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FAILURES OF LANGUAGE AND LAUGHTER: ANNA JULIA COOPER  
AND CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS OF HUMANISTIC PEDAGOGY

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This essay briefly explores reflections of Anna Julia Cooper concerning the meaning and significance of moments within educational settings when the conditions for laughter and language break down. I suggest that what she presented as moments of social and political failure have become the aims of contemporary, rigid nonpromotion public school curricula. The success of such narrow training, in other words, turns on the eradication of necessarily contingent intersubjective classroom relations that Cooper described as the tragic consequence of ongoing challenges to the legitimacy of black teachers and the trauma of lynch law. Cooper's prescription—that a coherent understanding of the role of teachers and of schooling requires reintroducing questions of purpose, value, and meaning, of who we as individuals and as a society seek to become—emerges as an equally relevant resource for enlarging the language for defending the ongoing necessity of humanistic education. Her thought offers a viable critique of and alternative to the tough-love approaches that dominate contemporary public education in the United States, particularly those of the No Child Left Behind program.

What strikes readers of Cooper's work immediately are the kinds of terms she offers for thinking about how to evaluate the returns on the relative investments made in different communities of young people. Perhaps the clearest example is her classic essay, "What Are We Worth?" where she maintains that one can clearly, and without sentiment, estimate the value of individuals, groups, races, or nations.<sup>1</sup> She suggests that one asks of them as one might of a watch: Of what, for example, is this made? How durable is it? How does it run?

Cooper emphasizes that human beings are born and remain thoroughly dependent for a protracted period of time. Raising a child requires extensive work and attention in ways that are not true of other animals. The result is that there are no adults who are not profoundly indebted to the people and communities who set the conditions for their maturation. And yet, Cooper adds without qualification, there are no higher profits, no greater returns, than investing in the development of people.

Cooper observes both how clearly most New World black communities understood this and how well black people fared in an analysis of the kind she recommended. Talk of failure and illiteracy always surrounded black people. At the same time, no group in the U.S. context, except perhaps the Native population, many of whom were mixed with blacks, had had less invested in them or faced such potentially insurmountable obstacles and odds. In spite of this, blacks appeared in what Cooper called "the world's honor role."<sup>2</sup> There

were black teachers, founders of independent institutions, singers, athletes, innovators, irrigators, and soldiers. Still, challenges to the value of the humanistic and liberal education, education that aimed not only to make “cooks” and “hands” of young black men and women, but adult citizens, abounded. Cooper herself understood the appeal of more vocational approaches: they could at least claim to insure that a number of poor African-American people would be promised employment and the possibility of economically viable lives. There were, however, kinds of hungers beyond those of the stomach, those that could only potentially be nourished by less instrumental kinds of learning. No one, she emphasized, was threatened by the training of young black men for manual labor, for work that put black people’s physical strength in the service of other people’s aims. Premature specialization could easily dwarf their ability to think, appreciate, and discern, especially because their lives were already, through the combined isolation of racism and poverty, parochial. The aim of humanistic education was to expand the community of Americans who could participate in the articulation of the ends and purpose of schooling.

It is no accident that essays of this kind, articulating a conception of human worth, were written by a black person such as Cooper. Suspicion that any and all expenditure on black communities is simply to throw away money was as rampant then as it is now. Cooper’s brand of feminism, which several writers have argued would be better described as womanism, was never one that eschewed the dependence of others.<sup>3</sup> Cooper, who lived through the experiences of slavery, the U.S. Civil War, reconstruction, Jim Crow, two World Wars, and the Civil Rights Movement, never gave birth, but adopted her late half brother’s five children at their mother’s death and consistently worked to create educational institutions that both employed black people and offered an alternative sense of how to be black in an anti-black world. Cooper neither valorized nor trivialized the difficulty of doing educational work, of tending to and creating conditions for the growth of others. She also never suggested, with her own her vast achievements, which included becoming the fourth black American woman to earn a doctorate and preparing generations of young people to pursue college level liberal arts education, that such work was beneath her. She understood quite correctly the significance of what she was doing and that her unique abilities and opportunities simply enabled her to do it with greater efficacy.<sup>4</sup>

