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A Pedagogy of Defiance
Public Pedagogy as an Act of Unlearning

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Tenochtitlán, Mexico, Summer 2008

In the haze of a smog-drenched afternoon, I made my way down the Paseo de la Reforma to see the Angel of Mexico City, a golden and blinding monument erected in the center of a busy intersection, a zócalo/round-a-bout, whose base houses the remains of some of the most notable leaders of the Mexican Independence Movement. Her name is “Winged Victory” and she stands 35 meters high in the sky, on top of a Corinthian column made of Chiluca stone. I passed the United States embassy along the way and was taken aback by the 10 foot high iron barricade that kept onlookers and visitors a distant 500 yards or so away. After gazing at the Angel for some time, I initiated my return to the trolley station and encountered en route roughly 200 police men wearing bullet proof vests, in single file formation, with batons in one hand and riot shields in the other, preparing for what might turn into a disruptive or violent event. I felt uneasy, for a moment, until I found the group of protesters who had provoked such a militant response: 100 indigenous men and women, baring nothing on their dark-skinned, lean and plump flesh, except for a paper loincloth with an imprint of a man’s pink-fleshed face, Dante Delgado, former governor of Veracruz. The police enclosed and faced the group, some with arms akimbo, and others with their forearms resting leisurely on their riot shields (see Figure 51.1).

Atop makeshift wooden and plastic platforms anchored by ropes, and flanking large banners that read, “The Senate Doesn’t See or Hear Us” and “The Senate Doesn’t Notice Us,” the women swayed in the nude, their arms moving up and down in mock go-go dancer style, to draw attention to the severity—and barbarity—of the government’s offenses since their demands had been ignored for so many years. These naked members of the Movimiento de los 400 Pueblos (the Movement of 400 Ethnic Groups) were protesting the destruction of their villages in Veracruz—Alamo Temapache, Poza Rica, and Martinez de la Torre—and the incarceration of 350 of their fellow campesinos (12 were in jail for seven years and many others from eight months to two years). They claimed that the Mexican government forcibly evicted them from their lands to make way for U.S. corporate pig farms that exploit the relaxed social welfare standards of the region.

While the farmers’ enduring protest did not likely elicit great attention beyond the Mexican border, the world’s population will never forget where these protesters came from: the region that was home to “patient zero,” four-year old Edgar Hernandez, who the Mexican govern-
ment identified as the first victim of the 2009 “swine flu” outbreak (Adams, 2009, p. 2).
Edgar lived in the small town of La Gloria in the Veracruz province, five miles south of Smithfield Farms, a U.S. agribusiness corporation whose Mexican subsidiary raises one million pigs a year and that has been identified as the potential source of the outbreak (Adams, 2009, p. 2). The owner of Smithfield Farms is regally identified as “pig baron” Joseph Luter III, who lives in New York City and oversees the $1.4 billion corporation. At the time of this writing, the pig baron and his Mexican-based managers have denied any wrong doing and have assured the public that the pigs were properly vaccinated and that the “vast swimming pool of faeces (sic)—industrial pig farming’s toxic byproduct—was covered with a lid to limit the exposure to the outside air” (Foley, 2009, p. 2). But the reports of swarming flies, photos of rotting pigs left scattered outside the factory, and the dozens of people who had fallen ill with similar symptoms prior to patient zero (including two children who died of their ailments), gave the farmers and civilians of the region new cause for protest. Perhaps they will take to the streets again, baring nothing but one of the 4 million face masks the Mexican government symbolically distributed in its capital at the onset of the official outbreak, and perhaps they will wear another paper loincloth, this time with the image of the 67-year old pig baron himself.

For the women of the 400 Pueblos protest, placing their private bodies in the public realm for passersby to see was a daring move, especially in a nation where public woman oft en means prostitute (Wright, 2008), and where the moral character of women is frequently tarnished as a result of their public activities (Wright, 2008). These women were defying and undermining the persistent patriarchal and Catholic social order that for centuries has monitored, censored, and disciplined their bodies. Women’s bodies are subject to various and sundry degrees of exposure, and positioned within asymmetrical relations of power, where the particular motive (profit versus protest; femicide versus reclamation) determines the extent to which nudity is valorized or bastardized.

