


Cultural Identity and Education: A Critical Race Perspective

By **Theodora Regina Berry**
& **Matthew Reese Candis**


Theodora Regina Berry is an associate professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching of the College of Education and Human Development at The University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas. Matthew Reese Candis is a teacher in the Henry County Public Schools, McDonough, Georgia, with a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction from the Tift College of Education at Mercer University, Macon, Georgia.

As we begin to journey through this new 21st century, educators at every level are endeavoring to meet the challenge to be responsive to the educational needs of their students, current and future. This is especially true in relationship to the education of students of diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings 2001; 1999; 1994) in public educational settings. These settings are largely made up of Black and Brown students, African American and Latino/a children. Education for these students has become an important consideration in curriculum and pedagogy for colleges/universities, state boards of education, school districts, and agencies including NCATE. This is further complicated by the fact that the majority of students entering the teaching profession are White and female (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

In 2006-2007, 105,641 students earned degrees in education (National Center of Educational Statistics). Of these, 83,125 were women, 70,889 were White women, and 18,979 were White men. The leadership of education mirrors the demographics of those earning

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degrees and initial certification in education. In 2007-2008, 175, 800 professionals earned Masters' degrees in education. There were 134,870 White/Caucasian degree recipients; 31,104 were White/Caucasian males and 103,766 were White/Caucasian females. Concurrently, 8,491 professionals received Doctoral degrees in education; 5,589 were White/Caucasian with 2,773 White/Caucasian males and 3,683 White/Caucasian female degree recipients. These numbers are staggering next to the increasing numbers of non-White students in America's public schools. These numbers also speak to the limited presence of African Americans as educators in public school settings. Just these numbers alone indicate a potential cultural gap between most educators and students.

As African-American educators working with White teacher/educators who teach diverse student populations, we know it is necessary for our colleagues to gain access to and create understandings of the cultural experiences of African American and Latino/a students. An understanding of these cultural experiences will, at minimum, provide a glimpse of their students' cultural identities while helping them to understand their own; "White Americans also have a cultural identity" (Robinson, 1999, p.88).

While it is clear that cultural identity and cultural experiences alter how individuals view their world (Berry, 2005), this discussion will focus on the ways in which these factors impact teaching praxis. Why is cultural identity and cultural experience important in the teaching practice of African American teacher/educators who will serve diverse student populations (primarily African American students) in school settings? How might the cultural identities and cultural experiences of the African American teacher/educator affect their (future) (African American) students? How might the cultural identity and cultural experience of the teacher/educator affect the students? How might knowledge of their students' cultural identity and cultural experience influence the praxis of the teacher/educator? In what ways does critical race theory (CRT)/critical race feminism (CRF) connect with issues of cultural identity and cultural experience? And why is it important to understand these connections in the context of teaching?

In this article, we will first discuss cultural identity and cultural experience. In this discussion, we will articulate our meanings for cultural identity, cultural experience(s), and cultural gap in the context of this work. Following this will be a discussion on CRT/CRF. Then we will address two questions: (1) In what ways does CRT/CRF connect with issues of cultural identity and cultural experience and (2) in what ways have such connections served the praxis of two African American educators?

Cultural Identity and Cultural Experience

Cultural experience, for the purpose of this work, is defined as events (singularly or collectively engaged) specific to a group of individuals with shared beliefs, values, traditions, customs, practices, and language. Individuals possess a cultural identity, significant way(s) in which a person is defined or defines one self

as connected to culture (customary beliefs, traditions, practices, values and language). Experiences occur within the context of a variety of socio-cultural venues and have the significant potential of shaping one's identities. Our past and present experiences as African American teacher/educators in a suburban school system, at a historically Black university (Berry 2002a) and at a predominantly White, traditional four-year university (Berry, 2009) have continuously shaped our present experiences in a predominantly White institution. As a result, this has re-affirmed our belief that identity is not a static, but rather a socio-dynamic, racialized, and historical construct. Robinson (1999) places identity as "multiple, textured, and converging" (p. 98) pointing out that "race ... alone does not constitute all of one's attitudes, experiences, and cognitions related to the self" (p. 98); however, race can be a dominant identity most influential in our experiences (Robinson 1999). As such, it can inform new experiences.

