

Revolution and Reality: An Interview with Peter McLaren

Carmel Borg, Peter Mayo and Ronald Sultana

You are on record as having argued that the most important ethical question you would ask is not 'who are you?', a question we would have been tempted to ask, but 'where are you?' How would you answer the latter question?

McLaren: The significant distinction between the questions 'where are you?' and 'who are you?' was brought to my attention by a contemporary Irish philosopher, Richard Kearney. Both of us are obviously quite influenced by philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, as some of my commentators and critics have pointed out. I use this distinction a lot in my speeches and I take it right out of some of Kearney's writings on the ethical imagination. The question 'where are you' demands an ethical decision: 'here I stand'. I am here and I am here for you. In other words, the "other" demands of us an ethical response - the unalienable right to be engaged as a human being. The phrase 'who are you' takes in epistemological and ontological concerns. They are important but before you ask somebody who they are I think you need to establish the possibility of solidarity with them first. As others have pointed out correctly, this characteristic of my work has been influenced by liberation theology. Which disturbs some of my critics who have noticed numerous references to Santeria and Umbanda in my recent work - but that's another story for another interview. Let me say that a praxis of solidarity entails, in Kearney's view, the correlative priority of praxis over theory, ethics as having primacy over epistemology and ontology. I'm always reminded of this when I visit South Central or East Los Angeles, or the ghettos of Mexico or the favelas of Brasil. This summer a



group of graduate students brought me to Brasil to teach a course and they actually arranged a lecture tour for me in Florianopolis, Porte Alegre and Sao Paulo. I remember visiting a favela, called Chico Mendez, in Florianopolis with a radical Catholic priest. Father Vilson did not ask people for their identity papers before he gave them assistance. They could be drug dealers, prostitutes or people dying in their shacks of AIDS. He was committed to all of them. People knew he was there for them - they knew where he stood. I noticed in meeting again with Freire - this time in Sao Paulo - that he reflects where he stands in even the subtleties of his thinking about ordinary events. But let me emphasize that ethical responses are in no way indiscriminate. Our unconditional stance is with the powerless, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, the immiserated, the wretched of the earth. Those who suffer and who long for comfort. We cannot avoid as educators, as agents for liberation, standing before the concrete other who is in need of our help. When I say, 'here I stand' I am implicating, as Kearney notes, a "we" in the "I" and a "there" in the "here." "I stand" takes priority over "I think." The "other" is always a precondition for "I stand" whereas "I think" betrays no responsibility to the other. Kearney points out that the "I" in "I stand" has no significance outside of the call "where are you?" We need to develop an ethical imagination in which others take priority over ourselves. I like to think that in my work I stand on the side of the suffering, the lonely, the desperate, the victims of the global capitalist marketplace. The anguished victims who call out to us - from the classroom corridors, from community 'half-way houses', from the streets of our cities. They even call

out to us from the boardrooms of corporations, from the marketing agencies, from the business and church hierarchies, if we would only listen to their cries. We need to know where we stand when they call upon us for assistance. They, in turn, need to know where we stand. I've been greatly influenced by the lives of Che Guevara and Paulo Freire, as you might gather. Both have spoken of the impossibility of revolutionary consciousness or practice without a love for the people. But a praxis built upon love distilled only into empathy is ultimately too think for the transformation I am talking about. Empathy is not enough unless it is accompanied by a political agenda to critically intervene in relations of exploitation and domination.

What are some of your key concerns as a citizen, educator and cultural theorist?

McLaren: My concerns shift in time, space, geopolitically and otherwise, but I shall venture to state, broadly speaking, that my key concerns stem from a struggle to understand the mystery of existence in its historical, material, ethical, and spiritual dimensions and not only to put these dimensions under erasure in some sort of deconstructive enterprise but rather to resymbolize, reframe, recode and reshape such existence in a real material way in the service of liberation and the elimination of needless suffering. I want to hold democracy accountable and responsible for its shortcomings and challenge it to live up to its ideals. I want to contest the anarcho-fascist politics of the splayed postmodern will. So that we can live in a society that can respect the challenge of Teresa Ebert's refrain: "From each according to her ability, to each, according to her need." Freedom from necessity is the key here. My goal as a citizen and educator and cultural theorist is to make the world less exploitative, less cruel, less inhumane than if I had never been born. My goal is to struggle against economic marginalization and abandonment of hope, against ethnoracial power wielded unjustly by whites or any other group, against the unequal global distribution of resources and the suffering of the people brought about by the international division of labor, against the global proletarianization of the worker and against labor relations brought about by relations and practices of imperialism. And if that gives me the label of a "dangerous man" then so be it. Economics is more than what Bataille refers to as the expenditure of desire. It is about material relations of exploitation and domination. Too often I see criticalists trying to romanticize critical pedagogy or exoticize the precious singularity of the "other" - of that unknowable alterity that escapes representation - and they forget about the

