

REVIEW ESSAY

Creating third spaces: Youth, schooling and difference

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Schooling, Diaspora and Gender: Being Feminist and Being Different

Georgina Tsolidis 2001

Buckingham and Philadelphia, Open University Press

145 pp., ISBN 0-335-19630-6

Constructing Race: Youth, Identity and Popular Culture in South Africa

Nadine Dolby 2001

New York, State University of New York Press

156 p., ISBN 0-7914-5082-1

The books under review are about young people's identifications as these are produced in urban multicultural contexts: Tsolidis with reference to the experiences of second generation immigrants from southern Europe, China, Vietnam and Russia in the context of secondary schooling in Australia; Dolby with reference to the accounts of young people in a multiracial school in post-apartheid South Africa. Both offer a challenge to fixed and static conceptions of culture and in this respect need to be situated within the context of cultural theorising that has taken place over the last 10-15 years. During this time social theorists have become increasingly concerned to challenge the cultural absolutism and essentialism found in previous theorisations of the relationship between race, culture and identity, and in the constructions of national belonging found in ethnic revivalist movements and in popular racisms (Rutherford, 1990) Much of this theorisation has taken place in the context of Western political developments where national solidarities after the 2nd world war have been challenged, and in the UK events such as the Rushdie affair and the Gulf War posed challenges to the essential black subject as they drew on competing claims of nationalism and religion.

Cultural theorists, instead, have turned to focus on unities within difference or 'new ethnicities' (Hall, 1992) that are produced in part through the productive tensions between global and local influences. Much attention has been paid for example to diasporic movements linked with globalisation particularly because of their capacity to present a challenge to racialised constructions of national belonging (see, for Shain, F. (2003) Review essay: *Creating third spaces: youth, schooling and difference*, *Discourse*, 24, 1, pp. 119-126

example, Rutherford, 1990, Appadurai, 1996). Diaspora, a term once used to describe the forced dispersal of Jews is now widely appropriated in critical cultural theory (Hall, 1996, Gilroy, 1994) to describe transnational groups of people, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, who have been dislocated and scattered to other lands through voluntary and involuntary processes of migration. Their location in new geographical contexts provides fertile ground for the hybridity, border work or transculturalisation that Bhabha (1990) identifies as a 'third space' which he identifies as the boundary between the opposites of insider/outsider - a space where counter-narratives of belonging can be formulated. For Bhabha, 'the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace the two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the third space' which enables other positions to emerge (p. 211)

While much of the work on 'new ethnicities' has taken place in the realm of theory, other researchers such as Back (1996) have drawn on more empirically grounded work to show how in the UK, new identities are emerging within hybrid forms of musical and cultural expression in cities such as London, but that 'these are equally being met by multiply accented forms of popular racism and elaborated forms of racial exclusion that sometimes operate inside multiculturalism and at other times prey on these fragile forms of dialogue (1996, p.7) .

Drawing on such analyses it is possible to see how the images for example, of Sikh men wearing turbans and waving British flags as part of the Queen's jubilee celebrations in the summer of 2002 in England can co-exist with extreme forms of racial violence and exclusion that enter into the everyday lives of minorities; the inner city disturbances across English northern towns and cities in 2001 being symptomatic of these exclusionary mechanisms for young Asian (predominantly Muslim men) who are also subject to new forms of racism in the aftermath of September 11, through the discursive re-positioning of Muslims as terrorists (CARF 2002).

While analyses of hybridity and new ethnicity have encouraged recent rethinking of essentialistic formulations of culture, the important role of schooling as a mediating force in these identity making processes and transnational forms of communication

has received less attention. Schools through both formal and informal relationships, represent powerful interpretations of what it means to be 'British', 'Australian' or 'South African' - that is, of belonging and non-belonging, inclusion and exclusion. The institutional practices and discourses of schooling frame understandings about who can legitimately make claim to such labels and who can not. Schools 'mediate between people and their cultures as they are represented through discourse related to ways of understanding and ways of doing' (Tsolidis, p. 98).

It is here in particular, that the two books make an important contribution. Not only do they offer empirically grounded analyses of young people's identifications through schooling but they also begin to raise important questions about the current organisation of knowledge in schools as well as the role that schools might play in challenging the power of race and difference- that is, they are about transformative pedagogy as much as they are about identity.

In *Schooling, Diaspora and Gender*, Tsolidis explores the ways in which minority girls are constructed through both education policies and teacher discourses as the victims of culture clash and denied their agency. The early part of her book focuses on the experiences of southern European women and girls. Tsolidis argues (p. 47) that this construction can be found both within policy dealing with gender, which she argues represents a concern with equity, and policy dealing with multiculturalism, which centres on questions of difference.

