

A Special Spacious Space

William F. Pinar

What of curriculum as itself a search for meaning?¹
Maxine Greene

Perhaps that question - more than any other - structures the lifework of Maxine Greene. Surely the most significant American philosopher of education of our time, Greene emphasized existentialism in her ongoing encounter with the pressing issues of the day, a long day whose dusk within which we in the West now live. It is a day when the Western Enlightenment dream of rational improvement of society devolved into a nightmare of political polarization, right-wing insurrections, curriculum controversies that compromised educators' intellectual independence and professional integrity. A light in dark times – the title of a tribute to her² - Maxine Greene exemplified intellectual independence and professional integrity. From around the world students flocked to her classes at Teachers College, Columbia University in the City of New York. In this brief introduction to this important edition of her work issued by the Beijing Normal University Press, I will give a glimpse of her continuing significance – and not only in the United States but worldwide – and as evident in the pressing issue of our day: the technologization of education. I conclude with a personal note of appreciation to the great philosopher *engagé*.

For Maxine Greene, art, not technology, comprised the curricular core of education. Why? “[A]esthetic education,” Greene told teachers at Lincoln Center – she gave a series of talks³ to teachers at the renowned center for the arts in New York City - “can be called education in being present, personally present as imagining, feeling, perceiving, thinking

beings to works of art.”⁴ For me such subjective presence is central to the very possibility of educational experience. The social experience of learning with and from each other in classrooms small enough to encourage subjective presence in dialogical encounter – complicated conversation guided by erudite, engaging teachers⁵ – institutionalizes opportunities, as Greene knew, for “engagement in the first person; it is a matter of reflectiveness and self-discovery and surprise.”⁶ In another of those Lincoln Center lectures on aesthetic education Greene cautioned: “What we are trying to bring about is neither measurable nor predictable.”⁷ Nor is what we are teaching reducible to preparation for a specific job, as Maxine Greene appreciated over forty years ago: “teachers know that they cannot prepare the young for specific jobs. Because of the rapid technological changes, no one can predict precisely what skills will be needed or how these skills will be rewarded, even in the near term.”⁸

Never mind the facts, promises prevail, as promoters assure educators that technology improves student learning. Universities and schools appear powerless to resist, diverting funds from teachers and students to purchasing the (ever-to-be-upgraded) products technology companies sell. Constantly acquiring technology has produced a “slick and fast-growing sales force,”⁹ Matt Richtel reports, hired by computer and other technology companies determined to profit from public financing.¹⁰ Nothing new: forty years ago, Greene was well aware that educators too “have been arranging contracts between various manufacturers of educational technologies (or programmed learning systems) and certain city school systems.”¹¹ The technology bubble continues to inflate, Richtel comments, even as “questions persist about how effective high-tech products can be at improving student achievement. The companies say their products engage students and prepare them for a digital future, while some academics say technology is not fulfilling its promise.”¹² As Maxine

Greene knew, we live in “a period of technological domination.”¹³ That domination is indicated not only in the salvational potential ascribed to technology in education but to its erasure of embodied experience itself.

In our time the real seems virtual not actual, imagistic not embodied, structured by the software and networks profit-seeking private companies have designed. “[T]he technological phenomenon,” Mejias warns, “represents the most dangerous form of determinism in the modern age.”¹⁴ As noted above, Maxine Greene was clear about that point over forty years ago, appreciating that “feelings of powerlessness [are] endemic to a technological, highly centralized society.”¹⁵ We live “in a time,” Greene knew, “distinctive for the walls of images and words constantly being erected between us and actuality.”¹⁶ Staring at screens distracts, informs, and entertains but it can provide no embodied encounter with the subjective presence of others. The subjective presence of others enables us to learn from what has happened, from what we think and feel, rendering one’s experience educational, and specifically so. “To the limit of his ability,” Greene urged, “each person ought to try to learn at least enough to make sense of what impinges on his personal life.”¹⁷ That requires experience from which we can learn, experience that is not only virtual but actual as well.