politics of collective struggle. They avoid looking at society as a totality for fear that they are entering the realm of universal master narratives. So they stick to particularities. Teresa Ebert notes that the alternative to local knowledges is not abstract universalism but rather collectivity. My biggest theoretical struggle now is to avoid overestimating the importance of experience outside of a theoretical language for explaining and transforming such experience. I meet students or colleagues who prefer to "speak from experience" rather than "from theory." I think experiences are important - experiences as women, men, as Latinas, as Chicanas, as Asians, as Maltese, as Americans, etc. But equally as important is the way we interpret those experiences in light of how such experiences have been shaped by the system of social production that produces what we take to be "common sense." I think it was Toni Morrison who said "language is not a substitute for experiences but arches to the place where meaning lies." That statement is the key to the title of one of my speeches, "Building an Arch of Social Dreaming." Some critics have found my metaphor "arch" to be rather confusing but it makes sense to me in light of Morrison's insight about the relationship among language, experience, and meaning. Joan Scott expresses a similar insight to that of Morrison: "Experience is a subject's history. Language is the site of history's enactment." Liz Bondi also speaks to this issue which I raise again and again in my work when she says: "the flaw [within hyphenated feminisms] was to remain too close to liberal humanism by assuming that knowledge flowed directly from experience and that experienced ensured the authenticity of knowledge." Of course, experience is important and needs to be affirmed. To deny experience is to deny voice. And to be without voice is to be powerless, without agency. Experience may be relevant and valid but that doesn't mean that it is the arch of foundational truth. Critical social theory and experience must be dialectically re-initiating or recursively linked - that's the issue I've been trying to emphasize. You don't necessarily learn from experiences. You only learn from experiences that you learn from, as Myles Horton once put it. Experiences always exhaust the capacity of language and language always exhausts the capacity of experience. The experiences of the subaltern should not be essentialized but understood dialectically in relation to theory. The point is to read the perspectives of the nameless subaltern along those of the ethnocentrism of the discourse of bourgeois humanism in order to articulate a counterstance that goes beyond imminent critique, that is, that goes beyond the philosophical and political norms of the dominant culture. The

racism of Proposition 187 (a California law voted in recently that denies medical care and education to illegal immigrants) is founded upon a modernist, bourgeois ethics of law (these are illegal aliens!) but this must be set against an ethics of liberation articulated from the perspective of the oppressed and the victims of this Draconian measure (we are human beings; we are here; we need your help; our children are sick and wanting). Such a perspective reveals the law to be complicitous with racism and the exploitation of the unfree labor of the migrants. You asked me about my pivotal concerns. One is to try to fathom the intricacies of subjectivity and historical agency: How can human beings reconcile their lives in a system that fetishizes their dreams, commodifies their wills, and puts a price tag on their souls? I've always been amazed - whether it's been during my years in Toronto, in Cincinnati, or in Los Angeles - at why more people don't run through the streets howling with rage, in the throes and thrall of madness? How can we live with so little outrage against the evil of global capitalism? How can we willingly adapt - and sometimes gleefully - ourselves, and our families, and our children to a system that exploits people on the basis of their social class, their race, their gender, religion, sexuality? My work has tried to fathom how the process of motivated amnesia works on a national scale, through local circuits of subject formation tied together by national myths, so that people refuse to confront their complicity in relations of domination and exploitation. Recently my work has focused on the topic of critical multiculturalism, a topic which is featured throughout my new book, *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture*. Here I try to distinguish different species of multiculturalism: conservative, liberal, left-liberal and critical. My work in Mexico and also my interest in border culture has led me to formulate a new conception of identity that I call 'order identity.' I've used Gloria Anzaldua's concept of mestizaje identity and recently Margaret Montoya introduced me to Francoise Lionnet's concept of *metissage* which refers to a type of creolization of subjectivity, a combination of the dominant language with outlaw languages of subaltern groups. Here we are encouraged as teachers and students to redefine and re-invent the language of identity, the language of theory, and the language of research from the perspective of the oppressed. This idea is tied into the concept of how whiteness colonizes the definition of the normal at the level of everyday life and the idea that whiteness serves as a principle of pure exchangeability that tries to become the universalism that white people purport to represent.

Who do you draw your inspiration from as you confront the world, that is to imagine a world that could or should be? On which bases do you construct your "arch of social dreaming"?

McLaren: Nietzsche once wrote: 'What does not kill gives me strength.' This to me serves as a fitting testament to those revolutionary workers whom I admire, especially those who struggle with young people for a better future. I need to draw inspiration from history, even though history is created retroactively in the context of the present. Last month I went on a march of about 100,000 people in east L.A. We were marching against Proposition 187 which subsequently passed and will force teachers into the role of informers for the Immigration and Naturalization Service. If teachers do not report suspected illegal immigrants (those who have brown skin!) they could be fined or lose their jobs. If this proposition becomes law, illegal immigrants will not be allowed to attend school and will not receive medical benefits except in the case of emergencies. I hope that this mean-spirited and Draconian proposition will be declared unconstitutional. I am ashamed to be living in a state that overwhelmingly supported this measure. It doesn't take much of an imagination to think back to an earlier time when people were scapegoated and citizens had to report them to the authorities under threat of serious penalty. So in the face of such challenges I draw inspiration and inner strength from many individuals: Amilcar Cabral, Memmi, Subcommandante Marcos of the Zapatista Army, Trotsky, Fanon, Malcolm X, Althusser, Foucault, and even from some of the ideas of bourgeois thinkers like Jacques Lacan.

