CHAPTER 5

The Class in Race, Gender, and Learning

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5.1 Introduction

In 2011, we published the first iteration of our scholarly work to produce a Marxist feminist reading of educational scholarship, research, and teaching. Located specifically within the field of critical adult education, and drawing from personal, intellectual, and scholarly histories of activism and community organizing, the collection titled *Educating from Marx: Race, Gender, and Learning* ambitiously sets out to address the contradiction between critical aspirations of educators and the reproductive function of education within capitalism by developing 'theoretical frameworks that expose and explain the underlying social relations that consolidate the social and material inequalities characterizing our communities' (Carpenter & Mojab, 2011, p. 4). We intended the text as a theoretical, empirical, and political intervention in both the Marxist and feminist theorizations of education.

Over the fifteen years prior to the publication of our text, Marxist education scholars Paula Allman (1999, 2007, 2010) and Glenn Rikowski (1996, 1997) completed detailed analysis to demonstrate the fault lines of a positivist reading of Marx's critique of capital and, particularly, the influence of that reading within the field of education. Rikowski went so far as to argue that it was time to set fire to a reliance on deterministic interpretations of the base/

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superstructure model and the mechanistic reading of education that led to intractable debates about the relative autonomy of education systems and teacher agency. Rather, the renewed purpose of Marxist educational theory should be directed at 'class as an element of the constitution of a world of struggle in practice' (Allman et al., 2005, p. 135). Beginning from this position, we also felt as though Marxist and Marxian analysis in education struggled with the same problems of Marxist thought more broadly: the thorough and thoughtful centering of women, people of color, trans and queer people, Indigenous people, and non-European modes of non/capitalist social relations in their analysis. While deeming capitalism to be a world system, the way much of the world experienced capitalism seemed to be less relevant within the Marxist tradition and produced an analysis over-reliant on the false universalism of a cisgender, heterosexual white male worker in the historical center of capitalist development. This kind of analysis limited the world of capitalism to the manufacturing floor and paid less attention to the fields, the home, the school, the welfare office, the back alleys, the bordellos, and all the other domains in which labor not easily visible within the valorization process takes place.

We also argued that feminist analyses of education struggle with the same challenges that the 'cultural turn' and the liberal bourgeois-ification of feminism wrestle with more broadly. Following particular academic interventions in the 1980s and 1990s, feminist theory quite simply absented class from its analysis and continued to leave an analysis of race to a marginal position, while embracing discussions of race that left intact the essence of liberal and capitalist social relations (Bannerji, 2000). Through this 'turn', feminist theory disconnected itself from feminist movement-making, while feminist mobilization, particularly in parts of the world deeply living within relations of colonialism and continuing aggressions and intensification of imperialism, did not undergo a similar turn (Fraser, 2009). Instead, they struggled with a slow take over by the nongovernmental and nonprofit industrial complex (INCITE!, 2017; Jad, 2008; Korolczuk, 2016). Part of the fall out of this tremendous shift was that feminist educational theorists were educated within a body of theory that fragmented race, class, and capital from patriarchy, both conceptually and within their analysis of educational systems specifically.

Into this landscape, we endeavored to collectively build a framework that would direct our inquiry to an explicitly feminist, anti-racist, and dialectical historical materialist analysis of education. Our aim was to return to the labor-capital relation as a dialectical contradiction; as not only a unity of two opposites, but as an internal relation concretized in social relations of gender, race, sexuality, language, ability, and nation. The social universe of capital recreates and expands itself through, paradoxically, the labor of people. We followed Marx's assertion that this laboring life was a conscious life to a particular conclusion: the social universe of capital is learned, and it can be unlearned. Through the use of particular analytical tools, we can understand its complex ideological processes, its morphology, and its points of crisis, contradiction,

and collapse. In the years since we first published our thinking, much has changed in the world and in the growing areas of scholarship that address lacunas in Marxist and feminist theorizing, including underdeveloped areas of our work.

In this chapter, we want to provide some discussion about how our thinking about Marxist feminism and education has developed and what are areas of growth and change within what should be constantly iterative and evolving theoretical debates. To accomplish this, we proceed as follows. First, we will revisit and situate our thinking within broader discussions of Marxist feminism and education. Second, we will revisit in more depth our discussion around 'social relations of difference' within capitalism and discuss how we might think of these relations as constitutive of capitalism as a whole. We do this through a comparative example of the recent critiques of the theorization of oppression that inform ongoing efforts at Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) work in educational institutions. Third, we will consider the implications of expanding our feminist and anti-racist reading of historical materialist dialectics for ongoing analysis within educational research and theory.

