Learning to Teach Differently

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1 Introduction

Experience with the Hindu caste-system shows that it was in the interest of the ruling castes to keep the so-called under-castes, out-castes and the remnants of the Austro-Asiatic tribals, away from intellectual labor, and indeed punish them for exercising it, encourage obedience, so that perception of the importance of the right to intellectual labor, the exercise of memory, and the access to abstract analysis, was millennially lost for the average person. This is an historical crime. The trained teacher must learn, usually with no hope of success in the short run, how to access such deliberately damaged cognitive-machines (imagination intact, intelligence fully alive in children), so that intellectual labor, unattached to definite goals, can begin to operate.

Shifting the ground to the United States (US), I have commented over the last few decades of teaching and writing, on W. E. B Du Bois' lifelong effort to achieve this in a less rule-driven socius than caste[1]. The only 'advantage'(!) of the situation of chattel slavery in the US is that it is relatively recent (1619), and people from African civilizations were regularly brought in through the slave trade. Chattel slavery in South Africa seems to have started forty years later and was not, by law, long-lasting. But of course, racialized class oppression, legalized as apartheid, did not alter the terms of cognitive damage, of a full divorce from disinterested intellectual labor, without which there is no democracy. And there is enough discussion of the situation in South Africa today to know that without a practice of freedom, changing the law does not produce an internalization of the social contract. The short-term policy is enforcement, the long-term, learning to learn to teach differently.

Experience of teaching at élite universities in so-called developed

[1] Refer specifically to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *My Brother Burghardt*, Harvard University Press, forthcoming.

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countries shows that the right to intellectual labor is not prized by the average student in that context either. I am teaching with an old-fashioned ‘benevolent’ white male teacher of Mathematics this semester. I do not, of course, treat one case as representative. But I am realizing daily how much ‘learning to teach differently’ is on the agenda at the STEM-ridden corporatist top. So, I repeat what seems to me an obvious requirement: focus, not only on the average, but even the ‘worst’ student, through the average. And yes, there is a ‘worst’, not always catchable through the multiple-choice evaluative schemes. Those schemes, with accompanying tool-kits, make the task impossible, by making it easy. The ‘worst’ has to be treated with affection, if that is what s/he seems to require, especially our patience at sharing their problems and drawing out a solution from them with infinite patience.

On the other hand, the ‘worst’ may have to be treated with firmness and a slight bit of fake contempt, if this is what seems right for an interested teacher from the worst living environment. In other words, we have to do some research into the microstructure of the worsts’ daily give-and-take (textuality in the sense of many-stranded textile?), in order to achieve something like a result into the subjectship of democracy – a rearrangement of desires. Very often, the class-difference between teachers and students makes this impossible. That is a greater barrier than COVID-19, which is the immediate efficient cause for learning to teach differently, and also produces a barrier. Zoom-teaching is bad and restrictive, but not prohibit-tively so. Deconstruction took the touchy-feelie out of me. I go to my village schools for my own training into this background-testing, and to show that there is no problem if a Brahmin lives with untouchables (although this conviction is hard to generate). And there, Zoom is inaccessible. But ‘Zoom’ can be fun if it does not make us transform the actual teaching material into a mechanical book club game. There is much to say here but it would be better ‘said’ one-and-one, perhaps even in a Zoomed classroom, for example, keeping the classroom as much like a classroom as possible, sharing a screen with the actual texts. However, without the micrology, the textuality of the students’ environment, we cannot begin to try to teach differently.

