One White teacher's autobiographical ruminations in Ranciére's "space between the words"

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In 2003, I met my incoming class of 7th graders, which included four young Black men, ages eleven and twelve years old. These young men began as my students and went on to change my life. From the beginning, as a White, middle class, lesbian, disabled, teacher who had also been a high school dropout, former foster child in an African American home, homeless teenager, single parent, and public housing dweller, my public and assumed identity as a teacher was fraught with tensions between what I had been taught about being a professional teacher and the multiple selves I was bringing to the profession. These tensions undergirded my assumptions about how I should and might relate to these young Black students. Thus, while our relationship began in a classroom, and in its earliest moments was characterized by the traditionally dichotomous, teacher/student relationship, we worked continuously in these tensions, pushing against this binary and other cultural and institutional norms until we had reframed the relationship by shifting its boundaries and redefining the relationship itself.

Eleven years later, we still engage in this work, attempting to sustain relationships that the institution of public education officially concluded eight years ago. The relational stories that we, both individually and collectively have composed and that reside in our ongoing connections, are concurrently layered with clashing breakdowns and reinforcements of: school/larger categorical and community boundaries; the complicated relationships between and among teachers, students

and institutions; and the multiple and variable impacts of these on both personal and professional identities and identity expressions, especially through complex processes of subjection and subjectivation (Youdell, 2006).

Methodology

Throughout my graduate school years, I have been trying to represent the complex ways our shifting, gendered and racialized subjectivities have been, and continue to be, shaped and morphed in this time-and-space-shifting relational setting. In earlier representations, I sought to explore, through ethnographic fieldwork and a decidedly critical lens, issues of institutionalized race, class, gender and identity relationships. While these categories were complicated, messy and troubled, they remained largely delineated, positioning and describing characters/actors against intact boundaries of each categorical division. Eventually, despite having a background in critical theory, I became increasingly troubled by it. My greatest problem with using critical theorizing to critique categorical and institutional oppression was that the category of race, despite being both ideological and material in nature (Omi & Winant as cited in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), has been under-theorized (Dyson, 2006) and remains largely unchallenged in educational research.

In recent years, I have struggled within and against my critically oriented sociological training in an effort to do more than describe, critique or "uncover" institutional racisms and gender-isms by engaging with feminist post-structural theories in the form of queer, autobiographical research in an effort "to trouble the link between acts, categories, representations desires and identities" (Miller, 2004, p. 220). In accordance with Miller's positioning of "autobiography as queer curriculum practice" (p. 220), I have begun working to challenge local, contemporary "identity constituting discourses in education" that frequently represent school subjects in educational research by entangling the mytho-poetic (Morrison 1992) and troublesome (Noguera, 2008) young Black male with the savior/failure (Taubman, 2009, p. 142) and/or multi-culturally deficient (Sleeter, 2001) White woman teacher in order to describe, explain or define "the achievement gap." As such, I have been looking for ways that autobiographical inquiry can explore how these categories become "unstable and incoherent" (Gilmore, 1994, p. xiv). By engaging in "writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic," as well as "writing as a way of knowing [or unknowing]—a method of discovery and analysis" (Richardson, 2000. p. 923), I have begun exploring Smith and Watson's analytical category of embodiment (2010) as a way to theorize my engagement in a queer practice of curriculum theorizing in order to invite "denaturalized stories… where official school knowledge, identities, and visions of revolutionary educational practice [are] exceeded by heretofore unimagined or unarticulated constructions of students, teachers, and curricula" (Miller, 2004, p. 224).

What this methodological approach allows is an ability to conceptually disobey the categorical and discursive limitations of critical epistemological and ontological assumptions. Through these allowances, I grapple with these questions: How have I constructed a racialized self and other throughout my life? How have/do I disrupt racial categories, and how do I sustain them? By extension, how are my own racial subjectivities constructed, deconstructed, and how do they

fluctuate? What is occurring in the spaces and times where and when they shift? And ultimately, can a body be narratively de- or re-racialized, or genderized by locating moments where the categories collapse?

These epistemological and ontological shifts have not been without agonistic moments. As I attempt to dodge the limitations and foreclosures of one approach, I am simultaneously working toward obscuring or shadowing another. Often, it seems that as I trouble essentialized, categorical framings of White women, categorical framings of Black boys are reinforced, disguising the ways that this identity category is constituted. Not just theoretical, these obscurations carry with them ethical implications for a White women writing of selves and Black men. And so it is in this authorial and theoretical space of dodging, characterized at times by both strategic and tactical theoretical moves aimed at easing fundamental tensions, that this paper will present a snippet of textual, autobiographically formed and informed data in the form/shape of internal banter, and will explore—in an abbreviated manner—the theoretical spaces between/around Ranciére's conception of dissensus (2000) and Grosz's contradictory space between the body understood as "a surface of social conscription and as the locus of lived experience" (Grosz, 1993, p. 188). After working in these spaces, I will try to remain still for a brief moment as I catch my breath from all the ducking and darting and look around to draw parallels between the theoretical dissensus I encountered and the dissensus within my own work.

