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Making Diversity Desirable: Scientism and the Fetishizing of Difference

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Even as we must fully comprehend the pastness of the past, there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present.

Edward Said¹

Introduction

In 1904, a distinguished American anthropologist W. J. McGee announced in the *World's Fair Bulletin* that his Anthropology department aimed to "show each half of the world how the other half lived" in an effort to promote not only "knowledge," but also "peace and goodwill". He further added that it was the "lesson of experience that personal contact is the best solvent of enmity and distrust between persons and peoples"[McGee, 1904, my italics]. McGee was promoting the numerous ethnological exhibits organized by his department for the 1904 St. Louis International Exposition in Missouri USA. The exposition, developed on 1,272 acres, was touted by McGee as the university of the masses (McGee, 1904, p. 4). Of educative import was the 47 acre exhibit of the Philippines that showcased Philippine products and had on display over one thousand native representatives of "types" of Filipinos brought from the archipelago. Like many ethnology experts of his time, McGee was impressed with the pedagogic power of human groups on public display.

Displaying human beings at world's fairs was not a new or uncommon practice. Curtis Hinsley (1991) has suggested that displaying human groups for profit, entertainment, or edification can be seen as early as 1853 with the touring shows of P. T. Barnum. Hinsley notes that dispatching agents abroad for the purpose of displaying exotic types, was likely to have originated in the late 1870s with Hamburg animal trainer and zoo master Carl Hagenbeck. Hagenbeck hired agents to bring back exotic types for public display and private profit. One such agent, Johan Adrian Jacobson, found the work so profitable that he made a career of it, bringing Lapps and reindeer, Patagonians, and Labrador Eskimos, to name a few, to Hamburg. By 1890, writes Hinsley, both practices were established and incorporated into world's fairs. For example, the Barnum mode, which showcased human "freaks" and "oddities" and the Hagenbeck practice that had a more ethnographic aesthetic.

"Diversity" now

I begin my essay with a gloss on the educative import of human displays and the pronouncements of McGee, published over a century ago, because they afford a glimpse into a way of reasoning in the past about identity and difference that is present in the way many colleges, teacher education programs, and teacher educators think, speak, and address the topic of diversity in the United States today. Since the Supreme Court's 1978 Bakke decision, the meaning of "diversity" has expanded from an emphasis on racial integration to one that includes gender, sexuality, ethnicity, income, socioeconomic class, body type, among others (Delton, 2007). In many educational institutions, ensuring diversity in schools is yoked to an argument concerned with an added-value that purports to reach beyond the students to the institution and to the public it serves. It is held that diversity contributes to the way students experience themselves and the worlds in which they live. The assumption here is that being around people very - or even slightly - different has more educational value than remaining in the comforts of what is familiar and customary (Bollinger, 2007).

In higher education, it has been argued that all students benefit from diversity. Attaining a diverse student body broadens the range of viewpoints held by students and improves the quality of higher education through greater speculation and experimentation (Moses & Chang, 2006). Some link diversity to the present conditions and argue that our interdependent and global reality requires global citizens. Consequently, diversity is seen as having a significant role in crafting a more global type of citizenry. These arguments pertaining to the "educational benefits" of diversity for all students, fuel much of the public and educational discourse concerning diversity (Moses & Chang, 2006). Continually, these arguments have shaped the parameters of how diversity is understood and what kind of action is possible.

