

APORIAS, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE IM/POSSIBILITY OF TEACHING
MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Hongyu Wang

Drawing upon Jacques Derrida's notions of aporia and responsibility, this essay discusses the dilemmas of multicultural education and the pedagogical responsibility of multicultural educators. Derrida emphasizes that there is no responsibility without experiencing aporia as the possibility of the impossible. To promote personal transformation and social justice in the multicultural classroom, we must acknowledge the aporias of teacher authority and student agency, self and other, center and margin, and intellect and emotion, and refuse to reduce them to any easy resolutions. The Derridean notions of aporia and responsibility ask us to approach multicultural education as a poetic experiencing of contradictions in order to invent new modes of subjectivity for both teacher and student. The complexity of teaching about social differences calls for creative pedagogy in which identity and community are destabilized while ambiguity and paradoxes are embraced, thus allowing us to imagine the world otherwise.

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When teaching multicultural education or any classes related to social differences, teachers often face the problem of pedagogical responsibility in asking students to think about controversial issues they may not want to encounter. How can we, as teachers who are committed to a vision of democratization and social justice, negotiate a space in which we can travel together with our students to “difficult knowledge” in an emotionally sustainable way?¹ How do we respond to the biased and stereotyped or even racist comments that sometimes surface in class discussions? And, after all, can we as educators assume that we “know” better than our students? How can we claim our authority as teachers without imposing our own frameworks and orientations upon our students? As an international faculty member, teaching in a predominantly white university, I find it necessary to confront these questions, which often pull me in contradictory directions. The paradoxes of teaching multicultural education make Jacques Derrida’s notion of *aporia* particularly appealing in my attempts to engage pedagogical responsibility. Using Derridean theories of *aporia* and responsibility, this paper explores the ambiguous and complicated space in which multicultural educators work in their efforts to promote personal and social transformation in the classroom.

APORIA AS THE POSSIBILITY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

The theme of *aporia* is prevalent in many of Derrida’s texts. In Greek, *aporia* indicates the state of impasse, nonpassage, or logical contradiction that can never be permanently resolved, a state of constant dilemma with no general or final solution. But *aporia* is not necessarily negative; rather, it is affirmative through the impossible movement of traversing — without crossing — the ultimate border. It is an event of “coming without *pas*.”² The affirmation announced through engaging with the edge or the borderline is the precondition for experiencing *aporia*, and thus is necessary for responsibility.

In *Apurias*, Derrida describes three cases of *aporia*. First, the state of nonpassage is reflected in the “existence of an uncrossable border” (*DA*, 20). Second, *aporia* exists when the limit is so indeterminate and permeable that there is no border to cross — that is, where the dividing line between two opposite sides is

1. Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Certain Objects* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 118.

2. Jacques Derrida, *Apurias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 8. This work will be cited as *DA* in the text for all subsequent references.

invisible. Third, an aporia resides in its own impossibility: "There would be an aporia because there is not even any space for an aporia determined as experience of the step or of the edge, crossing or not of some line, relation to some spatial figure of the limit" (*DA*, 21).

The theme of aporia is clearly related to the theme of borderlines. Derrida describes three types of border limits (*DA*, 23). The first is an "anthropological border," separating territories, languages, or cultures, whose edge is artificially determined. The second is a "problematic closure," dividing domains of discourse such as academic disciplines, where the unity of a certain inquiry is assured. The third is a "conceptual demarcation," the borderline separating concepts or terms, which defines opposites. Furthermore, these three borders can overlap and determine one another.

For Derrida, however, these borderlines are not fixed but are capable of exceeding themselves in their attending to "the other shore."³ This opening to another border calls into question the hierarchy implied in the delimitation of the anthropological border, the problematic closure, and the conceptual demarcation. On reading Martin Heidegger's texts, particularly *Being and Time*, Derrida claims that "the work exceeds itself, it surpasses the limits of the concept of itself that it claims to have properly while presenting itself" (*OH*, 32). The borders of language/culture, discourse, and concept are not closed but, rather, are always open to those that are not themselves. In this openness to the other, the demarcation of the boundary is not overthrown, but neither does it stay within the settled territory, so that it is *both* impossible to pass the border *and* necessary to transcend it. The juridical-political borders contained by traditions, society, and law are unsettled and displaced in this "both-and" situation. In the movement of displacement, identity and nonidentity connect, intertwine, but do not coincide.

