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## Introduction

# Free spaces: excavating race, class, and gender among urban schools and communities

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This article introduces the concept of ‘free spaces’ as an important site for the development of theory and practice around youth activism, teacher development, and the transformation of public and private space in urban schools and communities. Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Evans and Boyte (1986) introduced the concept of ‘free spaces’ in their book: *Free spaces: the sources of democratic change in America*. Their goal was to highlight the invisible ways in which ordinary people organize themselves and democratize their communities. The authors in this special issue implicitly and explicitly use the concept of ‘free spaces’ to chronicle how lives unfold in contested spaces—not flat, seemingly ‘neutral’ spaces—but socially produced spaces, spaces imbued with racialized, gendered, and hetero-normative values and the hidden agenda of our society (Lefebvre, 1974; Hayden, 1995). Specifically, the authors seek to broaden our understanding of the social forces impacting on education inside and outside schools, with a focus on the role of agency to respond in transformative ways to these conditions.

Free spaces represents an intellectual and political project created to reveal and theorize the social and cultural production of ‘ordinary people’ who have been relegated to the margins. By traveling across sites with a strong sense of possibility for social change the articles collected in this issue chronicle the inventive and diverse struggles waged by young people and adults in a range of spaces in which they live, work, and learn. Shaping and being shaped by race, class, and gender, these spaces include neighborhoods, segregated and desegregated schools, religious institutions, teacher development programs, youth centers, and community-based organizations. Perhaps one of the most important contributions of this issue is that there is no such thing as neutral space. Instead I argue that all spaces are politicized, racialized, and gendered, insofar as they are infused with questions of power and privilege (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. xiii). Writing about youth identity, particularly youth resistance, Weis and Fine state:

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All spaces suffer the burdens of social contradictions. None are insulated from racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. As such, all spaces carry the capacity and power to enable, restrict, applaud, stigmatize, erase, or complicate threads of youth identity and their ethical commitments (2000, p. xiii)

Remembering that there is no such thing as neutral space allows us to understand the political value of Black people/people of color resistance across social sites. It is no accident that white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, hetero-normativity, and Christian fundamentalism, to varying degrees, and in complex and contradictory ways, have systematically undermined Black people/people of color's efforts to construct what Evans and Boyte refer to as 'free spaces'. According to Evans and Boyte, Black churches, women's organizations, visionary unions, and agricultural cooperatives constituted 'free spaces'—places where people could talk over their ideals and grievances, rejuvenate their spirits, recover their identities, and learn how to build organic social movements and 'pockets of resistance.'

Perhaps most importantly, these 'crucibles of democracy' and communities of resistance were places where Black people/people of color did not have to encounter white racial aggression and hostility. Looking back at liberation struggles ranging from the Black Power movement to the Brown Berets, household, educational, and religious spaces have been crucial sites for organizing, forming political solidarity, and renewing the spirit. Unfortunately, however, many of our 'free spaces' have been seriously undermined by patriarchal domination of women of color by men of color where we abuse one another for not conforming to sexist norms and by processes of racialization which impede our individual and collective social mobility. Equally as debilitating have been intentional actions by state and federal governments to systematically infiltrate our political organizations as well as the withdrawal of public goods and services (like schools and public parks) from our communities. Writing about 'resistance,' particularly resistance for communities of color, Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Han says:

... resistance, at root, must mean more than resistance against war. It is a resistance against all kinds of things that are like war.... So perhaps, resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly.... I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness. (p. 7)

Free spaces for Thich Nhat Han are central to democratic, social, economic, and spiritual transformation because they enable communities of color to withstand the pressure of hostile social and political systems and to develop our own visions for the future. Thus following Thich Nhat Han, Evans and Boyte, as well as Black and Brown emancipatory scholars and activist such as Patricia Hill Collins, Ella Baker, Fanon, W. E. B. DuBois, Paulo Freire, Edward Soja, and Antonia Darder, I define free spaces as places that share some of the following characteristics: a sense of shared bonds, places to revive one's culture, places to rejuvenate our spirits, participatory and democratic spaces, places to civically engage—debate—dialogue, places to form

social networks, places to educationally achieve, places to form democratic or revolutionary visions of social change, places to recover and enjoy group identity, places to cultivate self and communal respect, cooperation, and community uplift.

Building further on Soja's work in *Postmetropolis* (2000) I suggest that there are at least three dimensions to 'free spaces' that can be studied in at least three different but interrelated ways. First, 'free spaces' can be thought of as mental maps, ideational fields, or imagined communities. Whether in the heart of the prison industrial complex, homeless on a makeshift bed, or confined to a small piece of earth, the vision for revolutionary change and participatory democracy can be conceived anywhere at any time (Kelley, 2002). A second dimension of 'free spaces' is the actual physical infrastructure of buildings, schools, neighborhoods, and those other sets of materialized spatial practices that work together to produce and reproduce concrete forms (Soja, 2000, p. 11). This second dimension of 'free spaces' is in line with Wilson's (1998) call for a more contextual analysis of inequality by integrating spatial theories of inequality into the field of education. The third and final dimension of 'free spaces' combines the first two perspectives while emphasizing the domain of 'lived experience'. Soja describes this dimension as 'a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual, locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency' (Soja, 2000, p. 11). In an effort to support the remapping of urban communal and educational spaces, I offer these essays to radical educators, community activists, youth organizers, and youth workers to image and re-imagine free spaces for transformative resistance and social change.

