

ANTI-RACIST PEDAGOGY AND THE CANONIZATION OF TONI MORRISON

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to examine the anti-racist approach in pedagogy in relation to the issues of representations of African Americans in the American literary canon. It has considered anti-racist pedagogy as a correct approach to create a truly democratic society in a racist society like the United States of America. In order to address these issues, Toni Morrison has been considered the most successful African American writer who has attained canonical status within the mainstream of both African American and American literature. The paper has, thus, raised some of the vital issues related with the representations of African Americans in American schools, curricula and the literary canons.

KEYWORDS: Anti-racist education; anti-racist pedagogy; American canon; African Americans; Toni Morrison

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the focus is on the issues of representations of African Americans in American schools, curricula and literary canon. Interestingly, the continuity and change in the canon are intimately connected with the pedagogy of language and literature teaching. With the efforts of African American intellectual generations, some of the African American literary works, including some slave narratives, have now been chosen for language and literature teaching at different educational levels and at different periods of history.

In principle, anti-racist pedagogy is a democratic approach to education in a racist society. It motivates the students and teachers, giving a feeling of being equal in the schools. Such teaching strategies also fit into any background of the students, especially to their learning techniques. Traditionally, in a democratic education environment, racism is taken as a personal prejudice, which does not resolve the problems of racism. But anti-racist pedagogy offers a suitable environment reducing the gap between race and education, for instance, in an African American context. In particular, anti-racist pedagogy is a discourse that consists of both inequality and race, dealing with the current pedagogical practice and reflecting on the African American education.

The debate about anti-racist education continues as a society like the United States adjust to a multicultural context. The spread of multicultural context in parallel continues to be resisted by the dominant cultural groups such as the European American cultural traditions. Because the advocates of ethnocentric education for

dominant cultures envision the continuing importance of the European and European American cultural traditions in the canons and pedagogy of the country. Thus, as Morrison's novels protest, the educators need to avoid racist and sexist behavior and to know how to teach anti-racist and anti-sexist attitudes in the American educational institutions.

ANTI-RACIST APPROACH IN PEDAGOGY

The debate over anti-racist education, as Alain Locke (1974) argues about art versus propaganda controversy, has been a big issue within the academia ("Art", p. 312). Here, the pedagogical goals and methods of several models of anti-racist education have been discussed. The first example includes models for anti-racist education as an art. Another example is anti-racist education, which is designed to maintain and restore a dominated culture by using education as propaganda, for instance.

To many critics, anti-racist pedagogy has all earmarks of propaganda. Certainly, the popular media portrays "anti-racist and other progressive pedagogies as extremist, humorless, strident, and biased" (Locke, 1989, "Values", p. 47). Here, the phrase "politically correct" is a term that advocates for equality, arguing against the common sense of reference. So its supporters believe that anti-racist pedagogy motivates the disadvantaged students to go ahead. Similarly, anti-racist pedagogy also motivates the privileged students to understand inequality that prevail in a racist society, developing an alternative perspective on the African American people.

Alain Locke's art versus propaganda framework can be the best approach to end racism in a divisive society through education. So anti-racist pedagogy can be a solution to the problem of inequality in schools that shares in "some of the grand ambitions of the Harlem Renaissance with regard to the possibility of fostering genuinely egalitarian appreciation and conversation between Black and white Americans" (Thompson, 1997, p. 19). Thus, the critics of that period had different views about the issues of African Americans that the movement was to bring change in the educational system in the United States.

As mentioned by Alain Locke above, the black movement was in favour of the change in educational system that can be the right solution to the existing problem of racism. But Cornel West (1993) argued that art could give an objective perception and assumption about black experience, physiognomy, and heritage (p. 50) that rejects the traditional way of resolving the problem. The idea offers a fresh look at race relations rather than giving a readymade solution to the problems.

The central idea of Alain Locke is his notion of art as education. He says that propaganda has nothing to do with any kind of purpose, as he meant for art to serve "a distinct social, political, and intellectual agenda" (1974, "Art", 314). Thus, his art versus propaganda dichotomy indicates that misunderstanding in a racist society is not a difference between propaganda and open inquiry, but it is due to the common sense. In other words, it is a way to accept things without considering its deeper significance.

In this way, Alain Locke is against the idea of resolving the problem of racism through liberal education, however. In this approach, as Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) argues, "the path to a freer understanding is through careful analysis, reasoned argumentation, and dialogue" (p. 231). Both Locke and Ladson-Billings raise the agenda of education in common, but they differ in their models. So Ladson-Billings suggests changing the ways to understand the case of race relations rather than correcting all

problems of race. But Locke suggests establishing new relations rather than improving the situations.

