

A Critical Pedagogy for Democracy: Confronting Higher Education's Neoliberal Agenda with a Critical Latina Feminist Episteme

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Abstract

A fundamental goal of the university must be to advance a democracy based on the socialist principles of freedom and critique. A Marxist revolutionary critical pedagogy for democracy is advanced that includes a call for the inclusion of faculty of color who may bring diverse epistemes toward doing research that promotes dissent. The author provides examples of how a Latina episteme, rooted in her experiences as a member of the oppressed, demands community engagement and democratic goals necessary to providing the clarity and rehearsal needed to break free from the shackles of capitalism.

Keywords: Socialist democracy, Marxism, revolutionary critical pedagogy, Latina feminist theory, academia

Democracy is a measure of our humanity – a way of life that develops free citizens who act upon their world collectively toward a new sociality. A critical pedagogy for democracy is a pedagogy of praxis that interrogates the “naturalness” by which we live in a world plagued by human suffering – poverty, terror, racism – all for capital accumulation – that will necessarily immiserate as the transnational capitalist class grows their wealth exponentially while the poor’s already precarious lives become even more perilous and vulnerable (Hill, 2012). Critical pedagogy provides the tools that may lead us to a new social order grounded on humanist principles of freedom and equity (Denzin, 2009).

Regrettably, democracy has been co-opted by the transnational capitalist class, stripped of its socialist underpinnings, and made to appear synonymous to the current neoliberal capitalism (Carey, 1997). Amin (2010) points out that even though it is evident that capitalism cannot

sustain the democratic ideals that are attributed to it, the mythical alignment of capitalism to democracy, orchestrated by the U.S. and its allies in the 70s to bring down the Soviet Union, continues to this day, with the majority of citizens believing that democracy could only be achieved within a system that would stand in direct oppositional contrast to the then soviet regimes. With a moralistic stance that belies its treacherous dealings to secure its name as the world's greatest superpower, the U.S. has designated itself the world's watchdog to "protect" against any and all dissent to capitalism and to spread "democracy" across the world. This is evident through the U.S. led war on drugs and terrorism waged in Mexico that serves more as a strategy for U.S. surveillance of Latin America (given the overwhelming evidence that the war on drugs has not been effective and that terrorism coming from the U.S.-Mexican border is virtually non-existent) (Monzó, McLaren, & Rodriguez, in press), not to mention the recently discovered U.S. surveillance of its allies (McCoy, 2013). The hegemony of this "democratic capitalism" is secured throughout the world through consent by promoting a numbing and stupefying hyper-consumer culture as the greatest way of life, the ruse of humanitarian aid, and through coercion via the threat of the U.S. military industrial complex (Amin, 2010).

Although the university has always served to solidify state interests, it could be said that this has been done covertly with an attempt to maintain the university image as a bastion of free thought and creativity, secured through a presumed objective tenure process that is said to guarantee academic freedom. Currently, we are seeing less concern with maintaining this image as the competition game becomes more vigorous under neoliberalism, often at the expense of programs and courses of study that support the development of critical social understandings. This turn to the corporatized university has important implications for the nature of academia, the work we engage in as scholars, and the impetus for diversity in the academy (Edu-factory, 2009; Giroux, 2009; Peters, 2011). Indeed this neoliberal order has domesticated the once critical multicultural turn in higher education spawned during the civil rights movement when diverse and critical voices, including those of racialised minorities and women, were brought into and began challenging the hegemonic western and positivist episteme that had been previously imposed without question (Darder, 2012).

In this paper, I argue that we must reject the current neoliberal trend toward corporatizing universities and commodifying knowledge in favor of doing work that champions our democratic ideals and moves us toward our destined humanity, one built on the principles of freedom and equality and where class-relations – the ownership of the means of production – cease to exist globally. Drawing on a critical Latina feminist episteme, I argue further that the inclusion of diverse epistememes in academia where knowledge is legitimized is critical toward these ends.

Democracy and Critical Pedagogy

Democracy is a highly venerated term that invokes a sense of reverence or awe. It signals for most people the notion of justice and freedom and is often touted as the ideal society.

Regrettably, it has been co-opted to signify merely a political process by which officials are elected by citizens. The U.S. carries the largest banner for “democracy” as a result of its “free” elections that presume every citizen has a right to vote their conscience. Set against media spectacles of ballot fraud in other countries, our own narrow and inadequate conceptions of “freedom” are obscured and a shrouding haze is blasphemously procured over the people such that many fail to see how corporate money and capital interests are tied to our political process. Through its slogan as “the greatest democracy in the world” the U.S. uses cultural imperialism and warfare as tactics to erect capitalism across the world and to restrain any socialist movements that may challenge the interests of the transnational capitalist class. Real democracy, in my view, is about equitable inclusion, the freedom to pursue life’s opportunities for development without oppression, and guaranteed access to healthy living and education. Such a democracy develops through an ethic that puts our humanity above all else and discourages competition. It develops through acts of love and hope in the tradition of Che Guevara, whose profound love for humanity was evidenced in the ultimate sacrifice (McLaren & Monzó, in press). His death also signals the infinite hope that history is ours for the making, which stemmed from his strong grounding in Marxism (Löwy, 2007).

John Dewey, influenced as he was by Marx, proclaimed democracy to be much more than a political process. In his classic *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey expounded democracy as fundamentally about a way of life, a way of being in the world individually and socially, and argued for a progressive education that would support democracy (Dewey, 1937).