I continue to draw inspiration from the works of Tina Modotti, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, the Situationists, the life and works of Paulo Freire, Che Guevara, Myles Horton, and El Salvador's Archbishop Romero. The writings of bell hooks and Cornel West figure prominently in my work. I could fill up the page with the names of people that I admire. I find some strong thinking in the work of Maxine Greene, for instance. I draw a great deal of inspiration from numerous individuals. My work in Mexico and Brasil has had a strong effect on my work, obviously, but my visits to Cuba, to Argentina, to Poland, and to Malaysia have also had a powerful impact, both spiritually and politically. My references to Santeria and to Umbanda have not gone unnoticed by readers. Not many people know this but when I was a young man I seriously contemplated going into the priesthood, or entering a life of spiritual contemplation. Having abandoned this idea I was drawn, much later, to liberation

theology and I felt that, if necessary, priests and ordinary citizens should take up arms to defend oppressed groups. My intellectual life was at that time rich but undisciplined. It wasn't until I started working as a public school teacher that I began the journey into pedagogy that has taken me to the present. It has been a journey towards revolutionary consciousness, and it is a journey that always seems to just be beginning. It is always and perhaps inevitably a series of beginnings. Modotti's photo entitled "Misery" - her famous depiction of two peasant women passed out in front of a pulqueria - represents for me a metaphor of the material consequences of capitalism. Capitalism is like a leaking nuclear power plant wrapped in a velvet ribbon. I am not against a market economy but I am against a capitalist economy. The nature of investment should not be at the mercy of supply and demand, for instance. The workers need a more active role in controlling investment decisions. You could say that my arch of social dreaming is built upon the strength and power of the imagination and the courage to face the real. To face the real is to recognize that our actions are the consciousness of our dreams. They constitute our unconscious as it dreams us into consciousness. In our unconscious we are capable of the most brutal and horrific acts of violence. Unless we recognize this - unless we recognize the other side of our otherness - we cannot not be other than we are. And who we are now is what we see. We need to build our arch of social dreaming in the liminal, subjective mode of being. We need to transcend who we are so that we can become otherwise and discover where we have always been. I am not trying to be cryptic but I can only answer such a question in the form of positing paradoxes. More concretely, the arch of social dreaming that I continue to dream helps to politicize youth against the seductively violent thrall of capital, to menace passive consciousness like a surly stranger.

In her book, *The Struggle for Pedagogies*, Jennifer Gore remarks that there are few references in your writings, post-*Life in School* - to your own teaching or to testing out your theories of critical pedagogy. Can you comment on this remark? We are particularly interested in learning how your movement from the Jane-Finch corridor to the predominantly white/middle/upper-class Miami University of Ohio has influenced your works.

McLaren: I have met several times Gore and like her personally yet I remain perplexed by her book. I consider feminist theory to be among the most sophisticated critical theoretical work currently being

done and the most urgent. I was looking forward to Gore's book, even though I was a little apprehensive since I had already encountered some difficulties with one of her previously published articles. I readily admit the aporetic status of critical pedagogy, and I also will admit to many gaps, inconsistencies and confusions, and this certainly includes my own work. It's true that my work - anybody's work - is always incomplete and I have often modified my ideas in reaction to good, sound, critique, regardless of who is making it. I have learned much from feminist theorists and writers such as bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, Rey Chow and others. For instance, hooks' new book, *Teaching to Transgress* is a powerful collection of writings. In comparison, I was very disappointed by Gore's work. Back to your question: I don't know if Gore has actually read much of my post-*Life in Schools* work at all since, if I recall correctly, there aren't many works of mine actually referenced. What works is she talking about? If she had actually read my other books and articles - and there is no indication that she has gone beyond a rather cursory examination of *Life in Schools* - she surely would have found some insights in other works such as *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* - considered by many critics to be my best work prior to *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture* - to contradict some of her criticisms. Is there a motivated amnesia here? I can't really say. It is curious that Gore left out any references to my writings with Canadian feminist critic, Rhonda Hammer. But I'm still happy her book is out there because it may provoke some good, productive debate and I hope perhaps generate in the long run some alliance-building. Now to the point of your question about empiricism. I went to Miami University, having been denied a full-time contract at Brock University in Canada due to some controversy over my leftist politics. Frankly, it was the only job I could get and I was delighted at the opportunity to work with Giroux. The student body was indeed white and upper middle class. But, after all, critical pedagogy is not just a pedagogy for the poor; it's also a pedagogy for the middle class and for the affluent. In fact, it seems to me that if you can reach the hearts and minds of people that have a good chance of occupying positions of power in the social order, then you are doing something worthwhile to contest the reproduction of hegemonic relations of domination and exploitation. I am now at UCLA working with Chicano, Asian, and African-American students, but a great deal of my students are still white and upper middle-class. I prefer this kind of diversity to that of Miami, obviously, given my ties to Latin America and to my revolutionary politics. But I don't regret working with

white students nor the work I did at Miami. Don't forget that many of the teachers in my classes worked not only with affluent students but with Appalachian students in rural areas or black students in the inner-city of Cincinnati, and they deserve a critical pedagogy, too. And what kind of empirical test does Gore want? Since there is no direct methodology to my work, since it cannot be reduced to a formula, it's hard to measure it empirically. The best empirical test would be perhaps to visit my former students and find out what they are doing in their classrooms. Are the students developing a sensitivity to social issues? Are they exploring the relationship between capital and labor? Are they trying to interpret their experiences and identifications in the cultures that surround them? And are they transforming their experiences? How are they accomplishing these tasks and in what directions? Are they developing a social ethics? A cultural ethics? Is the world less oppressive and less exploitative than it would be if they had not been born? I believe my students are doing some wonderful things. I think it's important to remember, too, that I didn't work only with bourgeois white students at Miami. I also had students from other countries and states in the U.S. who came to work with me and with Henry - students from Chicago, California, Argentina, Brasil, and Ireland - and they have all returned to their home countries or states, ready to take on the struggle against exploitation and social injustice and to prepare their own students to do so. I'm proud of the work I did at Miami of Ohio. And I'm proud of the work many of my former students are doing in critical/feminist pedagogy.

