Conclusion to the Special Issue: Queer of Color Analysis: Intermitions and Pedagogic Possibilities

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INTRODUCTION

The contributors to this special issue have mobilized queer of color epistemologies as lenses for knowledge production in educational studies, broadly defined. This work, called queer of color analysis (QOCA) can be viewed as a form of critique designed to unsettle the dominant discourses, key questions and normative beliefs of educational studies. As stated in the Introduction, each author’s attention to pedagogical implications holds the potential to engage a range of stakeholders and allies interested in anti-oppressive approaches that interrupt the systems of domination that produce hegemonic modes of knowledge production. As a way of thinking about next steps for QOCA in educational studies, I want to conclude this special issue by reflecting on how each article interrupts dominant discourses and ideas in educational studies and the pedagogic possibilities derived from these analyses. I then describe how these interruptions and pedagogic insights are related to my own work in urban education. In doing so I highlight some of the tensions associated with thinking about pedagogy across formal and informal settings as my research focuses on the education and well-being of Black male youth in urban communities and schools, and is born of collaborations with teachers and community-based programs and service providers. My hope is that such an exercise will inspire others to engage with QOCA to confront the normalizing practices and discourses that marginalize queer people of color in educational studies and expand, more generally, the possibilities for anti-oppressive equity and social justice work in a range of learning spaces, formal and informal.

PART I: INTERRUPTIONS AND PEDAGOGIC POSSIBILITIES

The two framing questions for the articles in this special issue are as follows: (1) How can queer of color epistemologies interrupt hegemonic processes of knowledge production? and (2) how can these interruptions inform
transformative pedagogical work that benefits queers of color specifically and anti-oppressive educational scholarship more broadly? The articles in this special issue constitute a range of discursive interruptions and pedagogic possibilities that are emblematic of the diversity of approaches to the study of curriculum and pedagogy in the field of educational studies. Each article should be read on its own terms, rather than as contributing to a single conceptual or theoretical project of QOCA. Taken together, however, they can be used to push the boundaries of a particular scholarly project or research agenda as I demonstrate in relation to my own research program following my discussion of each article.

In the first special issue article “LGBTQ Youth of Color Video Making as Radical Curriculum: A Brother Mourning His Brother and a Theory in the Flesh,” Cindy Cruz focuses on cultural productions of queer youth of color that “story the self.” These are media, visual and performing arts pieces in which queer youth of color recount the process of interrogating their own bodies as they confront a range of oppressive forces such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), sexism, racism, homophobia, classism or violence. Drawing on the work of women of color scholars central to Third World feminism, Cruz argues that cultural productions are repositories for “theories in the flesh” that center the lives of queer people of color. These cultural productions, which begin with the body, are a conscious effort of queer people of color to address the Cartesian split that invalidates embodied knowledge, alternative ways of knowing, and problematic categories of identity. The theories in the flesh embedded in cultural productions serve to subvert identity categories and identity politics that essentialize race, class, gender and sexuality identities that render queer youth of color invisible. Theories “in the flesh” that emerge from the cultural productions of queer youth of color illustrate the development of critical consciousness and serve as representational resources that can be used to facilitate reflection and pedagogical possibilities beyond the formal curriculum.

To illustrate this point Cruz conducts a close reading of a video poem produced by Peter John Cord, a queer youth of color participant in an alternative education program in Los Angeles, California, in the United States. The video poem centers on Cord’s brother, Frankie, who lived on the streets, was forced into survival sex and ended up dying from complications of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Cruz suggests using the poem as a heuristic to illustrate the impact of the AIDS epidemic where multiple histories of migration, homophobia and economic duress intersect with what is often “a traffic” in youth in Los Angeles. Without a doubt the violence, discrimination and power relations depicted in cultural productions of queer youth of color are challenging and disruptive of state-sponsored curriculum, which describes learning goals and objectives associated with content areas (Apple, 1990, 2006; Kincheloe & Hayes, 2007; Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Gresson, 1996; Popkewitz, 2000; Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999). Cruz’s work exposes the limitations of curriculum that
corresponds to mainstream notions of what it means to be intelligent and therefore worthy of citizenship. How many teachers trained to administer this formal curriculum would feel prepared to address issues such as HIV/AIDS, homelessness and racism in their classrooms? The life experiences queer youth of color bring to school exist beyond state-sponsored curriculum, which may partially explain why so many queer youth of color report being disengaged from school (Blackburn & McCready, 2009).