The key-note of democracy as a way of life may be expressed, it seems to me, as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of [wo]men together: which is necessary from the standpoint of both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals (p. 457).

Under this conception, every person is to participate in the processes that govern how we live in the world. Dewey argued all persons who participate in the institutions of a society are shaped by them and therefore must have a voice in how they are shaped. Our democratic form of government in which each citizen has one vote was supposed to seep into the psyche and cultural values of our society such that people would become “naturally” inclusive and recognize our interdependency as a species, learn to value every person’s diverse contributions, and view full participation as a right of all human beings. Dewey (1937) recognized that exclusion from participation would render the individual unable to develop fully as a human being and that society would suffer without their intellectual contributions. He also recognized that it would be those excluded who brought wisdom regarding their own social conditions. His progressive education was embedded with the idea of learning and development as “self realization” through a curriculum and pedagogy that honored productive activity rather than alienating lessons devoid of social significance and his work suggested that this would lead to a new collective consciousness or socialist order (Brooks, 1994).

Dewey’s ideas were founded upon a Marxist humanism (Brooks, 1994). Marx’s scathing and prophetic critique of capitalism was rooted in the humanist tradition wherein human beings are seen as agentic actors in the making of history (Allman, 2001). Marxist humanist theory emphasizes the absolute necessity of a socialist alternative that will develop at the historical conjuncture following capitalism. According to Marx, capitalism will reach a historical moment of impossibility when the masses can no longer tolerate the incessant destruction of capital and will rise up against the capitalist class (Fischer, 1996). Although this may seem a utopian dream, Marx was utterly grounded in a historical material reality. That is, a socialist alternative, what Marx termed communism, would arise from the current historical conditions of capitalism (Allman, 2001).

Allman (2001) points out that the genius of Marx was in his clarity regarding the impossibility of reforming capitalism by addressing its negative effects, which has preoccupied liberals to this day, including the redistribution of resources and collective ownership. Capitalism as a totalizing structure of social relations creates the conditions that allow capital to self-generate, including the values and ideologies that sustain the very system of social relations that define it as capitalism – a class system in which an exploited mass of workers exist to service an elite capitalist class that owns the means of production. The escalation of the mass destruction that capitalism produces can cease only when these social relations are transformed.

Also drawing on Marx, Paulo Freire (1970, 1998) was more explicitly concerned with the material and related social conditions that created oppressed and oppressors. He expounded a vision for a fuller humanity through a dialogical praxis, a process of “... reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (1970, p. 33).

While the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind's central problem, it now takes on the character of an inescapable concern... And as an individual perceives the extent of dehumanization, he or she may ask if humanization is a viable possibility (1970, p. 25).

According to Freire (1970, 1998), ethical critique and social consciousness-raising moves the oppressed to act toward their own and their oppressors' liberation. Fundamental to Freirian thought is hope, which develops when we understand our role in history as one of always being in the process of becoming.

Critical pedagogy has evolved out of these previous scholars, especially Paulo Freire, as well as more contemporary scholars (Darder & Torres, 2004; Giroux, 2009; McLaren, 2006, 2011). A critical pedagogy for democracy calls for confronting today's neoliberal and transnational capitalism and the antagonisms that are created to maintain a class of workers divided, including racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity. This is a pedagogy of praxis that entails not only critique but also critical social action. Teachers and other cultural workers are particularly tasked with an ethical dialogic praxis that engages students in all sectors of society in questioning, critiquing, and transforming existing social relations of production toward a more just society (Duncan-

Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1998; McLaren, 2012). Some scholars, however, have domesticated critical pedagogy to support reformist movements that focus on local concerns without challenging the broader structure that creates the localized problems that exist. Examples of these are efforts at school reform and efforts to narrow the achievement gap. Increasingly, this liberal stance relegates class to the cultural sphere and conceives of it as particular identities, life-styles, incomes, and privileges. In this conceptualization, “box people” attempt to categorize and differentiate people’s class by having them check off particular identities and incomes (Allman, McLaren, & Rikowski, 2003). Class in this usage becomes a parallel identity to race and gender instead of the foundational basis of a political economy that divides laborers and capitalists. An important understanding is that while there are multiple variations in incomes and life-styles and certainly differential opportunities based on these differences (often highly aligned to race), these multiple variations do not negate that capitalism is a system of social relationships that is based on the unequal relations of workers and the owners of the means of production. White-collar workers are still workers and racial and ethnic divisions serve to pit workers against each other and to hide the fact that collectively they all experience dehumanizing, alienating, and exploitative conditions that, seen in this light, would develop into a class consciousness against the onslaught of abuses endured in service to the capitalist class (Hill & Cole, 2001).

In this contradictory version of Freirian thought, praxis becomes civic engagement that focuses solely on reforms that increase opportunities within the existing capitalist system. Such efforts alone obfuscate the role of class and unwittingly support the existing structure by treating capitalism as a proverbial and impermeable reality or suggesting that minimizing inequalities is both possible and sufficient to creating a just society. Within this liberal agenda, terms such as liberation and freedom index narrow political conceptions such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press – ideologies associated with “democratic” advanced capitalist societies that while important do not address the most fundamental human right – the freedom from necessity and from alienation. A socialist democracy that emphasizes freedom and participation among all citizens, regardless of gender, race, or other social positioning is untenable within a capitalist economy. The extreme and widening gap between the wealthy and the poor, the focus on labor power as opposed to real power, the extortion of surplus value off the poor to maximize profits for the wealthy, the relegation of poverty and a hyper exploitation of racialized communities and

especially women of color in the U.S. and across the world, and the alienation experienced by all human beings are incompatible with a democratic way of life.