The Regan-Bush years have witnessed an intensification of the New Right onslaught on public education, with the emphasis being placed on new vocationism, learning the 'great books', the market ideology in education, the assertion of a dominant white culture at the expense of subordinated, subaltern cultures, etc. We know that people like Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, Maxine Greene, Ira Shor, Kathleen Weiler and yourself have been in the forefront of the struggle for greater democratic spaces in education. Considering that some of the most important policy making in the United States occurs at the state rather than the federal level, is the Clinton government likely to accomplish anything significant in the way of fostering greater democratisation in American education?

McLaren: We are now witnessing the end of democracy as we once knew it and are entering the era

of teledemocracy within technocapitalism. Clinton was just crushed politically in the elections in November, 1994, and the Republicans now control almost everything. I am amazed at the absolute stupidity of this kind of voting. The Republicans have somehow convinced the American public that nationalized health care is the government - Big Brother - legislating health care. So what is the alternative: Health care remains so privatized nobody can afford it? Republican governments always have more bureaucracy but they manage to camouflage this from the American people. It's democracy through image production, through spin doctors. Issues don't make much of a difference. It's now democracy through the organization of affect, of emotional economies. The Right does this better than anybody. Clinton will now become more centrist and move towards the right of the Democratic Party. One good thing - he did speak out against Proposition 187 but it didn't make a difference. I hope he can withhold federal funds from California if the law takes effect. I don't expect Clinton to move much on education; he's about where Bush was with his Education 2000 plan except Clinton is more committed to Head Start programs and federal funding initiatives. After the recent Republican win, Republican Congressman Bob Doran predicted: "Back to God, family and country." The Republican vision is that of the carceral society: more prisons for black males, and more orphanages for children of the destitute. Some school boards run by the Christian right are eliminating breakfast programs for starving children on the grounds that eating at school is anti-family. I think a few ideas of Iris Marion Young can be helpful here. I agree with Young when she argues that we need to move away from interest-based and deliberative democracy - discursive democracy in other words. We need to move towards a communicative democracy. Interest based democracy is involved with one's own individual interests and preferences which are usually expressed in a vote. It doesn't really put pressure on engaging in dialogue with others collectively in debate and discussion. Look at Proposition 187. Deliberative democracy is a bit better because it is directed towards agreement by force of the better argument. Of course, we now have video democracy and argumentation can't match images on the television screen of rioting blacks in South Central L.A. Communicative democracy - a bit of Habermas here - is developed by Young to be based within a communicative ethics that includes standpoints of the concrete and generalized other. This is situated in the transformation of people's preferences and an openness to persuasion. Just norms are not transcendentally grounded but are

arrived at freely and by maximizing the available social knowledge. Within a communicative democracy, according to Young, social understanding occurs from a multiplicity of social locations, where the politics of greed and self-interest gives way to a politics of social justice. Majoritarian democratic procedures often perpetuate social injustice towards minority groups. This is because social and economic disadvantage prevent many minority social groups from available political resources. Cultural imperialism has enabled Euro-American values to become the accepted social norms. Take Proposition 187 as one example. We must analyze this proposition as it has been developed as a viable social alternative in this particular conjuncture, at this moment in the social formation. We need to understand this in terms of the way majoritarian democracy occludes the structure of racism within it. Balibar calls this an age of "crisis racism" and it is marked by the denial of class solidarities and the fact that class divisions no longer determine different attitudes towards the Other. Social pathology is condensed into a single cause - immigrants! What often appears as a democratic consensus - as in Proposition 187 winning in a landslide vote - really amounts to a form of exploitation - it's really an empty, artificial consensus brought about by procedural democracy. We need to start our struggle for equality from the position of social justice in a context of social, economic and cultural equality - a context of qualitative fairness rather than quantitative fairness. The majority of Californians voted for Proposition 187 but it is not a qualitatively fair proposition. It will go down in infamy. It is shameful and inhuman. As Balibar notes, racism is the absence of thought, an oligophreny in the extreme - and that reflection upon it is not enough; rather, it requires a change in the modality of thinking.

Your work as well as that of your former associate at Miami, Henry Giroux, is often regarded as being couched in the language of post-colonialism. What would you regard as the basic tenets of a post-colonial education?

McLaren: It's quite true that both of our work is characterized this way. Speaking about my own work on post-colonial education, I would say that for me the crucial issue is what Negri refers to as the imperialistic process of capital, the ways capital can circulate on a global basis, and the opening up not only of ways of exploitation but also ways of contesting such exploitation. This involves the struggle for spaces of hegemonic rupture out of which new democratizing possibilities may be won. It involves a challenge to Eurocentric, totalizing, and essentialistic notions of

identity and the official knowledges of colonialism. I try to locate schooling within the formation of Western forms of metropolitan power and representation. Post-colonial pedagogy, at least as I am attempting to formulate it, sets out to challenge global transnational capitalism and the forms of cultural pluralism that have resulted - forms which I argue really serve to camouflage what I call the neo-colonial cultures of whiteness. Basically it's a pedagogy of anti-imperialism. It's really operative in my work at this stage more heuristically than substantively. It ties into my work on multiculturalism. Schooling tries to commodify black rage, Latino militancy, Asian resistance, and to hellify their world by constantly cannibalizing representations of them and providing prison as the most realistic educational alternative for them. Courses begin at Chino, Folsom, Tehachapi.

