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THE SOULFUL WISDOM OF ANTONIA DARDER: THE STRUGGLE FOR CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

LA CONMOVEDORA SABUDURÍA DE ANTONIA DARDER: LA LUCHA POR LA DEMOCRACIA CULTURAL

Hernandez, Kortney¹

¹Westcliff University, Irvine, California, USA, kortneyh@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3415-1432>

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the life and soulful wisdom of critical pedagogue, Antonia Darder. It is situated as a response to her recent article “Reflections on Cultural Democracy and Schooling” (this issue), and illuminates the authors take on her powerful scholarship and life. In line with the humanizing and emancipatory intent of Darder’s work, this paper will reflect upon salient themes of her work, including: love as a political force, language as a site of struggle, cultural workers in the struggle for freedom, and the impact of her seminal text *Culture and Power in the Classroom*. Committed to a lifelong culturally democratic political project, Darder’s teachings serve as a guide for educators who take up the call for social justice.

KEYWORDS: cultural democracy, social justice, love, cultural workers, language, cultural hegemony.

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Este trabajo reflexiona sobre la vida y la conmovedora sabiduría de la pedagoga crítica Antonia Darder. Constituye una respuesta a su reciente artículo “Reflexiones sobre la democracia cultural y la escolarización” (este número), y muestra el modo en que los autores asumen su poderosa erudición y su vida. En línea con la intención humanizadora y emancipadora del trabajo de Darder, el presente artículo abordará temas prominentes de su trabajo, incluyendo el amor como una fuerza política, el lenguaje como un lugar de conflicto, la lucha de los trabajadores culturales por la libertad y el impacto del trascendental libro de Darder *Culture and Power in the Classroom*. Las enseñanzas de Darder, comprometidas con un permanente proyecto político culturalmente democrático, sirven de guía para los educadores que asumen el llamamiento a la justicia social.

Palabras clave: democracia cultural, justicia social, amor, trabajadores culturales, lenguaje, hegemonía cultural.

Antonia Darder did not merely write about cultural democracy; rather, her words and life give essence to the soulful wisdom within *cultural democracy as the practice of freedom* that is palpable to many “readers” of her body of work. This body of work does not merely entail the written elements and features of her scholarship but rather the embodied forms of her work as well, including the passion and dynamism by which she lives. Darder’s article, “Reflections on Cultural Democracy and Schooling”, situates her lifelong struggle for liberation and social justice within the classroom and larger society (Darder, 2022). She fervently challenges the

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current conditions and historical legacy of undemocratic schooling that have been exacerbated by the current pandemic, pushing educators to develop their political clarity, embrace solidarity, and fight for liberation amidst the debilitating structures of oppression. My words here will respond to this most recent article in which she reflects on cultural democracy and schooling as well as the impact of this work on my life.

Antonia Darder's life, as a working-class woman of color, has been one of struggle and survival in a laborious battle against oppression, lovelessness, racism, colonizing practices, and the continued disembodiment of our individual and collective humanity. For over 40 years, she has theorized deeply and epistemologically reimagined aspects, of culture, language, democracy, the political economy, racism, inequality, social justice, and education. Therefore, it is without a doubt that the impact of her work has challenged the field of education to embrace cultural democracy as a liberating praxis and in turn, through advocating a profound solidarity, to integrate these ideas in reinventing our educational world. It is from this vantage point that I offer my reflections on the contributions of Antonia Darder's life and political commitment to revolutionary educational thought and express my sincerest solidarity, hope, and love for her fierce and courageous spirit.