Ranciére's Dissensus

In Ranciére's discussion of dissensus (2000), he describes the linguistic turn as occurring in two splintered phases. The first phase, characterized by a "primacy of the linguistic," emerges with Levi-Strauss and his "linguistic model of relationality" and its coupling with the Lacanian concept that "the unconscious is structured like language," thus bestowing upon language the characteristics of Freud's unconscious and Marxian theories of infrastructure (Ranciére, 2000, p. 114). The second phase is described as a critique of this "langue/infrastructure model," resulting in an understanding of "speech acts as political gestures" and "reconfiguring the distinction between words and things" as well as the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate speakers (p. 114). Ranciére goes on to assert that in the United States, this substantial fracture was much less visible, evolving into the dissenting positions of "the infinite reading" and "the denunciative critique" and meld[ing] together into one over-arching logic of suspicion" (p. 114). Thus, the space surrounding these two, melded positions remains palpable in its oppugnancy.

Ranciére problematizes and offers interventions for this development on multiple levels. Offering the concept of "literarity" as an "excess of words in relation to things," he argues that words "exceed the function of rigid destination [and are] ceaselessly contested by those who claim to speak correctly" (p. 115), challenging the polemical relationship between "legitimate and illegitimate speakers" by calling for a careful consideration of this excess across "various forms of socio-political interlocutions" (p. 115). This excess, positioned as opening up a political space characterized by dissensus in the "politically fertile potential of the opposition between two differing accounts of how words circulate" (p. 115) is positioned as crucial to a politics of

reconfiguration. For Ranciére, dissensus works to open up political space by cutting across forms of belonging tethered to culture, identity and hierarchies between discourses and genres, working to introduce new subjects and heterogeneous objects into fields of perception. As such, this act of dissensus challenges the "deliberative democratic model of communicative rationality of the 'linguistic turn'" (p. 115) while concurrently distancing itself from the denunciative critique, offering new ways of thinking about this space between the words.

It is in this oppositional space where I wish to take up Ranciére's call to "think about the distance [écart] between the words differently" (p. 114) and engage in a complicated conversation around bodily conscription as an entanglement of this between-ness. Threading this call with the heterogeneous logic of Grosz's contradictory space between "the body understood as a surface of social conscription and as the locus of lived experience" (Grosz, 1993, p. 188), a theoretical dissensus will be employed via autobiographical analysis in response to Miller and Pinar's request for us "to consider the plurality, indeterminacy and complexity of reality as well as the positionality and limitations of all attempts at representation, while still attending to the historical/systemic configurations of relationality" (Miller & Pinar, 2014). What follows is a conversation around a piece of autobiographical data working as both "an act and a text" (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 21) in its attempts to work in the space between the denunciative critique and the infinite reading by attempting to narratively explore the banter between the two that has been occurring as I engage in data analysis around queer teacher/ student embodiments, as exemplified in my relational work with my former students. In this banter I hear the residues of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks from my early critical work engaging with my more current work with Judith Butler, not in an effort to suppress or supplement, but rather as an effort to work with/in a state of political dissensus that sifts through the space between the words for possibilities.

Autobiographical Banter

Mid-way though our first year, Anthony scrambled into my classroom, almost, but not quite late, and greeted me, "Hey Black lady, how ya doing today?" There was a low roar followed by some nervous laughter, as another student (White) said, "She is not Black," to which Anthony replied, "She sure as heck is." [Journal entry, January 2009]

There is much more to tell, but due to the brevity of this paper, I'll stop there. I am at once struck by the question of what discourses Anthony employed when he deemed me, a White woman "Black." What had made Blackness visible to him? Looking to the ideas of Smith and Watson, as well as to Grosz, around embodiment and location, narratives of the body, and reading for the body, I wonder, as I re-visit my 2009 journal entry: what cultural discourses determined which aspects of the body became meaningful? And how/did my "socio-political" body, representing cultural attitudes and discourses that encode the body's dominant public meanings, make Blackness as a social construct visible to him? What parts of Grosz's "imaginary anatomy," reflecting social beliefs rather than "the body's organic nature," were at work (as cited in Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 50)? Is my being "Black" important to him for our collective, discursively and materially constructed, identities? For his "identity"?

Having lived with an African American family for an extended period of time in my adolescence, and having since lived in communities that are considered predominantly African American, in what ways might/has my White body been re-signified in such a way that a student recognizes me, in a performative, Butlerish (1999) sort of way, as Black? Smith and Watson elaborate:

By exploring the body and embodiment as sites of knowledge and knowledge production, life writers do several things. They negotiate cultural norms determining the proper uses of bodies. They engage, contest, and revise laws and norms determining the relationships of bodies to specific sites, behaviors, and destinies, exposing and sometimes queering, as they do so… . And they reproduce, mix and interrogate cultural discourses defining and distinguishing the cultural norms of embodiment. (p. 54).