In what ways is the ideology of colonialism being reproduced in the US educational system and why is it important for educators to unveil the foregoing ideology?

Labor power as the source of value in our society has nearly been masked completely. It has been veiled by the multivalent power of the image to reorganize desire into hegemonic blocs in ways that are tied to ideologies and discourses of representation carried over from colonial times. Euro-American concepts of agency, value, self-worth, and citizenship are often not very hospitable to other cultural articulations of identity and subjectivity. The autonomous, stable, ideal self of modernity is profoundly Eurocentric in its attempt to speak from a particular standpoint and for all of humanity. This creates the pre-condition for both the affirmation of the subject of history and its eventual demise as it is put under erasure by the counterstance of cultural workers in the margins and periphery of the dominant culture. Ethics and democracy have become sundered from each other. The commodity form is now internal to the meaning of democracy and democratic citizenship, mediated through the vestiges of colonial sensibility and racial typology. Subjectivities have been created in forms serviceable to the slave-form of capital. Subjectivity has actually become capitalized just as our idea of nature is now seen as the incarnation of capitalism. Human nature is now capitalist. Its power is imprinted on the body, regulates the investment of affect, organizes intricate and often contradictory economies of desire, and creates value from market functions and state powers. It wears a crooked top hat; with iron fists inside velvet gloves, it grasps the throats of its dark-skinned victims, attempting to suffocate the last breath of hope; it has the blood

of the workers dripping from its fangs. Labor and the division of labor have not disappeared. The class struggle, as Etienne Balibar and others have noted, is a determining structure affecting all social practices: the antagonistic forms of class struggle may appear in different forms but they have not disappeared.

Given the so-called ‘post-Fordist’ milieu, in which most educators in the US are operating, how is it possible to build a movement of “critical subjectivities” that is loud enough to bring about substantial transformation?

What is the ground zero of subjectivity but the movement in which absence is transformed into presence. The internal divisions of fractured, decentered subjectivity have been reunited by the call to nationhood, by myths racialized and incanted in the campaign slogans of the New Right. Racism has become respectable again, as a new book on the genetic inferiority of African Americans in terms of intelligence gets great airplay in the media. Illegal immigrants are to be turned out of schools and medical clinics. Counties in California are planning to evict the homeless. Even attempts to transgressively challenge the confines of control is predatory on the very mechanisms of control one is trying to resist. Management and labor depend upon one another. Resistance rarely evades the larger circuit of production and consumption. At the most we have school reform measures that simply transfer domination from one site to another. The problem has been the centrisms - Anglocentrism, Euro-American centrism, and the discourses and practices of whiteness. But the counter-movements? Take the case of Chicano centrism or Afrocentrism. There is a major problem here. I think that bell hooks and Paul Gilroy have made some good criticisms in their claims that many articulations of Afrocentrism are distinctly European, such as the mythic construction of Africa with Isis and Osiris as superheroes. Some forms of Afrocentrism are grounded, for instance, in 19th century Eurocentric forms of nostalgia. hooks also notes that this is similar to Rousseau’s notion of the masculinized public sphere with the household transformed into an opaque space for culture to reproduce itself. Neo-black nationalist views on Afrocentrism, according to hooks, often deny that gender is problematic creating a fiction of our social reality that avoids recognizing that black women and children will constitute 75% of the black poor in the near future. But the most dangerous centrism right now is white, Euro-American centrism which has colonized most of the other centrisms. The cultures and logics of whiteness shape the very con-

tours of what counts as normative in the United States. Actually, I’m against all and any centrisms. I believe we need to think of difference differently - not in essentialist ways but discursively and materially. Whiteness tends to define all other groups as it claims to be both everything and nothing - a principle of pure exchangeability. Whiteness should not be the regulating principle of everybody’s identity. It needs to be unmasked as linked to forms of ethnicity. White people tend to believe they have transcended the ‘lowness’ of ethnicity. Everybody else is ethnic/cultural. They are beyond ethnicity as pure reason, pure rational consciousness. I believe that racialized categories and categories of gender are not linked to the tropic slippage or immanent laws of signification that we hear so much about from the trendy, bourgeois poststructuralists but rather are linked to the division of the labor and the regime of the commodity. We can’t locate difference outside of the social relations of production which produce exclusion and exploitation. We need to locate difference in a historically materialist way - within a material system of exploitation.

In your work, as well as that of other writers committed to the area of critical pedagogy, we notice an emphasis on multiple forms of oppression. This strikes us as being the trend in a lot of left wing literature on education coming out of North America. We consider this to be commendable and necessary in the interest of a radical and truly emancipatory democracy. It prevents us from being trapped within an essentialist, reductionist vision of oppression. Yet, judging from the literature emerging from North America, don’t you think that we’ve reached a situation where class analysis is increasingly being placed on the back burner? Furthermore, isn’t there a need for coalition building among the various movements and groups struggling to confront different forms of oppression and what role should intellectuals like yourself play in this process?