Robinson (1999) defines identity as "both visible and invisible domains of the self that influence self-construction. They include, but are not limited to, ethnicity, skin color, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and physical and intellectual ability" (p. 85). Taylor (1999) defines cultural identity "as one's understanding of the multilayered, interdependent, and nonsynchronous interaction of social status, language, race, ethnicity, values, and behaviors that permeate and influence nearly all aspects of our lives" (p. 232). All of these factors influence the way we see the world and inform our experiences.

For African Americans, our experiences and identities have served as part of a binary construct in a dichotomous relationship to those identified as White. As "involuntaryimmigrants"(Castenell& Pinar 1993, p.4), our experiencesand identities have taken place solely in socio-cultural venues constructed and dominated by White people, even in those venues solely visibly occupied by African Americans. As African American educators teaching in predominantly White institutions, our race became our dominant identity. But instead of resisting this singularity placed upon us, we have utilized it in performing pedagogy. Race is the dominant factor in the focus of the curriculum we use. Race is the dominant factor regarding the decisionsabout how we present curriculum(Berry, 2002b). Our genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations are secondary; regardless of class, gender, nationality, language or sexual orientation, race has often surfaced as a dominant factor toward influencing our experiences.¹

For White Americans, experiences and identities have served as the model for all "other" Americans. And although "White Americans also have a racial identity ... it is rare that a White person has an experience that causes them to assess their attitudes about being a racial being" (Robinson 1999, p. 88). It is rare that White Americans have and/or take the opportunity to "address the ways in which their culture influenced their beliefs and actions toward others" (Taylor 1999, p. 242).

Schoolanditsprimarycomponents/activities—curriculum, teaching, andlearning—is a major socio-cultural venue from which our experiences and identities are

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(re)invented, racialized, and remembered (Oakes & Lipton, 2007). That shouldn't be surprising considering that many of us were required to attend school for 12 years of our lives, 180 days each year for approximately six hours each day. For all Americans in school, there is a certain way to be, a certain way to act and react, a certain way to live. However, for African Americans these ways of being and living in this place and space often, if not always, do not coincide with the ways African American students live within their cultural communities. Given what is known about the history of schooling, its connections to notions of assimilation, and the current demographics of the teaching force (Oakes & Lipton, 2007), these students may be experiencing the symptoms of a cultural gap. For the purpose of this work, a *cultural gap* is defined as theoretical, conceptual, and practical disconnects and spaces between the culture (values, traditions, customs, beliefs, etc.) of the learners and the communities from which they come and the educational institutions and the proponents thereof. So, for many of those hours, days, and years, African American students experiencing the cultural gap may be suffering an identity crisis. Our classroom praxis provides opportunities for teacher/educators to investigate ways in which they were able to come to begin to know their students' cultural communities. Teachers whose future teaching practices are affected by their coming to know the cultural identities and experiences of their students may, in turn, have students who are less likely and less often experiencing identity crisis (Ayers, 2001).

Within our cultural communities, African Americans are keenly aware of our contributions to this country. It was the backs, arms, and hands of our ancestors that built this country (Robinson, 2000). Emerging scholarship, oral histories shared at family and community gatherings, informal scholar dialogues, and formal meetings and conferences have enriched our cultural identities (Ladson-Billings, 2001); as such, we create experiences that are invaluable to who we are, our identities.

In this day of increasing numbers of White, mostly female, teachers in public schools, educators must find it imperative to link these experiences to students' school lives in order to strengthen and honor the cultural identities developed, formulated, and affirmed in the cultural communities of their students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In order to do this, all teacher/educators must come to understand who they are within the socio-cultural venue of school. Maintaining a eurocentric character of school not only denies role models to non-White students but also denies self-understanding to White teachers (Pinar, et. al. 2000). We argue that to teach without knowing your students limits how much you truly know about yourself as teacher and, thus, limits how well you can teach your students (Irvine, 2003). Having the multiple, complex perspectives and experiences of your students as a central part of the classroom curriculum may have the affect of challenging and enhancing what you know and how you know it. Knowing your students means knowing their stories.