It is in the very event of exceeding borderlines — an impossible passage — that aporia is experienced. At the moment the edge is overrun, contradictory imperatives and opposite gestures from both sides are fully awakened and thereby bring pressure for an answer. The affirmativeness of aporia through the impossible is implied at this moment of responding to conflicting gestures. To Derrida, the ethics of affirmation, if there is such an ethics, implies "that you are attentive to otherness, to the alterity of the other, to something new and other."⁴ This attentiveness is an openness both to the other and to the future. But as an advent of the event, as

3. Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 7. This work will be cited as *OH* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Jacques Derrida, "Interview of Jacques Derrida by Alan Montefiore," in *Jacques Derrida* (Princeton, New Jersey: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1992), film. Transcription prepared by Denise Egéa-Kuehne and Vikki Hillis (1996), 7.

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a promise, the experience of crossing the border always remains to come as long as the aporia continues. The border is not passed and cannot simply be erased, although the borderline can be invisible; the other cannot disappear into the self and must remain its alterity, its potential for newness. The name of an experience indicates "a traversal, something that traverses and travels toward a destination for which it finds the appropriate passage."⁵ In this sense, aporia cannot be fully experienced because it refuses the arrival at the final destination. Perhaps, the process of experiencing, enduring, or dwelling is more relevant to "test[ing] a passage, both an impossible and a necessary passage" (*DA*, 17). There is no way out of aporia, but in this impasse, active engagement with the impossible becomes imperative for creating new forms of life.

In *The Other Heading*, Derrida discusses the aporias inherent in the notion of European identity (*OH*, 76–83). The duty both to recall the European memory and to open Europe to its other, which is not Europe, is caught in two equally imperative but contradictory gestures. This duty becomes a double duty in the testing of aporias: European identity and nationalism; the resistance to totalitarian dogmatism and the resistance to dogmatic resistance against totalitarian dogmatism; critical tradition and deconstructive thinking; the European tradition of democracy and democracy as a promise; the call to respect differences and the rule of the majority; the need to exceed the order of reason without losing faith in the Enlightenment ideal; the call for responsibility and the necessity to refuse a certain responsibility. Each aporia is concerned with "the double concept of the border": the border between one and an oppositional other, and the border between one and an other that is no longer its other. Thus, the border must be exceeded while the crossing of the border is slippery when the border is no longer a border. Actually, the double concept of *border* is aporetic itself. In the experiencing of aporia, the three types of borders or limits described previously are marked and at the same time erased, which "is to trace them as still possible while also introducing the very principle of their impossibility" (*DA*, 73). Thus, in the passage and nonpassage of the borderline, aporia becomes the possibility of impossibility, and nonidentity becomes a part of identity. When it is open to the other heading, European identity constructs, deconstructs, and re-creates itself.

Here, nonpassage and passage form an aporetic doubling. Without testing the passage, there is no experience of aporia and no affirmative promise through a negative form; without the nonpassage, no aporia exists — aporia is lost in assurance. Thus, the constant and unsolvable paradoxes inherent in aporia not only uncover two nonreducible heterogeneous imperatives, but also reveal the aporia of aporia: the "ultimate aporia is the impossibility of the aporia *as such*" as one must endure aporia (*DA*, 78). Here is the difference between the notion of aporia and the Hegelian notion of dialectics. As Richard Bernstein points out, while Hegel's "logic of inversion" ends with an overcoming and "reconciliation of oppositions and

5. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David G. Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16.

differences," this reconciliation "is *always* deferred" in Derrida's deconstructive analysis.⁶ Without any final resolution, aporia ultimately questions its own existence.

The notion of aporia as the possibility of the impossible invites our active experiencing of such with its logical contradictions. The possibility of both the "coming to pass" and the "coming without *pas*" makes the event of crossing the border paradoxical:

If the new *arrivant* who arrives is new, one must expect — without waiting for him or her, without expecting it — that he does not simply cross a given threshold. Such an *arrivant* affects the very experience of the threshold, whose possibility he thus brings to light before one even knows whether there has been an invitation, a call, a nomination, or a promise.... What we could here call the *arrivant*. is whatever, whoever, in arriving, does not cross a threshold separating two identifiable places, the proper and the foreign, the proper of the one and the proper of the other (*DA*, 33–34).

Upon the arrival of the unexpected new one, the boundary of identity is moving, the space for passage between borders is shifting, and the event of approaching the border transforms the border itself. Thus, "coming to pass" becomes "coming without *pas*" at the edge of the borderless border, or between the double border. Between the heading and the other heading approaches the possibility of the impossible passage, the impossible nonpassage, which is the aporia.

In the endless process of living with irreducible aporia, we need a new sense of response, responsiveness, and responsibility. If aporia does not lead us to a definite solution, how can we respond to it?