“No pedimos limosna, pedimos justicia/we do not ask for charity, we ask for justice” read the signs, and for approximately an hour the men and women faced the street and the armed policemen, chanting, passing out pamphlets, and demanding justice. These members of the “400 Pueblos” had been protesting on a daily basis since 2003, calling for the trial of their former governor, Dante Delgado, for obtaining by force 2000 hectares of indigenous land, and imprisoning the campesino/as in May of 1992.

As I stood on the other side of the street, watching the protesters’ ritual unfold, I was confronted by a mestiza who easily picked up on my foreign air, and who proceeded to chastise the young man who was informing me of the movement’s ongoing struggle. Her eyes carried tears,
her mouth became distorted in a fit of rage, and she pleaded that I not show the salvajes/savages any attention. She glanced at the protesters with sheer odium. She identified herself as one of the casualties of their ongoing public protest; a working service-clerk in a nearby store whose owners fired her because, she claimed, the protest hurt business. “Por ellos no tengo trabajo, son inútil!” Because of them I do not have work, they are useless!” she shrieked. I can still see her face.

Members of the movement began the struggle on the dank earth of their indigenous lands, directed their protest to the requisite official in charge, and followed the allocated channels of “representative democracy” hoping that the government would respond in kind. The group decided to take to the streets in the country’s capital after their hunger strike in front of Senate chambers elicited nothing more than a passing glare as legislators departed for vacation. Unable to generate legal, congressional, or public recognition for their cause through one of the most long-lasting mechanisms of peaceful social protest on record, they took to the streets, armed with flesh. They discovered that it was the sight and persistence of their healthy bodies that generated concern, not their possible emaciation. As one man recalled, “We are only peasants, we don’t have other arms, and the only thing we have is our body to call attention.” Their weapons were raw flesh, thick and thin, large and small, dark and darker, male and female. In the nude they subverted the legacy of colonialism that required that flesh remains subservient, separated from spirit and mind, and in honor of an imposed God. In the nude, they exposed their voice, power, and persistence, fully present in body and mind.

As I took a step back and watched the protesters from afar, I was taken by the glaring visual contradiction between the clothed men, women, and policemen on the street, and the unclothed protesters. Thoughts about the notion of civilized versus uncivilized occupied my imagination, and I began to think about how such categories are often bereft of meaning. Here, on a busy city corner, where a majority of industry and high-rise buildings tower over the nameless and relatively moneless people on the street, there was a reversal of meaning taking place, by the symbolic gesture of disrobing. Breaking away from the colonial orthodoxy that to be “unclothed” is to be “uncivilized,” the protesters shed any lingering diffidence they might have had by communicating in the nude to the businessmen and working women scurrying along and to the suited policemen relaxing at the sight of the protesters’ dancing feet, that to be “civilized” is to have the ability to communicate their knowing and being in the world, as opposed to being passive objects of society’s indifference. The counter-story of exposed flesh—the forced nudity of recently exposed U.S. torture tactics designed to render people helpless and restrained—suggests that to be nude is to be vulnerable, and to be clothed is to gesture towards one’s status and power. Thus, the naked protesters were engaged in a double move; they became clothed by the moral virtue of their position while the wider public became disrobed by their seeming indifference to the protester’s cause.

Some in the public questioned the significance of an ongoing protest that for over half a decade failed to elicit an official response. Was it sheer social performance, a form of public theater, a group of indigenous men and women gone mad? Was it a pedagogical act that provided a corporeal context for learning—about a people’s condition, about a government’s illegitimacy, about communicating public power? A collective behaviorist using a scale of rationality might have even placed the crowd’s behavior at the most irrational end of a human continuum (see Eyerman, 2002).

Willingly or by force, the public was motivated to see and hear their fellow Mexican citizens and confront their own rage at the unknown “other” that lives in all mestizas. Witnessing the spectacle of the nude protesting campesinos perhaps worked at the level of an allegory at some unconscious level for the public, due to the fact that most people from Mexico are mestizas who carry within their own bodies’ indigenous genes. The index of mestizaje in Mexico is gener-
ally conditioned by class position and the darkness of the skin—with Indigenous peoples from Mexico being at the lowest rung of the capitalist hierarchy. While the protesting campesinos were unlearning their complicity with a system of capitalist exploitation, the onlookers were learning about their indifference not just to the plight of the campesinos but to their own ethnic origins and the history of colonization that clearly favors European-looking Mexicans. The protest sutures the seemingly unbridgeable divide that separates the campesinos and middle class chilangos with living flesh.