Alain Locke's art versus propaganda framework deals with the nature and functions of anti-racist pedagogy. His approach deals with "a way to frame anti-racist pedagogy in terms other than those of liberal education, while still embracing democratic relations and intellectual understanding as central goals of education" (1974, "Art", p. 317). So it is an approach to achieve certain purposes that discusses the importance of anti-racist education that emerges out of racism. His dichotomy is about the idea of race and reality. But it lacks a right tool to pedagogy that is termed as anti-racist pedagogy. There are other educationists who stand for anti-racist education. But Locke's art versus propaganda dichotomy is for the idea of anti-racist pedagogy.

Alain Locke's has explained the world 'propaganda' as "one-sided and often pre-judging" (1974, "Art", p. 313). Thus, in this sense, propaganda is equal to democratic education. It is close to the belief of the readers, adjusting mistakes and imbalances that are available within many other perspectives. Propaganda is successful when it convinces others about the errors and embraces the one position. In this way, propaganda can be accepted when it succeeds on any terms other than the overall presentation.

Pedagogy that identifies the "traditional knowledge as andro-, hetero-, or Eurocentric, for example, is said to substitute an anti-male, anti-straight, or anti-white or, more simply, anti-American approved version of history or literature, for objective standards that define Western knowledge" (Thompson, 1997, p. 20). In this way, Thompson argues that anti-racist or anti-sexist pedagogy is unnecessary. This argument is insignificant and superficial. So it is useless to make such a claim. However, supporters like all to believe in it as many other ordinary people believe in. For instance, as Audrey Thompson (1997) believes that it is the "political correctness" (p. 23) of them, which is based on an ideological plan.

Academically, propaganda is all about corrections that indiscriminate the understanding of the problem. Many of corrections to texts become propagandists because they correct all misperceptions and imbalances. They also increase the representation of minority. In this case, Locke (1968) argues that they "invoke the very assumptions they are intended to discredit" ("The Legacy", p. 233). So they deal with the modifications of the approaches and their effects remain unequal. For instance, in the case of black issues, historical images or perspectives work as radical exit rather than common standards that should be the text.

Overall, anti-racist pedagogy has two educational perspectives that should be discussed here. One is about anti-racist pedagogy as propagandist as Locke has argued. In this sense, the anti-racist approach is democratic, but distorts the problems that racism has created at times (Thompson, 1997, p. 17). Thus, democratic education dismantles all kinds of prejudices because it deals with the outside world. It also gives minority groups a kind of knowledge that helps understand their problems.

The second one is about ant-sentiment to education that is related to any kind of objections. This is all about the negative approach in education, raising voice against the issue. Here, Alain Locke says that it is not independent and does not do any good in education. However, it tries to define the nature and role of education as it is mentioned in terms of Afrocentric perspective, anti-racist pedagogy can be defined as reactive. Thus, the approach is race-centered education that can raise the issue of race in terms of

a shared cultural heritage, not as a shared political agenda. For instance, “anti-racism is a political category to be decided upon, an emergent standard and not a fixed point of reference, does raise an important challenge to Locke’s notion of art as capable in itself of supplying anti-racist truth” (as cited in Thompson, 1997, p. 41). As this definition suggests that such an idea is associated with anti-racist pedagogy as political that has emerged in the form of democratic education.

There are power relations in this discourse that does not completely rely on politics. So, anti-racist pedagogy should be taken as the right teaching as John Dewey (1987) has elaborated on this notion in 1937:

Democracy [...] means a way of living together in which mutual and free consultation rule instead of force [...] a social order in which all the things that make for friendship, beauty, and knowledge are cherished [...] These things at least give a point of departure for the filling in of the democratic idea and aim as a frame of reference. If a sufficient number of educators devote themselves to [...] find[ing] the answers to the concrete questions which the idea and aim put to us, I believe that the question of the relation of the schools to direction of social change will cease to be a question, and will become a moving answer in action. (p. 417)

According to Dewey, anti-racist pedagogy is a democratic way to overcome the problem of racism in education. It is clear that pedagogy should not ignore this aspect of education.

As discussed above, anti-racist pedagogy cannot be propagandist. Rather in some cases it does have the sense of propaganda as it is mentioned in the following lines: Of course, this is not at all to say that it is not, in particular cases. As Alain Locke (1989) notes,

Insofar as education is conceived in terms of texts and curricula that have racist attitudes and assumptions, it is conceived as a form of propaganda. But of course texts and curricula are not magical repositories of anti-racism that can, of themselves, transform racist sentiments, ideology, or structural relations. (Locke, “Values”, 1989, p. 50)

In this way, education of a certain kind can address the problem of racism that restricts certain texts and methods that develops a pedagogy that directly deals with the issues of race relations. Like art, pedagogy is strongly a way to create spaces that guarantee the everyday meanings to experience.