Contending with the "enriching" virtues attributed to diversity is another conception that locates diversity within the larger agendas of advancing civil rights and remedying social inequality. Although not permitted as justification in affirmative action law, it is argued that the lingering effect of past societal discrimination makes attaining diversity all the more necessary. Within this larger goal of achieving justice, diversity is a means of redress, a remedy to the present effects of past wrongs associated with racial discrimination and subordination. In the present climate of school desegregation and affirmative action lawsuits in the United States, some educators have looked to the congressional debates from 1865 to 1875 to carefully show how race and color affected "fundamental questions of citizenship, civil equality, and political power".³ James Anderson (2007), for example, brings to America's collective memory how a racial ideology was infused into debates and resolutions related to new standards for citizenship and equality. He underscores the effects of that ideology when he notes that the feelings and judgments about different racial and ethnic groups were encoded into Reconstruction laws and constitutional amendments. In a different but related analysis, political scientist Ira

Katznelson's (2005) *When Affirmative-Action Was White*, shows how specific national policies of the 1930s and 1940s New Deal era, which created a modern white middle-class, were not only "crafted" to exclude a large number of blacks but were "administered in a deeply discriminatory manner" against black America. So as the American middle-class mourns the destroyed world the New Deal built (Meyerson, 2007), we should also be mourning this country's inability to confront the social relations established from "racialized social systems" (Bonilla-Silva, 1996).

Within the current social and political context, then, we can find both of these discourses, one aimed at its pedagogical benefits and the other at redress, fueling and shaping the way "diversity" is understood and entailing the reforms that are needed. The former tends to place the focus on teacher education and the latter on university admission policies. Many public schools, colleges and universities in the United States are expected to "build a community of diverse learners" who can learn, teach, and thrive together (Bollinger, 2007). A diverse student body and faculty, it is argued, are essential to students' "training" for our interdependent global reality (Bollinger, 2007). Elaborating on the argument, Lee Bollinger (2007) asserts that learning to see the world through a "multiplicity of eyes" we make "ourselves more nimble" in mastering, integrating, synthesizing, diverse fields of knowledge.

In addition to its knowledge-related legitimations, the desirability of diversity is increasingly aligned with a neo-liberal economic imperative. Not surprisingly, diversity, like other "outputs" of higher education, is fashioned as a commodity. It is being made to respond to economic needs - part of a larger strategy to accumulate capital and power in the global economy. Diversity is not only used in the preparation of students training for the 21st century workplace; it will also ensure the competitiveness of universities in the global market (Bollinger, 2007). For all that, the discursive figure of the global culturally sensitive but astute subject begins to look more and more like the flexible citizen, a name Aihwa Ong (1999) coined to describe the kind of citizen who is not only able to but is expected to respond to changing political-economic conditions. Thus, the emergence of this subject cannot be severed from the specific conditions from which it stems—conditions that are regulated by "practices favoring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to markets, governments, and cultural regimes" (Ong, 1999, p. 6). This reasoning, within which knowledge, diversity, and the global economy are brought together as if they are naturally aligned, is rarely questioned in the discourses of higher education.

Courses on diversity are expected to emphasize the unique characteristics of various sub-cultural groups that have been lumped together under one cultural category. Such a course of study might focus on the ways in which the category "Asian" subsumes other cultural groups, and that each cultural group may have unique cultural characteristics that facilitate or impede their learning. Consequently,

students' learning and experiences are central. For example, teachers need to find a way to teach all students, but particularly those at-risk students who come from marginalized and traditionally underserved groups who underperform on standardized measures of learning. The target of these reforms is culturally, linguistically (English language learners), and socioeconomically diverse student groups. There are calls for equitable (as opposed to equal) instruction and assessment for diverse students. Teachers are expected to be aware of who they are teaching, expected to know the cultural background of their students, and expected to teach from a multicultural perspective in order to better serve students. These demands, which put an emphasis on multicultural teacher education programs aim to prepare teachers to work with students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, to work with "diverse" learners (often a code for students identified with "special needs" and other disabilities), as well as students with gay and lesbian parents.

To some extent the "educational benefits" rationale harbors a mode of thought closer to McGee's undertaking in 1904 to promote knowledge of the Other, which constituted a "science" of human beings that were purportedly different from the Euro-American self. Familiar with this piece of history, formed out of a desire to include "alien races" for the "instinctive curiosity" of visitors at the 1904 world's fair, I cannot help feeling some discomfort with recent strategies of multiculturalism and the all-encompassing category "diversity".

