistemologies constitute another force that influences how we perceive, think, and act in relation to other cultures and cultural Others. In his ground breaking work, *Orientalism*, Said (2003/1979) argued that “the Orient was almost a European invention” (p. 1) that helped define the West as its contrasting image and the relationship between the Orient and the West as a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony (pp. 1–4). As “a book tied to the tumultuous dynamics of contemporary history” (2003/1979, p. xvii), *Orien-*

*talism* foregrounds the fact that neither individuals nor social groups nor cultures ever develop or exist on “a level playing field” because these phenomena are always constituted in and through discursive and material practices that are invisibly constituted by complex sets of asymmetrical power relations (Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1990). This means no discourse of knowledge, self, other, or cultural relations/interactions is ever neutral (e.g., Foucault, 1979, 1980; Said, 1994a, 2003/1979). This includes discourses of difference, which are never descriptions of objective reality but judgments we make about other cultures and cultural Others that are grounded in histories of unequal power relations (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1999, 2005; Said, 2003/1979). Thus, how problems of difference are understood depends on the political locations in which individuals stand. In this regard, integrating the insights of Foucault on the power/knowledge problem with the postcolonial scholars (e.g., Said, 1994a, 2003/1979; Spivak, 1988a; Bhabha, 1999, 2005) has shown us that intercultural relations are always invisibly linked to discourses of the more powerful (dominant) because the less powerful (subalterns) are always represented by dominants in ways that serve dominants’ interests.

Though well-intentioned, many current multicultural educational research and curricula seem to forget this fact and act as though discourses are unmediated. These research projects and curricula are riddled with rhetoric about seeing students from different cultural backgrounds “through their eyes,” respecting them for “who they are,” and allowing them bring their cultural practices and funds of home knowledge into classroom. These are obviously not bad practices in and of themselves, but they fail to recognize how rooted they are in colonial impulses—at best, in their naïve and simplistic understandings of power and at worst, in their refusal to acknowledge the nature and effects of asymmetrical power dynamics at all. We are always implicated in the process of “seeing our students,” and how students are seen (whether by teachers, by researchers, on school examinations, or in the world of work) is always filtered through lenses of dominant discourses. Any work that is serious about fostering mutual public conversation across cultural difference must not forget this fact.

Thus, even though differences may appear to be neutral, they often become markers of superiority and inferiority, tools to control and police, and agents of colonial perpetuation that firmly reinforce hierarchical relations. “Power uses difference as a way of marking off who does and who does not belong” (Hall, 1998, p. 298). We live in a world in which “freedom from domination” is far from an actuality, a world in which the old divisions between colonizer and colonized have re-emerged in other divisions that separate people from different cultures and societies (Said, 1994a, p. 282). These emergent divisions are just as rooted in a will to power and dominate as the old divisions were, but they are less visibly violent and thus more pernicious. Given these insights, depoliticizing discourses of difference diminishes the possibility of dismantling current hegemonies, naturalized us/them ways of constructing difference. Furthermore, how we perceive and relate to cultural Others says much more about ourselves than about them (Said, 2003/1979). Thus, to begin to dismantle current hegemonies, we must first try to understand the effects of these hegemonies on ourselves, and then we must enact *violent turbulence* in relation to these effects. Only by doing this can we really begin to understand the histories that created these hegemonies in the first place, the current conditions that hold them in place, and the effects they exert on people either through overt violence or symbolic violence (i.e., complicity).

Key here is the fact that our political locations are not of our choosing but constitutively linked to histories of inequality that we usually do not understand. We must, therefore, not view power through some narrow, localized, and psychological lens and think that we can solve problems of difference by stepping down from or by banishing power through acts of will.<sup>7</sup> For

example, we must ask questions such as whether “allowing students from diverse backgrounds to speak” without confronting the context that mediates “these voices from the margin” might do little more than galvanize the asymmetrical relations of power that motivate such impulses in the first place (e.g., Alcoff, 1991; Jones & Jenkins, 2004; Spivak, 1988a). Because we are *all* “subject-effects” (Spivak, 1988b, p. 204), because we are all inescapably constructed within and seduced by sociopolitical structures and forces, we must fight constantly to understand these structures and forces and to resist being complicit with them (especially the ones from which we may derive various benefits or advantages).<sup>8</sup> Importantly, these claims are equally relevant for those at margins as for those at the center.<sup>9</sup> For those at the center, enacting *violent turbulence* involves un-learning and giving up<sup>10</sup> taken-for granted privileges. For those at the margins, enacting *violent turbulence* involves a willingness to face negative consequences of not “bowing down to the master,” as well as refusing to adopt legitimized and universalized knowledges that are imposed on them in the name of equal opportunity.