McLaren: Yes, in a new global order where societies are being subsumed by capital, and where the state has expropriated all forms of production, the analysis of class is on the backburner among educational theorists, as some of my previous remarks have strongly indicated. Class antagonisms thrive although their forms and contexts differ within practices of flexible specialization than they do in contexts of Fordism or peripheral Fordism or Taylorism. But class antagonisms also need to be seen in terms of the way they intersect with practices involving racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia. Today’s political climate

favors neoliberal ideology. Private power is now being glorified over governmental power. Society is to be organized pursuant to the powers of special interests. Responsibility must, neo-liberals argue, rest in private hands and stay out of the hands of the government. Cultural homogeneity is valued above all else. In such a context, it is difficult to organize coalitions - more difficult than with Fordist workers, for instance. The antagonisms among the state, the economy, and the worker, have a different aspect to them in the current context of deregulation and other current realities. Yet, in an important way, the xenophobia reflected in Proposition 187 has sparked resistance across the country and not only in California. Recently I spoke at Harvard and on my way back from my lecture my spirit began to swell as I witnessed hundreds of students in Cambridge demonstrating against Proposition 187. Did you know that here, in California, more students are leaving schools to march and demonstrate than during the Vietnam war. I think that the anti-immigration discourses that are developing at this particular historical juncture will provide the basis for a new social movement primarily by Latinos. Many teachers have or will join them. I am one of them. We can only truly build the necessary revolutionary coalitions needed to challenge the power of capital by our continuous experience of resistance and struggle in organizing countervailing powers both strategically and, more importantly, tactically so that proletarian power can consolidate itself. We need to seize on the constitutiveness of the agent and the possibilities in building community. New alliances must be made, must be grasped in new and innovative ways. And here I follow Gramsci, Negri and Foucault in stressing the relation between power and knowledge and how knowledge as an ethical practice can play a central role in the struggle for liberation. The role of the intellectual is important and I applaud much of what Gramsci has said about the role of the "organic intellectual" and Foucault has said about the "specific intellectual." I am also concerned with what I call the "border intellectual." The border intellectual refers to new forms of the social production of subjectivity brought about by determinate antagonisms that can be traced genealogically through the development of modern capitalism. Following Negri, we have entered a new crisis in which deregulation, unemployment, forms of social control through technological means, and global competition have led to the terroristic transformation of subjectivity. Most postmodernists have simply celebrated heterogeneity in such a context and have not, according to Negri, fully explored the possibilities for the constitution of the revolutionary subject from

confronting the proliferation of new antagonism brought about by the new crisis of postmodernism. The border intellectual is attentive to such a crisis, and the role information and communication plays in the hegemonic production of subjectivity and in terms of controlling the means of production by controlling the way subjects are produced through antagonisms with respect to the formation of common sense. This involves the educator as border intellectual effectively promoting new forms of agency through the transgression of linguistic, cultural, economic, global and local boundaries - the periphrastic values of the cultural dominant - from the radical perspective and vantage point of a plural self, a non-unitary self, a mestiza self, and interspecies self that Gloria Anzaldua writes about. It is obvious how much Anzaldua figures in my work by taking a look at my writings on border identity over the last several years. Subjectivity is produced materially and collectively and that is something I have taken from Negri's work.

Peter, you will recall that, at the 1992 AERA Meeting in San Francisco, one or two people from the audience raised the issue of the "difficult", often incomprehensible language in which the work of some writers, in the area of critical pedagogy, is couched. We are sure that this accusation is levelled at you and your colleagues time and time again. That day, as well as on other occasions, you quoted a piece of advice given to you by Paulo Freire, namely that you should always 'be simple but never simplistic.' To what extent do you follow this advice in your work?

I'm not surprised by this question. This question and I have become good friends and I have reached the point that I am almost disappointed if it is not asked during an interview such as this. I have always tried to prevent my writing from being imperialized. As is often remarked, I occupy a strange site of enunciation in my work. My work is like an urban hallucination. Half the time I don't know what it means until long after I have put my thoughts to paper. I think it's irresponsible of a writer to claim to know what she is saying before others engage the work. I am a restless thinker. Rarely do I allow myself to be stabilized in one disciplinary domain, trope, genre, or style of writing. I write in order to be otherwise. Some people think I'm just trying to be 'highfallutin' or that I am unwittingly imprisoned by the patrician conceits of the bourgeois metropolitan intellectual and sometimes fellow marxists admonish me or activists decry my academic prose. And then again I have received letters from leftist intellectuals whose

work I admire very much - intellectuals and artists who share a similar admiration for my writing. Writing is an avenue of self-examination and a means to articulate necessary counter-pressure; for me it's an attempt to find a discursive terrain - whether this means treating criticism as a literary artifact or cultural object, or both - in which I can reinvent myself in ways that take into account a deeper reading of social life so that I can be a more critical agent of social change. Some of this has to do with redemption and self-projection, moral rectitude, and the flight of the spirit into different worlds of meaning. It is an attempt to keep social evil at bay. Writing is a social practice, a political practice, a form of cultural criticism. It enables me to reunite the discourse of critique and joy. My own writing helps me to view the world critically from multiple perspectives - from a grounded aesthetics - that seeks emancipatory transformation of both the world and the word. It is a form of individual self-fashioning for communal emancipation. It would not be wrong to say that I am attempting to create and occupy new subject positions that appear closed off to the majority of educational critics because of the way educational critics choose to represent themselves that trivialize the political realities at stake. Realities that have to do with human suffering, with exploitation and oppression and racism and hatred. We are now glorifying in the media the authors of Proposition 187 and other states now want to get rid of the immigrants. Supporters of this proposition are at this very moment trying to cut off food for illegal pregnant women and school lunches for illegal immigrant students. All under the banner of being American. Being American is a discourse which has nearly completely displaced an ethical discourse, a discourse of compassion. We have capitulated to an occidental separation of democracy and culture, ethics and aesthetics, criticism and utopian dreaming. For the most part, I hate reading the educational literature. It depresses me. Most of it is junk. Not only does it refuse to admit its ideological presuppositions, it cannily installs you in its ensemble of pre-set identities, and situates you within ideas about gender, race, and class that are formulated in advance - ideas that bear more than just the blemish of patriarchy but which are ravaged by the discourses of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism. It's all about pre-programmed historical agency and the reinscription and reinstitution of sovereign subjectivities which I consider to be a zombification process. It puts you into an arena of expression that chokes the spirit. And where do I get this spiritual inspiration? From the spirit of the jubilee. From the will to resist. From examples set by my *companeros* and *companeras* in struggle. From my