Know that I am not romanticizing the rawness of lived experience – unlike simulated experience on the screen embodied experience in the world can be unpleasant even perilous – but I am reminding us that such educational experience as lived can keep us conscious, “wide-awake,”¹⁸ as Greene felt sure our ethical obligation to students requires us to be. Without an ongoing if sometimes subliminal sense of abrasion, there is only simulated experience, not the “jolt” about which Greene wrote so sagely, that “which reminds the individual of his *presence* as a perceiving consciousness.”¹⁹ Because it is confined to the

“Cloud,” visible only on screens, virtual (or simulated) experience becomes a spectator sport. It substitutes the voyeuristic for the visceral. Exhibitionism displaces dialogical encounter. Virtual experience protects us from the peril of the unplanned, but in so doing ensures that we suffer the one fate we might have avoided, the evisceration of experience. We lose, as Greene put it, “the capacity to look through the windows of the actual, to bring as-ifs into being in experience.”²⁰ Staring at screens we stay stationary.

Of course, online one can become informed about this or that, but “there” one cannot know, cannot acquire the knowledge that derives from the reconstruction of experience as lived. Such learning, Greene knew, is that which “leads to transformations, that opens new vistas, that allows for new ways of structuring the lived world.”²¹ It is the material world she references here, but also the historical, the felt, the longed-for world for which we labor. “To speak of the self,” Greene reminds, “is to speak of an individual’s body as well as his mind, his past as well as his present; the world in which he is involved, the others with whom he is continually engaged.”²² The bodies we are disappears into the “Big Data” compiled by digital technologies, and “we” disappear into avatars and other virtualized representations of our life histories and lived experience, now available to corporations and governments for surveillance, manipulation in the service - presumably - of our “convenience.”

Surrounded by (de)vices, where else can one turn? Look at – listen to – *experience* art, Greene recommends. If one “is willing to open himself to works of art as a subjectively aware human being,” Greene appreciated, “the teacher can do much to help young people articulate what works of art” - and knowledge generally – “have made them think and feel.”²³ Indeed, she continues students and teachers “who read or look or listen attentively” - who

study – “can create new orders within themselves.”²⁴ Studying the work of Maxine Greene can do just that.

I was serious about studying Maxine Greene. My first acquaintance with her work occurred during graduate school: I was assigned to read the 1971 essay entitled “Curriculum and Consciousness.” I was mesmerized from the start. Jean-Paul Sartre was my man too, and when I met Maxine for the first time, she struck me as a female American version of Sartre. Dressed in black, wearing bright red lipstick and in those days a cigarette dangling from her mouth, Maxine sounded the same phrases as Sartre, speaking of the stranger, bad faith, and freedom. On one occasion in the mid-1970s I spent a weekend with her and maybe five other colleagues in cabins in the upstate New York woods discussing ... almost everything. Well, Maxine spoke; we listened. I never lost my being-in-awe-of-her, even when at our last meeting, in her apartment, as she moved very slowly and burned dinner. Jeff and I ate it anyway.

Because we traveled along similar paths – not only Sartre but several of her references in the 1973 book quoted here were mine as well – and she and I ran into each other on occasion. There was at least one collision, that in 1977 (I think it was), when John McNeil and I were giving the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Division B state-of-the-art addresses - Maxine was the discussant. She didn’t like my use of Habermas – through Richard Bernstein – but then she always pulled disciplinary rank on me, she being in philosophy of education, a prestigious subject then, and me in curriculum studies ... not so much. We must have met sometime after that meeting – avidly I kept reading whatever she produced – but my next memory is in my New Orleans apartment at that infamous 1994 party Bill Doll²⁵ and I threw during the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association that year.