And, indeed, there are multiple stories, especially in school stories, for our identities create such multiples. All students/teachers have multiple and intersecting identities in their school stories (Berry, 2009). African American students, indeed,

have multiple stories not only because we exist within multiple and intersecting identities but also because at least one of these identities carries with it the historical burden of oppression. As educators, we are obligated to create spaces where we can gain access to and stand “in the presence of others’ lived experiences” (Garrod, et. al. 1999, p. xvii).

Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Feminism

Critical Race Theory

We subscribe to and advocate CRT and CRF. CRT has been identified as a movement of “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001, p. 2).

The beliefs, practices, and institutions that necessitated the inception of CRT precede the creation of the United States of America. They are imbedded in the foundations of the Constitution that define the federal relationships that permeate various aspect of daily life (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Appropriately, the origins of CRT lie within the legal tradition that interprets the space that exists between principle and practice for the citizenry of the nation. The concept of “citizen” has had the same floating characterization as “race” throughout the short and turbulent history of the United States. The CRT perspective lay hidden in scholarship until the latter portion of the twentieth century, when voices began to emerge with evidence that the token advances of civil rights legislation did not attack the foundations of racism in the United States. In the mid-1970s Derek Bell and Alan Freeman emerge as ushers of this uniquely critical approach to legal and therefore social impact of race within the contexts of everyday experience (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Jennings & Lynn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Building upon foundations from critical legal studies (CLS), these perspectives held that the token integration advanced by the Civil Rights Movement cemented the racialist foundations of the effects of history on People of Color on an international scale. As more scholars of diverse backgrounds, nationalities, and interests furnished more research, a movement was created that gained momentum over the subsequent decades.

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When considering CRT and the potential utility that it can serve to inform educational research, it is essential to build upon a definition of what it is and how this framework can serve the atonement of our nation and world at large. The primary tenets of CRT are based upon the legal foundations from which the paradigm is spawned. Seeking to expose and address the inequalities that plague the current social and economic spheres, it addresses the ways that disadvantaged people suffer from the legacy of historical practices (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Jennings &

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Lynn, 2005). The literature in educational research related to this specific framework had gained tremendous momentum in recent decades due to the growing plight of disenfranchised students in America's schools. Investigation is carried out through analysis of people and the institutions that display the effects of these trends in a contemporary context.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) assert that race juxtaposed with economic status (property ownership) have worked to define the reality for the benefactors and victims of these racist paradigms. Larger access to resources, in this case schooling resources, provides the ability to define and perpetuate the ideals that maintain the social order. Research (Berry, 2005; Castenell & Pinar, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Oakes & Lipton, 2007) clearly indicates the ways on which such property ownership and its connections to schooling resources normalize race and racism in the social order. CRT offers voices and perspectives to provide avenues by which the testimony of previously marginalized groups can describe the impact that "race" as a construct has had on their life experience (Delgado, 2000), including schooling. The narratives, stories, and actions of the survivors intertwine to provide a clear account of the past that includes the triumphs and offenses that comprise the "American voice" hidden within the institutions, norms, and biases that have been established by the ruling class. CRT attributes the formation of that class to the ideology of race and the role in play as a factor in socioeconomic contexts.

In the United States and much of the post-mercantilist world, race and ethnicity continues to be the primary indicators of social standing and access to resources (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker & Lynn, 2002). African Americans and other ethnic minorities continue to display significant long-term psychological effects as a result of a need to forge cultural identity that indicates true hegemonic cohesion into mainstream society. CRT has held in the legal system that the very foundations of the policies, trends, practices, and statistics have been contaminated by racial tones and inconsistencies. This perspective becomes critical when these toxins are presented as unbiased and impartial (Parker & Lynn, 2002). The institutions that arose from the contaminated seeds of separatism have grown into the ideological maelstroms, with perspectives of all types competing for the opportunity to proliferate a compartment or facet of learning. The educational system is no exception to this infection of disenfranchisement and serves as a basin of activity related to these historical trends.