Queer youth of color video making opens up pedagogic possibilities related to intersectionality, that is, analyzing how social and cultural categories of identity and oppression are interconnected (Collins, 1993; McCready, 2004). Through “storying the self” in video, queer youth of color video making reveals, in Cruz’s words, “narratives of the body—the scars and legions of violence, neglect, and poverty that are often literally inscribed onto youth bodies” (p. 442). These scars, made visible through video making help youth think and talk critically about the multiple systems of oppression in the world around them. Educators can make these meanings accessible to other youth and adult allies through critical analysis and discussion as they would with texts in the formal curriculum. Another pedagogic possibility that emerges in relation to video making is the idea of teaching and learning as extensions of self-making rather than as disembodied practices. Rather than spending valuable time and energy trying to convince youth to uncritically accept state-sponsored content knowledge that corresponds to nationalist ideas of citizenship (Apple, 1990), Cruz’s work suggests there is much to be gained by making space for youth to create cultural productions of their lives, and then critically reading the web of emotions, ideas and oppressions that undergird their stories. Fostering this kind of critical literacy aids in the development of a critical consciousness that facilitates understanding the various kinds of oppression suffered by others (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Moreover, the development of critical literacy can form the basis of political agency and critical pedagogy that enables youth and adults to form anti-oppressive coalitions and solidarities that challenge multiple norms, discriminations and oppressions that hurt us all (Freire, 2000; Lankshear & McLaren, 1994; Morrell, 2008).

The need for conceptual frameworks and pedagogical practices that challenge multiple normativities and oppressions is an important theme in the second special issue article “Queer Youth v. the State of California: Interrogating Legal Discourses on the Rights of Queer Students of Color,” in which Rigoberto Marquez and Ed Brockenbrough interrogate the absence of race in discourses on queer students’ rights in the state of California. The authors observe that race and class dynamics may not be visible in court cases involving queer youth of color in urban communities because the lawsuits that comprise the cases focus on discrimination based on sexual orientation. Their consideration of two court cases, in particular, is driven by a “speculative” mode of knowledge production.
that underscores the salience of intersectionality in the lives of queer youth of color (Harper, 2000). For example, in the *Flores* case the two Latina/o youth involved were students in a predominantly White school. Marquez and Brockenbrough astutely ask, “How did they experience the school as racial minorities, and in what ways could racial difference account for their marginalized status and ostracism?” They also consider “the institutional climate of the school on matters of racial and cultural differences, and how frequently (if at all) . . . students of color [were] targets of harassment and acts of violence” (p. 473). These speculations interrupt the dominant discourses of queer legal theories that privilege sexual orientation-based discrimination (Hutchinson, 1997, 1999). The intersectionalities inherent in the lives of queer youth of color also hold the potential to interrupt the norms of critical race theory in education scholarship that relies on the ways narratives of people of color speak to experiences framed by racism, often to the exclusion of heterosexism and homophobia (Hutchinson, 1999).

A number of pedagogic possibilities lie in Marquez and Brockenbrough’s analyses, some related to the “speculative” mode of analysis they employ, others related to the implications of their analyses for advocacy work. Speculative modes of analysis hold the possibility of uncovering important power relations and dynamics that are not formally depicted in texts but still count as knowledge and serve to validate the status quo. Marquez and Brockenbrough’s approach serves as an alternative form of literacy, a way of reading the world that helps transform mainstream texts into potential repositories of knowledge that take into account the complex power relations that undergird the everyday lives of queer people of color (Freire, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Morrell, 2008). Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2002) describes this form of pedagogy as “reading in” or raising questions about particular power relations regardless of whether the text explicitly depicts those relations.