RESPONSIBILITY AS CREATIVITY IN EXPERIENCING THE APORIA

RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT THE GUARANTEE OF A UNIVERSALIZED FOUNDATION

According to Derrida, there is no responsibility without experiencing aporia. Any decision or responsibility guaranteed by predetermined rules or principles is merely a technical application instead of a responsible response:

To protect the decision or the responsibility by knowledge, by some theoretical assurance, or by the certainty of being right, of being on the side of science, of consciousness, of reason, is to transform this experience into the deployment of a program, into a technical application of a rule or a norm, or into the consumption of a determined "case" (*DA*, 19).

For Derrida, without conflicting demands, without "the ghost of the undecidable," there is no call for a responsible decision that carries the burden of answering to a paradoxical situation. When acting upon preestablished procedure, there is no need to make a free decision, and thereby the imperative of following orders prevails. Such an unquestioning application of principle, no matter how transcendental it claims to be, deprives the decision of ethical and political considerations and induces irresponsibility. Here, affirming the destabilizing power of aporia, Derrida directly challenges the universalized rules and transcendental foundations in which hierarchy, subordination, and metaphysical violence are implicated. For him, responsibility is not grounded by any "proper center," or guaranteed by any mature

6. Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 179.

technology, but is embedded in confronting the dilemmas of the human condition. This raises a series of questions: Is responsibility without the guarantee of a universalized foundation possible? When there are no normative references such as criteria, general rules, or laws, what purpose does responsibility serve? To whom do we respond?

In rethinking the biblical story of Isaac's sacrifice, Derrida points out the aporia of responsibility.⁷ In being responsible to the absolute God, Abraham is irresponsible ethically; ethics is sacrificed in the name of absolute duty: "One must behave not only in an ethical or responsible manner, but in a nonethical, non-responsible manner, and one must do that *in the name of* duty, of an infinite duty, *in the name of* absolute duty."⁸ Derrida calls responsibility based upon absolute duty "sacrificial responsibility," the most common experience of responsibility, a responsibility bordering on irresponsibility. He also alludes to the possibility of this sacrifice as the sacrifice of woman. However, he does not justify an ethical universality that excludes the element of the mysterious, either. In uncovering the aporia, he questions the universalized foundations of responsibility. Based upon Derrida's notion, William Doll attempts to develop a sense of responsibility as a *responsibility of being* instead of a *responsibility of* absolute authority.⁹ This Derridean sense of responsibility has radical ethical and political implications, as it removes the guarantee of the absolute and leaves an uncertain condition for inventing singular responses. However, such a questioning of the foundation does not necessarily lead to its negation, but intends continually to open up what is excluded by the force of founding. Derrida's commitment to the interminable process of democracy as yet to come, his efforts to expose the violence inherent in establishing authority, and his respect for the otherness of the other, all indicate his opposition to domination and his endless pursuit of reimagining political horizons.

In "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" Derrida reveals the paradox inherent in the efforts of founding and justifying the law. While the justice of the law is claimed, the founding of the law inevitably consists of force, power, or violence — a performative and interpretive violence. How can such violence claim any absolute justification? "Since the origin of authority, the foundation or ground, the position of the law can't by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground."¹⁰ For Derrida, responsibility begins with questioning the origin of universal rules and confronting the established concepts and practice: "There is no responsibility without a dissident and inventive rupture with respect to tradition, authority, orthodoxy, rule, or doctrine."¹¹

7. Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

8. *Ibid.*, 67, emphasis in original.

9. William E. Doll, Jr., "Struggles with Spirituality," in *Educational Yearning* eds. Thomas Oldenski and Dennis Carlson (New York: Garland, 2001), 10–21.

10. Derrida, "Force of Law," 14.

11. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 27.

He invites us to imagine a different ethics, an ethics that attends to what is suppressed, or what is "othered."

A RESPONSE TO THE CALL FROM THE OTHER

A rupture with tradition requires us to listen to the call from the other, a singular and irreducible call. The gesture of affirmation generated by aporia leads us to claim an infinite openness to the other:

The singularity of the 'who' is...a singularity that dislocates or divides itself in gathering itself together to answer to the other, whose call somehow precedes its own identification with itself, for to this call I can only answer, have already answered, even if I think I am answering 'no'...¹²

The call from the other remains singular and lies at the root of all ethical, moral, juridical, and political responsibility; it is the origin of responsibility. It must be answered, and no response is a kind of response. In answering this call, the self is led beyond itself into new realms of life. The call can never be captured or domesticated into the self, so its alterity remains. This openness to the other in the notion of responsibility can never come to a closure and enables a dynamic process of constant change, transformation, and creation.

However, responding to the call of the other does not mean the subordination of self to the other. Self "as the difference of the other, as the other different and deferred," can never be merged with the other.¹³ The otherness of the other cannot be reduced to the sameness of the self either. Only when alterity between self and other is affirmed in a reciprocal way is it possible not to give in to the dominance of hierarchy. Since no final resolution of differences can be expected, both self and the other are continuously transformed while they cannot be fused into one. Responsibility, in the experience of this identity as nonidentity, in the event of this "coming without *pas*," embraces the paradoxes of human life and dwells in the creativity of being and being-in-relation-with-others.

