A Pedagogy of Discomfort: A Qualified Defense

By

Heather Rosalee MacDonald

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**Abstract**

This thesis considers Megan Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort, an approach to social justice education that harnesses students' emotional responses of felt discomfort, such as anger or guilt, in order to prompt them to critically interrogate their existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing. Upon highlighting critiques of politicized curricula, I consider one potential objection that may be levelled against a pedagogy of discomfort, namely, that this pedagogy constitutes an imposition on students by the educator, infringing on students' freedom to hold certain beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing. I argue that in cases where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, this imposition is justified as a lesser evil.

I then address some of the challenges that may arise from implementing a pedagogy of discomfort in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny. I suggest that two tensions arise from imposing this pedagogy on these individuals. First, subjecting these individuals to the process of critical inquiry appears to reproduce the conditions whereby they are denied status as epistemic agents. Second, the act of collective witnessing through which the process of critical inquiry takes place requires that all participants recognize one another as epistemic agents. However, I argue that this mutual recognition may not be present in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny. I argue that the presence of these two tensions gives reason for caution when imposing a pedagogy of discomfort on students who are harmed by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny.

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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

I begin with the following two examples:

(1) During one of the meetings of a multicultural organization, the head of the organization proposes that in addition to promoting cultural diversity, the organization ought to address issues of discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity. In an effort to prompt discussion of these issues, the head of the organization begins by sharing some of the ways in which she, as a Black woman, has experienced racial discrimination, while locating these experiences within the larger context of the practices and assumptions of a primarily white community.[1] In response, some members of the organization assert that the instances of discrimination she describes are not, in the grand scheme of things, 'that bad,' and that the community is 'doing its best' to promote tolerance. When a new head of the organization is elected, these efforts to prompt discussion cease, and members' energies are channelled exclusively into planning and orchestrating events to 'celebrate' cultural diversity.[2]

(2) In "All the Caffeine in the World Doesn't Make You Woke" Kelefa Sanneh reports on his experience of sitting in on an "anti-racial bias" class that all United States employees of the American coffeehouse franchise Starbucks were required to attend. At the beginning of the class, employees are asked to "pair up and…list their differences" ("All the Caffeine"). While most of the pairs refrain from talking about race (limiting their discussions of difference to 'safe' topics, such as the number of siblings they have, or the hometown each is from), two employees engage in the following exchange:

Employee 1: Like, you're white. I'm not.

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[1] This thesis takes as its point of departure the assumption that race is a "social construction" (Smedley & Smedley 16). Thus, the terms 'Black' and 'white' used here denote social identities (both those that one claims for oneself, and those imposed on one by society at large), rather than "genetically discrete" or "scientifically meaningful" categories (ibid.).
[2] This example is based on a personal experience.

Employee 2: That's true. That feels kind of like a gimme.

Employee 1: It kind of is. (ibid.)

As Sanneh notes, these two employees are "the only ones who call out their races," and "as soon as they do, they drop it" (ibid.). Recalling this exchange, the reporter asserts that

Even here, at this meticulously planned racial awareness workshop…it turns out, it's still really hard to get people to talk about race….And…of course people, especially white people, are hesitant….It feels rude to sit down with someone and jump into race, as if that's what's on your mind, as if that's how you see them. But there's…training for that, and we're at it. (ibid.)

Confronted with these examples, one may feel compelled to ask what went wrong. What accounts for the unwillingness of the members of the multicultural organization and Employee 2 to engage in discussions of race and racial discrimination in a context where such discussions are both encouraged and appropriate?[3] This unwillingness is likely driven by a number of factors. For instance, in the first example, members' attempts to minimize the significance of instances of discrimination and defend the community's efforts to promote tolerance may be motivated by a desire to forge 'solidarity' (albeit in a truncated or deficient form) across racial or ethnic lines. However, I argue that a primary factor driving the unwillingness to engage in these discussions is individuals' desire to uphold the illusion that they are, as Steve Fuller puts it, all "living in the same world" – in this case, that regardless of one's racial or ethnic identity, all are subject to the same non-discriminatory treatment by others (xii).