Through two fieldwork studies, both government sponsored, but conducted ten years apart, she sets about challenging these constructions of minority girls. Her purpose in doing this is to see what they might tell us about how we might construct an anti-racist feminism that is relevant to everyday practice in school. Tsolidis' own positioning as both feminist and different, strongly underpins this book and in particular, her critical exploration of the dichotomy between equality (gender) and difference (multiculturalism). Her alternative conceptualisation of the girls' experience is formed through *diasporization*. Drawing on the work of Hall (1996), she defines this as a view of identities as 'irrevocably the product of several interlocking

histories and cultures'. They are those situated in-between different cultures. Tsolidis argues:

This location allows them to unsettle the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of another, In this way, diasporic communities are understood not as stranded minorities, but as providing, through the lived experiences of their members, insights into cultural production as it occurs in both of the locations they function between. (p.114)

Rather than casting them as victims of culture clash Tsolidis points to the agency and belonging that she finds in the accounts of minority girls and other students she interviews. Through their diasporic identifications they are able to challenge hegemonic definitions of femininity in the Australian context, that otherwise can go unchecked in teachers definitions of the mainstream (Australian culture and society) as a liberating experience. For example, the girls spoke about being more restricted in Australia than they were in Turkey or Greece because of the added restrictions that racism placed on by mainstream Australian society. In this way she argues diasporic identifications enable challenges to both racialised constructions of gender in the mainstream and also sexual double standard which resulted in a policing of their honour within their communities. Despite restrictions, the girls spoke positively about their experiences of families and wanted to bring up their families in diasporic ways. Tsolidis argues:

Women from minority communities many not have straightforward relationships within their cultures and communities , much as they do not with the cultures of the mainstream it is this ambivalence which produces something new, rather than merely replicates the minority culture as it is understood to exist in the country of origin, or mimics the mainstream. As feminists, particularly feminist educators we are left with a choice of understanding this ambivalence and acknowledging this agency or constructing these women and girls simply as acted upon in the process whereby cultures and identities are made and remade (p.121).

Tsolidis makes several interlocking arguments in this book that centre for example, on questions of gender and ethnicity, feminism and antiracism, feminist praxis, equity and difference, curriculum and pedagogy. This makes it very difficult to summarise, but it is also what makes this a very important book because through these interlocking arguments she challenges taken-for-granted feminist positions with respect to pedagogy and curriculum in her attempt to construct an anti-racist feminism that is relevant to everyday practice in schools.

Constructing Race sets out to address a core question - 'what happens when everyone is 'mashed together'? How do youth think about and live with difference? Dolby refers to the situation in South Africa, post-apartheid, where the old legalistic categorisations of race have been dismantled. Her book is based on a year-long ethnographic study in one multiracial, desegregated school in Durban, Fernwood, which was previously an all-white boys' school. In the early 1990s, the school earned the reputation of a 'rainbow school' because its policy of admitting diverse groups of students but as it began to recruit younger students from working-class and poor backgrounds, it fast gained the reputation of a reject school and tension and conflict are paramount in the school.

In the midst of the racial tension school, Dolby finds a number of attempts to reforge the old categorisations of race on new terms. The school's administration, for example, is actively engaged in the production of 'white' identities that is detached from any relation to the nation-state of South Africa. Instead it is linked to two imagined spaces and refuges of whiteness: a local whiteness that resides in the practices of elite Durban schools and a global whiteness that resides in the remnants of the old British Empire. Various strategies are employed in the production of this whiteness, including the practice of actively recruiting white bodies from poor backgrounds who ten years ago would not have been admitted to the school; the emphasis on the sports of cricket and rugby which has its historical roots in English private schooling, and on uniform which serves (for managers) as a symbolic connection to the whiteness of Durban.

For students however, global popular culture is the main site of struggle over racialised constructions of selves. It is here, Dolby argues, particularly through youths' appropriation and reinterpretation in a local context, of global commodities produced by transnational corporations and marketed to youth world-wide, that post-apartheid identities are made and re-made. But this process is not entirely random – to explain the particular reinterpretations that take place, Dolby draws on the work of Bourdieu to redefine race as *taste* which is constitutive of the process of class reproduction that Bourdieu analyses through the concept of *habitus*.

As a departure from a place-bound paradigm of culture, the concept of taste enables an analysis of race that places it in global circulation within, not outside of, the global flows of popular cultures and assisted commodities. Rather than explaining popular culture as a mechanism to resist parental or mainstream cultures, Dolby's focus on the way that youth through their actions, their symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990), 'embrace commodities, consumer culture, capitalism, the pursuit of pleasure and the importance of affect'. Much of this takes place in the realm of the imagination – because they cannot wear such clothes to school, and co-exists with extraordinary violence that is a remnant of the apartheid era in Durban.