ART/PROPAGANDA DICHOTOMY IN PEDAGOGY

Sometimes, according to Alain Locke, art and propaganda are complimentary to each other. For instance, art means the development of new points of view and propaganda means the inspiration. Art does not take the social convention in a literal sense. Metaphorically, art as for anti-racist pedagogy means “problematizing the supposedly neutral standards that privilege whiteness, and, in part, reconceiving both whiteness and Blackness” (1968, “The Legacy”, p. 335). In this way, art can be considered opposite to propaganda and thus Locke is in favour of art. He becomes apolitical regarding his stand for art as contrast to propaganda as ideological. So, art and propaganda go together in parallel.

Alain Locke’s notion of art is romantic in terms of his position as being apolitical. Regarding his perception of African ancestors, he observes that “the art of the people” is

“a tap root of vigorous, flourishing living” (1968, “Art” p. 313). Thus, his conception of art is aesthetically romantic as he believes that art is the source of a beauty, revealing the truth of “generations of the inbreeding of style and idiom” (1968, “The Legacy”, p. 258), which does not ignore its objectivity. The physical aspects of the black peoples should be taken objectively if they are to be studied for academic purposes. Here, Locke (1968) is of the opinion that art must discover the beauty out of prejudice (“The Legacy”, p. 264).

Art, as Alain Locke (1968) mentioned, goes against the stereotypical framework and is in favour of new inventions that should be true to “some sort of characteristic idiom” (“The Legacy”, p. 267). In fact, this approach to art can offer it as a cultural heritage and expressive in style. If he is taken in this sense, he becomes pragmatist that he considers art as to experience it with a new perspective and as continuing with a rich legacy of ancestry.

But in the case of the autonomy of feeling in art, Alain Locke’s definition differs from that of John Dewey as discussed above because Locke is for value and truth in art. He criticizes Dewey’s approach to art in terms of inquiry as Locke (1989) explains, truth is not only “the correct anticipation of experience,” but it may also be satisfying one’s feeling and validating it value. He defines art in this way: to the poet, beauty is truth; to the religious devotee, God is truth; and to the enthused moralist, what ought-to-be overtops factual reality (“Values”, p. 37).

In principle, as Locke (1968) has mentioned, art perceives the truth out of the fact. In this sense, it is a representation of experience, which must be more objective, more inclusive, and more dynamic. It must not be conventional in any sense. In short, it can be “a profound and galvanizing influence” (“The Legacy”, p. 256) and be a means for the new at the same time.

The purpose of art must be to teach a way to see, respond and appreciate the things around us. Alain Locke (1968) elaborates here that the duty of the artists is to teach their readers to see beauty in art and to see possibilities in art. Here, he further observes,

By refusing literalness, the artist requires the audience to work at responding to his or her vision. And by setting aside conventional frameworks of meaning, the artist exposes them as conventions: as the means by which a given society has historically and institutionally made sense of experience. (“The Legacy”, p. 298)

But still Locke considers the artists lacking vision rather they become more naturalist who see the nature objectively. So he is more in favour of new possibilities in art than being more objective in terms of being more realistic. He regards art as a way to express directly, especially through the everyday language. In particular, for the African Americans, the use of images and common sense in a biased way is the only way to misrepresentation of reality in art.

Regarding Alain Locke’s notion of art, Audrey Thompson (1997) argues that art offers “an essentialist though also pluralist conception of beauty and truth, as if what art does is to strip away the sedimented accumulation of prejudice, convention, and convenient stereotypes, thereby revealing the underlying experience” (p. 19). Such argument about art is against the spirit of beauty and characterization of art as opposite to the conception of propaganda. If it is taken in this way, propaganda can be considered to be partial, reactive, and political. In contrast, art can be considered to be whole, active, authentic, and beyond politics.

In conclusion, the art/propaganda dichotomy in pedagogy tries to prove that “art simply expresses experience or a vision without political overtones; by contrast,

propaganda is instrumental and reduces vision to editing” (Thompson 31). This argument is valid in the sense that art has to accomplish certain works such as to choose a form, find an experience and pass it to an audience. In the case of race relations in the United States, the experience of blackness and whiteness in society is inherently political. So art in terms of race is not away from politics.