The desire to uphold this illusion, when held by members of a dominant group, may give rise to what Nancy Tuana calls "willful ignorance," a "systematic process of self-deception…that infects

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[3] One might go so far as to make the stronger claim that these discussions are not only appropriate, but also *required*. As I demonstrate in Chapter 2, a pedagogy of discomfort rests on precisely this conviction.

those who are in positions of privilege," thus enabling the "active ignoring of the oppression of others and one's role in that exploitation" (10-11).[4] In light of the negative effects of acceding to the desire to uphold the illusion that we are all living in the same world, namely, that discussions of racial discrimination (and, one might argue, other forms of discrimination, such as those perpetrated on the basis of gender, sexuality, class, or ability) are shut down or foreclosed, we might wonder by what means this desire might be prevented from coopting these discussions. In particular, we might wonder how individuals' desire to uphold this illusion ought to be addressed in the context of social justice education. Given that its purpose is to foster critical awareness of unjust social structures in order to prompt the dismantling of these structures, social justice education seems to stand in direct opposition to this desire (Applebaum 863).

**Learning (In)vulnerability**

My interest in this latter question was sparked by Erinn Gilson's work on epistemic vulnerability. Rejecting the conventional, "solely negative" conception of vulnerability as susceptibility to "harm and injury," Gilson conceives of vulnerability as a condition of "ambivalent potential," one that renders one open to "being affected and affecting [others] in turn" (310). Likewise, "epistemic vulnerability" denotes an openness to "not knowing" and to "being wrong," so that one might "learn from situations in which one is the unknowing, foreign, and perhaps uncomfortable party," while resisting the desire to seek "full mastery" or "control" (Gilson 312, 324-5). Having proposed that the process of learning presupposes such openness, Gilson concludes that epistemic vulnerability "is what makes learning, and thus a reduction of ignorance, possible" (324).

While Gilson conceives of epistemic vulnerability as a necessary condition for learning, it remains to be seen how epistemic vulnerability might be embraced in practice, particularly within

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[4] As Tuana acknowledges, this conception of "willful ignorance" generalizes Charles Mills's notion of "white ignorance," a particular kind of willful ignorance whereby the "white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation," thus ensuring "the persistence of white privilege and racism" (Tuana 10; Mills 19; Gilson 314).

social justice education. I was therefore intrigued to encounter, in the process of researching

epistemic vulnerability, Megan Boler's proposal for a "pedagogy of discomfort." According to Boler,

a pedagogy of discomfort takes our emotional responses of felt discomfort, such as anger or guilt, in

response to avowals of the injustice of a particular set of social arrangements, and uses this

discomfort to alert us to the need to critically interrogate our existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways

of seeing (176, 190).[5] Rather than alleviating this discomfort by furnishing us with more 'accurate' or

'correct' alternatives to our existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing, a pedagogy of

discomfort challenges us to abide with this discomfort – as Boler asserts, "learning to live

with…discomfort" is a "worthy educational ideal" (197). On my reading, by upholding discomfort

as a worthy educational ideal, a pedagogy of discomfort rejects the image of the "prototypical,

arrogantly self-sufficient, independent, invulnerable master subject," thus offering an approach to

teaching social justice education in which epistemic vulnerability is embraced (Gilson 312).

**Situating a Pedagogy of Discomfort**

In addition to its implicit endorsement of epistemic vulnerability, Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of

discomfort can also be situated within the literature on critical pedagogy. The central assumption of

critical pedagogy, as stated in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is that in order to "surmount the

situation of oppression, people must…critically recognize its causes" (47). In other words, the

process of social change begins with the act of critical inquiry. In calling individuals to interrogate

their emotional responses to views that discomfort them as a route to destabilizing unjust social

structures, a pedagogy of discomfort builds on this primary assumption of Freire's work, and of

critical pedagogy more broadly.

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[5] Unless otherwise stated, page numbers for in-text citations for Boler are taken from *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*.

Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort also bears resemblance to bell hooks's work on critical pedagogy. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks challenges educators to facilitate students' "active" participation in the classroom, and to eschew approaches to learning that reduce students to "passive" consumers (14).[6] Similarly, a pedagogy of discomfort discourages students from engaging in the passive act of "spectating," whereby they "permit [themselves] easy identification with dominant representations of good and evil" (Boler 183-4). Instead, this pedagogy prompts students to recognize their status as "morally ambiguous" selves who are complexly implicated in the "system of differential privileges" and "arbitrary social hierarchies" that are the markers of social injustice (ibid. 179, 182).

Finally, both Freire and hooks reject the image of the educator as an invulnerable authority figure who is immune to critique. For instance, Freire calls educators to cultivate "the virtue of humility" according to which they recognize the "limits" of their own knowledge and remain "open to the possibility" that they could be "wrong" (Horton & Freire 193). Likewise, hooks advocates the creation of classrooms that both enhance students' capacity to live "more fully and deeply" and enable teachers to "grow" (21-2). Following in this line, Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort conceives of the process of critical inquiry into existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing as a "mutual" one in which both students and educators are implicated (187). In sum, its affirmation of critical inquiry as a prerequisite for action, its emphasis on active student engagement, and its conviction that both students and educators should be actively engaged in the process of learning situates a pedagogy of discomfort squarely within the literature on critical pedagogy.

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[6] Following Freire, hooks rejects the "'banking system' of education, that approach to learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed to them by a professor and be able to memorize and store it" (hooks 14, 40).

**In Defense of Critical Consciousness Raising**

Having situated Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort within the literature on critical pedagogy, I will now identify a key assumption under which this thesis operates, namely, that the process of cultivating critical consciousness is a valuable or 'worthwhile' pursuit. In "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang caution against the tendency to "allow *conscientization* to stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land" to colonized peoples (19). Similarly, we might think that the process of critical inquiry constitutive of a pedagogy of discomfort may stand in for doing the work of destabilizing unjust social structures. In other words, participants in this pedagogy may perceive transformation of their existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing into alternatives less mired in oppressive structures as an adequate substitute for doing this work. In Freire's words, to affirm individuals as "persons" who "should be free," yet "do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality" constitutes "a farce" (50). He continues, "the radical requirement…both for the individual who discovers [themselves] to be an oppressor" is "not a call to armchair revolution," but rather to transform "the concrete situation which begets oppression" (Freire 50, 66).

    While I do not deny the possibility that the process of critical inquiry may be used as a substitute for the work of destabilizing unjust social structures, I nonetheless maintain, following Freire, that "reflection…is essential to action," and thus that engagement in this process is necessary to raise awareness of one's complicity in unjust social structures (53). Given that efforts to destabilize unjust social structures presuppose that the individuals who undertake this work possess such awareness, I argue that while the cultivation of critical consciousness may be insufficient to fulfill demands of social justice, this process nonetheless provides a point of entry into doing this work, and is therefore a worthwhile pursuit.

**Chapter Overview**

Given the centrality of the issue of social location to the argument put forward in this thesis, it is only fitting that I acknowledge my own social location as its writer. Like the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort to which I refer in Chapter 3, I too am the beneficiary of unjust social structures. In particular, as a white person, I am the beneficiary of an unjust racial hierarchy. My purpose in stating this fact is not to exempt myself from accountability for the claims put forward in this thesis, but rather to acknowledge the influence my social location has on my framing of the concerns of this thesis.

In hindsight, I see that my social location as beneficiary informed my initial concern regarding a pedagogy of discomfort: that by prompting individuals to question their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing, a pedagogy of discomfort oversteps the bounds of what educators may permissibly do in the social justice classroom. Upon further reflection, sparked in part by Robin DiAngelo's work on "white fragility," I began to acknowledge the ways in which my privileged social location informed this initial reaction (57). In particular, I was prompted to confront my investment in insulating from critique those who benefit from unjust social structures. In light of this recognition, the aims of this thesis are two-fold. Its first aim is to defend Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort against one possible objection that may be levelled against it.[7] Its second aim is to