For both those at the center and those at the margins, enacting *violent turbulence* is difficult and risky because it often involves loss: loss of power, loss of a job, loss of status, loss of friends, loss of being liked by others, loss of economic or social capital, loss of feeling secure, etc. I know this all too well from my own experience. As critical as I am about people’s complicity within systems of power, I often remain complicit when certain benefits for doing so are involved. And when I don’t remain complicit, there is often a high price to pay, often quite a high price.

### Back to Curriculum Theorizing

If we are always inherently implicated in all processes of knowing, perceiving, and acting, then no matter how theoretically grounded our critical investigations or multicultural curricula are, ultimately it is us, as individuals, who participate in and mediate what we are trying to accomplish (e.g., Polanyi, 1969; Said, 2003/1979). If our individual locations, sensibilities, and habits are partially effects of various biological, historical, social, cultural, political, and institutional forces (e.g., Apple, 1990, 2000), then these forces need to be pretty well understood and worked against (*violently turbulated*) if we hope to become citizen-workers for democratic change with respect to cultural differences and to expand our capacities to develop ethical relationships with cultural Others (Kim, 2001, 2005). The need for such work is especially urgent at a time in history (a) when the social and political Right is increasingly powerful, (b) when *maintainers* are on the rise and *public intellectuals* on the decline, (c) when what the rhetoric of what counts as research (and practice) is becoming a matter of romanticized and obfuscated conservatism (e.g., Michael Apple, personal communication, May 29, 2008), and (d) when the American university remains blindly utopian and politically ineffective (e.g., Said, 2000).

Re-invoking Charles Taylor’s (1987/1971) insight that all understanding is ultimately always self understanding, my insistence on the fundamental importance of enacting *violent turbulence* in relation to ourselves, our locations, and our dispositions seems not just desirable but necessary. Problems of intercultural understanding and relations do not simply exist “out there” in the larger society or in our schools and universities but also “right here” in our minds, hearts, and bodies. However, an avowed commitment to social justice alone cannot transform existing social conditions because, even with a commitment, people often remain blind to the forces that created those conditions and continue to hold them in place. To make this point even more boldly, if we

do not understand the factors that incline us think and (re)act in particular ways in relation to cultural Others, and if we do not understand, at least partially, how these factors are linked to the external structures of society, we cannot make our own sedimented prejudices and habits visible to ourselves and thus we cannot initiate *violent turbulence* in relation to them. And if we cannot enact *violent turbulence* upon ourselves, then all our good intentions, all our curriculum theorizing, and all our social justice curricula will remain but “festive gestures” (Spivak, 2004, p. 543).

Put another way, if we genuinely want (a) to work productively with/in/across cultural difference, (b) to foster open debate where differences (as opposed to commonalities) are the norm, (c) to produce more co-existence-in-difference (and less domination/oppression), (d) to create more spaces for pluralistic research and teaching, and (e) to participate in restructuring the larger imperialistic social structures and systems, then we must first transform ourselves. Yet, as I have already mentioned, doing so is difficult, fear inducing, painful, and risky. And as I have also already mentioned, doing so involves much more than disrupting personal ideologies quietly within ourselves (e.g., Apple, 1990). It requires us to face the challenges of multiculturalism with no guarantees of solution or conclusion. It requires us to *do* what we think we should *do* no matter what. Given the human desire for recognition, stability, and wholeness, *violent turbulence* may result in changes that are not welcome—in one’s relationships with others, with the institutions within which we earn our livings, and with the ethos and world view of society at large. To engage in acts of *violent turbulence* also forces us into spaces of ambivalence, wherein we must press on without knowing exactly what we will accomplish or where we will end up.

But, as Hall (1992) reminds us, there is never a guarantee that engaging in radical social justice work will necessarily result in a more just world or transform spaces of domination/oppression into spaces of/for productive co-existence-in-difference. In the face of this knowledge, we would do well to embrace T. S. Eliot’s insight that “Ours is in the trying, the rest is not our business” (cited in West, 2000, p. 44). We would also do well to embrace West’s (2000) insight that, even in times as difficult as the present, we must acknowledge that “the world is incomplete and history is unfinished and the future is open ended, and what we think and do can make a difference, individually and collectively” (p. 44). All these insights remind me of experiencing severe airplane turbulence. This experience is always unpredictable, unstable, painful, and fearful. Yet, it is an inevitable part of flying, and, if I want to move from one place to another—whether geographic or political—I have no choice but to endure it, hoping for a safe landing while knowing that such a thing is never guaranteed.