Revolutionary critical pedagogy as developed by Paula Allman, Peter McLaren, and others reinserts a fundamental Marxist emphasis on interrogating and transforming the totalizing nature of capitalism that engulfs humanity through not only political economy but social and cultural relations. These scholars reject and critique the liberal trend to reform, recognizing these as unable to stop the destruction that is inherent in the labor capital social relation calling instead for creating the conditions for revolutionary change that would transform the forces of production outside of capital's value form. Revolutionary critical pedagogues call for a "collective struggle" across racial, ethnic, gender, and national lines (Darder, 2014). They understand that while racism and patriarchy must be fought these struggles alone will not end human suffering and exploitation. As Darder and Torres (2004) argue, as long as there exists a need for a mass of exploited workers as is needed under capitalism, these will undoubtedly be made of predominantly racialized minorities who have been made thus in order to preserve the dominance of an elite white transnational capitalist class. Racism is not an accident but an orchestrated material reality that hides the role of the capitalist class and sets up workers of "said working class and middle class sectors" to compete with each other for presumed less exploitative jobs, educational opportunities, and a myriad of other social and economic resources all the while the capitalists who own the bulk of the world's resources are rarely considered in the equation, must less confronted. Likewise, struggles against patriarchy cannot be forged without forging a struggle against capitalism since the exploitation of women in the U.S. and across the world is an important source of capital accumulation of transnational corporations. Thus, while I champion struggles that confront racial and gender oppression and also work to mitigate conditions of exploitation, I also argue that these struggles must be simultaneously accompanied by and conjoined with broader struggles against the capitalist class that aim to transform existing social relations of production. I reject the domesticated version of critical pedagogy discussed earlier in favor of a Marxist revolutionary critical pedagogy that is based on developing clarity rather than charity in which human beings are liberated from wage slavery through a process that necessitates – demands – revolution (Freire, 1970).

According to Freire (1970), the oppressed are tasked with forging this revolution because they have insights into the nature of oppression that are necessarily hidden from the dominant group. Thus, the participation of non-dominant groups in the decision-making of our society is a critical component of advancing democracy. If democracy embodies the notion that the diverse perspectives of different individuals and groups add to our collective understanding of society and to moving us forward as human beings, then we must recognize the need to bring the diverse epistemologies of women, people of color and other marginalized groups into the spaces that legitimize knowledge – specifically, the university.

The University Under Neoliberalism

The university plays a central role in the production of legitimate knowledge. While some have celebrated its historical role in the “advancement” of society through teaching and scholarship, others have called it an “ivory tower” espousing to a presumed superior Eurocentric episteme and positioned outside the sphere of the commons (Basole, 2009). Miller (2009) points out that the university, since inception, has been complicit with the state in promoting cultural imperialism and supporting research that responded to the state’s economic and political ends. Yet in so far as its rhetoric of “academic freedom” must be maintained in order to suppress its relationship to capital interests, it provides the spaces for dissent among faculty and students. Indeed one of the fundamental functions of the university is social critique. University students, energized by their newfound critical acumen, have often been the first in society to vociferously exclaim their outrage in protests and other rebellions (Zill, 2011).

The rise of neoliberalism, however, has led to the corporatization of the university and to what is being called “knowledge capitalism,” which has strengthened existing ties between universities and capital interests and dangerously undermining the role of the university as the context with the greatest potential to address social problems and equality. Mike Peters (2011) points out that universities are increasingly clamoring to join the game of marketization, *selling* themselves to students and investors with consequences to program development, curriculum, and research. Indeed many university presidents now sit on boards of corporations, which could mean conflicts of interest with respect to what the university’s goals are in terms of either advancing the ideals of democracy or corporate interests. It would seem that the latter is winning out. Rather than a

social service to society, education is increasingly seen as a highly lucrative commodity purchased by students at grotesquely huge tuitions that will leave students in debt for years to come. Students are, thus, seen as a large source of revenue for banks and other financial institutions.

The neoliberal emphasis on privatization, standardization, and accountability is increasingly witnessed at both structural levels and in programmatic and curriculum planning. Similar to the dehumanizing ethic of many transnational corporations that have moved their factories to the so called “third world” to maximize their profits through cheap labor, a number of U.S. universities are seeking new markets for exploitation in the “developing” world where local faculty are often hired at very low wages and as part timers without job security (Ross, 2009). While some may argue that providing university education to students in these countries is a moral imperative, an important concern is how this “offshoring” may result in further distribution of western knowledge systems in non-western countries. In a similar vein, we are also seeing fewer tenure line positions and an increase of poorly paid adjunct positions in U.S. campuses.

Faculty research and other scholarly projects are increasingly being reshaped to become more palatable to the business community or boards of trustees. Further impacting faculty are the increasing demands for increased productivity in the form of publications in specialized academic journals, closely tied to tenure and promotion decisions. This increased output and competition are creating a proliferation of journals and articles for consumption that do not necessarily strengthen quality and instead put tremendous pressure and increased workloads on faculty. The standardization of productivity that facilitates accountability has led to a narrowing of what counts as knowledge, with a return to notions of objective and measurable research being considered more rigorous and scientific than qualitative and participatory approaches.