2. READING ANTONIA DARDER

It is, indeed, a monumental undertaking to reflect upon and bring to light the wisdom to be gleaned when one "reads" the work and life of Antonia Darder. If one was to "read" Darder as Paulo Freire encouraged us in "reading the word and the world", her scholarship and life speak volumes to an unwavering dedication and perseverance to the revolutionary struggle for a culturally democratic vision of the

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world. This dimension is consistently embodied in all aspects of her work and lived history, as the range of her scholarship spans a variety of mediums and decades. As such, one must read Antonia Darder as a revolutionary subject, whose writings traverse the historical epochs through which her work and life have been shaped as “a colonized, working class, Puerto Rican woman living in the United States” (Darder, 2022). Consequently, her work mirrors an unusual capacity to feel to the core of her body and soul a “fire in the belly” as well as a profound sadness, tied to grappling with her lived history of oppression. In fact, Darder has argued that the “expression of human feeling” is often hijacked in traditional classrooms or spaces predominantly committed to the social containment and political conformity of students and communities. In contrast to controlling the masses, Darder has illuminated through her teaching and writing that open expression and power of love in the classroom makes possible conditions that are in alliance with cultural democracy (Darder, 2017; Darder, 2014a). Love as a foundational dimension of revolutionary praxis is paramount in the evolution of Darder’s scholarship and pedagogy, in that love and a fierce passion for cultural democracy is deeply felt by those who carefully read her work and those who know her.

Personally, I have read most of the works of Antonia Darder and also had the good fortune of being lovingly mentored and challenged by her soulful pedagogical wisdom. She came into my life when I was an early graduate student. In my experience as her student and colleague, she has consistently embodied, as Paulo Freire suggested, what it means to live an ethos of cultural democracy—where an open field of dialogical engagement is shared by students of all cultural backgrounds. Moreover, it was not until I read the writings of Antonia Darder, Paulo Freire, and other critical subaltern scholars, that I began to recognize that decolonizing praxis must evolve from a living knowledge of the subaltern experience. Through her

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pedagogy and scholarship, Darder opened the gateway to a world in which I felt both seen and heard. She also has continuously challenged and nurtured me to reflect on the dialectical relationship of my life and the world, in ways for which I am forever grateful. Through our relationship, I learned the importance of love in seeing the humanity of others, as we struggle for justice. To truly know Antonia Darder is to know love at a deeply embodied level, which offers us the opportunity to be touched by a revolutionary love and spirit that carries on to future generations. Thus, to be taught and mentored by her beautiful and courageous revolutionary spirit is nothing short of a pedagogical and intellectual transformation. This is key to embracing, reinventing, “reading”, and understanding Darder’s ardent struggle for cultural democracy within schools and the larger society.

3. CULTURAL DEMOCRACY AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM

Darder inspires and challenges us to rethink what it means to live in a truly cultural democracy.

Paulo Freire (in Darder, 1991)

Paulo Freire understood profoundly that there was no such thing as neutrality within the culture of schooling. Moreover, he recognized that education either worked to integrate students into the logic of the system or it became “the practice of freedom” (Freire, 1970). As such, Freire insisted that education as the practice of freedom necessitated the voice and participation of the oppressed in the transformation of our collective world. Voice and participation are then paramount to creating the conditions for cultural democracy. With this in mind, Darder has worked to examine questions of cultural democracy within the classroom and beyond. Her

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writing on this concept (Darder, 1989, 1991 / 2012, 1994, 2012a, 2012b, 2022) span the length of 40 years, where she has never wavered in her “commitment to liberation” as essential to a culturally democratic political project. If one were to trace the concept to its earliest ruminations within Darder’s corpus, one might begin with *Culture and Power in the Classroom: A Critical Foundation for Bicultural Education* (Darder 1991 / 2012).

3.1. Culture and power

Culture and Power, one of Antonia Darder’s seminal books, marks the beginning of an arduous journey in that this text is the first portal for many readers into Darder’s theoretical contributions to the world. The heart of the text is built upon a foundation of love for teachers, students, and communities. This book, derived from Darder’s dissertation, set in motion the development of her theoretical and philosophical articulation of cultural democracy. The term ‘cultural democracy’ was drawn from the work of Ramirez and Castaneda, serving as a starting point from which Darder came “to create a critical political construct for bicultural education” (Darder, 1991). The critical evolution of this concept through Darder’s work has grown in the field of education in ways that will continue to have an impact for generations to come. *Culture and Power in the Classroom* (Darder 1991 / 2012) crystallized a nuanced language of critique that spoke to the bicultural complexity experienced by subaltern students, through articulating a political project committed to coherence, critical pedagogical principles, and cultural democratic life. As such, Darder reminds us that subordinated cultures are not inferior or “tangles of pathologies” nor upon whom the blame for the world’s problems should be placed (Darder, in Jobin-Leeds, 2016). In contrast, she reminds us of our individual and

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collective wisdom and pushes us to dream and fight, as did Freire, for a more just and loving world.