She argues that youth use taste in conflicting ways: both to reproduce their positions within racialised structures, but at the same time to challenge those positions. They talk for example of being able to spot a coloured or Asian student from afar because of the way they dress and about respecting these differences of style. Collective, racialised identities become paramount, as individual students who breach racial norms are ostracized. Dolby cites the case of a black girl who is mocked for adopting 'white dress' and a coloured girl who listens to Alanis Morissette is rejected by her peers. Students are thus able to play with the borders of taste but these borders are actively policed often through conflict. There are however, points of connection, 'that point to other, emerging dynamics', African and coloured students in grade 12 find points of commonality through the shared experiences of being a minority in a predominantly white school. At the other end of the scale coloured, white and Indian students only 4 or 5 years younger come together through the practice of rave music. (p. 92)

In this book, Dolby moves easily from the national context of South Africa – with an explanation of the way schooling was organised under apartheid, through to the local dynamics of Durban and the institutional processes and discourses within the Fernwood, before moving on to explore students’ accounts of the complex ways in which racial identities are constructed and reconstructed. Her exploration of individual students’ negotiation of their identities as they play with the borders of taste is particularly illuminating. She reads these stories as tales of possibility or what Bhabha (1990) calls ‘the third space’ which opens up the myth of selves and allows for the contours of the politics of race to be re-merged in ways that both reinforce and loosen existing relations of power. Thus:

Race, for Fernwood students, is a critical part of the selves they both inherit and recreate. It is a category of difference that holds enormous power within the historical structures of South African society and will certainly continue to be a critical part of the voluntary and involuntary identifications. (p. 118)

What was missing from the account (for me) however, was discussion of the students who resist the imposition of global popular culture – who would typically be described as ‘daggy’ or ‘nerdy’. Dolby makes a brief reference (p. 82) ‘to those students who resist the imposition of taste norms [and] those whose families simply cannot afford the ‘right’ clothing’, but maintains that although these students ‘lack access to the commodities that mark their racialised selves, they still operate within a universe in which taste solidifies race’. There is thus little discussion of the ways that identities are negotiated outside the narrow confines of popular culture.

For Tsolidis however, the ways in which students come to be identified as ‘daggy’ or ‘nerdy’ is an important consequence of the role of schooling that plays producing and policing the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Tsolidis argues that school cultures interpret and define notions such as educational success and the possibilities for this. Fashion and academic success are constructed as binaries. Further, she argues that popular culture in the context of schooling, rather than being neutral has a relationship with racism. One of the markers of racism is the silence within popular youth cultures of those groups perceived as culturally distinct. While this may

disadvantage the students in relations to their school peers, it can be an advantage in relation to their academic profiles. Students who are not 'cool' are usually seen as academically 'good'. Such categorisations were applied mainly to Chinese, Greek and Jewish students who were part of the Bureau study.

This dichotomy between academic and popular culture is important to creating diasporic identifications. The Bureau students managed to find a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1990) between peer based and academic success. They drew on descriptions of alternative forms of youth culture which were embedded within their minority cultures. This was especially the case for Greek and Jewish students whose historic diasporic experience was, in this case, a means of challenging the dichotomy between academic and peer-based success.

Although the books are primarily about the identifications of young people, they also raise questions about the kinds of knowledge production that currently takes place in schools, and about the ways in which schools address and deal with issues of cultural difference. In this respect the books present a challenge to the version of multiculturalism that has dominated curricular thinking about cultural difference over the last decades in countries like England and Australia. Although Dolby does not explicitly address this debate in the context of the newly democratic south Africa, it is implicit in her references to Fernwood as a 'rainbow school' and to the 'new south Africa'.

Multiculturalism is based on the premise that the key issues facing schools and society is how to create tolerance and respect on the part of the host society for minorities and their cultures. Intolerance is conceptualised as a matter of attitudes and constituted by prejudice. In education this has been translated into the teaching of respect for cultural diversity in pursuit of an overall project of social harmony. But all too often the concept of culture that is drawn on is one that is static or essentialist. Dolby provides a useful example of this in a discussion of the ways in which teachers are engaged in producing black identities with reference to an imagined Zuluness. This leads one teacher to ask black students whether they practice a particular dance

associated with traditional Zulu culture, but for the students who do not find it remotely relevant to their lives, this is a source of amusement.