Unlearning by exercising collective voice—public power—is public pedagogy. It is a reflection of the organized and spontaneous sites of public pedagogy that are both oppositional and connected to broader projects designed to further ethnic/racial, economic, and political democracy. Unlearning silence in the face of injustice is a precondition for coming to voice; it is an act of remembering, of putting flesh onto words and, yes, to defiance. It is a way of unsettling the scripted hegemonic conventions and ideologies that are strictly enforced and that the public over time has internalized as natural and commonsensical. Public pedagogy is a pedagogy of defiance in the sense that all of the attributes and relations that constitute the “public” as an active and dynamic “place” that conditions learning and knowing are communicated, exposed, and contested. Unlearning as public pedagogy is where resistance meets transgression in the act of collective defiance. Here, the reiterated acting of the campesinos, their choice of self-presentation, refuses the invasion of the gestures of others into their own self-constitution and self-formation, reveals their identities not to be an a priori given, troubles the typical notion of the campesino as shy, or passively helpless, ruptures normative public opinion, showing it to be little more than a cultural fiction, and opens up a space for re-visioning the incorporative fantasy of the passive peasant within the inter-subjective community of the public. The nude protest—a testimonio of the flesh—unsettled the self-imposed immobility of the spectators, and unloosened the ideological corset of their political quietude.

**Public Pedagogy as Communication**

The observations exercised above bring to mind the broader complexity of understanding how members of the public engage in popular struggle and enact their collective knowledge and power as a communicative strategy. Clearly these questions are mediated by the particular political-social conditions of a group’s context. How the wider and ordinary “public” responds to popular demands to be heard and seen will be contingent on and an expression of the public’s beat in the hegemonic pulse of global capitalism. As people around the world become more impacted by the forces of globalization and interconnected both by the ability of media channels to transfer information from one region to the next, but also by the universal form that exploitation assumes within the globalization of capital, these questions will become more pressing as the world’s “underclass”—armed with flesh—communicate their resistance to various forms of violence: structural, economic, physical, territorial, and so forth.

In recent history we have witnessed various popular struggles that communicate indignation: Abahlali baseMjondolo, together with the Landless People’s Movement (Gauteng), the Rural Network (KwaZulu-Natal), and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (all part of the Poor People’s Alliance—a network of radical poor people’s movements in South Africa), the Zapatistas of Mexico, Movimento Sem Terra (the landless worker’s movement in Brazil who have occupied unused land and established cooperative farms since 1985), the Piqueteros movement in Argentina (see McLaren & Jaramillo, 2007), the mothers of Juárez, Mexico, and the spontaneous activity that does not register in the wider public consciousness such as the Movimiento de 400 Pueblos described earlier or the Pink Hindi Gang of India, to name a few.
Some of these movements are more structured than others, some stress spontaneity and horizontal organization as opposed to vertical and hierarchical organization, and some of them maintain categorically distinct philosophies about what it means to exercise and communicate public power. In the case of the Zapatistas, the decided turn to protect autonomous and endogenous development separate from state authority, control, and power is captured in the signature phrases, “fire and the word” or “a tapestry and a mirror,” in the words of Subcomandante Marcos (Ramirez, 2007, p. 17). For the Zapatistas, the spoken and written word serves as the primary means to communicate their collective sense of power, rather than changing the world through the pursuit of state seizure. The Piqueteros of Argentina, a group primarily comprised of female factory workers, utilized popular mechanisms of labor protest—the strike, sit-in, and factory take-over—to communicate their collective resistance to the economic collapse of the country. The mothers of Juárez continue to draw attention to femicide and the seemingly “natural” character that violence against women has assumed in the U.S. border region, through the symbolic gesturing of pink crosses on wooden electric polls and vacated store fronts and the ongoing public protest against the murders. Groups such as 400 Pueblos or the Pink Hindi Gang of India, a group of vigilante women donning pink burkas and fighting sticks who patrol their neighborhoods against corruption and domestic abuse, are relatively unnoticed in the national or international scene.