Critical Race Feminism

CRT has several basic principles, three of which are most appropriate for this discussion regarding CRF. The first principle asserts that racism is ordinary and normal in American society. Rather than accept the societal and political marginalization placed upon People of Color as identified in CRT, CRF places women of color in the center, rather than the margins, of the discussion, debate, contemplation, reflection, theorizing, research, and praxis of the lived experience as we co-exist in the dominant culture. As an outgrowth of CLS and CRT, it suits the sensibilities

of those who acknowledge, address, and accept Black male experiences as different (CRT) as well as womanhood experiences as different (CFT). CRT and CRF adherents like ourselves utilize narrative or storytelling as counterstories to the master narrative, the dominant discourse. However, unlike CRT adherents, CRF is multidisciplinary as it draws from “writings of women and men who are not legal scholars” (Wing, 1997, p. 5) as evidenced in the social and political writings of Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 1998), bell hooks (1990) and Joy James (1999).

CRF is supportive of and concerned with theory and practice. Adherents of the CRF movement believe abstract theorizing must be supported with actual concerns of the community. Advocates of CRF support a discourse of resistance that centers the voices of Black and Brown students in educational settings.

CRF suits our sensibilities as it addresses all of our intersecting beings: African American, teacher educator, researcher, scholar, spouse, sibling, friend, and more. By permitting ourselves to engage in the ideology of CRF, we can be more free to bring all of who we are into the classroom. By doing so, we can disregard the monolithic discourse of the universal Black wo/man and acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of our personhood.

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But why is CRF important for African American teacher/educators? First, CRF encourages us to acknowledge and accept of our multi-dimensionality as African Americans who are teacher/educators, among other things. As such, we must understand that we bring our whole self(s) and all connected experiences, into the classroom. What we all do gets filtered through these experiences. CRF also acknowledges the importance of storytelling. Educators’ stories, including their stories of school, are important to know in the context of their development as teachers because these stories, these experiences, may influence what they learn and how they learn it as well as what they choose to teach and how they choose to teach as emerging teachers. Making their stories important to the teaching and learning experience also centers, rather than marginalizes, their personhood. CRF advocates for such centering. Through the lenses of CRF, there is the ability to ‘see’ complexities. By viewing the world through such lenses, the complexities of “others” can be “seen” more clearly.

Critical race feminists understand that one’s racial/ethnic appearance does not dictate a singular story about who they are. CRF is a multidisciplinary theory that addresses the intersection of race and gender while acknowledging the multiplicative and multi-dimensionality of being and praxis for women of Color. While advocates of CRF are concerned with theory, praxis is central to this theory; theory and praxis must be a collaboration. CRF theorists strive to center those who are considered socially and politically marginalized in the dominant culture; those whose cultural identities are often placed as other become centralized in time, space, and place. Additionally, adherents of CRF support storytelling or counterstory as a means of understanding multiple positionalities of individuals or groups of individuals,

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particularly those stories of socially and politically marginalized persons living at the intersections of identities. As much as this theory applies to one of us as an African-American female teacher educator and researcher, this also applies to White students. As storytelling is an important part of the first author's work and a key component of hooks' engaged pedagogy, it was decided to centralize the counterstory in the teaching and learning lives of teacher-students as a model for de-marginalizing the lives of their students.

Counterstory

Counterstory, as described by Delgado (2000), is created by the outgroup, the members of the socially marginalized group, aimed to subvert the reality of the dominant group. For socially marginalized groups, this reality centers on a host of presuppositions, commonly held wisdoms, and shared understandings by the dominant group about the outgroup. These presuppositions, wisdoms, and understandings are what Romeo and Stewart (1999) refer to as the master narrative, stories of shared reality that subsume differences and contradictions and narrowly define people and their identities by supporting ideas constructed by the dominant group. These "stories we were taught and teach ourselves about who does what and why" (p. xiv). The essence of an oppressed people will always be found in their narrative voices, and these serve as the inspiration for identity and self-awareness the will share until people forget. Critical race theory and critical race feminism seek to record and affirm the experiences of the past.

Connections: Praxis and Process

Stories and counterstories that represent our identities and experiences are, truly, memoirs (recalled and revealed memories) of our praxis. For the purpose of this work, our praxis lives through bell hooks' notion of engaged pedagogy.