The corporate university necessarily functions to prepare students and society to participate in a market economy. However, while the university does prepare citizens to fill jobs it must also engage students in questioning and critiquing the existing structures of society, to recognize and confront policies and practices that are undemocratic, and to learn to imagine and conceive of alternatives that may bring greater equality and a new social order. When what is taught and

learned becomes significantly determined through business interests it is difficult for the university to retain autonomy toward these ends as they prove to be in direct conflict to capital interests (Giroux, 2009).

Critical educators have long proclaimed that public education is a basic human right and not a commodity to be purchased or invested upon for profit. As Henry Giroux (2009) indicates,

Higher education has a deeper responsibility not only to search for the truth regardless of where it may lead but also to educate students to make authority politically and morally accountable and to expand both academic freedom and the possibility and promise of the university as a bastion of democratic inquiry, values, and politics, even as these are necessarily refashioned at the beginning of the new millennium. (p. 672)

Increasingly, however, these same educators are faced with the ideological contradiction of partnering up with businesses that aim for profits in order to offer worthy support programs to needy students. Importantly, it may be that our world is becoming so corporatized that the language and worldviews embedded in neoliberalism are fast becoming a “natural” part of our everyday. Imminent then is our need to confront this looming assault on arguably one of the few spaces where people may question and critique our social, economic, and political concerns, where less than popular ideas, such as those of the left, could flourish, and where a new social world can be imagined.

At the forefront of any concerted effort against the university’s neoliberal agenda must be the voices of those who work within the university but whose concerns for a democratic alternative stem from their own experiences of oppression as members of disenfranchised communities. These are the women, people of color, members of the GLBTQ community, and those who bring Marxist and diverse critical perspectives and a praxis-based orientation that aim to challenge existing social conditions. Not surprisingly these border academics are and have been consistently under attack since their increased presence in university classrooms and faculty meetings became uncomfortably felt following the civil rights movement in the 70s. Antonia Darder (2012) argues that a backlash was orchestrated when it became evident to the institutional gate keepers that the inclusion of border intellectuals would bring in consistent challenges to the status quo. This orchestrated backlash termed by Darder and others as multicultural

neoliberalism involves the domestication of critical multiculturalism with an economic Darwinist orientation that while recognizing the racialized experiences and lack of opportunities of people of color and other oppressed groups, draws upon notions of individualism as a means for advancement within the existing social structure and therefore, in a similar vein to the domestication of Freire's work and the concept of class, circumvents any attempts for collective social action against structural relations of exploitation.

Darder (2012) suggests that this multicultural neoliberalism has effectively pushed many faculty of color - and other border academics to the margins at a time in their careers when they have tenure and would have been most likely to effect structural changes. Newer border faculty are now being brought into a highly competitive tenure-track system and counseled toward "careerist" orientations that enable a high level of outputs and grant opportunities (Darder, 2012). Such alignment tends to circumvent scholarly work that has a democratizing and social change emphasis, including progressive methods that attempt to give political power and voice to those who are marginalized. In her hold-no-punches approach, Darder points out the convenient embracing of a neoliberal agenda that whitewashes universities just in time to dissolve the possibilities of structural change that may have been spawned through the growing numbers of critical border scholars. In Darder's words:

"...critical notions of multiculturalism and diversity in higher education have been pushed back by an economic ethos that has rendered difference a whore to its own utilitarian pursuits or an enemy of the state.

In the process, scholarship and activism for structural equality, political inclusion, economic access, and human rights has given way to an emphasis on multiculturalized market niches, the management of an international workforce, a frenetic focus on the globalization of education through technology and the occasional portrayals of colored faces and celebrity rhetoric for public relations pamphlets and Web sites." (p. 412-413)

Although not all departments have bought into this multicultural neoliberalism and some continue to have key institutional players with a transformative democratic agenda and a position that may make some inroads, the reality of the corporatization of the university is being felt strongly and will have a significant impact on future faculty of color regardless of the support they may receive within particular departments and institutions.

This is because they will still be held accountable to the various demands that are being defined by neoliberal capitalism within the university. The increased demand and competition for publication along with increased workloads are likely to thwart the attempts by junior women faculty and faculty of color from engaging in research that requires long term engagement, including participatory action research, ethnography, and other methods that may risk the ability to beat the numbers game when they go up for tenure. Any potential for democracy that the university could advance is systematically thwarted when faculty who bring in different epistemes must push these aside to make themselves viable for tenure by simply adopting the kinds of activities that mainstream academics (read white and male) produce. When the standard of performance is based on a western episteme in which the university claims sole rights or ownership to knowledge production, knowledges developed through subaltern epistemes and/or in communities and everyday life are seen as suspect, invalid, and illegitimate. Basole (2009) argues, “a ‘free’ future... must also be accompanied by a retrieval of (lost) local wisdom and non-European intellectual traditions...” (p. 36).

While the university is encased within the totalizing system of capitalism and therefore cannot completely disavow itself from market demands, it can begin to function in the Marxist tradition of dialectics. That is, the university and the faculty must be prepared to adhere to those aspects of neoliberal capitalism that if thwarted would render us no longer viable as universities or faculty but also continuously consider more democratic alternatives that prepare us ideologically and in practice for the moment in which the world aligns together to transform the social relations of production and to develop a new socialist democracy.