It is important to understand such social movements as proponents of public pedagogy in terms set forth by the major social theorist of hegemony, Antonio Gramsci (1971). Gramsci’s (1971) famous methods for challenging hegemony—a “war of maneuver” versus a “war of position,” are a case in point. Rather than mutually exclusive distinctions, these methods are more a matter of degree than a matter of kind. A “war of maneuver” involves overcoming by force the coercive apparatus of the state. This strategy is effective only insofar as state hegemony is exercised by a strong political society alongside a weak civil society. If the credibility of the dominant groups within the state is strong within civil society, then armed insurrection or general strikes or uprising will be less effective. Here, civil society can actually reinforce the hegemony of the state. Gramsci himself advocated within liberal democracies with a strong civil society a “war of position” by which he meant resistance to forms of domination within the public sphere; the emphasis is on creating alternative institutions and groups, and discovering means of developing alternative resources. In this context, alternative organizations and groups are important for creating a shared discourse and political imaginary for challenging the ideological hegemony of the state (Gramsci, 1971).

When educators, activists, and researchers think of public pedagogy as communication within the ranks of civil society as a means of challenging forces of domination within political society (i.e., the state), it is necessary to consider the overlapping and mutually dependent layers that enacting public pedagogy assumes. There is the realm of language, where the speech act of public pedagogy becomes central to convey meaning generated in a social group’s activity. And there is the realm of receptive language—how meaning is generated from the audience’s perspective and the ways in which a phrase such as “public power” is interpreted and acted upon across various sectors of the population. It is in this sense, that the question that Arundhati Roy (2004) poses becomes increasingly relevant, “When language has been butchered and bled of meaning, how do we understand ‘public power?’” (¶ 2). Critical language that enables public actors to connect critique to everyday social activity demarcates and circumscribes the lineaments of public pedagogy, inclusive of the embodiment, organization, and execution of power as means to achieve a particular end. In her commentary, Roy adequately captures the indeterminateness of language, of the temporal shift that is experienced from what we generally refer to as “traditional” to “modern” society, where public displays of collectivity are split
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into differentiated analytical parts—the symbolic, real, liminal, liminoid—and when artificial impressions of “liveliness” gain frequency (Alexander & Mast, 2006). These are not necessarily negative assertions; they suggest that when analyzing collective displays of social resistance it is becoming increasingly difficult to generate a consensus about how public power is conceived, communicated, and executed. Language in the modern/post-modern era has the uncanny ability of serving to express concepts that cast ambiguity between what is said and the meaning that is conveyed. Ultimately, language—as a speech act—interpolates between various webs of social meaning and is grounded in the material and philosophical coordinates that place actors in the position of speakers and audiences in the position of listeners. What brings actors and audiences together in this social milieu is the very social structure that internally binds people together, making the image of one over the other contingent on their relative dependence to one another; and making people’s relationships to the concept of “public power” and “public pedagogy” so elusive. This signals, following Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1976), the difficulty of expressing “being,” “acting,” and “consciousness” through language. As Paula Allman (2006) writes,

According to Marx, a great deal of human beings’ sensuous experience within material reality involves engagement within internal relations or engagements with one or the other of the components of an internal relation...language expresses concepts that tend to obscure, even extinguish, the relational origin of these concepts. With the continuing development of language throughout life, this problem could confound our ability to think in terms of internal relations to say nothing of our ability to express such thinking, unless, of course, we remain vigilant and critically aware of the inherent limitations in even one of the most prized abilities of the human species. (p. 33)

Critical Public Pedagogy

When language is coupled with action as a form of exercising civic power, then we have a broad-based understanding of its communicative potential. A critical language practice can be named “critique” and it rests upon a counterhegemonic performance that is directed against groups responsible for actions of domination and exploitation. To exercise critique as a form of public pedagogy constitutes a refusal to accept the creation of a social world built upon illusions—enlightened false consciousness—as well as the ability to utilize “power” in unconstrained action. A critical public pedagogy creates the conditions of possibility for a critically self-reflexive grasping of everyday practices in their historical and social relations.