Cooper suggests, however, that some of the greatest obstacles faced by black teachers who worked in segregated schools and lived in segregated communities and remained committed to her vision of education might not have been what many readers would assume. In a response to an article published in the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s Crisis* in August of 1930 by Arthur Davis, Cooper argues that what segregation did was render black teachers humorless. Black people’s movement was heavily constrained, she observes. Even the educated and

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relatively elite members of black communities could not travel freely or walk through the corridors of power. For intellectually interested and academically minded black people, this pointed consistently in one direction—encountering much of the world through books. This was particularly true of black teachers who undertook their work with a profound sense of vocation. They tried, writes Cooper, to read *everything*. To this end, they would obtain every new edition of classroom books and attend every summer institute that claimed to offer opportunities for professional development. They did not realize, Cooper laments, that many such books and opportunities they tried so hard to access were not authored with the same integrity. Many new editions were not new in any substantive sense. They were repackaged to boost sales and the career situations of their authors or publishers. Still in an effort to meet elusive pedagogical standards, black teachers tried as best they could to digest all of what they thought they should.<sup>5</sup>

One of the greatest difficulties in making use of all of their preparation was that such black teachers faced ongoing cynicism about their ability to teach. Many, in turn, tried to assure that their teaching was flawless. There was, Cooper reflects, no room for error. Any mistake, however trivial, affirmed the black teacher's presumed illegitimacy in the role of educator. Writes Cooper, she was "determined [that] there shall be no flies on her teaching—and there aren't, except that she gives herself no joy in the act and loses entirely all sense of humor in the process."<sup>6</sup> In contrast, reflects Cooper, the black teacher's white counterpart could laugh easily and generously with her students. If she made errors, they were exceptions that affirmed that she was indeed human. If her students made mistakes, the white teacher could "taste a literary tang in the idiosyncrasies that [the black teacher] turns from in horror and disgust because she dreads and fears any out-cropping of what may be considered 'Southern' and...racial."<sup>7</sup> The possibility for errors to be the exception rather than an assumed rule allowed the white teacher to be comfortable in her classroom role and to be and encourage others to be natural in their interactions with her. Together they could consider and experiment with ideas. By contrast, the black teacher was locked in efforts to meet and match, not to fall beneath, book-fed "standards" that were "unwittingly and innocently a handicap and a hindrance to the equally conscientious student." Continues Cooper,

The result is that the classroom platform, so long ago banished from white schools, is still an elevation to stand on, in thought at least, for most colored schools and the teacher "speaks from the chair" with authority, with dignity, with finality...an easy give and take in discussing a thought or its application to life...is a thing too daring to be tolerated and must be summarily squelched as impudent and not duly respectful to teacher's opinions and decisions. Thus saith the book—and that puts the inviolable cloture on all further debate.<sup>8</sup>

Such teachers not only faced vastly inflated expectations that they had imbibed and imposed upon themselves, they were ones that, by definition, could not be met. What was wrong was that *she*, a black person, was occupying the role of custodian of knowledge and of reason, that *she* was the source of a particular lesson, idea, or interaction. The black teacher would try therefore to minimize herself as much as possible, taking on the voice of the book, of established learning. This, in turn, made it impossible to laugh. For if the aim was literally to rid the classroom of any dimension of her character and person, humor and laughter would reveal, make audible, and amplify these.

In *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon also relates a situation in which he wished to, but could not laugh. He explains that in antiblack worlds, the consciousness of the body of blacks is a third-person consciousness in which the body itself is surrounded by “an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.”<sup>9</sup> He writes: “Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historic-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me...by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.”<sup>10</sup> Suddenly he hears, “Look, a Negro!” as he passes by. It is a young French boy. Fanon makes a tight smile and when the sentence is repeated writes, “It was true. It amused me.” As a circle begins to form around him, he comments, trying to reassure himself and us, “I made no secret of my amusement.” When the child then says that he is frightened, Fanon writes that he made up his mind to laugh himself into tears, “but,” he then states, “laughter had become impossible.” All Fanon wanted was to be a man among men, not, as he was, expected “to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger.” He writes, “I shouted a greeting to the world and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged.”<sup>11</sup> Fanon, in these instances, was trapped in what Lewis Gordon has referred to as his “ice-cold exteriority,” a “two-dimensional object...without an inside,” in a situation of “epistemic closure” in which the person’s exemplification of an identity is read as providing in itself a complete knowledge of his or her being. It is only when Fanon insults the little boy’s mother that Fanon can laugh and, having done so, face the questions raised by what he has introduced as the challenge of being an embodied black person in an antiblack situation.<sup>12</sup>