I lived in an old, lovely (I must say), just-outside-the-French-Quarter place (on Esplanade between Bourbon and Dauphine). It was probably Bill Doll's idea to throw a party. We hired a band, a caterer (my friend Sue), waiters (one of them her college-aged son), put up a tent in the courtyard in case it rained, and hired a policeman to monitor who entered. The music, eating, and drinking went on almost all night – I remember Joe Kincheloe, Shirley Steinberg, and Peter McLaren were among those who remained as dawn approached – but it was about midpoint (not quite midnight, not late in New Orleans) that Maxine Greene made her appearance, with someone I didn't recognize on her arm. I kissed her on each cheek, welcomed her to my home as she introduced her companion (someone in the arts from New York City). By then the apartment was mobbed and we were slightly crushed. Before we could start anything resembling a conversation someone standing close-by requested an introduction to the legendary Maxine Greene. I did, adding that Maxine lived on Sixth Avenue in Manhattan (boasting, I suppose, that I had been there). At this point Maxine slapped me – hard - pointing her finger in my face as she corrected me: “it's Fifth!”

On Fifth Avenue it was, adjacent to the Guggenheim Museum, overlooking Central Park. It was a special spacious space Maxine inhabited, very much in the thick of things but with an expansive view. I knew that; I had known that from that very first essay of hers I had read. I have never stopped knowing that. In my 2011 book I devote Chapter 6 to her work at Lincoln Center. In my classes I never not reference her work. In the intellectually imprinting influence her work has had on mine I am not alone.

The work of Janet L. Miller is also imprinted. I introduced Maxine's work to her when Janet was studying for the M.A. degree with me at the University of Rochester. Miller completed her Ph.D. dissertation on the work of Maxine Greene. Over the years Janet has

conducted interviews – she tells me that Maxine insisted they be characterized as “conversations,” that the biography be conceived as “collaborative” – and it is Janet Miller who will write the authorized biography. It is Janet who is in possession of the boxes of Maxine’s letters and papers (ah, before computers) that will be archived at Teachers College. It is Janet who sat – sometimes joined by others - by Maxine’s side during her final days in the Lenox Hill Hospital. It was Janet who spoke at the funeral service, invoking the sound of Maxine’s voice: “singular, unmistakable, extraordinary.”

That extraordinary unmistakable singularity – its immediacy, vividness, reverberating not only through a Teachers College lecture hall but also through those who listened and perhaps through you as you read now – remains “not yet,” as Maxine always added. “This is her legacy,” Janet concluded her funeral oration, it is “unfinished conversations -- with untold numbers of students, teachers, colleagues, friends, and family -- as a form of daily questioning, choosing and becoming.” Maxine, I can hear you now. I’m still listening.

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Endnotes

¹ 1995, 89.

² See Ayers and Miller 1998. See also my tributes to her: Pinar 1998a, 1998b.

³ See Greene 2001.

⁴ 2001, 203.

⁵ No standardized set of "practices" but individuated and situation-specific enactments of ideals.

⁶ 2001, 147.

⁷ 2001, 30.

⁸ 1973, 91.

⁹ 2011, A1.

¹⁰ Richtel reported – in 2011 – that in the United States alone "billions" of dollars are at stake. In 2013, Singer (2014, B6) reports, "sales of education technology software for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade reached an estimated \$7.9 billion, according to the Software and Information Industry Association." Like the U.S., China is investing heavily in technologies of education: see Qian 2015.

¹¹ 1973, 197.

¹² 2011, B7. Failing to fulfill its promise may be only the beginning of the problems the technologization of education poses, as research documents the deleterious consequences of substituting virtual for actual embodied experience (see Pinar 2012, 140-161.)

¹³ 1973, 109.

¹⁴ 2013, xv.

¹⁵ 1973, 110.

¹⁶ 1973, 271-273.

¹⁷ 1973, 91.

¹⁸ 1973, 273; see also Greene 2001, 203.

¹⁹ 1973, 18.

²⁰ 1995, 140.

²¹ 2001, 37.

²² 1973, 136.

²³ 1973, 16.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See Trucit 2012.