5.2 Reading Marxist Feminism in Education

Our goal in this section is both to review our framing of Marxist feminism and education and to situate our reading of Marx. We recognize Marx's deficits in bringing his sharp analytical frame to questions of gender, sexuality, race, and nation, although he, and later Engels, developed some crucial insights. But we also recognize the work of extraordinary people like Dorothy Smith, Paula Allman, and Himani Bannerji who emphasized understanding the method of Marx rather than reading his texts in a prescriptive manner. In the work of these scholars, we find, as Dorothy Smith argued (2011, p. 20), a way to 'learn from a Marx who has seemed to me to have something different to teach than I have found in most of his interpreters'.

Thus, we read Marx and Marxian scholarship with an eye toward those who emphasize the ontological and, specifically, try to understand Marx's dialectics and take seriously his and Engels' guidance to

> not set out from what men [sic] say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process. (Marx & Engels, 1968, pp. 37–38)

We also take guidance from those who take seriously his emphasis on history and the importance of historical processes and forces in understanding our reality. To this end, we find reading Marxist historical analysis to be crucial to the development of contemporary social analysis. And we try to stay grounded in his articulation of materialism, that is *historical* materialism, which helps us to address what Paula Allman (2007, p. 35) calls 'inversions and separations in

thought and practice'. This mode of analysis helps us to constantly interrogate and recognize problems of abstraction, fragmentation, dichotomization, reification, and fetishism in social analysis. We do this through constant commitment to dialectical analysis as 'a way of thinking that brings into focus the full range of changes and interactions that occur in the world' (Ollman, 1993, p. 10).

In the introduction to *Educating from Marx*, we argued that a Marxist feminist framework for education, one that would be explicitly anti-racist, required five theoretical considerations. We called them 'considerations' instead of theories, because we wanted to encourage ongoing theoretical iteration, rather than suggest a rigid or dogmatic analysis, which has been a problematic tendency within positivist readings of Marxism more broadly. Further, we see theory-making as a form of praxis. As praxis, theory-making is constantly in motion, undergoing change, and in need of critical interrogation.

These considerations, however, were developed as a way to point Marxist feminist inquirers toward key questions for self and social, critical reflection. These theoretical considerations include a theory of the social (ontology), a theory of capitalist social relations and difference (an expansion of ontology), a theory of knowledge (epistemology), a theory of consciousness and learning (a dialectic of ontology and epistemology), and a theory of social change (teaching/learning for revolution). These five considerations were not conceived in a causal or linear manner, but rather as internally related. We believe they have heuristic value for Marxist feminist thinkers, and they help us not only to situate ourselves within the bodies of Marxist and feminist thought more broadly, but also to refine the analytical tools we use to interrogate and analyze the world we reproduce every day. And of course the purpose of these analytical tools is not simply to describe and explain, but to push for revolutionary social transformation.

The first of these considerations, that of ontology or a theory of the social, remains grounded in a feminist and anti-racist reading of dialectical historical materialism. We recognize that not all aspects of the Marxist tradition are particularly concerned with Marx's struggles with ontology, but we take seriously his critique laid out in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. For example, in the very first thesis, he refers to reality as 'not an object of contemplation', that is not an external 'thing', but as 'human sensuous activity' (Marx, 1968, p. 659). By turning his attention to the activity of being human, to the modes through which humans make and remake their material and social lives, Marx shifts the perspective of inquiry to the social and relational constitution of our lived reality. Beginning here, Marx emphasizes continually throughout his work, particularly on political economy, the active and conscious way in which humans construct their world socially and relationally and, in turn, then objectify and reify that world through specific acts of consciousness and forms of ideology, which he also understands as 'practical, human-sensuous activity' (ibid., p. 660). Through this reification of society as structures and systems, or what Dorothy Smith (2001, p. 166) calls 'blob-ontology', we arrive at 'violent abstractions' that reinforce, normalize, and naturalize our social reality. We use

the term reification to refer to particular acts of consciousness that turn process and relations into static 'things'. Reification, as a mode of thinking, removes time, and thus history and motion, from our understanding of our social reality. It also removes human agency, labor, and consciousness, turning social phenomena into 'things' that come from who knows where. Sayer (1987, p. 19) summarizes this ontological position within Marx's method when he argues that

> Marx did not conceive social reality atomistically, as made up of clearly bounded, separate, interacting entities: the kind of analytic particulars which can be grasped in clear, consistent and exclusive definitions. He saw the world, rather, as a complex network of internal relations, within which any single element is what it is only by virtue of its relationship to others.

It is important that Sayer (ibid.) emphasizes Marx's ontology as conceptual. This is because, as Mao Tse-Tung (2007) argued in his interpretation of Marx, it is not possible, on the terrain of ontology, to differentiate between knowing and being. Marx and Engels (1968) emphasized this point when they repeatedly referred to life as 'conscious life'. Rather, Mao argued, it is on the terrain of epistemology where we develop modes of conceptualization to grasp our lived reality. In other words, all knowing is, in some way, an act of abstraction and is 'the mechanism by which thought can have access to and come to know objectively the realm of reality' (Knight, 2005, p. 175). It is for this reason that the method of abstraction, the epistemology of historical materialism, is crucial.