Otherwise, all we have is top-down policy (public sector) and philanthropy (private sector) as the preferred methodology for confronting the underprivileged (racialized and otherwise), as a result. At the time of this writing, in my hometown, New York City, BlackLivesMatter is attempting to correct this methodology. In the specifically South African context, as it is

available to an international viewership of a certain class and inclination, BBC World News regales the viewer with a constant horror show of the desperate condition of the hospitals facing the pandemic. Here the short-term solution is redistributive policy. But, to quote Sharon Ife Charles, who works with drug addicts and gang members in New York, they will 'revert' if we do not keep up a sustained teaching differently, of which she gives examples. And I will say again what you know well: changing laws does not change minds. It is just that there is the law, but law, alas, is not justice. Whole populations must be trained persistently, generation after generation, to want to have good healthcare for everyone, a bourgeoisification, no doubt, which must also be sustained with training the imagination not to think of the goals of the bourgeois revolution as the bottom line. Du Bois tried this double project at Atlanta University, but Booker T. Washington's competitiveness undid the project. So, our learning to teach differently must learn to supplement bourgeoisification with training against unrestrained self-interest – a restraint on the basic human affect of greed. This is matter for one-on-one collective class-rooming, Zoom or otherwise. Here I give an example.

Anthony Appiah, in his superbly researched book on Du Bois, suggests that the Folk in the title and the content of the book comes from the German Volk, given Du Bois' feeling of general liberation in the two years he spent in Berlin at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität[2]. I myself feel that Volk was aufgehoben or sublated by Du Bois, negated and preserved on a different register. If we wish to look at the German colonial 'comparativist' use of 'Volk', we might consider the contribution of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute to help those colonials' 'goal … to make cotton production in Togo a "Volkskultur", a people's culture, and not, as elsewhere in the German colonial empire, a "Plantagenkultur", a plantation culture'[3]. 'Culturing' here is part of bourgeoisification.

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[2] Kwame Anthony Appiah. *Lines of Descent: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity* (2014).

[3] *Der Tropenpanzer: Zeitschrift für tropische Landwirtschaft* 7 (January 1903: 9) cited in Beckert (2014). Beckert's entire chapter, 'Destructions', is worth reading to prove our point. Gramsci had surmised such civilizing-mission uses of African-Americans. In the rural area where I run some schools, German-Bengalis subsidize the incorporation of local agriculture into European agri-business. They are our *Volk* and share a mother-tongue. One of the problems

Actually, what happened to Du Bois as he thought of claiming his 'folk', was more like a disciplinary change, moving from disciplinary history (*The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*, 1894) and a work that may be described as creating the field of qualitative/quantitative sociology (*The Philadelphia Negro*, 1899)[4]. I direct my reader to something else Anthony Appiah wrote, in his role as an ethics advisor for *The New York Times*: 'Go Ahead, Speak for Yourself', where you can find this nice sentence:

> Professor Spivak once tartly remarked, 'the question "Who should speak" is less crucial than "Who will listen?"'[5]

And, with his third book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) Du Bois moved into the Humanities, so that Black folk, and indeed, white folk would listen, whereas they would not listen to specialized books of history and sociology.

The need for this move came from a publishing house, A.C. McClurg and Company. As Herbert Aptheker shows in his Introduction to the *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois was the most important African-American ethico-political intellectual in the United States, and had been writing a stream of powerful reviews and articles in important journals[6]. It fell to McClurg to ask him to collect some essays. I will show below how the collection really makes the reader literally listen ('who will listen?'), through the use of music, to the humanity of an other 'race'.

Without knowing this, it is not possible to comprehend fully, the sources producing *Souls*, nor the full significance of the very title of a book affirming the humanity of a people which dominant thought held to be rather more animal than human.

The book finds a way in its rhetoric to involve the reader in what is

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with the Tuskegee men, one generation from slavery, was that they did not speak Ewe.

[4] Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade in the United States of America, 1638-1870.* ([1896]1975); and *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899]1973).

[5] A version of this article appears in print on 12 August 2018, Section SR, p.1 of the New York edition with the headline: 'Speaking as a ….'.

[6] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 1973: 7-10); hereafter cited as *SBF*, followed by page number.

called focalizing. Do this for the text, it says to the reader. This is a teaching text and so shifts the focus to the actual work of reading through the rhetorical signals in the little book-instrument. I will show how *Souls of Black Folk* invites the reader to focalize. Du Bois' staged implied reader is left somewhat unspecified, deliberately I daresay. But the famous sentence in italics is clearly addressed to a white audience, appropriate today, 117 years later, at a Black Lives Matter protest:

> Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy million sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations, in this drear day when human brotherhood is a mockery and a snare (*SBF* 265).