Cooper concludes her reflections as follows:

We have been so ridden with tests and measurements, so leashed and spurred for percentages and retardations that the machinery has run away with the mass production and quite a way back bumped off the driver. I wonder that a robot has not been invented to make the assignments, give the objective tests, mark the scores and—chloroform all teachers who dared to bring original thought to the specific problems and needs of their pupils...The trouble I suspect is that those who furnish the coin and “suggest” the promotions in Negro Education are not themselves a-wearying and

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a-worrying to see any Renaissance or primal naissance of real thinking in Negro Schools, and yet God knows they need it.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth considering the relationship between laughter and the “real thinking” that is so absent. There is the laughter of discomfort, which is engaged in to distance oneself from something that cuts too close. Related to this is the laughter of coping that stops short of acting on a problem. In this case, laughter affirms that one will, in fact, carry on. Infused in this is the sense that if one can laugh at a horrific condition, one has, at least, made it one’s own through naming and framing it. This may involve self-deprecation, but also agency. Gordon offers, by way of example, a joke of a Jewish World War II concentration camp survivor: “A German officer once yelled to a group of inmates, ‘Hey—all of you—get from behind that broomstick!’” Or an example of what are called the dozens in many black communities: “Your father is so black, when he falls down, people hop over from fear of falling in.”<sup>14</sup> There is then laughter that articulates the unspoken, describing a dimension of life that, in and through articulation, one recognizes as familiar. The process of making the mundane a theme of consideration by making it visible in lucid accuracy makes one laugh.

This kind of humor forms the core of Simon Critchley’s distinction between laughter in which others are the object and laughter at oneself. In the former, one looks at others as adults look at children, with a sense of superiority in a joke that turns on the familiarity of their strangeness. In contrast, with the latter, one sees the familiar defamiliarized in ways that render the ordinary extraordinary and the real surreal, in ways that change one’s situation by playing upon accepted forms and practices of a given society. In so doing, Critchley explains, the joke reveals the contingency of these dimensions of one’s social world. In this sense, humor that makes us laugh can have a critical function as well as reinforcing social consensus. Laughter of the former kind is highly contagious precisely because it “recalls to us what is shared in our everyday practices. It makes explicit the enormous commonality that is implicit in our social life.” In humor, Critchley concludes, the subject looks at itself and instead of crying finds consolation in a relationship of self-knowledge. “[H]umor recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation, but comic *acknowledgement*.”<sup>15</sup>

There is also, in the readiness to laugh, the open-mindedness of playful experimentation. Recall that Dewey describes the combination of playfulness and seriousness as the ideal mental condition of a curious and flexible, but directed mind. He warned that divorcing work and play was intellectually harmful, leading on the one hand to dullness, and on the other, to foolishness. In contrast, Dewey writes, in *How We Think*,

To give the mind this free play is not to encourage toying with a subject, but is to be interested in the unfolding of the subject on its

own account, apart from its subservience to a preconceived belief or habitual aim. Mental play is open-mindedness, faith in the power of thought to preserve its own integrity without external supports and arbitrary restrictions. Hence free mental play involves seriousness....incompatible with carelessness or flippancy, for it exacts accurate noting of every result reached in order that every conclusion may be put to further use. What is termed the interest in truth for its own sake is certainly a serious matter, yet this pure interest in truth coincides with love of the free play of thought.<sup>16</sup>

Laughter, in addition, literally loosens up the body within and with which we think. It is necessarily cerebral as well as corporeal. Indeed, Critchley emphasizes that the uniqueness of human laughter is rooted in our peculiar condition of both being embodied and having bodies, that we are creatures who do not only experience, but experience our experience. Laughter, he argued, can amplify all kinds of incongruity, in this instance “between our souls and arseholes.”<sup>17</sup> Encouraging student laughter is not then simply to embolden superficiality, but also to convey to them that all of who they are is welcome in the classroom. Finally, laughter is uniquely pedagogical precisely because it turns on a standard of accuracy. What is so enjoyable about good humor is how precisely it describes features of our world that we know to a point of sedimentation. It unsettles what have become ossified so that we can again consider the ways in which we constantly reconstitute our social worlds.