Marx's emphasis on concepts is replete throughout his writing, and his constantly shifting usage of them has been the subject of much objection and debate. It is his particular usage of concepts to name and ground his ontological position that is the root cause of so much misreading and ill-usage of his work. This is, in part, because Marx's method of critique often involved taking an already existing concept, for example, civil society, and reconceptualizing it in a relational way that is dialectical, historical, and materialist. As Bertell Ollman (2004, p. 25) argued, '[t]he relational is the irreducible minimum for all units in Marx's conception of social reality'. To produce knowledge in a way that is committed to the ontology of historical materialism and to a dialectical and empirical method of rigor is the basis of Marx's epistemology (Smith, 2011).

The inseparability of knowing and being, ontology and epistemology, is the basis for Marx's articulation of consciousness. We have written extensively about Marx's theorization of consciousness elsewhere (Carpenter & Mojab, 2017), but it is perhaps best summarized by Paula Allman (2007, p. 32) when she argues that

> Marx conceptualizes consciousness and reality as an internally related unity of opposites. Additionally, reality is conceptualized dynamically, as the sensuous, active experience of human beings in the material world. Therefore, at any one moment in time, consciousness is comprised of thoughts that arise from each human being's sensuous activity. Moreover, the consciousness of any human

> being will also include thoughts that have arisen external to the individual's own sensuous activity, i.e., from other people's sensuous activity both historically and contemporaneously.

Allman directs our attention here to both the ontological core of Marx's theorization of consciousness, but also to the idea that consciousness is, even in an individual, fundamentally a social phenomenon. Thus, human beings are constantly mediating not only their own everyday reality and experience, but knowledge and ideology inherited from the past and circulating in the present.

Consciousness occupies a particular place of interest in Marx's work in part because of the necessity of his critique of philosophical idealism. But it is also important because of the final point made in the *Thesis on Feuerbach*, which famously reminds scholars that the point of our work is not just to interpret the world, but to help change it. In this way, how we theorize consciousness and praxis, and thus learning and education, is fundamental to a project of social change, as are the ways in which we learn to analyze our society and formulate proposals for transformation. For this reason, we assert that all social change is pedagogical; in order to change the world, we must develop a critical understanding of it and learn to formulate a vision of our shared future. This kind of learning, however, is only possible when we engage in critical and self-reflective praxis embedded within and for purposes of class struggle, which is within a collective effort to transform our world. Social change is not only a process of forms of power confronting one another, but also a process of building knowledge and engaging in forms of praxis and struggle. Thus, our commitments to our own ongoing reflection, engagement, study, and praxis are indispensable. Paula Allman (2007) says this differently when she asserts that Marx's theory of consciousness is in actuality a theory of praxis, of the unity of thought and action. Rather than understanding praxis in a linear or causal manner, this notion of critical revolutionary praxis emphasizes the emergence of critical knowledge within class struggle.

Evidently, this reading of ontology, epistemology, and consciousness is deeply grounded in Marx and Engel's elaborations in *The German Ideology*. We read Marx to understand his analysis of the logic of capitalism and to go beyond what he was able to articulate. Further, we read Marx to understand his method of social analysis, and to be able to use it to read other critical bodies of literature, including feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist writing. This transdisciplinary and emancipatory reading of social theory is necessary in the field of education, which is knee-capped by its devotion to staying in the realm of the 'visible'. Understanding the world in terms of what is immediately visible does not require historical materialist analysis or any other form of scientific inquiry beyond systematic observation. It also does not require us to ask any questions beyond 'what' we are seeing that move us toward 'why' or 'how'. When we stay in the realm of the visible, and the fetishized realm of experience, we keep our inquiry in step with the outward appearance of social phenomena. In doing this, we direct our attention toward the effects of social relations and

thus confuse appearance with essence. The move from the individual to the social, from the fetishized to the relational, from the spontaneous to the critical, requires acts of inquiry that push further and further into the intricate processes and relations that constitute our social world. The goal is to understand what cannot be easily seen. Searching for the invisible is the ultimate goal of inquiry.