For Derrida, only by responding to the call from the other, from the otherness of the other, can one achieve the re/affirmation of the self. One is "more faithful to the heritage of a culture by cultivating the difference-to-oneself (*à l'égard de soi*)" (OH, 11). Thus, traditions, heritages, and memories are reaffirmed through their own transformation. The responsibility of answering the call from the other opens the self to its own rupture with itself, a rupture attentive to the differences in the other and in the future.

RESPONSIBILITY AS DOUBLE DUTY

Derrida's radicalization of an endless openness to the other as characteristic of responsibility and decision is often criticized as noncommitment, or as not taking any position, especially in the ethical-political context. To this charge, he responds:

12. Jacques Derrida, *Point(s) de vue* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 261.

13. Jacques Derrida, "Difference," in *A Derrida Reader* ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 70.

Not at all. But the difficulty is to gesture in opposite directions at the same time: on the one hand, to preserve a distance and suspicion with regard to the official political codes governing reality; on the other, to intervene here and now in a practical and engaged manner wherever the necessity arises. This position of dual allegiance, in which I personally find myself, is one of perpetual uneasiness.¹⁴

This perpetual uneasiness — in other words, this unsolvable aporia — must be lived within double gestures. Derrida refuses the quest for any universal rules or codes to ground our decisions and actions, but he clearly does not advocate inaction. On the contrary, the attempt to recognize the aporia requires us to be actively engaged with contradictions in order not only to respond responsibly in the present but also to open up nonpresent possibilities. For Derrida, democracy is a promise yet to come. The idea of democracy as a European heritage, is “not something that is certain to happen tomorrow, not the democracy...of the *fut ur e* but a democracy that must have the structure of a promise — *and t hus t he n e n e r y o f t hat w h i c h c a r r i e s t h e f u t u r e, t h e t o - c a m e, h e r e a n d n o w*” (OH, 78, emphasis in original). The “here and now” decision that must be made today is infused with both memory and promise — a memory no longer loyal to the past, and a promise not faithful to what we can project from today. A critical and reflective reentering into the present is called upon to transform self, history, and culture. In this sense, the ethical-political position implied in Derrida’s deconstruction may seem too radical for people who do not have the courage to undertake the endless, rigorous project of democracy.

Actually, Derrida does not intend to destroy traditional codes. Rather, he emphasizes the need to see conflicting directions at the same time. As Bernstein points out, Derrida understands that “we cannot question or shake traditional ethical and political claims without at the same time also drawing upon these traditional claims.”¹⁵ Thus, two paradoxical gestures are needed at once, and this difference in simultaneity is pregnant with new directions. In *The Other Heading*, Derrida points out the double duty of European identity: to affirm differences against the centralizing hegemony of homogenization in European cultural identity while avoiding nationalism and fragmentation. Bound by double gestures of memory and promise, traditions are constantly re-created and the present is always exceeded.

While the ghost of undecidability haunts every responsible decision, it does not justify neutrality. A decision always implies a position, which makes any claim for neutrality impossible. The minimum requirement of responsibility is to make a choice. On the other hand, Derrida reserves the right to silence “before any and every instituted tribunal” and to refuse the kind of responsibility that claims an absolute authority based on truth, reason, or justice (OH, 79). In other words, this is the refusal to be irresponsible. Derrida’s notion of responsibility asks us to make a decision “here and now” but, at the same time, to keep a distance for questioning, including questioning one’s own decision, so as to refuse a final closure and remain open to alternatives.

14. Jacques Derrida, quoted in Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, 214.

15. Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, 210.

RESPONSIBILITY AS INVENTION

How can we make two contradictory gestures at the same time? How can we respond to an aporia without stopping short before the undecidable? Without the support of fundamental principles, a responsible decision becomes an invention out of the impossible:

The condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain *experientia* and *experimentum* of the possibility of the impossible, the testing of the aporia which one may invent the only possible invention of the impossible invention (OH, 41, emphasis in original).

