

Jean Anyon, Scholar and Mentor: A Student's Reflection

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Jean Anyon was a towering scholar in education. She, along with a handful of others, laid the foundation for contemporary critical scholarship in the field and changed the way a generation of educational researchers viewed the relationship between poverty, inequality, and educational outcomes. Jean was among the first in the United States to offer empirical evidence of the ways schools reproduced social hierarchies by offering different kinds of preparation to students based on their social class status. Additionally, in her classic book, *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Education Reform* (1997), which was based on her years as a participant in a major school reform project in Newark, New Jersey, Jean offered one of the richest analyses ever written on the relationship between urban schools and the political economy.

I met Jean in 2001 when she joined the faculty of the PhD Program in Urban Education at the City University of New York, Graduate Center. I had left my teaching position to attend graduate school and had just begun to familiarize myself with Jean's work. The theoretical concepts explicated in her early seminal articles (1980, 1981) deeply resonated with me as I had developed an implicit understanding of the processes of social reproduction and the hidden curriculum during my tenure at a poorly resourced high school in the Mott Haven section of the South Bronx. And the powerful metaphor Jean posed in *Ghetto Schooling*—that attempting to fix inner-city schools without fixing the city

in which they are embedded is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door—captured so well my experience as a teacher. I became one of Jean's first doctoral students. I did not initially comprehend the significance of that honor because before I fully realized the weight of Jean's scholarly contributions, I had already become accustomed to her nurturance, humor, and her completely unpretentious way of engaging others in dialogue. We drank coffee at her kitchen table as I pondered the relationship between the school where I had taught and the youth prison across the street from the school, and we shared a hotel room when she brought me to my first professional conference—a forum at Harvard University on the school-to-prison-pipeline.

Jean, renowned for her scholarly contributions, was a natural as a doctoral mentor. Reflecting her own life-long commitments to teaching, civil rights, and social activism, Jean attracted many students who came into the program with experience in community organizing, activism, and teaching for social justice. Her vision, I believe, was to support the next generation doing that “on the ground” work, to help cultivate our critical scholarship, and provide a model for linking the two. In following this vision, she developed many close bonds with students and formed an amazing community. Jean's scholarship and her work as a mentor did not evolve in isolation from one another, and it is with deep gratitude and sadness—having lost our beloved Jean far

too soon—that I reflect on some of the ways her scholarship and her work as teacher-mentor informed each other. As her body of work has done for a generation of critical educational scholars, Jean’s contributions formed the foundation from which her students’ work has followed. She always supported the creative use of mixed methods and critical social theory to illuminate the relationships between urban classrooms, policy, and the political economy. From the beginning, she also challenged us to think deeply and critically about the ways in which social change occurs.

Yet, some in the field perceived that her unapologetic structural analysis did not offer a sufficient lens for understanding the potential schools offered as sites of possibility. While her earlier work actually did depict schools as contested spaces and never left us politically stymied, her full vision of resistance or, rather, radical possibilities, admittedly, had not yet been fully articulated in 1997 with the publication of *Ghetto Schooling*.

By the fall of 2004, some of us in the first wave of Jean’s students at the Graduate Center had begun the process of data collection for our dissertations. Jean was an incredibly giving advisor. She would point us in the direction of related literatures and potentially useful theories and would email each of us mountains of news articles related to our research. She talked us through field dilemmas and writer’s block, would give us sage advice, listen to the woes of our personal lives as struggling doctoral students, and always challenge us to think more deeply, to offer something of significance.

As a teacher, Jean’s pedagogical style was dialogical. Her students were examining

emerging educational and social problems in the context of a new set of political and economic conditions, ideologies, and policy trends. We were searching for theoretical frameworks to make sense of our data, and Jean keenly understood the need for a broad range of critical analytical tools to do so. She immersed herself in reading and re-reading a wide range of critical social theory. And seeing the need for it, Jean began to teach social theory courses at the Graduate Center. She would spend several years thinking through critical social theory for her students and with her students.

I remember after I had already defended my dissertation, she emailed me dozens of pages of notes she had taken on various theorists whose work was relevant to critical analyses of education—critical race, post-structural, post-colonial, queer, and feminist theorists—those who challenged, or at least complicated, her own Marxist roots and (primarily) political economic critiques. What a gift!