In the front material of the book, Du Bois offers his Black-veil identity as the narrative identity holding together scattered papers published elsewhere:

> Some of these thoughts of mine have seen the light before in other guise. For kindly consenting to their republication here, in altered and extended form, I must thank the publishers of the Atlantic Monthly, The World's Work, the Dial, The New World, and the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science…need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil? (*SBF* viii).

Aptheker reminds us that Du Bois wanted to write something strongly critical of Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise, which wanted to train Blacks into legalized greed, viz., entrepreneurship, at best. Aptheker also shows us that he included quite a few unpublished pieces and re-titled and revised the pre-published ones. Yet, and this is important, he staged the narrator simply as flesh of the flesh and bone of the bone of those who live within the veil. As we move into the text, where the rhetoric beckons and directs us, we must remember that the reader's empty slot will be filled with more and more diversified types as history moves and the narrator will be determined by the reader's ability to respond robustly to the text's rhetoric, inviting their imagination to go on an adventure. For the disenfranchised student in South Africa, can the teacher plan such an adventure?

As a teacher, Du Bois was altogether systematic, as his notebook for the subaltern elementary school where he taught for two summers demon-

strates[7]. At Wilberforce and Atlanta, he was brilliant but stern, even scary. But in his writing after *Souls*, after the humanities turn, so to speak, his writing will be to make folks listen. His greatest book of history, *Black Reconstruction* (1935), will be no exception. In what follows, I offer a reading of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), as a teaching reading through listening text. In my book I go on, of course, to an analysis of the content, but here I withhold that analysis[8]. Here I want to confront the problem of reading music, which the cognitively damaged South African 'worst' student might find ridiculous, and identify-cation with US enslaved history is also problematic, especially since the teaching style I am thinking of is not information imposition, but making epistemological performance emerge, teacher/student imaginative activism braided together with effort, difficulty, necessary and impossible.

The Reading

Here is the reading then, up for your transformation, written here for those who read Spivak's books.

As I follow through the rhetorical outline which will spell out the instruction or invitation to the reader to focalize *The Souls of Black Folk*, I notice, like all readers and scholars, that the epigraphs to the first thirteen chapters are double, each containing a verbal text by a well-known member of white Euro-US culture, and a line of notation given for an excerpt from a spiritual – in Du Bois's language, a sorrow song – where the verbal text is not quoted. As Eric Lanquister has pointed out, these notations are actually taken from existing collections, and as Craig Harris has noted, it is not the hymns themselves, some of which can be traced back to England, but what enslaved Africans did with them. That aesthetic, that spirit of possession and re-creation, inhabiting the past as the readers' present, is the key here. Rhetorically, however, they are also an invitation to the presumably white US reader to

[7] Given the Covid-19 pandemic at the time of revising, I cannot access this notebook, lying mis-catalogued in a drawer full of disorganized papers in Du Bois's final collection of books and papers at the Du Bois Centre for Pan-African Culture in Accra, Ghana. Given the sorry state f the collection, I cannot guarantee that a future researcher will be able to get to it.

[8] Parts of this piece are taken from my forthcoming book, *My Brother Burghardt*, Harvard University Press.

whom at least that searing next-to-last sentence in The After-Thought is addressed, to 'perform' the sorrow song in the anonymity of subaltern possession, only the tune. Rhetorically, a bar of notation is an invitation to read the music as music. If political fiction is actively political insofar as it finds a way in its rhetoric to involve the reader in focalizing, shifting the focus to the reading work, this is where *Souls* is active in its politics. Dream work. Later, we will briefly look at the imperfect reasonableness of the book's content, its waking text, as it were. Whatever that overt burden, in this framing the text translates, transforms, transfers and reterritorializes a performative element of subaltern Negro life, the tune, into élite performance, the reader receiving an invitation to read the music, no words. The reader must focus his or her voice, even if silently, and perform what has for so long been a subaltern performative. If you cannot read European notation, you cannot participate in the text. How can you make the disenfranchised reader imagine herself into that uncaring Euro-US reader learning performance?