This over-focus on culture and the essentialism contained within it, is a feature often associated with multiculturalism in education that diverts attention away from systemised inequality and relations of power. In saying this, I do not wish to dismiss the efforts of individual teachers or institutions that have adopted more anti-racist stance. This is based on a position that seeks to decode power relationships inherent in schools and society and tackle race inequality in conjunction with gender and class inequality. As Rattansi (1993) has argued with reference to the UK, it has been difficult at the level of practice, to disentangle multiculturalism from anti-racism and at a broader policy level too many aspects of anti-racism have been incorporated into multiculturalism.

I wish instead, to draw attention to the broader education policy context and in particular the neo-liberal reform of education over the last two decades that has impacted across west European countries, Australia and New Zealand among others. Although it has occurred at varying rates and paces and in localised ways in these national contexts, the shift to a market-based model of education has nonetheless limited the capacity of educators to deal with questions of social justice through teaching because it has shifted attention within education from process to outcome and in doing so, marginalized issues to do with social justice. Referring to the UK, for example, Weiner (1997) argues that under the Conservative government throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, concepts of equality of opportunity and social justice were recast as 'entitlement' and promoted rhetorically through support for individualism and entrepreneurialisms. 'This capacity to survive and succeed in the turbulence of the market and the aspirations of the individual were superimposed over post-welfarism and equality initiatives systematically targeted at identifiable groups and communities' (p. 7).

The continued and increasing focus on achievement, standards and data collection has shifted focus away from policy and practice outputs with regard to gender and race equality, to examination and assessment outcomes. This has not only led to a

marginalisation of social justice issues but as some researchers have argued the predominant focus on standards and accountability has actually exacerbated and reproduced inequalities. (Gewirtz, 2002).

There is something of a gap in Tsolidis' account concerning this policy context in Australia (understandably, given the considerable scope of the book which covers such a wide range of issues). In describing the shift in context that forms the backcloth to her two research studies, she concentrates mainly on turn to identity politics that posed problems for the school-based research, underpinned by a transformative project, she was committed to. The first of her studies, 'Educating Voula' in 1984, had all the hallmarks of affirmative action that was characteristic of this period in Australia, enabling her to connect feminist debates at the time to research conducted through teaching - it was, for Tsolidis, an exemplar of feminist praxis. The 'Bureau study' by contrast was conducted in a different theoretical climate in 1994:

Gone was the comfort of speaking from the margins. Instead.....the epistemic privilege of being relatively more oppressed – had consolidated itself. In my opinion this coupled with an impending inertia with regard to the types of research I valued and still value... For colleagues in other faculties, I detected an uncomplicated synergy between full-blown post-structuralism and the research with which they were engaged. At the time, women's studies conferences that I attended seemed like (to me) like an endless series of deconstruction.... How was I to frame a project, funded by a government body that insisted on a quantitative component to the study, around categories that were determined by the language of the bureaucracy; and maintain some semblance of theoretical dignity? (p. 103)

I would argue that this shift needs to be seen in parallel with the policy context that I outlined above, and it is precisely because they are conducted in this policy and research context that the two books – with their strong engagement with arguments about transformative schooling, are an important. Tsolidis' book challenges many taken for granted assumptions in feminism and approaches to race equality, and argues for a transformative project that is based within feminism through a simultaneous engagement with equity and difference.

What Dolby's account tells us quite powerfully with reference to post-apartheid South Africa is that desegregation is not enough. Without a critical pedagogy that moves beyond cultural essentialism and is based on a current understanding of the ways in which difference is played out or that attempts to understand of power of difference and dismantle it - there can be no search for equality. Otherwise as Fine, Weiss and Powell, 1997 (cited in Dolby, p.116) argue, 'settings that are technically desegregated will corrode into sites of oppositional identities, racial tensions and fractured group relations which simply mirror the larger society'. We can see this in many of the schools around us.

Dolby argues that instead of encouraging students to find out *who* they are, we need to deepen their understandings of 'the 'how' and the 'why' of difference'. This approach would allow space for engaging with how students themselves 'make sense of 'race' and how these meanings are both embedded in, and influence, the structures in which they operate. In other words, instead of insisting that we know in advance what it means to be an 'x' and transmitting that to students we engage in a conversation about the meaning and its historical and spatial variability' (p.117).

This means as McCarthy (in the forward to Dolby's book) suggests adopting an approach in which first world development is connected to third world underdevelopment, and one that involves reading back into education the tensions and contradictions that we tend to suppress.

Particularly in the aftermath of September 11 and the 'war on terrorism', and other ongoing conflicts around the world, discussion and debate about the how and why of difference become urgent rather than important.

With reference to the critical role of schooling, the two books make an extremely valuable contribution to this debate.

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