Another pedagogic possibility enabled through Marquez and Brockenbrough’s article is the re-imagining of advocacy for queer youth of color. Their work raises important questions about what constitutes effective advocacy for queer youth of color whose experience of marginalization may reflect multiple forms of discrimination. Conventional wisdom suggests the advocacy work done on behalf of the legal team that represented *Flores*, for example, was effective because they won the case, but at what cost? Must queer youth of color de-emphasize and devalue the range of ways they are potentially being marginalized in order to be advocated for effectively under the law, which better recognizes discrimination based on race or sexual orientation rather than race and sexual orientation? Riffing off the scholarship of Angela Valenzuela (1999) who theorized schools subtract resources from youth by dismissing their definition of education and instituting policies and practices that minimize their culture and language, we might view advocacy that requires simplification of queer youth
of color lives and encounters with multiple forms of discrimination as subtractive as well. Pedagogic possibilities lie in thinking about advocacy in ways that do not subtract the conceptual resources of queer youth of color and amending policies to recognize the ways marginalization is constituted through multiple forms of discrimination.

In the special issue’s third article, “Ladlad and Parrhesiastic Pedagogy: Unfurling LGBT Politics and Education in the Global South,” Roland Coloma looks beyond the walls of schools to coalitional politics and community organizing as sites for queer of color knowledge production. Coloma’s article chronicles the work of Ladlad, the first lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) political party in the Philippines to participate and field candidates in a national election. Coloma treats Ladlad’s political activism as an informal learning space outside of traditional K–12 schools. He argues that Ladlad’s activism was successful because members of the party mobilized “parrhesiastic pedagogy,” the fearless practice of truth-telling and speaking to power rooted in Foucault’s tracing of “parrhesia.”

Coloma’s article interrupts a number of dominant discourses in educational studies, the primary one being the tendency to situate one’s scholarship in a single discipline or academic discourse. Coloma, alternatively, situates his scholarship across multiple disciplines such as history, educational studies and ethnic studies, and in doing so points to the need for educational scholars to be in conversation with these other disciplines. Thus one of the interruptive acts of Coloma’s article is to challenge the boundedness of intellectual lenses and academic terrains that are used to think about pedagogical possibilities. Another way Coloma’s article interrupts academic social formations is through challenging the heteronormativity and overrepresentation of East and South Asians in the ethnic studies literature, as well as that discipline’s tendency to focus on the Global North (North America, Western Europe, Australia and Japan) rather than the Global South (Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific Islands). Through situating his work in the Philippines, Coloma points out that queer studies have been hegemonically dominated by theoretical and empirical analyses that foreground the histories, cultures and politics of White gay men from the Global North. Although beginning in the 1980s queer of color scholarship in the humanities and social sciences originating in the United States and Canada offered a critique of the overwhelming whiteness of queer studies, Coloma argues this intervention does not go far enough. In his words, “intellectual, political, and educational work in the Global South can significantly contribute, enhance, and even intervene in the understanding and enactment of Global North projects” (p. 487). For Coloma, the parrhesiastic pedagogy of activists in the Global South can serve as a lens for scholars, activists and educators in the Global North to see their blind spots about communities, schools and other possibilities for intellectual, political and pedagogical work in educational studies.
Coloma’s article is best understood as part of the collective, activist possibilities inherent in public pedagogies beyond formal schooling contexts that construct alternatives to the status quo (Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011). Community activist pedagogies push educators to think about the possibilities of political coalitions in grassroots organizations, neighborhood projects and art collectives as spaces for advancing democratic projects (Meiners & Quinn, 2010). Schools are just one site to learn about the ways of fostering democratic citizenship. Coloma’s article also opens up the possibility of viewing the practices of community activists in a more pedagogical light, one that decenters the work of scholars and researchers in formal educational institutions and pushes them to think more about working in decentered, communal configurations in collaboration with student activists and community organizers (Sandlin et al., 2011). Despite the possibilities afforded through decentering discussions of pedagogy from formal educational institutions, this move is fraught with tensions that I explore in the next section where I reflect on the interruptions and pedagogic possibilities derived from the contributors to this special issue in relation to my own scholarship in urban education.