Responsibility as invention becomes possible in creative interaction between tradition and a unique context: "...it is necessary to re 'invent' what responsibilities are involved in order to respond to the singularity of the event, not by ignoring previously developed concepts, but by going beyond them."¹⁶ Thus, a responsible decision without the guarantee of universal foundations is highly contextualized and is situated upon the interaction between principles and concrete conditions:

For a decision to be just and responsible, it must, in its proper moment if there is one, be both regulated without regulation: it must conserve the law and also destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case, rejustify it, at least reinvent it in the reaffirmation and the new and free confirmation of its principle. Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely.¹⁷

Responsibility as invention does not intend simply to reconstruct or rebuild something upon previously established ground, but is "constructing something else, something other."¹⁸ When we are neither protradition nor antitradition, the rupture with tradition does not lead to turning the established upside down but asks us to carry our memories in our imagining of new landscapes. Taking one side of aporia without acknowledging the other side cannot take us far. Conforming to tradition retains the violence of the given; at the same time, adopting the posture of antitradition usually brings back the worst part of the tradition. Living with paradoxes in the spirit of affirmation, we must seek passage and such negotiation has to be creative, singular, and context-specific. This invention as an experience and experiment of aporia is "poetic, poetical"; it cannot be logically described, but has to be experienced, to be felt, and to be lived.¹⁹ Multicultural education is situated in such a living creative space of enduring aporias.

LIVING WITH APORIAS: THE CHALLENGES FOR MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

The notion of aporia and responsibility in Derrida's theory has important *implications* (not applications) for multicultural education and pedagogy. If we do not view culture as a static entity, "multicultural education" as a term is already implicated in paradoxical gestures toward both unity and multiplicity, tradition and difference, and self and other. The aporetic nature of identity unsettles rather

16. Denise Egéa-Kuchne, "Deconstruction Revisited and Derrida's Call for Academic Responsibility," *Educational Theory* 45, no. 3 (1995): 303.

17. Derrida, "Force of Law," 23.

18. Derrida, "Interview of Jacques Derrida by Alan Montefiore," 6-7.

19. *Ibid.*, 13.

than secures the democratic claim of multicultural education. Yet it is precisely in this unsettling refusal to find terminable solutions that the urgency of pedagogical responsibility resides. If we cannot ground our vision of social justice upon consensus, what does teaching and learning about social differences mean? The openness to something *à her and differents* the precondition for any transformative learning, and disequilibrium is necessary for reaching another level of understanding.²⁰ In the context of teaching diversity issues, this challenge is dramatized to the degree that aporias of pedagogy are made more explicit and more imperative. The aporias between self and other, identity and nonidentity, center and margin, conscious and unconscious, relationality and individuality, and commonality and differences make any hope for quick success and the permanent "fix" of problems impossible. There is no formula that we can rely upon to "cure" the diseases of racism, (hetero)sexism, classism, xenophobia, or other forms of social hatred. Although we as educators are institutionally granted the position of authority, we are situated in the social, political, and cultural construction of our own identities. How can unsettling students' identity not be accompanied by questioning our own selves? However, the effects of this unsettling and questioning cannot be known in advance; therefore, our commitment to democracy as a promise is perpetually regenerated. To embrace the Derridean sense of responsibility is a difficult, yet necessary, pedagogical task. In the following section, I briefly discuss some of the contradictions inherent in multicultural education and call for responsible engagement with these aporias to invent new modes of pedagogy.

TEACHER'S AUTHORITY AND STUDENT'S AGENCY

The teacher's authority is both institutionally and pedagogically established. Institutional authority is presupposed before students walk into the classroom. Pedagogical authority, formed by the teacher's expertise and interactive styles, emerges in the process of teaching. In the case of multicultural education, especially for teachers from minority backgrounds who are teaching in mainstream classrooms, students' resistance against pedagogical authority can be discerned from the very beginning. Occasionally, students, angry about having to learn what they refuse to know, may bring a certain disruption to the teacher's institutional authority by registering a formal complaint. In this complicated space, how the teacher deals with the issues of authority and agency has an important impact on how multicultural education is received by students. By resorting to institutional authority to control conflicts and fill the pedagogical gap between "what the teacher wants for the student and what the student can hope for from the teacher," the teacher may be able to maintain order in the class, but such an approach does not promote students' transformative capacity for critical thinking.²¹

20. See William E. Doll, Jr., *A Post-modern Perspective on Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993); and Egéa-Kuchne, "Deconstruction Revisited and Derrida's Call for Academic Responsibility," 293-310.

21. Alice Pitt, *The Play of the Personal* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), xix.

In my own classroom practices, I refuse to claim my institutional authority (as teacher) to overrule students' biases. Although taking this stance can be problematic for a woman, especially one belonging to a cultural minority, I do not believe in the power of overcoming biases by external imposition. Transformation has to happen within the self, and external imposition, even with good intentions, cannot work well. Furthermore, even if I am the teacher, how can I recognize students' biases in an unbiased way? If we ask students to rethink their identities, our own sense of self cannot be privileged either. The aporia between teachers' authority and students' agency invites us to approach our responsibility as educators through the double bind of daring to challenge students' limits while being willing to consider seriously students' own thoughts.