I conclude this essay by invoking Said’s (1994b) distinction between *maintainers* and *public intellectuals*. First and foremost, *maintainers* take care of themselves. They collude with imperialism. They uphold the status quo. They work hard to protect their own social and economic capital. They shy away from conflict and risk. In contrast, *public intellectuals* are scholar-dissidents. They know that power and knowledge are deeply linked. They raise embarrassing questions. They expose hidden truths and the contingency of received ideas. They are not easily co-opted by institutions. They oppose the ruling class and the intractability of its power (p. 11). In other words, *public intellectuals* are constantly engaged in creating *violent turbulence*—within themselves, in society, and in the world. In the diverse, globalized, fast, capitalist but still neocolonial world of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the need for *public intellectuals*, especially in education, seems more desperate than ever.

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## NOTES

1. I use the term “ethnic and cultural Others” to indicate people from very different racial and cultural backgrounds from one’s own. I do not use the term to indicate a preconstituted nature of the Other or to essentialize so called exotic Others. It goes without saying that neither the identities of people or cultures are bounded, coherent, and timeless. It also goes without saying that the discourse of the Self does not exist entirely separate from the discourse of Others, since in the very processes of human interaction, aspects of the Self and Others are usually transformed in ways that are not entirely traceable (e.g., Bhabha, 2005). Therefore, by using the term “ethnic and cultural Others,” I am not drawing a neat boundary between us and them. However, I do strongly feel that there is also a degree of stability and unity in culture’s and people’s identities. Yes, things change, but not at the same rate.
2. Since there is no pure culture and since every culture is a result of a weaving of cultures that came before it, I recognize that the term “multiculturalism” is somewhat problematic. However, I use the term in this essay to signify the current social landscape in the United States, which is inhabited by people from myriad cultures speaking myriad languages in ways that are unprecedented in history.
3. Partly drawing on Erving Goffman’s (1959) work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Leslie Picca and Joe Feagin wrote a provocative book entitled *Two-Faced Racism* (2007). In this book, the authors drew upon 626 journals of racial events kept by white college students at twenty-eight colleges in the United States. They found that the racial attitudes exhibited by whites in private settings (“backstage”) are very different from the racial attitudes they express in public settings (“frontstage”). The authors reported that a majority of whites knew how to act racially polite in frontstage settings where they almost always said politically correct things, but they exhibited blatant racist performances in backstage settings.
4. Although it may seem otherwise given how I have organized them in this essay, how these constructs could or should be assembled and applied on the ground is hardly uncontroversial or linear.
5. Having said this, I am aware that the extent to which people can become aware of the unconscious desires that are disguised in their demands and actions can never be guaranteed in full and will always be incomplete and that such awareness will never guarantee changes in people’s actions. However, I suggest that acknowledging certain limitations such as the inherent human desire for stability and wholeness as part of the human condition is the generative ground for creating *violent turbulence* in ourselves and in relation to existing social conditions. It thus constitutes a “baby step” toward opening up possibilities for creating more progressive (even radical) spaces for human encounters and exchanges.
6. In relation to the durability and importance of the past and of history, Durkheim (cited in Bourdieu, 1990) puts it this way: “The present is necessarily insignificant when compared with the long period of the past because of which we have emerged in the form we have today. It is just that we don’t directly feel the influence of these past selves precisely because they are so deeply rooted in us. They constitute the unconscious part of ourselves” (p. 56)
7. In this regard, Foucault (1978) warns us that “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (pp. 92-93). Bourdieu (1998) also notes that:  
 Domination is not the direct and simple action exercised by a set of agents (“the dominant class”) invested with powers of coercion. Rather, it is the indirect effect of a complex set of actions engendered within the network of intersecting constraints which each of the domination is exerted, endures on behalf of all the others. (p. 34)
8. When I emphasize the importance of recognizing the constituted nature of the self and talk about selves as “subject-effects,” I am not by any means dismissing the “in-the-process,” changeable, and variable nature of the self. However, over-relying on changeability and downplaying the constituted nature of the self seems to me a poor substitute for trying to excavate the forces that constitute selves in particular ways that lead to conflicts and clashes



in intercultural relations.

9. I realize that center-periphery logics are riddled with problems (e.g., the problem of essentialization) and have been critiqued in many often legitimate ways. I thus use the terms “center” and “margin” with caution. However, because this essay focuses primarily on encounters and relations between western and non-western selves, I still think the binary has heuristic value. Among other things, naming Western and white “center” and non-Western, non-white as “margin” serves to underscore the durable forces at work that suggest the political impotence of most forms of happy multiculturalism (e.g., Williams, 2003).

10. I am not suggesting here that giving up one’s privileges will transform the structures of privilege that organize the world. What I am suggesting is that it is crucially important to recognize that all individuals are intimately connected to institutions, society, and the world and that they inhabit different spaces of relative privilege or its absence. Whether or not it disrupts the larger structures of power that organize the world, making a change (such as giving up a privilege) on the ground is a necessary condition for doing work that has any chance of contributing to the possibility of imagining and working toward a more just society.

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