Here, a critical public pedagogy of unlearning considers the notion of power not as an individual ability to act, but to act in concert (Habermas, 1994). Unlearning necessitates collectivity; the ability for groups to come together and identify the causes of the antagonisms that have led to their action. Following Hannah Arendt, we can think of power in the sense that “power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together” (as cited in Habermas, 1994, p. 212). The act of collective speech, of collective understanding, keeps a social group together. Once that collectivity is disbanded, power is diffused, and the ability to communicate knowledge, understanding, and a social group’s agency is either lost or forgotten. Importantly, power as a collective force suggests that it must originate from below; it cannot be generated from above. While acknowledging and identifying the structural forces that condition “power from below” it is not sufficient to assume that power cannot generate in the spontaneous activity of social actors given the limitations and constraints that stem from above. In turn, it is also not sufficient to say that structures from above cannot enable or create the spaces of possibility for power from below to emerge. Power generated by a
dialectical approach to critique is about mediation, not juxtaposition. It generates its force and potency from the dialectical interchange among social actors and their ideas, visions, knowledges, and strategies, their knowledge of the disparaging inequalities and injustices in the world, and a hopeful aspiration of social life beyond what is and towards what could be.

Performance and Performativity

Public pedagogy has historically signaled both the performative aspects of how people enact their identities and a performance designed to ignite political and social consciousness in the public realm. In either case, theories and practices of public pedagogy are designed to draw our attention to relations of power, domination, exploitation, and transgression that take place in the public sphere, of which schools are but one locality. This, however, speaks to the element of “critique” inherent in public pedagogy; the spaces and spheres that reside outside of the traditional school setting that impact students’ identities and knowledge production: what they know, how they know, and how knowledge impacts their sense of self and relation to others. In this sense, public pedagogy has not only referenced a temporal and physical sense of space, but also culture and politics (see Giroux, 2000). Public pedagogy as a critically performative practice most closely mirrors the cultural realm and the practices that constitute how social groups enact their sense of being. Questions about the workings between authority and power, pleasure and values, knowledge and ideology, and how these relationships are revealed by and through communities’ social organization and representation are central to understanding the performative character of public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000).

As performance, public pedagogy is not necessarily detached from the performative aspects or understandings of being, but rather, symbolic space (i.e., the discursive and material spaces where ideologies are produced, enacted, and challenged) becomes the constitutive principle in attempts to question or undermine the social relations that constitute everyday acts. For example, for some feminists, public pedagogy as performance stems from a need to expose in the “public” the mundane issues that have often found safe-haven in the private realm. Rape, violence against women, and the scripted behaviors that elicit domination from the heterosexual male over all “others,” have provided the seedbed for women to “publicize” “private” affairs. Many women working in the feminist tradition have pursued an “expanded public pedagogy” to inform and engage diverse audiences with issues relevant to their lives (Fryd, 2007), taking theater to the streets and asking the public to experience the effects of physical and psychological victimization (Fryd, 2007). Within art and literature, a feminized understanding of public pedagogy has sought to contest the artist’s or writer’s domain; moving across the borders between “inside” or “fine” art, “high” or “classic” literature, and outside to the political spaces that exist on the street, in community shelters, and in the personal narratives that constitute another way of written expression. Here, the body and the public display of human experience turns art (Fryd, 2007) and storytelling/narrative into an activist and spiritual medium that expresses intense emotions, reconnects the sensory body with the cognitive mind, in public spaces as the site of knowledge production. The “performance” is ultimately designed to lead to action, as was the case with Suzanne Lacy’s public theater performances during the late 1970s that drew attention to Los Angeles’ leading rank as the rape capital of the United States (Fryd, 2007).

The less structured and spontaneous organization of public pedagogy seen in social movements such as 400 Pueblos also include a performative aspect to their cause, in the same fashion that all forms of social organization—either spontaneous or structured—utilize the body, language, art, memory, culture, or an epiphenomenal connection to another way of seeing and being in the world to perform and exercise their collective power. This is not to suggest that the
performances are merely symbolic representations taking precedence over real relations; or that they do not constitute concrete actions of civil disobedience. Historically, public pedagogies of resistance have been symbolic, but also part of a larger act of real civil disobedience. What is disturbing nowadays, as duly noted by Roy (2004), is that “resistance as spectacle has cut loose from its origins in genuine civil disobedience and is beginning to become more symbolic than real” (p. 1).