A Critical Latina Feminist Episteme

An important consideration is what a critical Latina episteme brings to the academy and to the potential for advancing a socialist democracy. A Marxist critical pedagogy posits that an alternative to capitalism is an imminent historical reality. However, it is unclear what shape this socialist alternative will take nor how we may accelerate its arrival given the painful and humiliating existence that many people around the world face today. Indeed Marx argued that to determine this ahead of time would be inappropriate as the

alternative to capitalism must rise from those who will bring it to fruition within a specific historical conjuncture.

I believe that if as Freire, Dewey, and Marx claimed the oppressed must lead the struggle to their own liberation then it is of imminent importance to bring the various perspectives of non-dominant groups to the fore. These perspectives, hidden as they are in the everyday and community contexts that tend to be invisible or illegitimate vis-à-vis the valued western knowledges of the academy must be brought into dominant spaces, brought to light, or perhaps recovered after the violent epistemicide inherent in generations of colonization within which the Cartesian logic of western epistemology was established as the objective, unsituated, and universal truth. According to Grosfoguel (2013) and other decolonial scholars, the *ego cogito* (I think therefore, I am) that presumes the separation and superiorization of mind over body rises out of the historic and epistemic conditions of possibility developed through the *ego conquiro* (I conquer, therefore I am) and the link between the two is the *ego exterminus* (I exterminate you, therefore I am).

Gloria Anzaldua (1987, 1990), and those who have extended her work (Calderón et al., 2012; Delgado-Bernal, 2001, 1998; Hurtado, 2003) have had a profound effect on my understanding of my particular place in the world, in academia, and in my work as ethnographer. I have come to recognize key concepts from this framework, “borderlands consciousness,” “nepantla,” and “el mundo zurdo,”¹ as embodied in my everyday life and in the way I come to know and understand the world around me.

Borderlands consciousness (Anzaldua, 1987) refers to identities and associated values and ideologies developed across multiple and often contradictory social and physical spaces, reflecting either dominant and/or subordinate positionings in society. Anzaldua (1987) beautifully and poetically depicts a borderlands consciousness in her struggles with taking up English dominance and academia while simultaneously maintaining her cultural and sexualized identity as a Chicana lesbian. Her work stretches us to conceive of borderlands consciousness as multiple, dynamic, negotiated in context and potentially

conflicting and painful but also insightful. My own borderlands consciousness as a critical feminist Latina includes dominant identities as an academic, English fluent, financially stable and marginalized identities as Spanish fluent or *pocha*, racialized Latina immigrant, culturally outside the mainstream, impoverished background, and critical leftist orientation. As a border intellectual, I manage these multiple positionings on a daily basis whether it be deciding whether I will walk into my son's classroom as an academic or a Latina immigrant mother or both or as I decide the extent to which I draw upon my academic discourse or Latina experiential knowledge in writing my latest article or discussing key education issues with my students, all the while recognizing that the choice to be perceived as "capable" is dependent on the positioning I choose for the particular context but the social significance of that choice may contradict the very goals of my work as a social change agent.

These tensions, difficult as they may be, offer important insights into the structure of oppression and its manifestations as well as an understanding of privilege and power (Dillard, 2000). Dillard (2000) argues that rather than attempting to eradicate these contradictions, embracing our fragmentation is one way to become empowered, realizing that in these spaces of contradictions, what Anzaldua (1987) terms "nepantla," we can envision possibilities for equity and liberation (Dillard, 2000).

A sense of fragmentation or compartmentalization of the self occurs as we attempt to negotiate diverse social, cultural, and political contexts and make sense of our multiple and contradictory positionings. This is especially true as we encounter the "epistemological racism" (Scheurich & Young, 1997) of the academy in which our very ways of being are deficits to be checked at the gates of the ivory tower and we are pushed to do more "objective" and "unsituated" work that facilitates the market-driven demand for tenure and acceptance in dominant spaces. Yet conforming to Eurocentric and masculine knowledge systems "breaks us" into pieces and robs us of our full humanity. Colonized we go about the impossible task of attempting to thrive with disembodied ideas. We know, however, that we draw on more than our minds to make sense of the world. Our spirit guides and sustains us in the face of oppression and our bodies carry pain, love, excitement, and all sorts of emotions that we often cannot put into words.

Anzaldúa (1990) rejected the western privileging of mind over matter, claiming the need to draw on our whole selves through “mindbodyspirit” to make sense of the world. Cruz (2001) contends that a Chicana/Latina feminist theory must consider the central role that our brown bodies play in understanding our history of oppression as colonized beings. Our bodies have endured the brutality of the imperial being, of the men in our lives, and of the exploitative backbreaking work we often do in factories across the world and in our own homes. Our bodies have been made to twist and turn at the beck and call of others. It is also in our bodies and through our bodies that we hold and share our love, tenderness, and caring but in this too we have been told how it is appropriate to feel and touch. In “el mundo zurdo” (the left-handed world) is where our bodies are able to feel and move to our own rhythms, without the stigmas and ambiguities that the dominant society has created (Anzaldúa, 1983). Our bodies are thus critical sources of knowledge that sometimes can elude our conscious thoughts. Our bodies can be used to develop understanding and convey information.

The use of spirituality as a way of knowing is also an aspect of the Chicana/Latina episteme. It is not necessarily tied to religion but can be anything that moves us in ways beyond what our intellect supports. It can be a way of using our emotions and feelings to understand and make sense of the world around us. It is particularly useful in developing intersubjectivity with students and research participants. Spirituality seems antithetical to research only when we believe that traditional forms of data sources are objective (Dillard, 2000). For the Black community spirituality has been a source of strength in teaching and caring for Black children and has been used as form of pedagogy (Dillard, Abdur-Rashid & Tyson, 2000).