ANTI-RACIST EDUCATION AS DEMOCRATIC

Anti-racist education is a democratic approach to address the issues of representations of African Americans in the United States through education. The classroom cannot be taken as to avoid racism and is “not giving children ideas” (Locke, 1968, “The Legacy”, p. 256), but should be like giving sex education. Thus, anti-racist pedagogy is a personal treatment to children in a sense and political in another sense. It can be a helpful way to address the problems related to race relations. In order to maintain democratic relations, it is necessary to use anti-racist pedagogy that can be a tool for democratic education.

On the other hand, for Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), anti-racist teaching is “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 17-18). She does not believe in the assimilationist’s approach to teaching, which is defined as “one American identity” kind of teaching (p. 34). Similarly, for Jenice E. Hale-Benson (1982), the American education in the past was designed to teach the middle-class European American children (p. 65). Hale-Benson’s idea is to fit the black children into an American educational system. But the supporters of anti-racist pedagogy argue that the curriculum designers should change the educational system to accommodate the students belonging to the blacks, poor whites and other marginal groups.

Another way to correct the educational system that is closely related to anti-racist pedagogy is the selection of texts because they will provide students with an exposure to the books about various cultures. In this case, Arthur N. Applebee’s 1993 study shows that there is an absence of the people of color including the blacks in the English curriculum in public schools as he elaborates: “Our examination of the selections chosen for study creates a picture of a curriculum dominated by familiar selections drawn primarily from a white, male, Anglo-Saxon tradition” (p. 82). However, Paul Lauter (1991) argues that “the problem of changing curriculum has primarily to do with learning to understand, appreciate, and teach about many varied cultural traditions” (p. 108). Here, race theorists argue that racism is a normal, but sometimes it becomes complicated, so it should not influence in the selection of texts to be used in the classrooms.

Arthur N. Applebee (1993) also discovered that American literature anthologies have produced more multicultural literature. But still these anthologies have ignored many other aspects of American literature such as literature by women and other minority groups. For instance, “the twentieth century” he says, “is hard to imagine that the handful of selections by African American, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American authors, for example, is sufficient to leave students with a unique sense of the substance and appeal of these alternative traditions, but neither are these traditions well-integrated into a larger, common tradition” (p. 115). In this way, his study indicates that many American schools subordinate the students of color.

In another study by Linda A. Spears-Bunton and Carol D. Lee, it is found that the

whites are also benefitted from the culturally relevant teaching. They reveal that they use African American literature intentionally because the public schools did not use it for classroom purposes. Spears-Bunton (1990) was not happy with her anthology that includes American literature, so she included African American literature for her classroom. According to her, she “opened herself up to criticism from administrators and colleagues” (p. 568). She was the first to teach black literature in her classroom. Interestingly, she was requested by her students to include black literature.

Yet another study by Carol D. Lee (1993) shows that it is important to use black literature to the “forefront of research” and the classroom focus. She says, “Traditionally, research in the teaching of literature very rarely focuses on literary texts by authors who are not white and male” (p. 134). According to her, the black literature texts are not “part of the traditional storage of books that English departments have on hand” (p. 139). Her study shows the black students’ experiences because it is concerned with the illiteracy of the black students. But Spears-Bunton is trying to see the influence of culture, Lee (1993) is on how “culture affects comprehension of literature” (p. 32). Thus, Lee is concerned with the meaning of the African American community. She is also concerned with certain interpretive strategies for interpretation of literature. Here, Lee (1993) says, “I propose that novice African American adolescent readers bring into classrooms a powerful intellectual tool [signifying] which goes unnoticed, devalued, and untapped” (p. 13). Thus, in reconstructing American literature, it is necessary to precisely place the study of all cultures for equal and fulfilling education.

Both studies by Lee and Sears-Bunton support the idea of anti-racist pedagogy in the sense that the experience of white people is simply different. They say that it is problematic to use a western perspective to consider about the people of colour critically. In this connection, Toni Morrison (1984) writes,

I don't like to find my books condemned [...] or praised [...] when that condemnation or . . . praise is based on criteria from other paradigms. I would much prefer that [my books] were dismissed or embraced based on the success of their accomplishment within the culture out of which I write. (“Rootedness”, p. 342)

As mentioned by Morrison above, many suggest that it is important to read literature by the people of colour. Not only this, it is equally important to teach students to see the texts through culturally specific angles.