Reviewing recent debates on questions of race, gender, class, and sexuality has allowed us to think more deeply about the relationality of this explicitly dialectical, historical, materialist ontology and the phenomenon of social difference, by which we refer to processes of racialization and racial formation, gender, sexuality, ability, language, and nation. The existence of the diversity of the human species is not the crucial point of reflection, but rather the construction of certain forms of difference as significant, particularly within ongoing capitalist accumulation and, historically, for the development of capitalism. In the following section, we will continue our discussion of what we are referring to as 'capitalist social relations' and relations of difference. We want to emphasize the cruciality of this discussion within and among Marxist thinkers, readers, writers, and activists because of two key considerations. First, we believe that a social ontology articulated through concepts like social relations provides the best way to understand individuals and individual experiences and thus to resolve this inherent tension of what is 'individual' and what is 'social' and thus what constitutes social relations. Second, we contend that understanding the intricacies of social relations of difference within capitalism is the best, and perhaps only, way to actually approach an understanding of the 'universe' of capitalism.

5.3 Thinking Through Social Relations of Difference

In order to unpack our thinking about capitalist social relations and difference in a grounded way, we want to use the problem of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) work as an instructive and productive case. In following the previous discussion of our five considerations, our aim is not to look at EDI through these five considerations, but to use the complexity of EDI to elaborate one of these considerations. It is our hope that this will allow us to point out some of the difficulties of why the social relations of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and nation (among others) must be thought out as the *constitutive* relations of capitalism. In doing so, we reject a theorization of these social relations as mere 'effects' or epiphenomenal appearances of capitalist exploitation. But we also must contend with theorizations of forms of oppression that obscure the historical ontologies through which these relations come into being and what their continued, and persistent, organization has to do with the mode of production in which we live. In doing this work, we must all interrogate the forms of consciousness, praxis, teaching/learning, and activism that emerge from different ways of thinking through social relations of difference.

We have chosen EDI work as an instructive case in part because of its ubiquity, but also its specificity. Resulting from ongoing demands from historically oppressed and marginalized communities, EDI work can be found in many organizational spaces, but most certainly in educational institutions, from early childhood to postsecondary education and adult, workplace, and community education. EDI work, particularly in our context in Canada, includes an array of institutional practices and responses to persistent problems of discrimination, harassment, bias, exclusion, violence, and marginalization on the basis of race, sex and sexuality, gender, ability, language, ethnicity, age, and a host of other social positions related to civil and human rights. In other words, EDI work is the attempt by educational institutions to mitigate the racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, ableism, and, very rarely, classism that infuse all aspects of schools and universities.

Typically, in its most visible iteration, EDI work refers to institutional practices related to hiring and supervision, that is, the labor of people working within these institutions. But there are also efforts to infuse EDI in curriculum revision, asking disciplines to account for their roles in histories of social injustice and to teach content that helps to address the ongoing power relations between education institutions and particular communities, histories, and bodies of knowledge. So, for example, we are currently involved in 'EDI' efforts related to changing tenure and promotion practices in universities, revising undergraduate and graduate curricula, supporting secondary schools principals to respond to incidents of racism in their schools, and supporting teachers to 'Indigenize' provincial curricula. The weeding out of white supremacist and colonial content from primary and secondary curricula and the retraining of teachers to address nationalist mythologies is only one part of the many EDI initiatives moving through educational institutions today. Universal design, building school climates that embrace gender and neurodiversity, addressing racial bias, supporting immigrant students through more robust language learning, and addressing the legacies of colonialism for Indigenous students are all activities that, depending on the politics of those advocating these positions, might be brought under an EDI banner.

EDI, which in our Canadian context is sometimes augmented to EDID (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization), should also be of special interest to educational scholars and practitioners because it posits a theory of change which is pedagogical in form. The vast majority of EDI work is focused on trainings and workshops (compulsory or otherwise), with attention as well to policies around hiring, safety, and the rooting out of discriminatory and biased institutional practices. For the last thirty or forty years, there has been a growing industry of workplace training and human resource management that pays special attention to addressing issues of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and language in many different kinds of workplaces, including schools, through language such as unconscious bias, cultural competency, multiculturalism, and even sometimes anti-racism. How to make educational institutions more diverse, accessible, inclusive, and equitable has been reinvigorated as a major

issue of public concern in North America, following prominent police murders of Black people in the United States and the huge uptick on a global scale to attention to issues of anti-Black racism.

Almost as soon as EDI policies emerged, they were critiqued from all sides. Conservative voices who believe in concepts such as 'meritocracy' and who purport to be 'color blind' rejected the need for these interventions. Similar calls named these problems as exclusively individual and not institutional in nature, for example, the bad apple argument. There may be one male teacher who sexually violates his students, but the problem begins and ends with that individual. There is also a raging debate in centers of empire, including North America and Europe, about how to teach the history of colonization and imperialism, with many detractors insisting these issues are best acknowledged and then left in the past. These critiques of EDI set out to disprove that there is anything social or institutional at work in the continued impunity around acts of discrimination and harassment, but also to forestall the critique that there is anything fundamentally oppressive about how educational institutions do their work. For more progressive and even some radical voices, EDI work is often met with suspicion, if not disdain. The hegemonic reality of EDI as a means to create the appearance of reform without any real substantive shifts in power became quickly apparent.