### **An overview of the symposium**

Each essay in this issue implicitly or explicitly demonstrates the importance of 'free spaces' as launching points for transformative resistance and social change in local schools, universities, neighborhoods, and community-based organizations (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). The first article by Jeff Duncan-Andrade, 'Gangstas, wangstas, and ridas: defining, developing, and supporting effective teachers in urban schools', addresses the construction of 'free spaces' in four highly effective elementary and secondary urban classrooms in South Los Angeles. Andrade argues for the need to focus on the human elements of educational attainment—positive self-identity, purpose, and hope—alongside more quantitative measures of student achievement such as test scores. According to Andrade, 'the test score fetish of the high-stakes era has turned us away from prioritizing these measures of effective teaching, even though gains in these areas are the key to raising test scores' (Andrade, this issue). By broadening our understanding of the necessary conditions for learning and encouraging a pedagogy that humanizes students of color, Andrade provides us with a framework for developing 'free spaces' inside urban classrooms and a way out of the seemingly intractable relationship between race and the under-achievement of students of color.

Adrienne Dixon and Jeannine Dingus, then, in 'Tyranny of the majority: re-enfranchisement of African-American teacher educators teaching for democracy' attempt to extend the concept of 'free spaces' to teacher education programs by asking

three fundamental questions as Black women professors: (1) What does the presence of women of color professors mean within the field of education, particularly in a climate that presumes to celebrate and value diversity? (2) Given the normalization of whiteness in multicultural teacher education in terms of the curriculum as well as faculty recruitment and retainment (Sleeter, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2005), to what extent are professors of color (specifically Black women professors), valued more as symbols and tokens, rather than for their skills, experience, and voice? (3) And finally, how do multicultural teacher education programs dysconsciously silence professors of color in both the teacher education curriculum and in the very pedagogy that pre-service programs attempt to impart? While first considering the ways in which Black people/people of color are institutionally and systematically disenfranchised within multicultural teacher education programs, Dixon and Dingus conclude by establishing a set of democratic practices that departments and teacher education programs must consider to create, support, and sustain 'free spaces' within multicultural institutions.

The next two articles revolve around efforts to employ the concept of 'free spaces' in desegregated and segregated contexts respectively. In 'Race and school achievement in a desegregated suburb: reconsidering the oppositional culture explanation', John Diamond, Amanda Lewis and Lamont Gordon re-examine the oppositional culture hypothesis in a racially diverse suburban high school. These authors find that an oppositional culture is not pervasive among Black students even in a desegregated school. Their research is important to the conceptualization of 'free spaces' precisely because there has been so little attention paid to the achievement dilemmas faced by struggling Black students in desegregated environments. Although this issue has been neglected, it has obvious and important implications for new ways of understanding 'race,' shifting demographic patterns, and the reconstitution of urban and suburban educational spaces occurring nationwide.

In, 'Towards a politics of interruption: high school design as politically relevant pedagogy,' David Stovall documents efforts to respond to conditions of structural and material inequality through an examination of the physical and curricular design of an urban high school. Stovall's work is important because it illuminates the powerful ways that curricular design as well as the social production of urban space (i.e. the physical design of buildings with student and community input) can lead to the development of social capital, democratic visions of social change, and communities of resistance and solidarity.

The final two essays attempt to broaden the conversation of educational opportunities and constraints to include a wider range of social forces, institutions, and relationships interacting within and outside schools. In 'Youth activism in the urban community: learning critical civic praxis within community organizations', Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota challenge social science research that pathologizes African-American and Latina/o youth. Instead they focus on the ways in which community-based organizations provide youth with opportunities to develop *critical civic praxis* through engagement with ideas, social networks, and experiences that build individual and collective capacity to struggle for social justice (Ginwright and Cammarota, this issue).

Finally, my own contribution in this issue is ‘Cities as battlefields: understanding how the Nation of Islam impacts on civic engagement, environmental racism, and community activism in a Black American ghetto. This article demonstrates how work on urban poverty and education generally offers an individual-level analysis of inequality, while failing to focus on the relationship between schools and the kind of highly concentrated poverty that results from structural inequality and ongoing segregation by race and class—such as environmental racism (Rury *et al.*, 2006). More specifically, a challenge is made to America’s longstanding conceptualization of racially identified groups, and its schools and neighborhoods, as culturally dysfunctional, morally defective, and socially chaotic. Instead it is argued that notions of the ‘ghetto’ such as these, produced and deployed under the banner of ‘social disorganization theory,’ depoliticize the problem of poverty and related social inequalities by locating their origins in the moral economy of isolated Black and Latino households, rather than in the political economy of the greater society (Wacquant, 1997; Gregory, 1998).

In closing, the articles in this issue are less concerned with creating heroic role models or romanticizing stories of triumph and tribulation than with chronicling and re-thinking Black and Latina/o community politics, youth culture, teacher development, and identity production in relation to in-school and out-of-school educational processes. These articles are a small but important step towards developing ‘ways to connect everyday struggles to formal politics; to break down the iron triangle by refusing to privilege race, class, or gender; to reject formulaic interpretations in favor of the complexity of lived experience, to erase the boundaries between social, cultural, and political history; to pay attention to cultural hybridity; and reject the kind of subtle essentialism that treats African American (*and Latina/o*) culture in the singular’ (Kelley, 1994, p. 13).

### Notes on guest editors

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