Not putting closure to the pedagogical gap, teachers and students call upon each other to move beyond the familiar toward new landscapes of subjectivity. Such a process is initiated by the teacher's respect for each student's own sense of the self, and the teacher's recognition of the irreducible differences between the student and both the text and the teacher. However, this does not mean that the teacher merges with students' expectations. While the teacher's authority must be suspended to allow students' voices to come out, the teacher must retain the responsibility for taking a position "here and now" (without maintaining the position as absolute) in order to interrupt the given. Such a positioning against the teacher's (and students') complicity in the established may stimulate the unheard voices of students so that they surface and eventually emerge into words, privately or publicly. Pedagogical interruption is always uncomfortable for students, but the provocation of conflicting thoughts laden with affects is the condition for (responsible) education. This pedagogy-through-discomfort needs to be coupled with a loving guidance of students through their inner struggles, without assuming, however, that students must resolve these conflicts.

SELF AND OTHER

From a pedagogical standpoint, the aporia between self and other, and between identity and nonidentity in a multicultural classroom, points to the necessity of affirming the political reality of race/racism, gender/(hetero)sexism, and class/classism while at the same time deconstructing the very concepts of race, gender, and class. The multiplicity, alterity, and hybridity of an individual person's identity call into question any essential definition of the self. Attaching any individual person to a social category imposes a preestablished identity and ignores the capacity of the self to go beyond social constraints. At the same time, however, the social and cultural contexts of an individual must be recognized for us to understand how race, gender, class, sexuality, and other forms of social difference affect that person's life. Such an understanding is essential to our commitment to promoting social justice. The Derridean sense of responsibility asks us to consider the tensions between individuality and sociality as a generative site for reformulating the relations between self and other.

One of the impasses of multicultural education is the strong commitment of mainstream students to the rhetoric of the individual. This rhetoric secures their own sense of "the self" and legitimizes their refusal to encounter the other. The "color blind" approach, in which one sees the individual but not his or her culture, erases the concreteness and singularity of the person in social contexts. "Individual" as an abstract concept renders invisible the hegemony of racism, sexism, classism, and the other varieties of social exclusion of the other. Mainstream students often find the notion of a socially constructed self difficult, even threatening, to think about. Un/consciously they sense that acknowledging socially constructed differences poses a challenge to their own way of life. On the other hand, recognizing one's race, gender, class, nationality, or sexuality does not mean that an individual is simply a composite of these social layers. Individuals are actively engaged with their social and cultural contexts, and their singularity lies in the way they negotiate the social. Only when an individual becomes aware of social and cultural limitations can he or she make responsible choices about how to negotiate these limits. Dwelling in the aporia between individuality and relationality, we need to articulate a contextualized sense of individuality that is both socially situated and personally creative. In cultivating a richer, deeper, and fuller sense of the self through dialogical interactions with others, one participates in a larger process of cultural transformation. In contrast, remaining locked up by the myth of individualism perpetuates the status quo and causes people to lose the capacity for creative imagination. To shift from the defensive position of staying within the demarcation of the self to a mutually expansive sense of the self in relation with others is a promising, albeit difficult, task for multicultural educators and students.

The creativity of the self in his or her movement is preconditioned by openness to the other. The alterity of the other is irreducible, and in answering this call from the other lies Derridean responsibility. The commonality of humanity is usually relied upon as a foundation for building bridges of communication and understanding across differences. In such an effort, the singularity of the other is colonized into sameness. It is also an attempt to escape from "the other in myself," as Derrida phrases it.²² When the rhetoric of commonality is invoked as the only way to build constructive relations, we fail to acknowledge the newness of the other in her potential for offering something radically different from our own perspective. Cannot differences be a site for making connections? Can we share a communal space without sacrificing the originality of both self and other? Without an encounter with the indeterminate condition destabilized by difference, the ghost that pulls us into opposite directions, and the uncertainty of moving toward both self and other, our responsibility for inventing the possible out of the impossible slips away. Contradictory and different layers of the self — differences that can never be mastered — operate within, between, and among the teacher and

22. Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (New York: Routledge, 1999), 67.

students, interacting with one another to make the classroom alive with creative potential. When the teacher's vision and students' backgrounds do not match, it can be dramatized as mutual resistance. The issue, then, becomes how to transform mutual resistance into mutual challenge so that both teacher and student step out of their comfort zones into an uncertain, intersubjective space, a space vibrant with new possibilities.