Fetishizing Difference

I am a teacher educator in the social foundations of education, I teach multicultural education in our teacher preparation program and cultural diversity in our graduate program. In both courses I have found it nearly impossible to move my students in a direction that begins to question the superficial and essentialized treatments of cultural groups (Ladson-Billings, 1999). I am especially uneasy with the "cognitive" discursive practices, and related talk about learning differences, that have become standard fare in multicultural teacher education ultimately limiting how diversity is conceived. Such discourses construct boundaries through categories such as, "field sensitive" and "field independent" that tell teachers how to "see" diversity (Popkewitz, 1998). Naive inferences are then made about the radically different cognitive styles of learning between minority and non-minority group members.

In the 1980s another popular discourse advocated by cultural experts was "culturally appropriate" instruction. In one context, culturally appropriate instruction was used in an effort to raise the verbal responsiveness and participation of minority students (Au, 1981; Au & Jordon, 1981). It aimed to help minority students fit into the existing educational system. Today, this is still one of the more popular approaches in the field. I am troubled by the institutionalization of these discourses and bothered that these discourses have made inroads into the higher education classroom.

Recently I had a teacher complain in one of my department's master programs about my "teaching style", accusing me of neglecting the different "learning styles" in the classroom. To say I was taken aback by the charge, is to underplay the hegemony of these discourses in higher education. I am perplexed by the assumption that an instructor's "instructional strategies" can and should be aligned with her students' "learning style preferences." There is something very strange about this expectation. This strangeness should alert us to an assumption behind much of contemporary educational practice on teaching, "that there are rational paths to salvation--the efficient school, the effective teacher, the authentic teacher." (Popkewitz, 1998) But when we look honestly at educational practices, as Thomas Popkewitz so insightfully reminds us, we find a world based on politics rather than on certainty and logically organized practices (1998, p. 7).

Apart from the over generalizations that perpetuate simplistic stereotypes, what I find most disturbing is how multicultural teacher education becomes, intentionally or not, an educational practice that contains diversity and difference, fixes subjectivity, and creates a desire for order and mastery of difference. At the root of that desire is the modern scientific attitude, where language represents the world transparently. As Bauman (1994) insightfully pointed out over a decade ago, "a 'legislative' reason intent on designing and imposing order through categorizing, classifying, and regulating nature and humanity prevails" in the sphere of knowledge (quoted in Seidman, p. 14). Even before Bauman's critical insight poststructural scholarship warned "against the naturalization of the sign" and brought attention to how the world is "created and organized in language, in a particular society and at a particular time" (Barthes, 1981, p. 133). While there have been many discursive shifts in the deployment of diversity over the past several decades by educational researchers, educational practice and its research publications remain wedded to the scientific code.

Interestingly enough, the scientism in which McGee's pronouncements are embedded, and which lead to attempts at managing the parameters of the perception of the diversity of humankind, is one that is harbored in diversity pedagogy and multicultural curricula. Isn't it time to reevaluate and probe the operative relations of identity and difference and ask to what extent are these categories embedded in modernist discursive traditions? One of the legacies of that tradition is what Catherine McConaghy (2000) calls "culturalism", which presents educational problems as primarily problems of culture to be solved and implemented through more culturally sensitive teaching methods or curriculum. While a noble response, McConaghy warns that culturalism severs the problems from the politics. Based on her work on indigenous education in Australia, she has found that culturalism not only leaves unchallenged the structural and material bases of injustice, but ignores the range of cultural exchanges that produce multiple affiliations and hybrid cultural realities. To some extent, her critique

resonates with the social justice goal of attaining diversity that is often elided when diversity is treated as merely enriching rather than remedial.