Resistance joining with spectacle has been noticeable in various sites of large-scale social protest, the Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) protests of 1999 being the most often cited example. For the purposes of this discussion, David Boje’s (2001) remarks on the WTO protest/spectacle are particularly apropos:

...much of global protest is carnival, such as 400,000 WTO protestors facing the police overdressed in Vader masks and riot gear facing protestors costumed in sea-turtle shells, or ladies prancing naked with “Better Naked than Nike” or “BGH-free” scrawled across their chest and back, and gigantic puppets and floating condoms the size of blimps with the words “Practice Safe Trade.” For Bakhtin (1973), the carnival is “...that peculiar folk humor that always existed and has never merged with the official culture of the ruling classes.” The street theatrics of the WTO protest in Seattle, as well as the anti-sweatshop movement, has become a parody of corporate power using carnival. In the erosion of the nation state as a global character, the corporate state has emerged as a new star of the global theater, but one who is being vilified by activists in off-Broadway carnivalesque productions that rebelliously reinterpret the experience of consumers putting on garments in acts scripted to raise consciousness. (p. 432)

The Battle of Seattle marks a very important moment in the history of mass protest not only in the United States, but also throughout the world, where a vast number of protestors demonstrating an impressive understanding of the dangers linked to the globalization of capitalism, came together in a dramatic challenge the authority of the world economic powers. However, there are some aspects of this, and other, mass protests that need to be taken in the spirit of Boje’s remarks. The issue at hand is to what extent is all protest a form of theater and when does protest as theater transform itself into protest as spectacle? To what extent do the invasive forces of the “spectacle”—“a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (Debord, 1995, p. 7) calcify the politics of resistance by fetishizing the political dimension and bringing about an even greater symbolic distance between the protesters and that which they are protesting?

When this is the case, the very meaning of resistance, or public power in Roy’s terms, is amiss. Following Boje’s observations, when citizens come together in carnivalesque form as social protest, then the intent of the action is precisely to enter into a state of “carnival”—a temporary space with a pre-determined beginning and end that allows participants to subvert dominant meanings and to perform their resistance in ways that ensure the wider public will take notice. This is important, in the sense that the space of “carnival” creates the conditions for subversion, political, and social resistance. However, to solely focus on the “spectacle” over the politics of resistance neglects the profound effect that the mobilization of 40,000 people in the world leader’s meeting place had on subsequent economic policy and spontaneous sites of social organization around the world. The point to be made is that when more emphasis is placed on spectacle over the politics of resistance, dichotomizing the relationship that spectacle has historically had to the politics of resistance as a form of consciousness-raising and effecting concrete change, social protest is understood as more “symbolic” than “real.” This is similar to other noted rituals of resistance, such as Brazil’s annual carnival celebrations that began in
the country’s poverty-stricken shantytowns as a form of popular subversion and political resistance, but that have evolved into more structured and profitable enterprises that reify the class antagonisms between the rich and the poor. The origins of civil disobedience in such rituals and spectacles are lost in the process and in the culmination of events, when actors are able to re-integrate into society relatively unchanged and unaffected by the carnival’s events. How, then, is civil disobedience measured or public power defined when it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between the underlying intent of resistance and the intent of spectacle? What values do people collectively assign to such events and what knowledge is produced?

In their discussion of social performance, Alexander and Mast (2006) make some important observations of the various theoretical and analytical constructs that have been applied to social performance in both sociological and anthropological traditions. The authors importantly identify one of the challenges in theorizing contemporary cultural practices as the way in which it tends to slide between “artifice and authenticity” (p. 5). Using the term “cultural pragmatics” to denote the culturally-specific character of activities, the “manner in which they are expressive rather than instrumental, irrational rather than rational, more like theatrical performance than economic exchange” (p. 2), the authors emphasize the ways in which cultural pragmatics is about the relations between cultural texts and the actors in everyday life. Primary attention is given to meaning and not to action in the cultural turn of social performance. Meaning serves as the authentic interpretive category rather than an ontological state. In other words, the level of authenticity in a cultural group’s organization and social performance depends on and is contingent of the processes of social construction. To question the “authenticity” of the social act (real versus symbolic for instance) is to gloss over the processes of social construction that are constitutive of the social act. In their words,

if there is a normative repulsion to the fake or inauthentic, cultural pragmatics asserts that it must be treated in an analytical way, as a structuring code in the symbolic fabric actors depend on to interpret their lived realities. Yes, we are ‘condemned’ to live out our lives in an age of artifice, a world of mirrored, manipulated, and medicated representation. But the constructed character of symbol does not make them less real. (p. 7)