An important aspect of Chicana feminist theory is what Delgado-Bernal (1998) has coined “cultural intuition,” a “sixth sense” that draws on one’s personal experience, including community memory and collective experience, professional experience, and the analytical research process (Calderón, et al., 2012). Tied to this notion of reclaiming our various ways of knowing are both a personal and a political project that empowers and liberates us from the confines of the colonizers. It is not only a project of acknowledging and reclaiming forgotten ways of knowing but also of disclosing and reconfiguring new understandings by telling our

stories as Chicanas and Latinas, our stories that have rarely been told in our own words and with our own meanings.

Although often depicted as an abstract space where identities and ideologies are played out, my own use of a borderlands episteme reflects the material reality of borderlands spaces. We do not only understand but *act* upon the world through and within borderland social and physical spaces. The conflicting ideologies and alienation we experience in borderlands spaces are abstracted from the material conditions of poverty, educational access and opportunity, racism, and patriarchy that we experience and respond to in our everyday lives as we traverse within and in between spaces of power and oppression. Our stories are experiences that reflect our real conditions of oppression and they offer opportunities to develop agency with others and can be springboard to action and a venue for planning and rehearsal for social change.

Tantamount to addressing these concerns is the understanding that these are products of class relations – antagonisms created to divide workers, prevent them from rising up, and secure the wealth accumulation of the capitalist and now transnational capitalist class. The multiple vantage points of those who bring a borderlands perspective offer not only important insights into the nature of oppression and power but also opportunities for praxis – theory informing action informing theory – that challenge existing inequities in society and move our world toward greater inclusion and participation across groups. I have lived through poverty, fear, racism, and humiliation as an immigrant Latina and understand clearly the very tangible and intangible effects of this existence. My experiences as an academic has offered me insights into the lives of the dominant group and I have learned how material conditions – financial resources and engagement in contexts of power through family and social networks – provide very tangible opportunities and other privileges as well as the ideologies that they sustain in order to justify the atrocities that are committed everyday in the service of capital.

Although, I accept the argument that a cultural politics cannot change the unfreedoms we currently experience, that this requires ending capitalism which by definition involves the exploitation of the masses in service of the few, I strongly believe that we must also work to develop clarity and to break down the walls that divide us by race and gender and other

antagonisms in order to band together against capitalism. Diverse epistemes offer possibilities that are as yet unexplored and legitimizing these knowledge systems will prove an important step in challenging the antagonisms that keep us divided.

A western episteme is not necessarily wrong but because it is legitimized by the academy, it determines what counts as knowledge, how best to understand the phenomena in question, and more generally how to engage in the world. Other knowledge systems have been lost or marginalized and marked as invalid or backward. An important critique that I wish to acknowledge and challenge is that the idea of multiple epistemes is based on a relativism that runs contrary to the existence of an objective reality and hence, contrary to critical pedagogy and Marxist claims about capitalism's dehumanization. The impetus for social transformation embeds a fundamental understanding of oppression as an objective reality (Kincheloe, 2004) but our understanding of how it is manifested and how we must engage to transform it are subjective realities. Paulo Freire (1998) argued that objectivity and subjectivity are always present in a dialectical tension. Anderson (1995) posits that access to non-dominant epistemes cannot be thought of as having multiple but equally valid worldviews but rather that a non-dominant episteme may lead to more accurate and more truthful understandings regarding issues related to oppression, justice, and freedom.

Here, I reiterate an important tenet posited by Freire (1970) that the oppressed have insights into the nature of oppression that are necessarily hidden from the oppressors. It is the oppressed who must lead the struggle for liberation on their own behalf and for the oppressors, not only because of their insights but because any attempts for the oppressors to lead the struggle is a re-enactment of the power relations that exist under conditions of exploitation. It is in the moment that the oppressed take charge of the struggle for liberation that they evidence to themselves and to the oppressors a clear understanding of their own humanity as agents in history.

For many of us, Latinas and Chicanas, our experiences as fragmented beings and our critical understandings of the deep structure of capital as the basis of dehumanization spurs us to *act with our communities* as a means of learning and becoming empowered together (Delgado et al., 2006; Dillard, 2000; Hurtado, 2003). It can be seen as a political act that brings us closer to

the ideals of a democracy by providing spaces where typically marginalized speakers can make sense of their experiences of oppression, make themselves heard in protest, and rehearse for greater action. For example, *testimonios*, a form of narrative research growing in popularity, is discussed as a “map of consciousness” that may reveal to ourselves and others our strengths as people able to recognize, survive, and thrive amidst social injustice (Hawkings, 1995). This opportunity to develop agency is critical but it must always be theorized as rooted within and dialectically related to the deep structure of capitalism and it must also be a starting point that leads to action for concrete social changes that may mitigate local conditions but with a vision for real and lasting structural change that will restore our freedom and humanity. To be satisfied with changing conditions for a particular group – if that were even possible – would merely serve, as Freire (1970) argued, to becoming the oppressors in the same system that has merely moved players around. Our goal must be to challenge the current transnational capitalist system that keeps people alienated from each other, from other animals, and from the earth that sustains us (Ebert & Zavarzadeh, 2007). A critical Latina episteme leads to transcending the *I* toward a *we*, which can potentially support the development of new questions, new ways of knowing and engaging, and new solutions toward creating a path out of capitalism.