And yet, as a strategy for social change, it not only persists, but expands. EDI work cannot be seen as solely the brick wall described by Sara Ahmed (2012), despite the particularly apt and accurate description of the bureaucratic gaslighting that constitutes this kind of institutional practice. Critics of EDI must also recognize that the problem exists not just in how the institution responds to demands for change, but also in the demands themselves. To be clear, there is a continuum of demands made, but the ones that gain the most traction with institutions and protesters alike are those that ask for recognition of difference and forms of oppression, the inclusion of (some of) the people, and (some of) the ways of knowing historically excluded from the university and school curricula, and thus increased representation. The politics of recognition, representation, inclusion, and accommodation require that those within the institution learn to think about difference differently and, on a conflated and misunderstood continuum, acknowledge their bias, privilege, and, sometimes, structures/systems of oppression. Thus, the pedagogical component of this theory of change.

A problem emerges. EDI work, while pushing for greater recognition of the problems of racism, heterosexism, misogyny, and ableism, is positioned as performing a dual, and contradictory, act. On the one hand, it can recognize oppressive social relations and at the same time posit the institutions constituted through these relations and charged for decades with their reproduction, as the solution to this problem. In other words, as African American history scholar Robin D.G. Kelley (2016, para. 10) argued, 'core demands for greater diversity, inclusion, and cultural-competency training converge with their critics' fundamental belief that the university possesses a unique teleology: it is

supposed to be an enlightened space free of bias and prejudice, but the pursuit of this promise is hindered by structural racism and patriarchy'.

There is a particular conundrum here: how did we get ourselves into a situation where we can acknowledge oppression and try to address it, but through our acknowledgment participate in concretizing a different form of the same social force? Without an understanding of class relations on an international scale, including their historical and contemporary forms within settler and colonial contexts, it is impossible to see from whence these educational institutions came, in what interests they continue to do their work, or how their appearance can shift without a fundamental revolution in the essence of their form or purpose. The contradictions within EDI work allow us to think deeper about the constitutive relations of capitalism and the limits of a conceptualization of social difference that does not allow us to ask questions about class, class formation, and class struggle. Through this lens of interrogation, we hope to be able to throw into sharper relief what differentiates a Marxist feminist analysis of capitalist social relations from other feminist and anti-racist approaches that naturalize existing class relations and their concretization in institutions such as schools and universities. In order to pursue this analysis, we must go beyond the dominant Marxist understanding of class as well as the dominant feminist understanding of gender and race.

Buried deep in notebook four of *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973) has an extended discussion of how limits are dealt with in the circulation of capital. In summating his analysis of this dynamic of capitalist accumulation, he argues, 'but from the fact that capital posits every such limit as a barrier and hence gets *ideally* beyond it, it does not by any means follow that it has *really* overcome it' (ibid., p. 410, emphasis in original). In discussing the universe of capital in this way, he points us toward a crucial aspect of this dynamic when he uses the concepts of *ideally* and *really* in his description. By *ideally*, he is of course referring to the realm of the ideal, of consciousness, and of ideology, and with *really*, he signals another, different, material reality. In other words, it is through human consciousness that limits to capital are transformed into mere barriers and are then overcome. In the passage immediately preceding this quote, Marx is discussing how humans, in the development of capitalism, shifted their consciousness around nature and engaged in 'nature idolatry' where nature 'becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself' (ibid.). In other words, through ideological praxis, capitalism absorbs its own limits and contradictions. We have many, many examples of the ways in which a politics of representation functions in this regard. The entire episode of American history in which the election of Barack Obama and the establishment of a 'post-racial' society was immediately followed by the election of a proto-fascist, white supremacist is sufficient to make this point.

One of the great ideological tricks has been our own production of explanations of capitalism that fragment the ontology of this mode of production and allow the constitutive relations of capitalism to be obscured in favor of abstract 'bodies', or falsely universal, white male bodies, that act and are acted upon in particular ways. In other words, this involves taking apart the entirety of the

ontology of capitalism and breaking into different forms of oppression, different identities, that somehow must be philosophically reconstituted on the terrain of epistemology when they are in fact ontologically inseparable and historically co-constitutive. The current punching bag for this form of analysis, although liberalism and positivism are the culprits, is intersectionality, a feminist framework emerging from the theorization of a diverse range of Black, feminist scholars (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Taylor, 2018).