trips to East Los Angeles with my Chicano/a brothers and sisters, from the strength of character exhibited by South Central L.A. homeboys and homegirls, the viscera of the struggles of the Chicanas in the sweatshops - the *constueras* - who struggle on behalf of the International Lady's Garment Workers union, from my work in Mexico, Brasil, Argentina. And visits to places in Europe and Southeast Asia where the revolution is far from dead. From memories of Toronto. The most inspirational moment in the last few years was receiving a photograph of subcommandante Marcos sent to me by some members of the Zapatista army in Chiapas. In all of this I ask myself: What are the possibilities of the self? What are the cultural formations and social relations necessary to realize these possibilities? What kind of politics is necessary? What kind of revolutionary struggle? Now when I am working with teachers in, say, Mexicali, Mexico, or in Los Angeles I try not to sound like Derrida. I need to recognize my audience. If I do use some academic terminology, I try to translate this terminology respecting the contextual specificity in which the teachers find themselves in their classrooms and communities. *Life in Schools* is a textbook and that was not a book I really wanted to write but it was, I feel, an important political project. I didn't want to summarize theoretical positions but rather advance them and push them further. But I felt that there was a political necessity for a textbook in critical pedagogy. And so I tried to be as creative as possible with that book and because it is a very pedagogical book it sells - not surprisingly - more than many of my other books put together. Although it is not as sophisticated as, say, *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture or Schooling as a Ritual Performance*. I am trying to avoid the traps of white man's journalism, which informs most educational writing, and I do believe that the assault on experimental academic prose really is the same kind of assault that we see on the Black or Chicano vernacular. It's an assault on difference. On the other hand, there is a lot of very bad writing going on in the academy.

How can theory help cultural workers in their struggle for justice, given, as Roger Simon remarks, the fear that they are often believed to harbor with respect to such theory? We would also argue that certain cultural and community workers often seem suspicious of academics and theorists in our field, as was manifest in New York during the December 91 meeting which commemorated Paulo Freire's 70th Birthday. 'Get real' is the exhortation normally heard.

McLaren: That's an important question. I think

a lot of the criticism is populist elitism - people feel that closeness to the oppressed is the key and that academics read in isolation from the real world too much. Theorizing doesn't guarantee one's politics but neither does brushing shoulders with the oppressed. You need to be careful of your audience and your constituencies. You need to translate when you have to in order to be understood. Theories - reason and rationalities - undergird everything we do - they shape the contours of our social and institutional life. They inform our personal and political lives. Theories are agents, they are constitutive of tradition and prevailing forms of common sense. They organize peoples' responses to and in the world. They formulate our public and private 'gaze.' But they can also serve as subversive transformative and counter-hegemonic agents in the struggle against domination and exploitation. The key is to make the theories real - to ground them in the contextual specificity of real life and human suffering as well as happiness - to anchor them affectively in people's dreams and agonies, visions and mundane routines. We need to take theories out of the monoculturalism of academic life, out of the monovalent center of the academic mainstream, in order to get democracy off the ground in the streets and in the classrooms. Theories need to help in the mobilization of material resources and not just describe social life in endless forms of deconstructive textual analyses.

You have been criticized for speaking with a voice of authority. What is your reaction to such criticism in view of your pedagogical politics and your location as white, male, middle-class, Anglo-North American?

McLaren: Let me try to answer that by saying that the voice of authority is something that has been given to me, not something I have sought. This voice has been constructed historically through my writings and international work and, even if I denounce the authority of such a voice, it only paradoxically reinforces its authority. So if I am stuck with being a voice of authority or exhibiting an authoritative style in my work then I will try to make the most of it strategically. And how is this possible at a time when the white, North American man is held in such suspicion? Let me first say that I am uncomfortable in the role of the authority. Not because I am white or male and feel guilt about it, or because it carries such a tremendous responsibility, but because it suggests in this climate of expediency in thinking and especially in political thinking, that I - or anyone - can provide expedient solutions to pressing social and educational problems.