3.2. Cultural democracy and love as humanizing political forces

Paulo's brand of love stood in direct opposition to the insipid "generosity" of teachers or administrators who would blindly adhere to a system of schooling that fundamentally transgresses every principle of cultural and economic democracy.

Darder (1998)

There is no question that Paulo Freire's loving spirit touched and nourished the soul and wisdom of Darder's life. As she writes, his words "spoke to the suffering of my heart, the weariness of my spirit, and the yearning of my soul" (Darder, 2014a). Ever present in Darder's revolutionary struggle for liberation has been the embodiment of love as a political force (Darder, 2014a) in the practice of education. This force coherently and consistently emanates from the core of her politics, scholarship, mentorship, and pedagogical praxis. As such, undemocratic schooling represents for her the "lovelessness of oppression" (Darder, 2014a). Hence, she called upon educators to embrace love as a political force and as an essential critical dimension of their lives within and outside of the classroom, as a means for cultivating a more culturally democratic and humanizing space for subaltern populations. Additionally, love as both a political and pedagogical imperative supports intimate and vulnerable relationships between students and teachers—relationships built upon trust and dignity. More recently, Darder (2022) has challenged the absence of this critical relational dynamic within the disembodied and dehumanizing culture of virtual schooling, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

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The task, as proposed by Paulo Freire and Antonia Darder, is for educators to embody an authentic love in their teaching, “as a powerful dialogical force for political transformation and as a decolonizing epistemology” (Darder, 2015). This force is reflected in Paulo Freire’s words when he writes “I love my students not because they are in a room where I am teacher. I love my students to the extent in which I love the very process of being with them”. Similarly, Darder’s fierce love and mentorship has been a powerful example of what it means to live love as a political force and embody it as a dialectical force. Even in difficult moments and times of despair, her faith and love of students has remained steadfast. As she and other critical scholars have rightly noted, love here is not a feel-good, sappy form of love, but rather a commitment to teach and live with risk, solidarity, intentionality, coherence, a critical spirituality, and within an ongoing collective struggle for our humanity and respect for all living beings. For Darder, these are indispensable qualities for revolutionary educators who embrace love as a pedagogical weapon in their labor as cultural workers, while simultaneously supporting students in their development as cultural citizens of their world.

3.3. Cultural workers in the struggle for cultural democracy

The more that we were willing to struggle for an emancipatory dream, the more apt we were to know intimately the experience of fear, how to control and educate our fear, and finally, how to transform that fear into courage.

Darder (1998)

Antonia Darder, in sync with Paulo Freire, believed that educators and community members, as cultural workers, must willingly take up the fight for social justice and the restoration of the dignity of our collective humanity. Given this task,

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cultural workers must be prepared to teach for freedom and, with this, recognize the importance of centering the history and knowledge of subaltern populations. Cultural workers conceive the intent of their labor as tied to the emancipatory role education can have in transforming the oppressive conditions of society. Accordingly, they do not maintain a neutral stance but rather an ethical stance that is grounded in political clarity (Freire, 1970). In this way, cultural workers are vital to the political struggle for democracy, in that democracy must be recognized as a site of struggle, linked to questions of culture and power in unveiling “who controls cultural truths” (Darder, 2022).