While this depiction of embodiment is comforting for a fledgling poststructurally oriented researcher, I still struggle. By queering Whiteness in my work, what does that do to the concept of Blackness? It is certainly not the same sort of "doing" that Anthony is engaged in, is it? Is my performance of Blackness "improper"? If so, to whom, and why? And what of Anthony's re-interpolation? Is it "improper" as well? I can't help but think of Smith and Watson's discussion of the kinds of stories particular bodies can tell. Can a White woman tell stories of ethnically diverse others? And how does my gendered body come into play with these young men? As a woman? As a lesbian? On more than one occasion students have interpreted my limp as "swag," a currently "cool" embodiment. Is my embodied swag raced?

As we rode in my convertible to basketball games, "bumping" to "banging beats," and just hanging out, moving together to bass laden tempos that became us, these students and I became something other than what we were when we began. But how? And why? And in what ways? And how was/is this "becoming" racialized? For example, my peers often challenge my allusions to Black boys and hip hop as essentializing. My response is often a knotting in my gut and the warm flush of shame. In what ways is it possible to de-essentialize the White women without essentializing the Black boy? Another area of significant interest to me is the idea of the collective, and the relationship between the individual and the collective, and competing collectives. Somehow, I am making connections between Smith and Watson's assertions about our different subjectivities being intersectional rather than additive, and Patricia Hill Collins' early work around race, class and gender intersections. Melding these ideas, how do we explore the space where subjectivities maneuver not only these intersections, but also the collectivities they encompass, momentarily and always changing, at the same time. On what levels are such explorations even possible? Discursively, experientially, bodily? For Anthony, as a young Black male, who did I need to be for the dissonance between our most apparent categorizations to be alleviated? Who did he need to be for me? In what ways did we co-construct those subjects? I suspect I may be in a moment and in simultaneous spaces where "racial identities are founded and flounder" (Haizlip as cited in Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 38).

Further compounding this dissonance, I speak two languages, urban colloquial and White middle class, and maybe even three or four if you include other hybrid forms of communication. As a White "code-switcher," I am constantly confronted with the dilemma of desiring to be heard in the

academy, and betraying the loved ones of my roots. Do I switch out of shame? Out of necessity? Where do I fit? How will this inform my research? As a White woman, am I entitled to reposition myself outside the meta-narrative of Whiteness? What happens when I don't feel White? How does one write about that? And even if I don't feel White, how is my Whiteness implicated in my interpretations?

These questions bring me to Stuart Hall's work (1997) around race as the floating signifier. From this position, race is a social and historical construct with biological signifiers; people approach biologically defined objects that have experienced race subjectively as a social construct that is historically positioned. Complicated right? My thought is that while we know that race as we experience it is socially and historically constructed, there doesn't seem to be a space that allows for looking at race as exclusively socially and historically constructed. How could there be? The conversation becomes even more complex when one takes into account the emotionality of race. There are perceptions of race that are visual/sensory, and then there are experiential perceptions, culturally experienced elements of race. Race matters and race is felt. These feelings and perceptions are layered, complex, and borderless, despite being used in education as precisely categorical and bounded. This irreconcilable juxtaposition creates dissonance in interpretations of teaching, learning, research and curriculum conceptions as well as interpretations of what and who counts in educative experiences.

Excessive remarks

I return now to Ranciére in order to explore a bit further the parallels between Ranciére's theorization of dissensus and the experienced dissensus within my own work. Specifically, I here return to his notion of words that "exceed the function of rigid destination" (2000, p. 115). In my theoretically inclined, narrative banter, the racial epithet "Black" was signified, re-signified and signified again as I dodged and darted around and between critical framings of Blackness/Whiteness and poststructural conceptions of fluid and discursively constituted identities. It could be argued that the word "Black," summoned as a re-interpellation by Anthony, had exceeded its function of rigid destination, but only for a moment. Quickly, it was reeled back in for analysis, and interrogated as to its "properness" by this author and novice academic in a desire to speak "correctly"—that is, to "speak" in what still are taken to be "preferred" versions of academic scholarship. What occurred in the contestation between excess and "proper form," however, is of most interest to this discussion. Rather than a squelching of one perspective by another, or one perspective acquiescing to another in an act of pacification, the banter lingered, tingeing the words weaving back and forth across the page without the need or desire for erasure on either side.

Concurrently, as Ranciére posits, the banter attempts to challenge the polemical relationship between "legitimate and illegitimate speakers" (p. 115). By tracing some implications for the socio-political interlocution, "Hey Black lady," questions are posited, but no answers offered. Instead, the textual reading occurs beside, within and in excess of the critique, residing briefly and momentarily within the narrative in such a way that both positions become textually necessary. There is not a right or a wrong analytical lens, but rather an analytical form of dissensus. I would

argue that it is in this dissensual space that complicated conversations occur. As Ranciére asserts, "that which initially separates us does not stop us from intermingling" (p. 115). In fact, it is this intermingling, laden with the possibility of "fertile opposition" (p. 114) that characterizes political dissensus—the space between the words.

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