**PART II: TOWARDS QUEER OF COLOR ANALYSIS IN URBAN EDUCATION**

Scholars in urban education tend to focus on the problems of low-status minority groups, the complexity of urban school systems and the financing and governance of such systems (Gordon, 2003). Urban education is an important site for QOCA for at least two reasons. First, metropolitan areas are home to a wide array of formal, informal and non-formal learning spaces for queer people of color such as alternative school programs for queer youth, social and support services by and for queer youth in and out of school (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). Second, cities are the nexus for multiple glocal forces of domination, which make them ripe for QOCA.

My own research in urban education challenges dominant discourses of the problems of low-status minority groups who are low-achieving, dropouts, “pushed out,” or marginalized on account of their race, language, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, socio-economic and/or citizenship status. Researchers of low-status minority groups seek to understand how and why students are low achieving and/or marginalized at both a structural level (organizational policies and practices of schools and communities) and cultural level (values, beliefs, practices and interactions of groups of students). My own work seeks to understand the range of structural and cultural dynamics that lead Black male students to be disengaged from school (McCready, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2010; Venzant Chambers & McCready, 2011).

In looking at the ways structural and cultural forces shape the schooling experiences and identity constructions of Black male students, it is evident
that gender and sexuality remain under-explored dimensions of their experience. More specifically, there is a tendency to focus on issues of race and class as the primary structural and cultural dimensions affecting the lives of Black male students in urban school communities. I argue, however, that gender and sexuality also are integral structural and cultural dimensions of urban school communities. Thus, Black male students in urban schools potentially can be marginalized not only on the basis of their race and class identities, but on the basis of their gender and sexual orientation as well.

I have begun to articulate pedagogic possibilities based on interrupting the heteronormativity of discourses, interventions and school reforms related to “troubles” of Black boys (McCready, 2009). Some of these possibilities are related to the ones described in the special issue. For example, similar to Cruz, the negative representations of Black youth in educational data from the Toronto District School Board (2006, 2007) and the absence of representations of queer youth of color in the formal curriculum inspired me to think about alternative forms of curriculum and pedagogy that help teachers and students think and talk critically about the power relations and systems of oppression that affect youth well-being. Towards these ends I collaborated with the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (BlackCAP) on the research and knowledge mobilization project “Picasso’s Black Canvas [PBC]: Verbatim Theatre as a Tool to Explore HIV Risk for Young, Black Men Who Have Sex With Men” (Leahy, 2012). The project used life-history interviews with 10 Black gay male youth as a basis for a theatre piece depicting the complex embodied experiences of living as Black, male and queer in Toronto, a city that contains multiple structural and cultural risks and opportunities. I reasoned that PBC might do more to disrupt dominant representations of Black gay male youth than any scholarly article I might write.

The project generated pedagogic possibilities as well in the form of a 3-hour event entitled, “Young, Black and Gifted: (Re)telling Stories of Survival and Thrival for Black Youth” that brought together educators, social workers, artists, youth and adult community members to witness the lives of Black gay male youth as told through a series of overlapping monologues, poems and songs. Both anecdotal feedback and completed evaluation forms from the event indicated a palpable influence on audience members’ views of queer youth of color. For example, one audience member noted the performance caused him “to view Black queer youth in a whole new light.” Another audience member reported that “[t]he performance helped me understand the struggles of Black gay males in Toronto.” It may be easy to understand the concept that queer youth of color experience multiple forms of oppression, but listening to how this plays out in their everyday lives can be heart wrenching and eye opening. Audience members learned how race, class, gender and sexuality norms permeate their home, school and peer-group environments. Moreover, the occasion of the reading brought together youth, educators and service
providers who might be inspired by the event to work together to advocate for the well-being of queer youth of color in ways that draw on rather than subtract the social and cultural resources they have developed over the course of their lives.