If the loss of laughter is a function of an effort to be other than oneself in a role of authority, the loss of speech represents a similar retreat, but in this instance, from the give and take of the inherently social nature of the spoken word. In the “Loss of Speech through Isolation,” which most Cooper scholars think was written in 1923, she describes her task of overseeing a playground in West Virginia. Standing out most conspicuously in her memory of this period, she writes, was a family that she calls “Berry.” Their children were known among the teachers of the neighborhood for their annual repetition of suspensions and expulsions. Each year, they appeared “all spic and span with clean shirts, clean, if patched trousers, and clean eager faces for the year’s start.”<sup>18</sup> Something always then happened to disrupt the promise of their initial appearance. One was lucky if they remained through October.

Something strikes Cooper about the particular brand of the Berry boys’ mischievousness: “Decidedly antisocial,” they would slip through the locks on the playground “to enjoy criminally what they might have had freely by simply being in the current with other people.” Cooper continues, “They were never openly and bravely bad—they were only bad as rats are bad—with a passion and genius for getting around all constituted authority.” They would roll boulders down the hill just above the playground so that they would come crashing down only to stop before the gate of Cooper’s jurisdiction. She emphasizes that “their bedevilment was peculiarly voiceless. Most urchins of

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that type would be ready to sing out in fiendish glee when they thought they had you wrought up to a charming pitch of impotent rage: Not so with the Berry boys” (*STN*, 225□26).

One day, alone on the playground, a place of supposed free play and laughter, Cooper noticed “a forlorn little figure with a pair of big round mellow eyes” peeping through the fence. When Cooper started to speak, the girl looked as if she would dash away. Cooper coaxes her into the yard, putting her in a swing and quietly pushing her. “Tho she said nothing, one could read her gratitude in those lustrous round eyes—her joy was too deep for utterance.” That is, until a “tall soldier clad in khaki, puttees and an over-seas cap” came up the walk. Cooper notes with astonishment that,

Without recognizing me or uttering a word he took up a position at the rear where he caught the eye of the little mite in the swing. The effect was electrical. The child fell out of the swing as if she had been shot! And pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, as fast as her little legs could carry her she flew, neither looking back nor waving goodbye. (*STN*, 226)

Cooper was outraged. When the stranger explained unaffectedly that “Meh wants her home,” Cooper scolded him for failing to speak, for not *saying* that the girl’s mother had called for her. When the man replied that the girl knew what he meant, she continued,

Perhaps! But it isn’t right for you to deal in dumb signs in conveying what you mean. You owe that child the English language. You are grown and have traveled. You can express yourself and interest her in the wonderful world outside that you have had glimpses of. She will never be anything but a dumb, shut-in creature unless you make opportunities for her to cultivate human speech! (*STN*, 226)

Cooper comments that her “bursts of eloquence” were met with an “unbroken stolidity.” Neither “resent[ful] at the lambasting” nor offering “a gleam of appreciation that it was fairly well done for a woman,” instead the man chewed patiently and without passion on a strand of wheat straw (*STN*, 227). In desperation from his sheer lack of response, Cooper turned and left.

Soon after, when overseeing the children in their basket weaving, Cooper noticed that one of the Berry boys was hovering about, clearly trying to ask something that he was struggling to articulate. He finally said, “Mith Coo’ show—I make bick *too*!” Cooper responded with “ready comprehension,” speaking very distinctly to convey that she understood that he wished to make a basket. Working with him each day, Cooper determined that the final product, the basket, would be her “card of introduction” to the boy’s mother, Mrs. Berry, “the ‘Meh’ of whom [she] had heard much but never seen” (*STN*, 227).

Armed with playground products, Cooper ventured out “to break the ice” with those whom she had failed to lure to the playground. Mrs. Berry was to be first. Cooper knocked on the door with her umbrella. She writes, “after some minutes a comely little black woman appeared in the doorway just opposite and stood with hands crossed in front of her waiting to learn the cause of the intrusion” (*STN*, 228).