A great deal has already been written, either to dismiss intersectionality as ontologically incompatible with a dialectical and historical materialist approach, or to try and reconcile these two 'traditions' (Bohrer, 2019). It is not our intent to rehash that discussion here as we have done it somewhere else, but we read intersectionality as a concept that fragments the social totality of capitalism and cannot articulate modes of oppression through their constitution in class relations. Paradoxically, it emerged out of an attempt to do just this, but its refinement into a fetishized theory has relied upon an absenting of capitalism from its analysis. Its current popularity, in part, stems from the extent and ease of its co-optability. In this way, intersectionality, no matter how radical the intent of its user, requires the stitching back together of a social universe that cannot be ruptured in such ways (Mojab & Carpenter, 2019).

Regardless of the reasons why Marxists are either uncomfortable with, or perhaps too easily accept, the premises of intersectionality, this framework is not the only approach to theorizing oppression that struggles to overcome a fragmentation of social relations. Attention to this work is sorely needed as much Marxian scholarship continues to struggle with the same problems of reification and fragmentation of social relations. We would include a host of critical scholars, including Marxist scholars and ourselves, in this complaint. One important lesson of Marx's work is that dialectical analysis is always changing and never ending. And so, we carry on. In this section, we want to weave together some recent analyses that challenge dominant theorizations of oppression, and which highlight the corrosive and insidious ways in which neoliberal ideology has infused our thinking about capitalist social relations and shaped our demands within its universe.

We bring neoliberalism as a concept to the discussion here to help make visible the ways in which class warfare has operated at the level of public policy, discourse, and institutional reorganization over the last forty years, resulting in the extension, differentiation, and intensification of capitalism into all domains of human life, including our own subjectivities. Neoliberal policy and ideology, enacted and circulated by *people*, has so effectively riddled the domain of social reproduction with crisis that more and more aspects of life have been subsumed within the labor-capital relation, or simply disappeared entirely. At the same time, the normalization, naturalization, and, thus, neutralization of these processes and relations have left many of us grasping for moments when these ideologies crack open. These theorizations of capitalist social relations determine our political demands and proposals for social change, and thus critical engagement with them is important, but also generative, for developing our thinking as Marxist feminist educators.

Difference, Identity, and the Pain of Oppression

Following the 2014 murder of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri, a new era of activism against police violence and anti-Black racism began in the United States. Characterized by Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives, these political movements have crossed borders and circulate widely on the global scale. They also contain multitudes and fractious debates across a political spectrum. In 2016, Robin D.G. Kelley contributed a critique of the shape of some of this movement building, particularly on university campuses, to a forum in *Boston Review*. This critique emerged again, recently, when it was censored from an Advanced Placement curriculum in African America History by the actions of the Florida State Legislature.

His critique, however, concerns not only activism against anti-Black racism, but the question of political resistance and struggle within the academy at all, and perhaps even educational institutions more broadly. He begins with a critique of what he calls the 'more modest' politics of inclusion, accommodation, and recognition; in other words, the project of EDI. These demands, he argues, express a felt and lived reality of the trauma of anti-Black racism and its constant, unrelenting, and trans-local visibility given the advent of digital communication technologies. However, embodied in these 'modest' demands, Kelley sees a theorization of oppression that reduces Blackness to suffering, psychologizes and individualizes that suffering, and engages in a historical forgetting of the myriad and creative forms of Black resistance that have charted the freedom dreams of not only Black diasporic communities, but many other racialized and oppressed peoples as well.

Kelley is not, by far, the only scholar who has raised concerns over the individualizing of oppressive social relations through the language of trauma, despite demands for trauma to be recognized as part of the history of particular social groups. Chi Chi Shi (2018, para. 6) has gone as far as to argue that 'the psychic dimension of recognition permeates the language of the left' and that demands for inclusion are increasingly based in 'affective recognition from institutions and those in positions of power'. Shi (ibid., para 7) argues that underneath the discursive demand for recognition, particularly of trauma, lies 'pressures of individualisation produced by neoliberalism' that 'have created a political climate where the demand for emancipation sounds as a demand to de-stigmatize and make visible oppressed identities' (ibid.). For Shi, this turn in left politics, and the theorization of oppression that underpins it, is inseparable from 'neoliberalism as a rationality that structures subject-formation' (ibid., para 13). Neoliberal rationality not only seeks to reorient our understanding of ourselves as rational, self-interested, and competitive individuals, it seeks to promote politics that undermine any sense of public or common good, social solidarity, or collective identity. In this way, Shi (ibid., para 14) argues that

> Neoliberalism, in its attempts to destroy the basis for collectivity, provides the basis on which movements privilege individuality. Reflected in the theory and

> practice of contemporary identity-politics is a depoliticisation of struggle which frames oppression as subjective and individual. The discursive shifts enacted in the language of identity politics evince the shifting assumptions concerning the boundaries of possibility. In general terms, the primary shift has been from language that signals collective and structural issues to language which privileges individual behaviors and emphasizes difference. Even though it is stressed that oppression is 'systemic,' it is the effects of oppression that are focused upon … The problem with this reading is that focusing on the victims of misrecognition often overshadows analysis of the causes of misrecognition.