Autobiography/Memoir

Autobiography has served as a tool for knowledge construction within a host of theoretical frameworks within education to include, but not limited to, CRT, CRF, feminist theory, post-colonial issues, and post-structuralist theory. Storytelling forms such as biography, autobiography, life stories, personal narratives, and memoirs are abundant in educational research.

Autobiography, life histories, life narratives, and personal narratives have been used in educational research in a variety of topics (Griffiths, 1995). It has been useful in the examination of teaching practice (Anderson, 1988; Ayers, 2001a; Britzman, 1991; Delpit, 1995; Foster 1997; Gay 2000; Henry, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Miller, 1990; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000), teacher education programs (Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000) and students' educational experiences (Anderson, 1988; Cooper, 1989; Garrod, Ward, Robinson, & Kilkenny, 1999; Nieto, 2000). Many of these and other studies have focused on the students' educational experiences in concert with their cultural identity

and experiences. The construction and revealment of a personal story includes a myriad of experiences that are influential in the (re)development/shaping of one's identity.

In our work, the term memoir will be used in lieu of autobiography. Preference for the use of this term is based on two components that precede the telling of one's story: recall and revealment.

Recall, for the purpose of this study, in relationship to memoir focuses on what the writer remembers as well as how well the writer remembers. In memoir, revealment asserts intentional or unintentional selection of what is recorded or told. Memoir, therefore, is what the writer chooses to tell based upon memory.

But, as Ayers (2001b) cautions, memory is a motherfucker. What we recall is purely in context. Memories are not isolated segments that can be pulled out from the emotional, historical, racialized, gendered, spiritual time and space in which they occur. To be able to place all of these factors onto a page and have each and every reader feel the intended impact and receive the intended message would be the mere creation of a miracle. Kelly (1997) provides a cautionary note regarding memoir:

... unproblematic or romantic notions of the power of story and/or the educationally redemptive powers of auto/biography—even where applauded by those whose agendas might appear more radical—must be approached cautiously, for notions are never innocent ... The caveat holds: to tell one story is to silence others; to present one version of self is to withhold other versions of self. (p. 50-51)

Kelly (1997) provides special attention to the use of such memoirs in education by “members of socially marginalized groups” (p. 51). Memoir has provided a means by which such groups can expose and/or reveal social and political oppression from a historical perspective. However, by placing in view a particular self in a prominent position, the writer not only silences another version of self but also potentially essentializes one's identity. As stated earlier, an individual's identity is multiple, intersecting, and socio-dynamic and, as Kelly (1997) clearly recognizes, this creates multiple stories.

Engaged Pedagogy

bell hooks (1994) speaks eloquently about the process of teaching students “in a manner that respects and cares for” (p. 13) their souls as opposed to “a rote, assembly-line approach” (p. 13). In her interpretive approach to hooks' work on engaged pedagogy, Florence (1998) views this respect and caring as a tool toward inclusivity and caring as an acknowledgement and appreciation of difference. Only in this way can “educators ... give students the education they desire and deserve ...” (hooks as cited in Florence 1998, p. 88).

Life experiences, when permitted into the classroom and given voice, can call to task the established or official knowledge (Apple 2000) generated and perpetuated in education. This voice, which hooks speaks of frequently (1984, 1989, 1990,

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1994), has the potential to move professors/teachers from a 'safe' place of lecture and invited response to a place of resistance (Florence, 1998) thereby challenging the "implications of equating white middle/upper class male experience and cultural histories to a national cultural heritage"(Florence, 1998, p. 96).

As a contrast to the 'safe' place of lecture and invited response, hooks (1994) moves to a place of resistance as she espouses an engaged pedagogy: "a progressive, holistic education ... more demanding than critical or feminist pedagogy" (p. 15). hooks advocates an education that goes beyond the classroom (Florence, 1998) and relates to them as whole human beings. Beyer (as cited in Florence, 1998) suggests that this may mean including elements of popular culture in the classroom experience. This facilitates classroom discussion that allows students to interject many facets of their complex lived experiences into the curriculum. From this position, students and professors/teachers can free themselves into an engaged pedagogy that is holistic and progressive incorporating passion, dialogue and interaction.