In the classroom, multicultural educators (and students) must deal directly with the living paradoxes of teaching antiracism, anti-(hetero)sexism, and anti-classism in a context where the very notions of race, gender, and class are problematic. The process of constructing and deconstructing social, cultural, and political identities makes a transformative pedagogy of multicultural education an ambiguous undertaking. The consequences of such efforts are uncertain — we may never be sure that we are doing the “right” thing, yet it is within this ambiguity that our commitment to reducing violence is perpetually renewed.

CENTER AND MARGIN

The failure to acknowledge the aporia between the center and the margin brings misconceptions about multicultural education. First, the idea that “multicultural education is for the others” at the *margin* promotes the rhetoric of tolerance, which is implicated in the unquestioned positioning of a *center* in the workings of repressive pluralism.²³ Furthermore, it may, paradoxically, bring an almost universal outcry from privileged (white, heterosexual, middle-class, male) students who demand an answer to the question, Where is my voice in multicultural education? Such an outcry reveals both the obsession with a unitary self and the refusal to welcome previously excluded others, including “the other in me.” These students fail to understand that the location of the center is made possible only by the existence of the margin and that such a geography of social borders is not “natural” and can be disrupted.

Power, privilege, and their impact upon one's everyday life, when not addressed, leave the dominant social structure intact. The rhetoric of paternalistic inclusion of the margin does little to transform the power relations that secure the central role of the privileged subject. Only when the “invisible privilege” at the center is brought to light can students begin to confront their own race, gender, class, nationality, and sexuality and understand how their individuality cannot be free from these social constructions.²⁴ Such an understanding is essential to developing the critical capacity for recognizing and further resisting socially imposed self-constitution.

For those from the center and those from the margin, self-understanding and self-mobilization take different forms. Those at the center must undergo a “self-shattering” process, to use William F. Pinar's apt phrase, to interrogate the

23. James A. Bank, *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 5; and Susan H. Edgerton, *Translating the Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 12–13.

24. Paula Rothenberg, *Invisible Privilege* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

seemingly integrated self that is the consequence of cultural hegemony.²⁵ For those already on the margin, self-affirmation of one's subjective experience is crucial to reconstructing a public world. The self-critique of the privileged serves to reincorporate into the self previously excluded elements, and self-affirmation of the marginalized serves to expand the self confined by social limits. Located in history and culture, the dynamics of center and margin are contextualized differently for different people. In the end, though, the movement of the self in the process of decentering, or demarginalizing, or both, leads to individual and social transformation. Maintaining double gestures toward both center and margin is important to avoid replacing one center with another center, and thus reproducing the mechanism of exclusion. Without intending to overthrow the center, the teacher needs to challenge privileged students to step out of the central position and see the landscape differently. Refusing to assimilate difference into the same, the teacher faces the challenge of supporting marginalized students' efforts to create their own voices. The center and the margin may overlap when the multiplicity of the self is considered. In a college of education where white, middle-class, females are the majority of the student population, more often than not a student both occupies the (racial) center and stays on the (gendered) margin.

The multiplicity of one's identity permeates the border between center and margin so that the boundary is already exceeded, yet this fluidity does not erase the boundary once and for all. Different layers of the self still need to be addressed through the movements toward decentering and demarginalizing, both of which are temporary configurations of subjectivity that lead to an awareness of the other in opposite directions and thus make the reification of any stable location impossible. These movements themselves cannot be settled, however. When the shift of locations becomes permanent, the creative potential of aporia is shut out. It is in the tensions between center and margin that our struggles with the norm become meaningful.

INTELLECT AND EMOTION

Acknowledging what underlies one's resistance to know, Gloria Anzaldúa points out that "'knowing' is painful because after 'it' happens, I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable."²⁶ Learning difficult knowledge is not only an intellectual but also an emotional process. Many mainstream students resort to rational arguments and fail to acknowledge how their own emotions, couched in the unconscious, while socially constructed, affect the way they know. Laden by "the denial of guilt," they feel that the multicultural society threatens the security of their identities, and they argue forcefully against this challenge, drawing on the logic of individualism and refusing to see how culture affects an individual's life.²⁷

25. William F. Pinar, *What is Curricular Theory?* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 47.

26. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 70.

27. William F. Pinar, "Notes on Understanding Curriculum as a Racial Text," in *Race, Identity and Representation in Educational Journals*. Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (New York: Routledge, 1993), 64.

Some students respond to the pain of encountering racial and gendered injustice by choosing to reinforce their own identities rather than risk self-transformation, while others feel overwhelmed and depressed by the dark side of history and culture, from which they have been sheltered. Unfortunately, neither response supports movement toward change. These feelings of anger, guilt, and depression must be addressed in a tactful way, if not explicitly. We in the West usually associate emotions with the private realm and rationality with the public realm, so building a bridge between the two is often a daunting pedagogical task. The role of feelings, desires, and affects can hardly be overemphasized in multicultural education. Living with aporias as a poetic process has to be felt, as Derrida points out.