It is important to note that these collaborations took place in an informal learning space and that overall the contributors to this special issue examine QOCA beyond the walls of schools: Cruz in a youth video-making workshop, Marquez and Brockenbrough in legal discourses and Coloma in coalitional politics and community organizing. I do not think this is a coincidence. The interruptions and pedagogic possibilities derived from the articles in this special issue reveal tensions related to mobilizing queer of color epistemologies in the context of the official curriculum of schools and generating school-based pedagogies that disrupt these norms. In the final section of this conclusion, I consider the radical potential of QOCA and the challenges associated with realizing this potential in the context of formal educational settings.

PART III: THE RADICAL POTENTIAL OF QUEER OF COLOR ANALYSIS IN EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

In this special issue we have provided the reader with multiple examples of QOCA in educational studies. The contributors bring queer of color epistemologies to bear on a broad range of issues and topics in education and in doing so raise important questions about the knowledges that are brought to bear on teaching and learning, the limitations of dominant discourses and practices that exclude queer people of color, and the pedagogic possibilities of non-formal and informal settings. On the one hand these accomplishments represent the potential of QOCA to be a form of intellectual activism with implications for public pedagogies. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2013) draws from the field of public sociology and reflects on the “special mission” of Mari Evan’s poetry in the Black Arts Movement to define intellectual activism quite simply as “the myriad of ways that people place the power of their ideas in service to social justice (p. ix). QOCA can be viewed as a form of intellectual activism when it does the social justice work of challenging and/or interrupting the dominant ideas and practices of educational studies related to teaching, learning, identity and curriculum. Interestingly, the sites where the contributors choose to do this work are beyond traditional elementary and secondary school settings. In this sense the pedagogic possibilities afforded the intellectual activist work of the contributors to this special issue are more “public,” meaning they focus on various forms, processes and sites of education and learning beyond formal schooling contexts (Sandlin et al., 2011).

On the other hand, it is this radical potential that tends to push QOCA in educational studies beyond the walls of school into spaces beyond the
reach of state-sponsored curriculum and normative conceptions of learning and citizenship. It seems QOCA will not and cannot realize its radical potential if it is simply incorporated into formal educational institutions. In “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens,” Cathy Cohen (1997) argues that the radical potential of queer politics lies not in simply including queer people of color into existing canons and social movements, but rather “if there is truly any radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin” (p. 438).

So where does this leave QOCA in terms of its relevance for formal educational institutions? Although Cruz and Coloma, for example, provide a strong rationale for focusing on informal and non-formal learning contexts, paying close attention to the interruptions and pedagogic possibilities of grassroots activists’ practices and cultural productions, neither contributor seems enthusiastic about bridging their pedagogic insights to formal educational institutions. I do not think these contributors are alone in their skepticism of the pedagogic possibilities of QOCA in formal educational institutions. The “common sense” of those institutions are powerful and working against it requires understanding, ironically, that knowledge, including that produced by queer people of color, is paradoxical (Kumashiro, 2004). Queer of color epistemologies can help us improve the lives of queer youth of color in schools, and more generally make schools more inclusive of all students. At the same time QOCA results in the need for healing from the suffering that results from the conventional ways we learn and think, and the ways we challenge those conventions (Kumashiro, 2004). Until those spaces for healing exist in formal educational institutions, I suspect queer people of color will struggle to produce knowledge that is directly germane to schools.

I want to thank my co-editor, Ed Brockenbrough, and the contributors to this special issue for daring to continue their work on queer of color knowledge production in the face of a scholarly community that struggles to understand the relevance of such knowledge. I also want to thank Dennis Thiessen, Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández and the editorial staff of *Curriculum Inquiry* for their foresight and diligence in devoting the inaugural special issue to an area of curriculum studies that is less well known in academia.

**NOTE**

1. In the notes to the Introduction of *Aberrations in Black*, Roderick Ferguson (2004) defines queer of color analysis as a mode of critique that “interrogates social formations at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices” (p. 149).
REFERENCES


