

IMAGINING WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN IN FOUNDATIONS

A REPORT ON MAXINE GREENE'S REMARKS AT NYSFEA'S 29TH ANNUAL MEETING

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In her keynote address at our 29th Annual Meeting in New Paltz in 2000, Maxine Greene recounted some history of foundations before arriving at her own contribution: fostering the imagination through participation in the arts. Foundations, as an area of study for teachers, originated at Teachers College in the 1920s and 1930s, as recorded in the journal, *The Social Frontier*. Greene noted that in the early days, foundations was connected with Roosevelt's New Deal, the WPA, theater, and the labor movement. Greene compared the feeling of solidarity with the working class then to today's focus on altruism, pointing out that not many people now ask George Counts' question, "Dare the schools build a new social order?" Greene used F. Scott Fitzgerald's metaphor of the "foul dust" in the Eastern air in *The Great Gatsby* to describe the social pathology of the culture; querulousness, impotent drifting, facile optimism, rioters galore, and intimidation of dissenters were evidence of the spirit of the times. Foundations scholars attacked this "foul dust." In addition to Counts' famous challenge, Dewey attacked "economic royalists" and "economic individualism" in the United States, Harold Rugg wrote new social studies texts which were attacked by the American Legion, and Charles and Mary Beard wrote an economic interpretation of United States history, among other responses. Unfortunately, the voices of foundations scholars calling for reform did not prevail, although they were heard. Kilpatrick, whose classes drew thousands of teachers to Teachers College during the summer sessions, earned the nickname, "Columbia's million dollar professor," but was forced to retire by a reactionary dean.

Greene cited Dewey's work as inspiring her own, quoting Dewey's definition of education as "the art of giving shape to human powers and adapting them to social forces." Greene added Dewey's insistence in *Democracy and Education* that the individual is to be educated as a social being to his insight in *Art as Experience* that "the imagination is a way of seeing and feeling things so they compose an integral whole." The combination makes "old and familiar things new in experience," creating a sense of adventure out of the materials of everyday living. This leads Dewey to assert that "imagination is the only the gateway through which these meanings can find their way into a present interaction" for people (Dewey, 1958, p. 267, 272). Greene focused on the need for educators to cultivate the imagination. She criticized much of American philosophy for lacking imagination, refusing to engage in speculative ideas, and turning a deaf ear to movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the voices of excluded groups such as African Americans and gays. While praising the vitality of social foundations movement before World War II, Greene pointed out that foundations scholars, too, ignored these themes. There are no entries under 'urban,' "African-American," and "feminism" in Cremin's *The Transformation of the School*. The interdisciplinary approach of Kilpatrick, Rugg, Brameld, and others was dismissed in favor of a discipline-based philosophy of education, history of education, and sociology of education. Unfortunately, even *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* didn't attract much attention from foundations scholars, Greene lamented. This "should have set off alarm bells," she said, but alas it didn't. In the aftermath, events of the 60s - civil rights, feminism, the anti-war movement, Kent State, Cambodia, Nixon's plumbers - initially drew little response. It was years before critical theory attacked the old middle class assumptions again, in the work of Gintis and Bowles, John Holt, Jonathan Kozol, Michael Apple, Joel Spring and others.

Greene praised Cornell West's call for moving philosophy away from being an intellectual exercise centered on language toward becoming a form of cultural criticism. Greene holds that "many lenses are required to make sense of what is happening." The big question

remaining, according to Greene, is how to do this. She suggested using theater, film, music, and novels as avenues into new ways of seeing and feeling. Greene lamented that Lincoln Center remains “elitist and fancy” despite her ongoing work to bring art to the people in that venue. She cited Whitman as someone who “made audible the voices of the people.” Greene also found an example of the kind of critical outrage that we need to develop in Morrison’s lead character in *The Bluest Eye*. Claudia’s anti consumerist hatred of white baby dolls and the Shirley Temple culture grows out of her deep desire for an opportunity to develop her own powers. Claudia is strong enough to make the space that she needs, but the culture tragically destroys Pecola, despite Claudia’s attempts to save her.

Greene’s claim: we should be instructed by the events of the 30s and the 60s so that the “funded meaning of that time” can contribute to our vision of what we should be doing. One reason that the police shot Amadou Diallo was that “they were incapable of seeing a black man with a wallet, not a gun.” They lacked the ability to “open up their perspective from a narrow, one-dimensional world,” and imagine “alternative realities.” Greene deplored the use of testing and tracking and the trend toward deprofessionalization in education, which shifts the focus from teachers encouraging children to use their imagination to teachers drilling children to give the right answer on the test. Greene warned that this approach leads to the kind of narrow vision that can have tragic results like those in the Diallo case. Paying attention to children’s stories is the corrective. What we need instead of “rationalists wearing square hats” is the possibility of “a slow fuse lit by the fire of the imagination” to transform our world.

In pursuit of these goals, Greene organized a conference on the Ambiguities of Freedom at the Center for Social Imagination, the Arts, and Education at Teachers College to address what Friere called “a culture of silence.” The conference brought together education activists, artists, and cultural critics to discuss jazz, hip hop, identity politics, the construction of race, racial profiling, use of tests and

single standards, tracking, and other violations of children such as “welfare to work” programs that tore thousands of children from their parents. In Greene’s view, freedom does not just consist of choice, but “there has to be a space wide enough for you to resist what stands in the way of choice.” In her analysis, there is now an absence of such a space. Little has been done to create it, while the educational research industry that arose after World War II has narrowed our thinking, leading to criticism of education based on test results, tax-payer revolts, and attacks on public schools instead of a new vision for education.

Greene developed Sartre’s idea that we need to invent a future vision to become better aware of the deficiencies of the present. She concluded by calling for “creative democracy” to re-imagine the possibilities of education, but she cautioned that “it has to be founded in outrage and we must be willing to invent.” I hope we can heed Greene’s critical insight in order to keep the study of foundations a force in teacher education that is vital, visionary, and effective in bringing about reform. We need to create a fair and just system that broadens children’s horizons while it improves the life chances for all children in the 21st century. If Greene is right, and I think she is, this must be preceded by an outrage at the present state of education based on our vision of what education could do if we had the courage to make it a reality. Greene’s own work could show us the way.

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END NOTES

Dewey, J. (1958). *Art as Experience*. New York: Capricorn Books.
(Other quotes are taken from my notes on Greene’s talk.)