Cooper offered Walter’s basket, which she explained that she helped him to make. Cooper grew awkward in the face of Mrs. Berry, however, who “held her pose of dignified aloofness in queenly silence....She did not frown, neither did she beam a smile.” Cooper continues,

She did not ask me in nor say that she was glad I brought the basket. She did not make a pretense of thanking me for any interest I had taken in Walter nor did she try to act out the lie that she was glad to meet me, and yet with it all her manner was singularly free from active repulsion. Bryon’s line comes to mind: “I seek to shun, not hate mankind,”....But here in this solitary little woman was something that was no pose, something commanding respect, almost akin to awe and reverence, something, I felt instinctively, too scared for prying eyes and inquisitive “investigators.” (*STN*, 228).

Mrs. Berry “stood and appraised” Cooper and finally said, “I keep to myself; I don’ wan’ nothin’ to do with nobody.” Her tone, Cooper explains, was even and clear with neither hysteria nor “overwrought emotion.” Her words, Cooper writes, “might have been borne in from a disembodied spirit, so passionless were they, so sublimated, so purified of the tenseness and dross of the physical and earthly” (*STN*, 228).

Cooper engaged Mrs. Berry, illustrating all of the reasons that one cannot really live a human life in isolation, that people are necessarily interdependent. Cooper writes:

I was rewarded by seeing the merest ghost of a smile flit across her countenance, more like the quivering gleam of faraway lightning than the steady radiance of sunlight and dawn. We were still standing where I could look out from the threshold of the porch on the muddy water of the Ohio River. “There’s nothing you could get to eat,” I continued, “without calling in someone to help you out. You can go to the river and fish—” “And then I’d have to have lard to cook ‘em wit,” she put in brightly. (*STN*, 229)

As Cooper begins to depart, Mrs. Berry tells her to come and visit again when she is in the area. Cooper, teasing, reminds Mrs. Berry that she does not like visitors. “Well, if all was like you,” Mrs. Berry answered “dismally” (*STN*, 229).

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It was only some time later that Cooper came to understand the tragedy that shaped the Berrys' "grim struggle with life." Mrs. Berry's husband, an innocent man, had been torn from her arms by an infuriated mob that brutally murdered and lynched him. The true culprit that occasioned the outburst later confessed and the town realized its mistake. But the damage had been done. Cooper reflects on "the humble drama of that obscure black woman like a wounded animal with her cubs literally digging herself in and then at bat dumbly turning to face—*America*—her 'head bloody but unbowed.'" Cooper avers that the "smug injunctions" that black and poor parents cooperate with the school and its teachers should be considered in light of the kinds of conditions that shaped the Berry home, which had, after all, evolved from American conditions. What would the school create to guide such homes, Cooper asked, which "were a type as truly evolved from American environmental conditions as are the blind fish in the Mammoth Cave or the broncos of the western plains?" (*STN*, 229).

Cooper, who had spent her life emphasizing the significance of voice, speech, and language, was herself forced to reflect upon circumstances that would lead one to cope through the isolation of silence. To speak is to involve oneself in the human world, to share its grammar of reciprocity. Not to speak, as political theorists have noted for centuries, is to die as a human being. We live in and through language. It makes life vivid; for a theorist like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, allowing us to think in the general terms indispensable to political life; in the poetry of Pablo Neruda, literally giving qualities to qualities and creating the possibility of the unspoken, of our ability to speak with our eyes and to gesture with our hands.<sup>19</sup> But what if the world into which speech gives one entry is inhuman? To continue to partake of it, under such circumstances, suggests a perverse complicity, the use of the uniquely human capacity for language to become beastly.

A similar character, a young woman who refuses to speak, appears in Jonathan Kozol's *Shame of the Nation*. Describing his first teaching placement in a dilapidated building to which most students and staff ambivalently adjusted, this particular student, who was one of the brightest Kozol encountered, refused to be engaged. He concluded that unlike many of her peers, she realized what was being done to her and her peers by requiring that they attend such an institution.

