

Our Debt to Jean Anyon

Michael W. Apple

University of Wisconsin, Madison

Like all of you, I am deeply saddened by Jean Anyon's death. She and I came to know each other during the late 1970s through our mutual struggles to redefine Spenser's question of "What knowledge is of most worth?" into "whose knowledge is of most worth?" I had completed the writing of the first edition *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979/2004) and was actively seeking colleagues who could teach me and push me further. Some of these allies were located in England. But I soon found that some were much closer to home. Upon reading Jean's critical analyses of the politics of teaching and curricula that were appearing at that time, I quickly recognized the power and importance of her work. But to be honest, there were other things about Jean that connected us and that kept that connection alive over the course of many decades.

In this regard, let me repeat something that I said in my Series Editor's Introduction to the first edition of *Radical Possibilities* (Anyon, 2005), since it speaks to some of the personal and the political connectedness I have always felt with Jean.

Reading Jean Anyon is like coming home. She and I have similar political and personal histories. Both of us come from politically active families. Both of us taught in inner city schools that seemed all too often to almost be purposely organized in ways that made the lives of students and teachers extremely difficult. The two of us share a sense of profound anger at the ways in which not only schools, but nearly all of this society's major institutions are organized to maintain massive inequalities. And like so many others who share this anger, we want to participate in struggles to alter these conditions.

*In 1932, George S. Counts published a short book with the title of *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* (Counts, 1932). It was a call to activism, a call to use the schools to create a society in which equality and social justice would be the fundamental aims of all economic, political, and cultural policies and practices. In hindsight, we might admit that Counts was a bit naïve. However, the question raised in the title still has resonance today. Can schools play a role in making a more just society possible? If not, why not? If so, what can they do?*

There has been a long history of work on these questions. But few people have been as honest about the complex, but still doable, politics involved in answering them as Jean Anyon... Jean Anyon directs most of her attention to urban schools and the economic and educational crises that have been so very damaging to economically and culturally dispossessed people in our cities and neighborhoods. However, what she has to say is crucial to everyone who is concerned with what is happening in education in this society.

I wrote these words nearly a decade ago. Rereading them today, and making them public again, reminds me how much Jean will be missed. But it also reminds me of my own personal debt as a teacher and as a critical scholar to Jean. Let me say more about this. Every spring semester, I teach a class on the relationship among knowledge, power, and education. We begin with reading some of the most well-known books on how education reproduces relations of dominance and subordination and then move on to material on the politics of interruption and to the importance of social movements along multiple axes of power (see also Anyon, et al., 2009) in creating and filling the spaces

of interruption. Among the final things to which we pay serious attention are my own new book, *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2013) and Jean's compelling treatment of counter-hegemonic movements in *Radical Possibilities*.

Jean's book never fails to excite students. It provides them with hope instead of the sometimes all too prevalent sense of powerlessness. It stimulates a very different conversation in the class—stories of their own involvement in similar movements; seeing themselves as not only “researchers” but as “public intellectuals” and scholar/activists. And it provides a perfect pairing with my discussion of the tasks and risks of the critical scholar/activist in *Can Education Change Society?* Without her powerful discussion of progressive social movements, students may be much less able to see their roles as actors within larger historical traditions and movements.

The fact that I repeatedly refer to Jean's work in my own efforts to understand the power of the Right and to construct alternatives to it demonstrates to me once again that all of our efforts are collective. There is no doubt in my mind that my understanding both of how this power operates and of the ways in which the intersections of class and race produce such frightening consequences in this society is funded by Jean's insights and actions over the decades of our friendship.

Yet let us remember that Jean was not satisfied with “bearing witness to negativity.” For example, I had answered the question of whether education could change society by focusing on the creative ways the Right had incorporated and used education as part of its larger project of radically transforming our common-sense (Apple, 2006), and urged us to learn lessons from the Right's ability to transform society. Here again, Jean was our

teacher. She demonstrated the transformative power of progressive mobilizations and focused as well on what we could learn from these movements in ways that again gave hope. The new 2nd edition of *Radical Possibilities* (Anyon, 2014) will undoubtedly make her aim here even more visible.

During the last stages of Jean's courageous battle with cancer, Wayne Au and I were finishing the table of contents of a four-volume set of books called *Major Works in Critical Education* (Apple and Au, in press). It was clear to us that Jean had to be there. But that was the easy part. As we began re-reading her work, we faced a very difficult decision. There were so many of her contributions that could/should be represented—in urban education, critical educational and social theory, the politics of knowledge and the curriculum, social movements, and the list goes on. This dilemma again brought home to us something all of Jean's colleagues and friends may already know but perhaps take for granted—the range of her contributions, the ground-breaking studies, the ability to make crystal clear what was happening and what was at stake if we did not act back, on even who the “we” was.

That she did this with such humanity and courage reminds us as well that while she may not be physically present, her efforts live on in all of us who continue to ask the kinds of questions to which she devoted her life—and who demand that we act on the world to make it a more equal place.

MICHAEL W. APPLE is John Bascom Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He also holds professorial appointments at the University of London Institute of Education

and the University of Manchester. Among his recent books are *Knowledge, Power, and Education* (2013) and *Can Education Change Society?* (2013). He can be contacted at: apple@education.wisc.edu.

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