Occasionally, in my own teaching, I ask my students how they *feel* about the readings. Sometimes the question opens up a blocked discussion while other times it brings awkward silence. When emotions are articulated, we gain a reflective distance that has the potential to loosen up the psychic “attachment to subjection.”²⁸ In this way, bridges between affects and words are built and language becomes embodied, thus enabling what Julia Kristeva calls “intimate revolt.”²⁹ When emotions resist expression, an invitation to think about this resistance in silence may open an entrance into one’s inner world. The intimate interiority that sustains one’s capacity for psychic renewal cannot be maintained without such an entryway. Revolting against the social given would not be possible without transforming the psychic life of the inter/personal. The gap between affects and words (or the psychic and the social) is aporetic, as the two cannot be reduced into the same; this irreducibility makes possible the mutual transformation of both and the invention of new ways of living with difference. Playing with this gap is essential to enacting a transformative pedagogy. To shatter the strong grip of the symbolic structure that creates the myth of individualism, a powerful multicultural education must touch students and move them out of their own comfort zones, rather than simply lecturing against racism, sexism, and classism in the classroom.

Sometimes students come to me with “red eyes” after class to express their frustrations with the readings and discussions about race.³⁰ Confronting the pain caused by unlearning, teacher and student need to engage in a “pedagogy of suffering,” a pedagogy that transforms suffering into social compassion and meaning-making.³¹ This position of both sustaining students and guiding them in new directions is unsettling. I often find myself wanting to shelter students from suffering in the process of unlearning what they have learned. But this desire for learning without conflict, and without suffering, fails to acknowledge the creative potential in the aporia between intellect and emotion. How can we reach the ground of mutual — not common — understanding without addressing hurt, if we are to let go of our emotional attachment to the given? Gary Howard argues that “once

28. Judith J. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 105.

29. Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

30. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 91.

31. Rebecca A. Martusewicz, *Seeking Passage* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 101–105.

suffering is acknowledged, it can be dealt with. If left repressed or denied, however, suffering only festers and pushes the pain ever deeper."³² Without faith in students' own capacity for working through their inner struggles to reach new ground, pedagogy cannot enable the power of self-mobilization, a power that can only be supported by bridging ideas and affects. Leaving emotions untouched puts us under the siege of the rational and the familiar, even though tackling this delicate realm of emotions and education brings great uneasiness and discomfort.

Maxine Greene, Susan Edgerton, and Mary Doll have all argued passionately for the power of imaginative literature, fiction, and poetry to nourish one's inner self and transform the public world.³³ Racism and sexism, as a "communally shared trauma" displaced into the unconscious, can hardly be dealt with by reasoning alone, but they may be intimately experienced and worked through in the Kristevan semiotic flow of literature and auto/biography.³⁴ Through "empathetic understanding" and getting in touch with their own (repressed) feelings, students may expand their sense of the self so that the other or otherness is welcomed rather than rejected.³⁵ This space between the unconscious and the conscious, the emotional and the rational, is indeed educative and pedagogical.

The aporias dramatized in multicultural education, between teacher authority and student agency, self and other, center and margin, and intellect and emotion, ask us to respond to pedagogical situations with a paradoxical sense of double duty. Without assuming that contradictory directions must converge as a result of our interactions in class, it is the process of affirming yet questioning self and other through addressing differences that really matters. This process hosts a potentially generative site in which new senses of identity and community can emerge. Derrida's insights into human dilemmas do not intend to offer a solution; our own journey in living with aporias in the multicultural classroom is necessarily interminable.

In short, the Derridean notions of aporia and responsibility ask us to approach multicultural education not as a body of knowledge to be transmitted but as a poetic experiencing of contradictions in order to invent new modes of subjectivity for both teacher and student. It is impossible to "teach" multicultural education, therefore; but through enduring the aporias of teaching multicultural education, new possibilities for democracy and social justice can be imagined and invented. By embracing double gestures and actively dwelling in a space of ambiguity and uncertainty, creative pedagogy can transform all participants in the process.

32. Gary R. Howard, *We Cant Teach What We Dont Know* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 79.

33. See Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995); Edgerton, *Imagining the Curricular* and Mary Aswell Doll, *Like Letters in Running Water* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000).

34. Ann C. Berlak, "Teaching Stories: Viewing a Cultural Diversity Course Through the Lens of Narrative," *Theory and Practice* 35, no. 2 (1996): 93-101.

35. Paula Salvio, "On Using the Literacy Portfolio to Prepare Teachers for 'Willful World Traveling,'" in *Curricular Inquiry and Development*, ed. William F. Pinar (New York: Garland, 1998), 41-74.