There are several other striking parallels between Cooper's reflections on education at the dawn of the twentieth century and Kozol's at the very start of the twenty-first. Kozol's aim is to narrate what life is like within schools in which rigid nonpromotion policies, didactic pedagogy of command and control, a complete, cross-referencing system of learning outcomes within which every cognitive event has a name,<sup>20</sup> and methods used in drug rehabilitation programs, prisons, and training manuals for the National Guard have taken hold. A central feature of this culture is the heavily scripted role of the teacher. Kozol describes the response of teachers to these curricula. Many criticized

what was now asked of them, feeling as if they were reading lines from a commercial playbook by an unknown author (*SN*, 72). Teaching, many would admit, is in part theatrical, but it is so in pursuit of authentic experiences of learning.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, one teacher said, “Forcing an absurdity on teachers does teach something....It teaches acquiescence. It breaks down the will to thumb your nose at pointless protocols—to call absurdity ‘absurd’” (*SN*, 80).

Much of this curricular material leaves so little room for the competence of teachers that it could be delivered by anyone, whether or not they may have studied education or the developmental needs of kids (*SN*, 84). It is, in other words, designed to be teacher-proof. Deborah Meier’s response is the most explicit: such emerging norms directly challenge the authority and legitimacy of teachers. She argues that to tell teachers that they cannot know what their students are learning without an outside agency’s formal measures is an outright attack on their autonomy through that of their students. She states, “For a teacher who sees a kid day in and day out to admit that she won’t know how well he reads” until the day the test scores are delivered by an outside agency “is not good news” (*SN*, 117). Ironically, public school teachers, particularly those working in low-performing inner city and rural schools, are increasingly in the position of the black teachers in the segregated South described by Cooper.

One teacher interviewed by Kozol describes the “system of belief demanded of the teachers by the method of test-driven teaching at his school as ‘a doxology’....the unquestioned faith that there is one straight road and one road only, to be taken and that every stage along the road must be announced—stated on the walls, reiterated by the teacher—in advance” (*SN*, 124). This leaves little, if any, room for less manipulated learning, for unanticipated questions and unpredicted answers. Such approaches, in other words, literally “allow no detours.”<sup>22</sup> Their aim is to break down the conditions of speech, which is, by definition, open ended, and of laughter, which spontaneously disrupts the settled by playfully emphasizing incongruities.

Kozol, when visiting a third grade class, listened to sentences the students had written about what they liked the best about the new Success For All (SFA) curriculum. “My favorite skill is silence,” said one child. “No talking,” said another. One reported that her favorite dimension was “looking at the other person,” which was an emphasized element of Active Listening (*SN*, 54). Kozol notes with dismay a classroom in which nothing frivolous took place. No one laughed. He comments,

In most classrooms, even those in which a high degree of discipline may be maintained, there are almost always certain moments when the natural hilarity of children temporarily erupts....Even the teachers, strict as they may try to be, cannot usually resist a smile or a bit of playful humor in return.” (*SN*, 70)

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The relevance of Cooper's reflections to Kozol's more recent ones is not coincidental. The contemporary culture of education is much like the period in which Cooper wrote. Characterized by brands of geneticism or Social Darwinist thinking that Bowles and Gintis (1977) argue consistently characterize the backlash against periods of relatively progressive education, it is also shaped fundamentally by the ideals of a culture of Taylorism, of an obsession with eradicating wasted time and money without any consideration of how particular kinds of people, activities, and products are so designated. This obsession with cutting the fat is linked to another, with predictable outcomes, that treat as closed the question of what the aims of U.S. learning should be, the question that Cooper articulates in "What are We Worth?" of the kinds of people schools should try to produce. Robert Reich has lamented that the consistent response of educational policymakers to moments of radical social disruption is to carry on with even more deliberation in outmoded norms that have become the rule rather than trying to formulate questions and answers that would be contemporary. There are small, affluent U.S. communities, he qualifies, that offer some of the most cutting-edge education available worldwide, *the* best preparation for the highly rewarded work of symbolic analysts. Most schools, by contrast, teach outdated information and habits to adjust young people for factories that have long since left the communities in which they remain.<sup>23</sup>

An emotive culture of learning or the reification of language and laughter as their own ends is not itself the response to an empiricist culture gone mad. Neither is an affirmation of the individual self alone as an antidote to what are and are experienced as externally imposed standards for teaching and learning. An indispensable stage of human development requires imitation, the swallowing of other people's ideas. Growing up is engaging these to determine which such rules and standards to take on as one's own and which to reject, reinvent, or attempt to transcend.<sup>24</sup> It is adolescent to attack all standards without qualification as oppressive or even hegemonic.<sup>25</sup>