Shi takes pains to recognize that the concept of 'identity politics' is now largely divorced from the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist usage first articulated by the Combahee River Collective. While there are many insights to her analysis, we want to focus on her insistence that the current recalibration of oppression through its affective dimensions not only colludes with neoliberalism, it does so by reducing our focus to the effects of oppression. Our gaze, directed in this manner, remains out of focus of the causes, or roots, of these social relations. We have argued many times that the purpose of Marxist feminist analysis is to overcome exactly this problem; our aim is not only the effect of social relations, but the constitution of them. We must investigate not only the appearance of these social relations, but their essence.

Kelley (2016) makes a similar point in his piece. The forum in *Boston Review* offered several affirmative and dissenting opinions on Kelley's argument, but as a whole the forum raised the question of the difference between political strategy and political analysis. As a strategy, some may see efficacy to demands for institutional reform via the politicization of suffering, particularly if they build to bigger demands for change. However, Kelley's critique is not only leveled at the strategies of EDI. It is directed at the theorization of oppression that underpins these demands and which articulates oppression as policies and practices within institutions, and sometimes bias within people, as forces that truncate the life chances of *individuals*. He addresses the individualizing tendencies of these discourses and theories of trauma through attention to 'bodies'. He argues that

> to identify anti-Black violence as heritage may be true in a general sense, but it obscures the dialectic that produced and reproduced the violence of a regime dependent on Black *life* for its profitability. It was, after all, the resisting Black body that needed 'correction.' Violence was used not only to break bodies but to discipline *people* who refused enslavement. And the impulse to resist is neither involuntary nor solitary. It is a choice made in community, made possible by community, and informed by memory, tradition, and witness. (*ibid*., para 25, emphasis in original)

Kelley identifies here a problem of social fragmentation, specifically of 'the dialectic' of white supremacy and capitalism. It is not the only fragmentation he cogently and concisely identifies within this passage and to which we will

return. But for now, we turn our attention to a re-constitutive approach to conceptualizing capitalist social relations and difference.

The Struggle to Overcome Fragmentation and False Universalisms

Through the struggle to reorient our thinking toward social relations, or as Ollman (2004) posits to see 'social relations as subject matter' (p. 23), we must fully move our ontological grounding to the relational, dialectical, historical, and materialist approach Marx and Engels (1968) repeatedly articulate throughout *The German Ideology*. We then struggle to reformulate and use concepts that signal, as Dorothy Smith (2005) was fond of saying, the 'ontological shift' (p. 4). *Social relations* is one such concept, and to use it signals a different ontology and epistemology than systems, structures, discourses, or any similar conceptualization that accomplishes the taken-for-granted task of reifying and fragmenting social totality. In *Educating from Marx*, we described social relations as 'both forms of consciousness and practical, sensuous, human activity (not just what we think, but also what we do)' (Mojab & Carpenter, 2019, p. 5). We then argued that the concept of social relations becomes a useful tool for contemporary social analysis when we understand that we are consciously living *capitalist* social relations.

Capitalist social relations, or the capitalist mode of production as a 'mode of life' (Marx & Engels, 1968, p. 32), is then taken beyond an economistic or determinist emphasis on the economy or even simple production, consumption, and circulation. To understand the mode of life of capitalism, it is necessary to understand all its particulars and how, within those particulars, the totality of capitalism might be found. To this end, every form of 'social difference' or 'othering' is an opportunity to better understand the universe of capitalism. To be clear, we are speaking specifically of social relations of race, gender, sexuality, nation, and ability, which are the forms through which class relations have emerged and are continually concretized within capitalism.

But the way we go about inquiry into 'the social' is key, and it begins with conceptualization. Hopefully, at this point we have put to rest the theorizations of race or gender or sexuality as purely cultural or epiphenomenal. It should be obvious after so much careful scholarship of race, gender, and sexuality that these are the relations that constitute the most intimate aspects of our material reality (see, among many others, Anievas & Nişancioğlu, 2015; Federici, 2004; Horne, 2020). As Nancy Fraser (2014, p. 55) argued, they are 'behind Marx's hidden abode'. If Marx sought to go from the appearance of the market to the 'hidden abode' of production, then Marxist scholarship must move beyond into the hidden abodes of reproduction in order to understand how the abode of production is constituted. Education is one of these crucial abodes. As Bannerji argued, to work in the realm of these sorts of abstractions presupposes false universalisms of male-ness, white-ness, cis-ness, hetero-ness, and able-bodied-ness. This is a significant blind spot in some Marxian scholarship since 'the actual realization process of capital cannot be outside a given social and

cultural form or mode. There is no capital that is a universal abstraction. Capital is always a practice, a determinate set of social relations- and a cultural one at that' (Bannerji, 2011, p. 47).