Critical Ethnography *with* Community

As a Latina critical ethnographer, I am continually reflecting and growing in my craft and in the way I live my life, which for me is one and the same. I engage in ethnography with communities always through long-term engagement. Work that involves years of spending time with people and learning to see *with* them is really about building relationships – about reciprocal learning in the midst of living. My work is focused on learning with Latino communities on issues that directly affect us, including racism, patriarchy, immigration, and bilingualism. Recently, I have begun to apply a critical pedagogy approach with a decidedly Marxist orientation and have come to understand the limiting and problematic nature of focusing only on a particular antagonism without addressing the root cause of inequalities – capitalism. Critical pedagogy faces head on the reality and root cause of our dehumanizing existence while also recognizing that diverse epistemes are valid and necessary for breaking free of the chains of capitalism. It also speaks to me of hope and possibility and offers us tools to help us carve out a path to the liberation of humanity.

I began my career as an educational ethnographer attempting to put into practice the staples of ethnography that I had learned through my doctoral program and through the many books on methods that I had read. I soon realized that while these were good starting points they were unable to speak to me as an ethical Latina working *with* Latino communities. My understanding of ethnography at the time in which I began my doctoral dissertation was that I was to capture participants' perspectives and practices without influencing their actions or words. While it was recognized that my subjectivity would undoubtedly enter the research context, this was something to be utilized for the purposes of building rapport and gaining greater access to deeper meanings and participants' more closely guarded fears and pains. However, it was also suggested that the longer I was in the setting and participants became comfortable with my presence, the more likely they would return to their typical routines and be more relaxed about sharing their beliefs and thoughts without self-censoring. In my own experience, however, I was unwilling to be a bystander, observing and recording the difficulties that parents and children were having in schools and other dominant contexts without offering assistance with translation, instrumental information regarding schooling, tutoring, intervening in school contexts on their behalf, and engaging in critical dialogue with participants related to poverty, the cultural contexts of schooling, bilingual education, racism, and patriarchy.

My work as an ethnographer with Latino communities has revealed the insights that my "cultural intuition" provides regarding Latino families and their schooling experiences, how to engage and build community with them, and how to cautiously traverse the fine line between insider and outsider. Indeed, in ethnography I not only bring my cultural intuition to bear in my interactions and understandings but the contexts of ethnography itself fosters my cultural intuition as my often compartmentalized skills and experiences become enmeshed and inform each other to offer insights that would likely not emerge within the spaces of my own family nor within the academy.

My interactions with participants have always been reciprocal. I have shared the many stories of my own life and my own fears and unresolved contradictions. Participants, even children, have often provided me with new ways of framing my own life experiences and new ways of understanding social relationships, parenting, marriage, and many other aspects our lives. I

believe that ethnography has provided participants and myself opportunities to grow in understanding of how our lives are shaped by our social and material conditions and we have supported each other in developing more agentic ways of engaging in the world.

My approach to ethnography as described above can be easily traced to my homegrown episteme that demands active and reciprocal engagement *with* participants. It reflects the values, practices, and experiences that I grew up with as well as my understandings of these as situated within a structure of domination and capital accumulation that relegates primarily people of color and many women to the social and geographical slums of society. An immigrant of Cuba at the age of four, I grew up with parents who did not speak English and who struggled to find work with less than an elementary education. My mother taught by example that a Latina woman was above all else someone who was caring, gentle, and always humble. She also taught me about sacrifice, doing for others, and about perseverance. My father taught mainly through stories. His stories were always outlandish but the message was clear – we should dream big and strive always for the moon. There was a message that he ingrained in my sister and I, “La palabra y la familia es lo más grande que hay en la vida. (One’s word and one’s family are the most important things in life.)” To share with others was ingrained in us through everyday acts, making us always cut even the tiniest square of chocolate in equal sized parts with anyone who was present. Sharing of money or belongings was also extended to knowledge and skills as my sister and I were called upon and expected to not only translate and help our parents and family with English, literacy, and other tasks but also friends, neighbors, and even strangers on the street when the occasion presented itself. Refusing to share or assist others or at least try to do so was considered “*egoista*.” Of course, we did not always adhere to this ideal but these were the values to strive for, what it meant to be a good person. Now as I consider these values I see them as instantiations of our social positioning in society. Poverty and racism demands that Latino communities develop values for sharing resources. We survive contexts that are foreign by turning to each other for support. Perseverance is a staple of survival for Latina women whose oppression is found not only out in the streets of what is often a foreign and hostile country but in our homes and at the hands of the men who are supposed to love us deeply. Given these values and understandings, the notion of watching people I had grown to care for struggle with

education or other needs when I could intervene or offer support was not something I could or would consider.

My sister and I were expected to strive for excellence and get good grades but presumed “intelligence” was not necessarily more valued than other characteristics and competition or showing off our accomplishments was not acceptable. Everyone brought something unique but equally valued to our lives, whether it were street smarts, book smarts or kindness. Furthermore a person’s skills or aptitude did not determine their worth. People were worthy simply because they existed.