The contemporary American educational agenda is presented as the obvious and only conclusion of tough, sober, and mature thinking by individuals who refuse to tolerate excuses for the ongoing racial and economic gaps in student learning that they implicitly (and often explicitly) suggest their more progressive counterparts indulge.<sup>26</sup> An actual look at the evidence suggests that such punitive talk is simply unrealistic. Dealing with the ongoing challenges of failing urban public schools will not be accomplished by the widespread imposition of the latest gimmicks of the business world, by constant and obsessive testing, and the use of military and prison strategies that aim to create a completely docile student body. Indeed what one sees more of in an educational culture in which the fate of schools and the careers of their teachers and administrators depend entirely on publicly reported test scores is the creation of major incentives to cheat, either by telling students the answers that they should give or by correcting those they have actually recorded. The

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recent scandals of school-facilitated cheating in Camden, New Jersey, have been presented as an astonishing anomaly, a district the desperation of which drove it to moral weakness and opportunism.<sup>27</sup> Given that desperate school districts are not rare anomalies, it would be surprising if this response to the requirements and threats of the No Child Left Behind legislation is not much more ubiquitous, particularly given that the rises in test scores in the Houston, Texas, school district promoted as a miracle in education and the evidence for now national models of public school reform has recently been revealed to have involved district-wide cheating. In addition, as in New York and Chicago, in Houston supposed rises in graduation rates were shown later to have been deliberate misrepresentations. Countless students who had dropped out of schools simply were not accounted for (*SN*, 205–9).

Such a culture of deliberately invoked fear limits and curbs, rather than encourages, spontaneous and public action which, as Rousseau noted so long ago, requires hope and the aim within political life of creating conditions worthy of hope.

To educate, as opposed to train, means to be led out. Its etymology does not only suggest a journey with direction and purpose, but one that cannot be undertaken alone. We would do well, in the spirit of Cooper, to reintroduce, however anachronistic they might first appear, such humanistic questions of where, as a society and individuals, we are going. What kind of people do we aspire to bring into being? It is only within the context of at least tentative answers to such considerations that the kind of clarity of purpose that Cooper described and a coherent sense of educators' legitimacy might emerge. The conditions required for this kind of discussion, of learning as direction-in-the-making, are the same as those necessary for the possibility of both speech, through which we reveal who in addition to what we are, and laughter, that in encouraging that we acknowledge our limitations helps us not to take ourselves too seriously.<sup>28</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Anna Julia Cooper, "What Are We Worth?" in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, eds. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, Mass.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998).
  2. *Ibid.*, 182.
  3. See, for example, Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).
  4. For a recent argument that also encourages a kind of feminism that does not eschew all forms of dependence on women, see Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder, eds., *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency* (Lanham, Mass.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002). The effort to decouple
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questions of mothering and motherhood from many brands of feminism has been a grave mistake. In a world in which most women mother, questions of how to create conditions to do this in ways that maximize the possibility of ongoing growth of women and children, should be a central problem for feminist writers. Angela Barron McBride makes these questions explicit in her *The Growth and Development of Mothers* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981). She contended that one cannot speak coherently of the development of children without also asking about the maturity of the adults by and the society within which they will be raised.

5. Anna Julia Cooper, “The Humor of Teaching,” in Lemert and Bhan, eds., *Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, 234.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 234–35.

8. Ibid., 235.

9. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markman (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 110–11.

10. Ibid., 111.

11. Ibid., 112, 114, and 115.

12. Lewis Gordon, “Into the Zone of Non-Being: A Reading of Black Skin, White Masks in Celebration of Fanon’s Eightieth Birthday,” *CLR James Journal* 11, no. 1 (2005): 1–43.

13. Cooper, “Humor of Teaching,” 235.

14. Gordon, “Into the Zone of Non-Being,” 29.

15. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002).

16. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1997).

17. Critchley, *On Humour*, 50.

18. Anna Julia Cooper, “Sketches from a Teacher’s Notebook,” in Lemert and Bhan, eds., *Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, 225. This work will be cited as *STN* in the text for all subsequent references.