(I cannot read European notations. No doubt Du Bois could. It is the imagined implied reader. And the readership changes.)

But this is not all. Chapter 14 brings the sorrow song out onto the stage. As Aptheker points out, this was freshly written for *Souls* (SBF 10). It now shows the latent rhetorical movement of the text in a more manifest fashion. The burden is to bring the performative performance play as a successful narrative in the last chapter, the title of which is 'The Sorrow Song'. Slowly through these chapters, the sorrow song emerges into the waking text, as it were. The verbal text in the epigraph there is, 'I walk through the churchyard to lay this body down', not contrasted to a Euro-US verbal text, from Schiller, for example, or Simmons. And in place of the author, we see the words: 'Negro Song.' The subaltern group is shown to have brought itself into an authorial position. (I hope the teacher will walk the student through the formal analogy with the historical claim made by Du Bois more than thirty years later for the contraband agent of the general strike: the 'fugitive slaves' joining the Union army of Lincoln downing tools and withdrawing from the plantation economy.) And then, with the subaltern group now moved into agency, *Souls* matches verbal text to music. This is for the reader who, through the thirteen earlier chapters, has carefully followed the invitation to focalize performance.

Du Bois matches verbal text to music, latent into manifest, dreamworking into the fragile clarity of a reasonable continuity, text and narrative coming together by way of the epigraphs. This entire chapter is a discussion of

the sorrow songs with many quotations, and at least two of them matching words to notation, again indicative of the rhetorical movement of the entire book. But this line, the rhetorical use of the sorrow song from performative to performance, emerging into the public text with words matching notation, is the entry into rhetorical unity with an indication of progression. The heterogeneous content is nestled within this continuity or unity achieved through imaginative activism, epistemological performance, reader-training into a reparation for which the disenfranchised South African student must perform an imaginative shift. She must imagine that loss of Africa happening to the enslaved centuries ago.

For the most extraordinary moment in this paragraph in this last chapter is the untranslatable song, which makes the reader shiver, from '[m]y grandfather's grandmother … seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries ago; and coming to the valleys of the Hudson and Housatonic, black, little, and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees, thus'. This is, of course, Africa imagined. 'The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music. This was primitive African music ... – the voice of exile' (*SBF* 254-5). And then those words with music, provided for me by the magisterial piano of Yohann Ripert.

If you put this link in a browser, the Julliard pianist's reproduction of (un)remembered Africa will sound forth: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XMVXMbMjugafBcHjXPsPwMlBPOIatW8U/view?usp=sharing[9].

The lesson to the reader is now complete. The author is African-American, united as American with differently hyphenated Euro-US men, hearing the song as at once heathen and primitive, and divided from them as African-American, for the meaning of the music is clear to the children, even though the words were not. Double consciousness.

Let us now see how the question of woman has to be excavated through paying attention to the rhetorical structure of this extraordinary account. The woman at the origin is the repository of culture, singing a song, if David Levering Lewis is to be credited, where she asks to be saved from the hole into which she has fallen, presumably (since the last line is paratactic), by a

[9] I thank Surya Parekh for making the URL.

circumcised son[10]. She articulates the protective role of a boy-child just initiated into manhood, calling for her savior. The child at her knee as she sings is a boy: 'he sang it to his children'. And the ones who carry it through into a history that can finally notate it into European music, are 'our fathers'. Nahum Dimitri Chandler has marked her as, 'She appears, if she can be said to appear at all, as an absence, or under the sign of absence, an invisible X, perhaps' (101) (in Spivak 2021). On this my comment has been that the other X for him produces an entire book, whose title is *X – The Problem of the Negro as A Problem for Thought*, whereas this woman as X is simply an instrument for the conversion of song to male history. We might compare Aunt Betsy in the Black Flame trilogy, Du Bois's final novels, a fierce woman who is in touch with African culture, officiates at birth and death with powerful blood-rituals, but otherwise remains close to plantation aristocracy, full of mentoring for her male descendants. How to fit gendering into the students' heterogeneous circumstances without lecturing, is always a challenge.