TONI MORRISON AS THE CENTER OF THE CANON

The writings of African Americans deal with the life in America, which is “highly and historically racialized society” (Morrison, 1992, *Playing*, p. 4). Morrison (1992) says that racial ideology has something to do with the imagination of masters as she acknowledges in the lines below:

Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction. (*Playing*, p. 6)

In this way, Morrison says boldly that no black and white authors can escape from the language that is used in the racial discourse. In fact, living as an African American in “a racially articulated and predicated world” (Morrison, 1992, *Playing*, pp. 15-16), it is necessary to take care of the things carefully, whether there is racism or not.

There is guarantee that art or propaganda would change the African Americans to a new place in terms of racial relations. Rather it can encourage racism and worsen the situation. Art must be successful and should be aware of its dangers. Propaganda, on the other hand, would not necessarily be free of racism. Similarly, art is not free of racism in the real sense.

As such, as Justine Tally (2007) notes, it is not necessary to define Morrison as “marginal.” She has moved to “the center of the canon, but because she has managed to move the center” (p. 1). According to Harold Bloom (2007), Morrison and her works are “central to the current canon of literature read and studied in American schools and colleges” (Introduction, p. 8). In fact, it would be her multi-faceted and untiring work. She has changed a predominantly white and male-centered literary world into a multicultural society like America. Interestingly, it is also not easy for her to attain that canonization which is rarely awarded to women writers, and it has never happened with the blacks. As Harold Bloom notes that attaining such canonical status is difficult because

All canonizing of literary texts is a self contradictory process, for by canonizing a text you are troping upon it, which means you are misreading it. Canonization is the most extreme form of what Nietzsche called Interpretation, or the exercise of the WiU-to-Power over texts. (as cited in Baumlin, 2000, p. 22)

Hence, a debate about the canon is connected with important recent debates concerning interpretations and representations of African Americans in the mainstream of American life. Morrison plumped out with interpretations of the critics and in fact attained her canonical status, representing her race and culture. She is yet the first non-white, non-male African American woman writer to challenge the hegemony of the white and male center. She is alert in the sense that the writings of the blacks and women have been patronized from the mainstream. She won the Noble Prize in 1993; Susanna Rustin (2008) says that Morrison has earned a “licence to strut” (Online). With her entry into the world of interpretations and the African American literary pedagogy, Morrison exercises power over the literary discourse of African American presence in the mainstream American life.

In addition, in context, Morrison’s canonical status as an African American writer has become political and collective in nature. For instance, in 1987, a group of forty-eight black writers wrote an open letter to the *New York Times*, decrying the non-recognition of her *Beloved* for both the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Eventually, she has been canonized as great, and whose works, irrespective of her base in the marginalized discourse in terms of race, gender and color, have been widely studied and taught in schools and universities around the world.

It is ant-racist education that must be for a pluralist society. It is most appropriate in the context of American ethnic diversity. In an interview, Morrison (1989) claims that the present-day situation in America would be appropriate, for instance:

It is a question of education, because racism is a scholarly pursuit. It’s all over the world, I am convinced. But that’s not the way people were born to live. I’m talking about racism that is taught, institutionalized. Everybody remembers the first time they were taught that part of the human race was Other. That’s a trauma. It’s as though I told you that your left hand is not part of your body.

How to breach those things? There is a very, very serious problem of education and leadership. But we don’t have the structure for the education we

need. Nobody has done it. Black literature is taught as sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious, rigorous art form. ("The Pain", p. 49)

Here, as a critic, Morrison does not want race to be marginalized in American literary pedagogy. The texts which are in the margin should be considered for artistic or cultural point of view. For instance, she claims that the black history should be brought back to life.

The African Americans want to rediscover the texts that have been ignored for long time. Their texts should be included within the canon and studied in the university. For instance, Morrison's international appeal increased dramatically, following the awards of Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize, as Deirdre J. Raynor and Johnella E. Butler (2007) add: "Toni Morrison's work within anti-racist and human rights organizations seems to be a natural extension of her project as a writer, and to complement her "speakerly" texts rooted in history and experience, inviting reflection on the present" (p. 182). For Morrison, in the conception of Alain Locke's pedagogy as an art, anti-racist education should receive public support in the democratic society and retain its power to progress in regard to aspirations of all Americans.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the main concern here is all about anti-racist education and pedagogy, not about all forms of anti-racist activity. It means that anti-racist pedagogy is directly related to education, not to politics at any cost. Various teaching methods used in different situations with different groups of students should improve their learning. In this case also, Morrison envisions a future where the people of color, especially the African Americans, in the context of American education, achieve their equality of political, economic, and cultural power. She has expressed all this through her novels. In principle, the canons impose a needed sense of order for pedagogical purposes. For instance, when African American literature is taught, it offers the teachers new methods to share the tradition of African American literature with their students.

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