As a Latina immigrant, I understand the world differently. For example, I have noted that some faculty members seem to regard class attendance as the most important priority that a student must have. I have heard such faculty comment that they would not excuse an absence for family gatherings, a parent or grandparent’s birthday out of town, or even their own wedding (I think this one was told in jest). The value is clear. There is almost nothing more important for a student than the learning that happens in a classroom. While I am not cavalier about the importance of class attendance, I have a strong value for informal learning contexts, for family obligations and being present for important people in our lives. As a chronically absent student in High School I understand first hand that excessive absences can be problematic, but I also know that out of school experiences can be important to our academic development and can enrich other areas of our lives. Because I did not have the opportunity to travel or take part in many typically mainstream and dominant group activities, I believe these are important for students and not only understand their wanting to attend rather than coming to class but encourage their attendance. Given my Latina episteme, I am a strong believer that everyone in the world has strengths, that many of these are not harnessed in our schools, that intelligence is malleable, and that, in spite of or perhaps because of my many years of schooling, I know very little about many things that others know a lot about. As I have entered academia, I have come to realize that although many of my dominant White colleagues may hold similar values, these are not embedded in the everyday practices by which the academy functions, and especially not in traditional approaches to research. My episteme has led me to interact with participants in ways that reflect a strong value for their knowledges and a willingness to follow their lead in our interactions (Monzo,

2013). This has resulted in some important opportunities to support our growth. Rather than keeping traditional distance, I have sought to develop intersubjectivity with participants and to combine all of our resources to intervene in ways that could result in improved conditions. I have to admit, though, that these approaches were not strategic. I was intervening as situations arose that demanded it because to merely observe from a distance would have been unthinkable even though I had learned that I should keep my research “objective” lest I might influence what the participants would say and do.

Armed with revolutionary critical pedagogy, I go about my work without any apologies to intervention. I seek to engage in prolonged and reciprocal research projects where together we can improve current social and material conditions and gain “clarity” about our material, social, cultural, and political positions in the world and about how capitalism structures the oppression that we experience (Freire, 1970). Clarity is the ultimate act of love. Clarity about our social and material conditions and an understanding of our role as actors in the making of history supports the development of hope and possibility and allows us to imagine a world free of class, to organize and to bring about a revolution that will free us from the death grip of capitalism.

Some may argue that addressing the current localized conditions of particular participants or groups undermines our overall efforts to overthrow capitalism by supporting the illusion that with sufficient resources we could eradicate local problems or the suffering of particular communities thereby obscuring the very basis of capitalism – the ownership of the means of production by a few, which by definition involves inequality. Although I recognize the rationality of this premise, an ethical humanity cannot stand by and allow human suffering to continue when there are things we can do to ameliorate conditions, even if only for the few. I have come to reconcile this contradiction by conceiving of this tension in dialectical terms that involve both rather than either/or arguments. A theory of dialectical tensions supports engaging in both localized efforts and large-scale structural changes. The goal, then, would be to act in favor of local improvements while simultaneously developing clarity about the function of capitalism in creating mass exploitation and human suffering. This approach can be thought of as rehearsal in preparation for the time when forces align to create a mass uprising against capitalism. At that pivotal moment in history we will need sufficient workers prepared socially,

materially, and ideologically to take up positions in movements organized horizontally and transnational in scope. Our localized efforts can support the long-term goal of revolution by providing the social spaces for popular analysis while also creating opportunities for participatory and direct action that foster momentum in the struggle against capitalism (Hill, 2012; McKenna, 2013).

The aspects of my episteme I have shared above suggest that I bring different ways of understanding the world – different insights, different questions, and different answers - and that these are rooted in my experience as a racialized immigrant woman raised in contexts of poverty. Like my own episteme, other non-dominant peoples bring their own subjective insights into the objective reality of the unequal relations of production and capitalism. These insights are rarely heard or understood within the academy and therefore remain as hidden local musings that are not taken up and seriously considered toward informing the way we go about the business of creating clarity, bridging divisions among the working class, and finding common ground between us to fight against capital and create a new imaginary of freedom beyond necessity.

Conclusion

I have argued that democracy is more than a political system of representation but a moral imperative, wherein all people are viewed as bringing unique and important contributions to the advancement of society. The democracy for which I have argued is a socialist democracy in the Marxist tradition. This socialist democracy cannot be achieved so long as we live in a world structured by and through capitalism, where by definition society is divided into workers and owners of their labor power, a structure that creates numerous antagonisms that justify inequalities and obscure the role of capital in this process. Further, I have argued that the university can potentially have an important function in the eventual imploding of capitalism that Marx prophesized through its inclusion of diverse faculty who may bring a diverse episteme that may lead us toward a greater value for the society's marginalized groups who must necessarily come together, across a multitude of ideological and material antagonisms, to rise up against capitalism. Whether the university fulfills its promise to serve the public good is contingent upon our ability to snatch the university from the grips of the current neoliberal transnational capitalist class. As faculty we must arm ourselves with a revolutionary critical pedagogy that fosters in our

students and in our research participants clarity regarding existing conditions of domination and exploitation created through and within capitalism but with the historical understanding that we the people are the makers of our history and are essentially agentic beings toward our own social development. While studying the revolutions that have taken place in history I would be wary of devising a blue print since revolutions must be waged as they make sense in the specificity of a sociohistorical moment in time and determined by the people whose courage and revolutionary love transcends learned notions of individualism and self preservation in order to willingly sacrifice for the sake of humanity. Anger and indignation must fill our hearts as we recognize that our suffering has been contrived but we must also learn to love our enemies whose excessive greed for capital accumulation has duped them of their own humanity, such that we gain the strength and courage to stand up together and roar in unison, !Viva la revolución!

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Notes

¹ These concepts are discussed generally within this text. As Keating (2005) argues, however, these concepts are meant to defy specific definitions. Rather, it is expected that they are experienced differently across people and contexts.