This section ends with the full notation of a song that takes us out of the text onto a walk into a future to come. This traveler, too is male. The reader trained by the book watches him and hears himself sing a song that leads both traveler and reader outside the book. This reader ends with an exhortation added by Du Bois as he revised the first essay from its initial journal publication: 'And now what I have briefly sketched in large outline let me on coming pages tell again in many ways, with loving emphasis and deeper detail, that men may listen to the striving in the souls of black folk'. Listen.

There is no direct line from knowing to doing. When the University of Coimbra did me the undeserved honor of inaugurating their PhD program in Social Sciences, I gave them the title: 'Study, Know, Learn, Hear, Listen, Do?' with a question mark at the end.

I told my colleagues there that I would dwell on each cognitive position, that the hard one was the necessity to move from knowing to learning. Knowing through study must of course be done very well, but there the object of investigation is just that, an object. To move to learning the object of investigation must itself become something like a subject, and only that can lead to a change in practice. Our formulaic description is a prayer to be haunted. The humanities, I wrote to them, emphasized the cognitive variations reflected in the title. How can these variations enhance our work as a means to

[10] Cited in Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 2007: 220).

an imaginative activism that allows for the epistemological performance required by those of us who work within the possibility of institutional validation for ourselves and our students and think about democracy?

Try this out, then. Move *Souls* from knowing to learning through listening. Stage an African-American struggling with Africa and an African language as it is unachievable within personal memory, given that disenfranchised South African students, in Africa, speaking one or two of thirty-five languages as well as Afrikaans and English, are not often asked to think beyond their rights into equality with the dissimilar. Let us talk about it and learn to learn, in different ways.

Conclusion: CODA

Gilles Deleuze wrote this passage about four years before he took his life because of an intolerable lung disease:

> If the three ages of the concept are the encyclopedia, pedagogy, and commercial professional training, only the second can safeguard us from falling from the heights of the first into the disaster of the third- an absolute disaster for thought, whatever its benefits might be, of course, from the viewpoint of universal capitalism[11].

I call these words from Sophonia M. Mofokeng's *Pelong ya ka* (translated as *In My Heart*), written in Sesotho, recommended to a Zulu son by his father in the 60s – a brief indication of the book's encyclopedist impulse: collectivist details of what we are[12]. Simon Gikandi, based in Gikuyu has demonstrated that in this text, Mofokeng, the first Black PhD from the University of Witwatersrand, tries the epistemological performance of staging the 'ordinary':

The heart is powerful. That is why we Basotho talk about it so much. When a person is eating, and the food does not go down well, when he feels nauseous, he says: 'This food does not go down well. It is sitting on my heart',

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[11] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (1994: 12).

[12] Sophonia M. Mofokeng, *In My Heart* ([2021]), forthcoming. The father-to-son recommendation was given to me in private conversation. Gikandi's comment is to be found in the Introduction to the book.

or 'My heart is bilious'. Perhaps a glutton is sitting next to us, a person who is never satiated, who keeps eating greedily, eating with eyes wide open as if food will run away. We steal a glance at one another, and when he turns around the corner, one of us says: 'Hey people! what a big heart he, banna!'

Even in revelry, when we are happy, we keep on talking about it, not least in sorrow. How can it not rear its head in such conversation, whereas joy and sorrow are two sides of the coin of our lives? Something has happened which makes you happy, and you say that it has whitened your heart, it has cleansed it and it is pure. Ah, a clean thing is like snow, it is pure white.

I believe it is time to turn this encyclopedist impulse into pedagogy. We take the young women and men on the streets of South Africa not as 'disenfranchised', but as 'ordinary', – merely ontic, if you need a sexy word. Remembering that enabling students for income production is not the humanities teachers' only task; we train their imagination toward non-resembling others, and bring forward the French philosopher's English, globalized for another 'we'.

If the three ages of the concept are the encyclopedia, pedagogy, and commercial professional training, only the second can safeguard us from falling from the heights of the first into the disaster of the third – an absolute disaster for thought, whatever its benefits might be, of course, from the viewpoint of universal capitalism.

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