The concerns I raise throughout this essay are not directed at the research communities, administrators, staff developers, or teacher educators who promote celebrating diversity for its educational value. Rather, they are aimed at provoking a reconsideration of the practices and purposes of multicultural education in light of the present conditions. Because multicultural education is often the means in teacher education programs for addressing diversity, it is crucial that teacher educators examine contemporary educational practices critically. Granted there is a body of multicultural education research that advocates a critical examination of the sociopolitical contexts of schooling that can be drawn upon.⁴ What I want to call attention to is a type of analysis that asks a different set of critical questions concerning identity, difference, and the exercise of power. This scholarship asks how certain ways of thinking and seeing identity and difference work in conjunction with particular fields of power/knowledge. It looks at the discursive divisions and distinctions that generate the kinds of action thought of as possible. It considers how the subjects of “diversity” become objects of social administration. Finally, it provides a critical angle to analyze how inequality is constituted and maintained through processes of normalization.

The social epistemology work of Thomas Popkewitz (1998), specifically his ethnographic study of a national reform program in *Struggling for the Soul*, provides an important point of entry into the considerations outlined above. Popkewitz offers a mode of analysis that shifts the focus from questions of “essence” (such as, “minorities are field sensitive”), to questions that pursue the spatial politics of pedagogy that intern students with cultural/ethnic/racial attributions that reside outside the norm. He is worth quoting at length:

It is not sufficient to say that teachers need to believe in children as successful learners, that the school needs closer ties to the home, that the curriculum needs to be responsive to the diversity of the American population, or that schools need to be locally controlled—part of the mainstays of contemporary reform discussions. Neither is it adequate to say that schooling needs better recruitment of teachers . . . These tactics for educational reform are inadequate because they leave unscrutinized the scaffolding of pedagogical ideas that divide, order, and contain. They fail to look at the way in which the norms of achievement, competence, and salvation . . . are the effects of power (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 129-130).

This approach, rooted as it is in postmodern and poststructural scholarship, proceeds by analyzing the very practices of categorizing, distinguishing, and differentiating that grow out of the historically

constituted “reasoning” of schooling. It offers an alternate reading of questions of inequality, one that can expose the ordering principles that enable and disable what kinds of action is possible. To put it more directly, it challenges teacher educators to analyze power as it operates through the discursive practices of schooling and reform that compare, differentiate, hierarchize, and divide students into “differentiated social spaces”, which, in the end, intern and enclose them in particular ways.

Concluding Thoughts: A Provocation

The questions I explore in this essay concerns the way identity and difference, as developed in the educational practices of multicultural teacher education and cultural diversity, proceeds in directions that leave unexplored several fundamental assumptions. First among them is the assumption that pedagogic practice can and should be aligned with students’ learning preferences and thereby leaves unquestioned the norms and competencies that organize school practices and educational goals in the classroom. Second, multicultural education and cultural diversity are licensed or authorized discourses that provide the right inventory of cultural norms of different cultural groups. This assumption leaves unchallenged the social relations and political and historical forces which sustain distinctions and differences. Finally, when cultural diversity and multicultural education are reduced to a “unity-in-diversity” discourse, it has the unfortunate effect of rendering difference and conflict inconsequential (Kirshenblatt-Gimblatt, 1999). These questions are posed in an effort to reinvigorate the increasingly restricted conception of diversity in education and to call attention to what is politically and ethically substantial about diversity, the issue of justice. My provocation is not a bid to reinforce the conceptual dichotomy that has taken over as the key tension in diversity; it is, rather, to solicit thought in a direction that takes into account the social, political, and economic transformations in the present time and the systemic historic problems underlying racial disparities in education.

- 1) See E. Said Culture and Imperialism p. 4.
- 2) I want to thank Clifton Tanabe for bringing this point to my attention.
- 3) The significance of racial ideology on these questions is powerfully illustrated in J. D. Anderson (2007) “Race-Conscious Educational Policies Versus a “Color-Blind Constitution”: A Historical Perspective” Educational Researcher.
- 4) Critical treatments of multicultural education can be found in C. Sleeter and P. McLaren (1995) Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the politics of difference.

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