19. Consider this piece of Neruda’s poem, “The Word”: “And so this is the inheritance;/this is the wavelength which connects us/with dead men and the dawning/of new beings not yet come to light.” And: “here is where silence came together with/the wholeness of the human word,/and, for human beings, not to speak is to die—/language extends even to the hair, the mouth speaks without the lips moving,/ all of a sudden, the eyes are words.” Finally: “Words give glass quality to glass/blood to blood,/and life to life itself” (Pablo Neruda, “The Word,” in *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, ed. Ilan Stavans (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 621–22). Consider Rousseau’s reflections on

pages 50–51 of *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*: “Moreover, general ideas can be introduced into the mind only with the aid of words, and the understanding grasps them only through sentences. That is one reason why animals cannot form such ideas or even acquire the perfectibility that depends on them....Every general idea is purely intellectual. The least involvement of the imagination thereupon makes the idea particular. Try to draw for yourself the image of a tree in general; you will never succeed in doing it. In spite of yourself, it must be seen as small or large, barren or leafy, light or dark; and if you were in a position to see in it nothing but what you see in every tree, this image would no longer resemble a tree...The definition of a triangle alone gives you the true idea of it. As soon as you behold one in your mind, it is a particular triangle and not some other one, and you cannot avoid making its lines to be perceptible or its plane to have color. It is therefore necessary to utter sentences, and thus to speak, in order to have general ideas.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse), Polemics, and Political Economy*, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, Christopher Kelly, and Terence Marshall, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau, Volume 3*, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, N.H.: University of New England Press, 1992).

20. Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005). This work will be cited as *SN* in the text for all subsequent references.

21. For a recent discussion of the how to acknowledge the inherent theatricality of teaching while remaining honest about who one is as a teacher, see Jay Parini, *The Art of Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

22. One might recall here Abbey Lincoln’s haunting warning in her album *Straight Ahead* (1961). In the song with the same name, she reflected, “Straight Ahead/The road keeps winding/Narrow, wet, and dimly lit/Vainly looking for a crossroads/Lead a trusting soul astray. For some, this road is smooth and easy/Riding high without a care/But when you have to use the backroads/Straight ahead leads nowhere.”

23. Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 225–40.

24. This is a central theme of G.W.F. Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, in particular his discussions of morality and of ethics. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

25. It is interesting that a concern with teaching children too quickly to criticize is a consistent feature of republican thinking. Jose Ortega Y Gasset described mass culture as one in which people treated the achievements of civilization as if they had grown up as naturally as weeds. It was essential, he argued, that citizens had a more profound sense of what had been involved in such

developments so that they might appreciate them as accomplishments and realize that in their fragility was the demand that people take responsibility for sustaining them (Jose Ortega Y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994)). Hannah Arendt also feared the politicization of education. She thought it was key that young children be able to learn in environments that were pre-political, in which they might develop a thorough acquaintance with tools that would help them to understand and take responsibility for a world which they would enter as a new generation. Unlike political life that was necessarily composed of equals, coherent education, in Arendt's view, required a clear distinction between adults and children, even if the substance of the delineation was contingent upon both time and place to which it referred (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958)). The concerns of both Ortega Y Gasset and Arendt remind one of the curricula that made occupations "the articulating centers of school life" in Dewey's Laboratory School (John Dewey, *The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum*, ed. Philip W. Jackson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990)). These took young children through economic history culminating in their industrial present. This was in part to learn the science and history that were the ground for their own societies, but also so that young people could develop an empathetic imagination and an understanding of themselves as part of a larger trajectory that preceded and would follow them.

26. See, for example, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, *No Excuses* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

27. For examples of recent coverage see Melanie Burney, Frank Kummer, and Dwight Ott, "Principal Tells of Pressures to Cheat," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 26, 2006. For the New Jersey State Department of Education's official investigation of these events, see Lucille Davey, Jay Doolan, and Brian D. Robinson, "Camden City School District Assessment Investigation and Review of Results for 2005," August 2006, [http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/news/special\\_packages/camden\\_schools/](http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/news/special_packages/camden_schools/).

28. This definition of speech is from Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, chapter 5.

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