But the authors discussed in the previous section are also pointing toward other problems in our conceptualizations and articulations of difference and 'otherness'. To the extent that we rely upon fragmented ontologies that divvy-up social relations into ossified identity categories with essentialist characteristics, we are then left with only the option of conceiving of these identities as *externally* related. This puts us back into the realm of reified ontology. It also opens us up to problems of equating identity with consciousness, which can obscure very real class interests as well as complex collusion with white supremacy, patriarchy, and so forth, not to mention paternalistic forms of racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. Kelley and Shi also caution against equating the appearance of oppressive social relations with their essence. They explicitly argue that placing a determining primacy on affect renders invisible the actual constitution of capitalist social relations and, importantly, substitutes collective, revolutionary struggle for individual well-being.

But again, the question of how we theorize capitalist social relations is not just key for the development of political strategy, but it is crucial for political analysis and thus pedagogical processes of politicization and conscientization. As educational researchers and activists, we must direct our attention to constitutive questions, such as how does schooling and education, more broadly, produce and reproduce not only classed relations, but racialized and gendered class relations? How can we move beyond inclusion, accommodation, and equity politics that leave these class relations untroubled and simply seek to propagate mythologies of mobility? To answer such questions requires shifting the starting point and standpoint of analysis away from how individuals experience the effects of social relations as well as refusing a posited duality of the self and the social. Overcoming such fragmentation of the self and the social is the same ontological struggle to overcome the reification of capitalism in undialectical readings of Marxist analysis. This ontological struggle leads to an epistemological one and, hopefully, a changed pedagogical praxis and the taking up of education as a domain of class struggle.

5.4 Returning to Living, Learning, and Teaching Revolution

In the epilogue to *Educating from Marx: Race, Gender, and Learning*, we proposed that there were three important dialectical 'moments' at the core of revolutionary pedagogy. These were the dialectics of matter/consciousness, necessity/freedom, and essence/appearance. We proposed these moments to guide the critical and reflective praxis of educators; we argued that these moments should guide the choices we make regarding content and pedagogy as well as the myriad of other choices, decisions, and processes that critical educators encounter in their teaching/learning work. We chose the dialectic of

matter and consciousness to remind educators of the necessity of working from an ontology that understands human activity, social relations, and forms of consciousness as conscious, sensuous, active relations.

In other words, as Freire (1973, p. 60) argued, 'consciousness as consciousness of consciousness'. We chose the dialectic of freedom and necessity to remind ourselves that the actually existing world and its complex forms of exploitation and oppression are the conditions in which we live and the relations we must revolutionize. We must work with the world as we find it, and, in this struggle, we must constantly remind ourselves that our freedom dreams, as Robin D.G. Kelley calls them, must be radical and 'go to the root'. Finally, we chose the dialectic of appearance and essence to remind ourselves of the purpose of critical science. As Marx (1959, p. 817) famously cautioned in the third volume of capital, 'all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided'. The way things appear in the everyday conceals the social relations, ideologies, and contradictions that actually constitute the concretized relations of capital. Looking beyond the appearance of a social problem and into its essence is the epistemological mandate of critical, educational praxis.

The discussion we have provided earlier offers divergent ways of understanding and analyzing the oppressive social relations of capitalism. These divergent theoretical positions also offer different ways forward in terms of a collective pursuit of freedom. What Kelley and Shi are pointing toward are the many problems, both philosophically and politically, that arise when our theorization of various forms of oppressive social relations is focused on the appearance of these forms rather than their essence. Another reason why we want to expand on our theorization of 'difference' and capitalist social relations, within our own work and Marxism and education scholarship more broadly, is because of the enormous implications this conceptualization has for social change broadly and education specifically. How we work to conceptualize oppression and its constitution and function within capitalism is clearly crucial to understanding problems of white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, and other forms of oppressive social relations.

Articulating these forms of oppression as class struggle is the next challenge to Marxist feminist thinkers. Exploring the dialectics of reform and revolution in educational spaces, particularly as articulated through the social relations of difference, is a necessary turn. In the dialectical contradiction between the human vocation of becoming and the social universe of capitalism, education workers are uniquely positioned to revolutionize at the point of reproduction. Such a collective undertaking would certainly be a sight to behold. But for this struggle to emerge, exploring these formations is crucial to an understanding of what capitalism is, how it emerged, how it functions, how it reproduces itself, and how we have failed to make a revolution against it. The story of capitalism is not exclusively a European story, it is not a white story, it is not a male story, and it is not an able-bodied story. If we take seriously Marx's assertion that capital is a *relation*, then what and who constitutes that relation should be the focus of our inquiry.

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