There are those who disagree. There are those who question and challenge the use of dialogue and interaction in the classroom experience. Ellsworth's (1989) work, which is a critique of critical pedagogy, addresses a need for something more demanding than critical ... pedagogy. In *Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy*, Ellsworth (1989) identifies the need for teachers/teacher-educators to "criticize and transform her or his own understanding in response to the understandings of students" (p. 300). Ellsworth contends that by moving critical pedagogy to lived experiences placed into current reality, teachers and teacher-educators can begin to deconstruct the perceived empowerment gained from such a classroom experience. In this way "students would be empowered by social identities that affirmed their race, class and gender positions ..." (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 300). She seems to suggest that focusing on the understandings of students through their lived experiences detracts from the political singularity of critical pedagogy. In other words, the teacher/teacher-educator is no longer the sole provider of empowerment. The content/material of what is learned becomes affirmed by the students' experiences. Such valuation "redistribute[es] power to students" (p. 306), delineates "the socially constructed and legitimated authority that teachers/professors hold over students" (p. 306) and understands that students' lived experiences provide dimensions of knowledge into the classroom that the teacher/professor could not know "better" than the student. However, "to assert multiple perspectives ... is not to draw away from the distinctive realities and oppressions of any particular group" (p. 323). Creating a space for multiple perspectives is in no way designed to oversimplify or homogenize any one's experiences regarding oppression and conflict in the classroom. Rather, it may facilitate the valuation of multiple ways to experience. hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy allows for students' lived experiences to facilitate their understandings, thereby creating an understanding for teacher/teacher-educator. Ellsworth and hooks appear to agree on these points.

A key tool in hooks' engaged pedagogy that facilitates this experience is dia-

logue. This is where hooks and Ellsworth distinctly depart from one another. hooks' engaged pedagogy incorporates passions, dialogue and interaction through the entrance of lived experiences. Ellsworth has identified dialogue "as a fundamental imperative of critical pedagogy" (p. 314) with rules that include the assumptions that all members have equal opportunity to speak, "all members respect members' rights to speak and feel safe to speak ..." (p. 314). However, among other problems, she feels that critical pedagogy does not alleviate the historical power of the teacher/professor and thereby can limit the freedom of speech in the classroom setting. hooks does not address this dilemma in her engaged pedagogy in this way. Ellsworth refers to this as a problem of "the students' and professor's asymmetrical positions of difference and privilege" (p. 315). In hooks' engaged pedagogy, there is a failure to address these asymmetrical positions and the issues of difference and privilege (or lack thereof) that accompany them. As a result, what also does not get specifically addressed in hooks' engaged pedagogy is how privilege and difference may silence such dialogue.

However, hooks (1994) does approach this issue differently. Engaged pedagogy warrants the vulnerability of the teacher/professor via revealment of personal lived experiences in connection with the subject. In fact, hooks insist that initial revealment come from the teacher/professor, facilitating movement from that safe place to a place of resistance. In this view of engaged pedagogy, it may be assumed that such revealment of by the teacher/professor is a comfortable position from which to operate in the traditional space of the classroom. This may be true for hooks; however, hooks does not address issues of comfort or ease for others attempting to move into this position. Critical pedagogy, as presented by Ellsworth (1989), presents dialogue as an entrance to multiple perspectives. But critical pedagogy places the responsibility on the students to gain the empowerment as it is assumed that it is freely provided by the teacher. It also places the point of vulnerability on the student as a means of effective dialogue, thus, accentuating the problem as presented by Ellsworth, regarding difference and privilege. In other words, if the student doesn't reveal their oppression, the dialogue, if any, isn't effective. By contrast, hooks' engaged pedagogy insists the teacher/professor initiate and continue to participate in such revealment as a means of effective dialogue. And although there is no guarantee that the teacher/professor acknowledges and relinquishes any privilege, teacher/professor vulnerability via revealment has the potential to shift the power relationship. This has the potential to have a positive effect on how the asymmetrical positions of difference and privilege play out in the classroom. The possibility of change in the power relationship between teacher/professor and student(s) via teacher/professor revealment has the potential to change the way teacher education is conceptualized. In this view of engaged pedagogy, the teacher/professor must be critically thought-full about shifts in power and privilege via vulnerability within the classroom curriculum.

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