Darder, a cultural worker at heart, has utilized her artistry as an educator, activist, poet, artist, and writer to labor persistently for a more just world. As Darder suggests, many educators are often so removed from the conditions of their students and frightened by the racialized or class misconceptions they possess, they do not allow themselves to genuinely know their students as vital human beings. Additionally, she reminds us that students are often treated as objects to be managed, manipulated and subject to control in ways that elicit their prescribed responses. To break from this banking approach (Freire, 1970) of prescribed answers, Darder encourages teachers to search for the organic knowledge that students bring to the classroom and work to co-produce and co-create cultural knowledge with them as part of a culturally democratic praxis of classroom life. Additionally, Darder recognizes that cultural workers and educators must be attentive to the political and pedagogical significance of the body, understood as central to critical formation and without which no genuine democracy can flourish (Darder, 2012b). While being attentive pedagogically to the body, cultural workers must also embrace, understand, make space for and center the cultural dimensions of democracy in schooling—including language.

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3.4. Language as a site of struggle

For Darder, language is a critical aspect of cultural democracy and also a site of struggle. Often, subaltern students are forced to endure a *culture of forgetting* (Darder, 2022), that Darder views as an undemocratic space that requires bicultural students to reject their cultural system and adopt the dominant language and cultural ways of being. These zones of cultural forgetting are described as violent spaces that work to sever students' "intimate cultural bonds" (Darder, 2014b). Hence, it is not coincidence that language becomes an institutional site for cultural and linguistic racialization. Fittingly, drawing from Darder's "superb exegesis of the political economy", Paraskeva notes that she brings language to the core of the battle against eugenics and proposes that "any critical theory that aims cultural democracy cannot ignore the power of biculturalism as a poesis that determines culture and power relations in the classrooms" (Paraskeva, 2021).

Given her concern for culture and power in the schooling of subaltern students, the question of language has always been a central tenet of Darder's articulation of the politics of cultural democracy within education (Darder, 2014b; Darder and Uriarte, 2012). I witnessed some of her public struggles firsthand. One particular experience illustrates for me her ability to be both courageous and loving, while simultaneously challenging cultural hegemony. I attended an educational conference where she was the keynote speaker. Antonia was introduced by a white male colleague, who without care or awareness, badly mispronounced her name. Antonia ascended to the stage and prepared her notes to offer her talk, but paused briefly—almost as if to breathe before she would offer her first words. She then decided, in that moment, to correct the pronunciation of her name and tie this to her presentation, which just happened to be on linguistic racism and cultural hegemony. She explained that her remarks were not to point blame at her colleague who

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mispronounced her name, but rather to address the larger structural realities that make us believe it is not important to learn how to pronounce someone's name, if they are from another culture. This echoes her claim that "there is some acceptance of language diversity but, without question, English is considered the most important language" (Darder, 1994, p. 28). In this moment and others, I came to realize that Darder battled daily to remain coherent to the words she spoke, taught, and wrote—a task seldom easy for even educators who express a commitment to social justice.

4. A FINAL REFLECTION: THE CAPACITY TO DREAM

Much like the buzz and cooptation of multiculturalism, Darder recognized early on that social justice often represented more lip service within educational settings than an actual commitment to social justice. She understood that colonizing, abstracted, and euphemistic discourses often worked to thwart a genuine commitment to liberatory schooling in the interest of subaltern populations, warning of the need to be vigilant (Darder, 2016, 2022) to the ways in which our revolutionary dreams can be defiled. Hence, she proposes the need to decolonize social justice in ways that include a "culturally democratic understanding of justice". As such, institutions must break from the colonializing structures of dependency in which they are embedded in (Darder, 2022). What educators and cultural workers can glean from the practice of decolonizing social justice and cultural democracy is that it requires a genuine effort and commitment to affirm the voices of subaltern populations as well as breaking with the traditions of colonizing practices that encumber genuine cultural participation. This speaks to the need for educators to recover our revolutionary capacity to dream. Toward this end, Darder's writings on cultural democracy and schooling provide necessary critical themes—genuine

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participation, development / centering of voice, solidarity, love, and honoring the cultural contributions of subaltern communities and students—that critically enhance our ability to dream of and struggle collectively for a world where human rights, economic, justice, and cultural democracy prevail. I am forever changed by the soulful contributions of Antonia Darder’s life work, in that she has offered the world, as Freire recognized, a language of possibility and writings that dare us to dream.

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