But when the motivation behind social performance is to change, to unlearn domination, and to transform social relations, then what type of “analytical” categories are necessary to consider in public pedagogy? The question of theory and practice, praxis, has troubled many generations of educators, researchers, and other cultural workers. When the point of practicing performance is to have a qualitative change for the social group or for broader society in general, then performances are understood as both ceremonial and interactional processes of the “marginalized, the enslaved, and the subaltern” (see discussion of Conquergood in Alexander & Mast, 2006, p. 14). The praxiological approach of social performance recognizes that marginalized and oppressed groups do not come together to only enhance their “cultural meaning” or “ontological referents” but that cultural practices are embodied and experiential; cultural practices of resistance expose oppression in the dominant social order. In a pedagogy of defiance, a public pedagogy of “unlearning,” both the partially autonomous configuration of how social groups come together—culturally and politically—to make themselves visible and heard, is coupled with an understanding of the macro-social structures and relations that constrain and occasion the social performance. When social action is understood in and of itself as a meaningful text, then it is also capable of capturing the sacrality (the sacred elements of engaging in action) and of displaying it in symbolic performance (Alexander & Mast, 2006, p. 14).

The question for educators and cultural workers who are committed to understanding and
supporting the conditions for public pedagogy as resistance to emerge as a site where youth, families, and communities, engage in a pedagogy of “unlearning” is how to fuse performance with politics. In other words, while public pedagogy has a central cultural element, it is not sufficient to remain in the cultural realm altogether as a site of resistance or transgression. Culture enters into an iterative relationship with the social milieu and structure; to privilege one over the other denies both the collective power that is present in a cultural group, and the possibilities of transforming broader social relations when power is exercised. To speak of “culture” as part of public pedagogy is to connect people’s meaning-making in the world with a collective political project towards justice and social transformation. Meaning in this sense is coupled with action, and without guarantees.

Critical public pedagogy acknowledges that meaning cannot be captured adequately among the signs of our postmodern sign economy. Meaning, according to Teresa Ebert, is not the correspondence of language to reality as realism implies, nor is it the endless play of the sign as linguistic theory suggests. Rather, it is important to understand that meaning is a social relation, and the uncertainty of meaning and its ambiguity are not caused by the slippage of signs away from any fixed referent but by social change and contradictions (Ebert & Zavarzadeh, 2008; see McLaren, in press.).

There is no guarantee that a public pedagogy of unlearning will result in tangible and enduring changes in the social order, nor is there the guarantee that the collective formation of the group will remain intact. But social change always depends on the unknown and the unpredictability of people’s actions, because it is ultimately dialectical in nature. It is the process that is set in motion by a public pedagogy of unlearning that creates the conditions—yet not the certainty—for actual change to occur. The members of the 400 Pueblos have continued their struggle to recuperate their territories and violent confrontations have occurred in Veracruz between the members and a state-supported organization of campesinos. And it is likely, as is the case with many of the social movements mentioned in this chapter, that they will continue to re-make themselves and their social protest depending on how the government and civil society respond to their ongoing demands.

To avoid the pitfalls of reducing social organization, resistance, and transgression to both the material and symbolic realm, there is a necessity to keep the pedagogy of unlearning in dialectical motion. It is understood that the social performance of unlearning is at once an individual and collective experience, and represented by various symbolic gestures and cultural attributes; it is also about an understanding of the social processes and formations that are subject to discipline and control by larger political and economic processes. Those committed to the wider project of social transformation recognize that the affective dimensions of pursuing social change do not fit into neat analytical categories. Even in the face of defeat, of state repression or violence, of feeling overwhelmed by the colonial legacy of history, of losing a sense of ‘self’ in the face of capitalist profit and accumulation, the performers of a critical pedagogy of unlearning are able to keep the performance moving, when and until change has taken place and a new type of performativity makes its way into the collective consciousness and activity of social actors.

References