By the time Jean’s second book, *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement*, came out in 2005, she had become markedly more explicit about her interests in social change and resistance. She wrote about the importance of critical pedagogy and the centrality of youth critique, but she also argued that critical pedagogy and social justice teaching do not, in themselves, get people involved in social movements. “Rather ... people are radicalized by actually participating in contentious politics” (p. 170). Ultimately, she called for inter-generational, multi-racial mobilization around economic and social injustice, and she placed urban school reform at the center of such a movement. She had explicated a new—and detailed—vision of the ways power could operate—from the bottom up.

Theory and Educational Research: Toward a Critical Social Explanation (2009), which Jean wrote along with six of her doctoral students, was the first published account of the dialogical work around research and theory that Jean did collectively with her doctoral students. We, the students, had gone in several directions, writing about a diverse set of topics—racial segregation, the GED, school choice, the experiences of LGBT students, and school discipline and surveillance—and we had taken our own paths choosing, rethinking, and bringing together a wide range of critical social theories. Sometimes our theoretical perspectives sat in jarring contrast from one another and from the Marxian perspective Jean inspired in us. Some of our deepest conversations (and tensions in our work) were focused on the ways in which power works, the kinds of analyses that felt most liberatory, the relationship between race and social class, and the usefulness of the civil rights movements of the 1960s as models for social change at a new historical moment. Our discussions were invaluable for all of us. Ultimately, Jean masterfully wove our ideas together into a cohesive framework for the book.

Reflecting on her own journey, Jean wrote in the book's introduction, "As I was wrapping up *Radical Possibilities*, I realized that three years of reading and teaching Michel Foucault was seriously challenging my conception of social power. Power, I began to see, does not only 'descend' from the state or the corporate and political elites; it is, as Foucault alleged, the air we breathe. We produce power and we are produced by it. Foucault's conceptual arsenal was clearly capable of undermining my structural Marxism" (p. 7). Given Jean's own thought process, it is no coincidence that we all examined within our individual projects, in one way or another, processes of

social change, grassroots political struggle, or everyday forms of resistance.

Another important dimension of Jean's life's work was her strong commitment to racial justice. As a young woman in the 1960s, Jean was an active member of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), taught in racially segregated, urban schools, and participated in the Civil Rights movement in a variety of ways. In *Ghetto Schooling*, Jean wrote forcefully about the deleterious impact of racial discrimination in housing, the job market, and economic policy, the historical processes of racial segregation, and the political isolation of Black city residents. Thus, she offered an illuminating discussion of racism alongside her political economic analysis, yet it was not her goal to develop in the book a theory of racial oppression as it intersects with the political economy.

In the context of my own work on the relationship between urban public schools and the criminal justice system, our discussions centered on the racist nature of crime policy and urban school reform and the racialized discourses that support mass incarceration and punitive discipline. Nevertheless, Jean was well aware that there was considerable work to be done in educational scholarship in terms of theorizing around the relationship between social class, economic exclusion, and race.

In her 2011 book, *Marx and Education*, Jean was clear about the importance of the next generation of critical educational scholarship going in this direction. She names, for example, Zeus Leonardo, as one of the important recent scholars extending Marxian educational scholarship in this way. I also know how proud she was of her students for pushing their thinking in this area, especially

Michael Dumas who has pushed further and more insightfully than most of us with his work on cultural political economy and the politics of Black education.

In 2011, Jean was inspired by the Occupy Movement and attended rallies with her students. I have a copy of a photo of Jean from one protest hanging above my computer. She sits smiling, a sun visor peeking out from her mass of curls, with her sign proudly displayed: Tax the rich! (She was so in her element.)

On Friday, September 6th 2013, the evening before we lost Jean, I visited her at her home, along with Michael Dumas and Kiersten Greene. Many other students, current and former, who had stayed close to Jean in her final weeks were with us in spirit. Jean was still sharp but terribly weak. Our conversation turned to the satisfaction she was feeling having finished the 2nd edition of *Radical Possibilities* due out in the spring of 2014. In it she offers her critique of the Occupy Movement, which she struggled in her weakened state to outline for us. It is not rooted in communities. This was about as much as she could offer, but we knew she was referring to the alienation of poor communities of color from the movement and the need for social movements to be fully inclusive of those who experience the brunt of economic policy and racial oppression. Right until the end, Jean was mentoring and theorizing around social change.

I am so deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to study with Jean, receive her guidance and love, and be a part of the community that she formed. I am in awe of the way she chose to live her life, what she accomplished, and the incredibly generous

heart that she had. Her great legacy lives on in all of us who have been inspired by her life's work and her life so well lived.

A thousand thank yous, dear Jean. May you rest in power.

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