Many people who have read my work but do not know my ethnicity often assume I am Latino or African-American. I've been at more than one conference when somebody has remarked: "You're white!" I've just been invited to be a member of the Chicano Studies faculty here at U.C.L.A. - one of the few Anglos, if not the only one, as far as I know. I've been asked to be an advisor to the Frente Grande in Argentina. So there is something going on here that transcends my location as a white male scholar-activist. The only serious criticisms I've had have been from bourgeois white feminists, some of whom consider me apparently to be a "macho Marxist" I still have that working-class sentiment to my work, that of a fighter, I was working class until my father landed a managerial job when I was young- and that turns some people off I guess. It's in my tone. I sometimes use the "royal we" and have tried to temper than somewhat where I feel it's not helpful to my arguments or to the agency I am trying to develop. But as long as I can remember I have always been involved with different disadvantaged ethnic groups. I would argue that I am more than my whiteness, more than my maleness, more than my Canadian-ness or my adopted American-ness, or my ancestral Scottishness. The key, I feel, is to remember the privilege that being a white male affords you and to use such privilege to fight against exploitation and economies of power and privilege. I know what being patronizing is all about, what exoticizing otherness is all about, what patriarchy is all about. It's not so much who you are but where you stand and for whom. People who know me well know I don't equivocate on this.

In *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* you distinguish between 'street corner knowledge' and 'knowledge acquired in classroom settings'. How can schools accommodate 'street corner culture' without simply coopting it?

McLaren: It is impossible not to co-opt cultural knowledge in some sense. Those who co-opt such knowledge are not unaffected by it. Knowledge always turns into something else. Street corner knowledge is important because it is felt knowledge and occurs in the asignifying dimensions of experience - that is, it occurs on the affective plane and often is supplementary to academic knowledge. In other words, it occurs in the gap between ideology and the body. It is visceral; it is laced with emotional investment - with what Larry Grossberg calls "affective investment." But it is problematic because of the suffusion of capital into mundane and quotidian social relations. This has caused a generalized commodification of desire; de-

sire has been transformed into the performativity of the purchase, of the aquisition of the image. In their attempts to escape the subject positions of adulthood, they try to find a space of their own which, unbeknownst to many, has already been written for them as well in the spectacle of youth anger and alienation. Informed by the necrophiliatic drive of predatory culture rather than the plural versality of being, youth today occupy identities that are crusted over by empty images, like stench-ridden landfill sites. What holds many students together is their collective inability to feel outside of texts of identity that have been already written for them. They are literally decomposing and want to aestheticize their emptying-out of anything meaningful - anything that can be felt. Students need spaces where they can talk about and come to critically interrogate the constant fracturing of their agency, so that they can somehow put life into motion. Teachers absolutely cannot reduce their identities to some unholy criteriology or typology. They need to understand how student identity is constructed at the site of the popular and the national popular. They need to acquire a theoretical language that can help students understand how their desire has been manufactured along with their consensual attitude towards their empty futures. Students need courses in media literacy, in critical social theory so that they can ask the following: What is it about the way the world has made me that enables me to resist myself and the world?

In countries like the U.S. and Canada, which are characterized by a strong racial mix and which provide the conditions for the emergence of anti-racist education, one is often confronted with the term 'multiculturalism.' From the experience which two of us had with the Maltese community in Toronto, we have realized that multiculturalism is nothing but a means of keeping the Maltese community entrenched within its own traditional cultural boundaries, boundaries that breed ghettoisation and which foster an inorganic sense of the community's traditional cultures. This inorganic sense of Maltese cultures is what feed into the present hegemony in which a dominant group (Anglo-Canadians) is presented as the invisible norm presupposed by the existence of the 'insular' other. Is this experience unique to the Maltese community? If not, isn't all the talk that we hear, concerning 'multicultural education', problematic?

McLaren: That's an important and urgent question. No it's not unique to the Maltese community. Multiculturalism is a word rightly viewed with suspi-

cion by non-dominant groups. It's become a code-word for absorption and/or containment. Whiteness is the privileging norm, the invisible norm that is able to hide right out in the openness of everyday life. It not only hides in the light - it is the light. Whiteness, as I have said, is equated with rationality while non-whiteness is considered irrational and the less white you are (the darker you are) the more irrational and more ethnic you are considered to be. White cultures are able to maintain their invisibility and also control of economic, social and cultural relations. Whiteness is not just about skin color but is entwined in systems of intelligibility enmeshed in colonialism, imperialism, Eurocentrism. I know some African-Americans and Latino who are white, who have accepted the terms of enfranchisement which means to become culturally stripped and deracinated. Whiteness is an invention - a socially constructed way of looking at others, at oneself from a position of structural advantage and cultural privilege; it is, in short, an inscription into ideological relations that are imbricated in economies of power and privilege also linked to class, race, and gender relations. The issue is not for people of color to simply reverse relations of power so that they assume the same proprietary position as whites but to create new spaces of intensity, new forms of ethnicity, new democratic social relations and zones of sociality. The notion of pluralism is really an empty notion because pluralism is often just an adding-on of different cultures into a mosaic in which whiteness is the architect. Recently Christine Sleeter and I edited a book called *Multiculturalism and Critical Pedagogy* in which we explore this question in depth. I've also recently co-edited a book with Barry Kanpol entitled *Critical Multiculturalism*. Right now I'm looking at a way outside of identity politics to foster a program of revolutionary struggle. I believe that we need to respect difference but that we also have to understand how differences are deployed by systems of social production within global capitalist relations. How is difference the product and outcome of material and historical practices - that's the issue that we, as educators, need to explore. As revolutionary cultural workers, we need to become driven by a visceral movement of the spirit, by a ethico-political consciousness, by a commitment to fight against exploitation and oppression in all of its contemporary guises. But unless we are guided by a wisdom born through struggle and love, strengthened by hope, all of this is mere foolishness.