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[7] My purpose in providing this defense is not to argue that a pedagogy of discomfort will necessarily be successful (in the sense of fulfilling its "minimal hope" that individuals will "examine their values, and…how they came to hold those values"), but rather to defend as *morally acceptable* the practice of using discomfort as an instrument for precipitating social change. This is not to underestimate the challenges that may arise from efforts to implement this pedagogy (Boler 198). Indeed, one may object that the express purpose of a pedagogy of discomfort – to engage individuals in the process of questioning their cherished beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing – risks provoking resistance in students, such that they "dig in their heels and blatantly refuse to engage in critical thinking" (Boler "Teaching for Hope" 120). While efforts to implement a pedagogy of discomfort are accompanied by this risk, I reason that the question of whether a pedagogy of discomfort will be successful is of little consequence if its status as a justified practice cannot first be established. In arguing that a pedagogy of discomfort is justified, I seek to lay the foundation for addressing the more empirical concern about its efficacy.

identify two tensions that arise from implementing this pedagogy in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed rather than benefitted by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny.

To these ends, I begin in Chapter 2 by reconstructing Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort. First, I distinguish a pedagogy of discomfort from two other approaches that involve attending to our emotional responses: the "mental hygiene" movement and "emotional literacy" programs (Boler 49, 61). I then show that both of these latter approaches are antithetical to a pedagogy of discomfort. Whereas the mental hygiene movement and emotional literacy programs discourage individuals from engaging critically with dominant cultural values, a pedagogy of discomfort encourages such engagement (ibid. 103, 176). By prompting individuals to question their cherished beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing, and to recognize the ways in which these are influenced by dominant cultural values, this pedagogy seeks to destabilize the system of differential privileges and arbitrary social hierarchies to which these values give rise.

I then highlight two caveats that Boler issues as part of her proposal for this pedagogy. The first caveat states that the call for individuals to engage critically with the values of the dominant culture constitutes an invitation, rather than a demand (ibid. 179). The second caveat states that rather than exempting the educator from this process of critical engagement, students and educators are *mutually implicated* in this invitation (ibid. 198).

Having reconstructed Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort, I proceed in Chapter 3 to evaluate the moral acceptability of this proposal. I begin by highlighting critiques of politicized curricula advanced by the so-called "new right" (Quicke 5). To ground my analysis, I identify a potential objection to this pedagogy to which these critiques may give rise, namely, that *a pedagogy of discomfort constitutes an imposition on students by the educator*. I refer to this objection as 'the charge of imposition.' Upon showing that the charge of imposition does in fact pose a distinct challenge to this pedagogy, and that the power dynamics governing the relation between students and the

educator in the context of formal education prevent the call to critical inquiry from functioning as the mutual invitation that Boler envisions, I argue that a pedagogy of discomfort does indeed constitute such an imposition. However, conceding that some impositions are justified, I argue that a pedagogy of discomfort constitutes one such justified imposition. I conclude Chapter 3 by claiming that in cases where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, the imposition of this pedagogy is justified as a lesser evil.

In Chapter 4, I address some of the challenges that arise from implementing a pedagogy of discomfort in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed rather than benefitted by the unjust social structure under scrutiny. I suggest that the imposition of a pedagogy of discomfort on these individuals gives rise to the following two tensions. First, while efforts to impose a pedagogy of discomfort on these individuals may seek to *free* them from the oppressive grip of dominant cultural values according to which they are denied status as epistemic agents by those occupying dominant positions, the process of critical inquiry used to secure this aim risks *reproducing* this denial. Second, while the act of "collective witnessing" through which the process of critical inquiry takes place requires that all participants in this pedagogy recognize one another as epistemic agents, I argue that this recognition may not be present in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny (Boler 176). In this chapter, I flag these two tensions as the basis for advocating caution when imposing this pedagogy on these individuals.

Having stated the central aims of this thesis, I begin the next chapter by outlining precisely what a pedagogy of discomfort entails.

**Chapter 2: A Pedagogy of Discomfort**

In *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, Megan Boler issues a proposal for what she calls "a pedagogy of discomfort," an approach to social justice education that seeks to engage individuals in the "process of questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions," whereby they "examine how [their] modes of seeing" (habits that lead them to emphasize certain details of a given context in the attempt to obtain "static truth or fixed certainty") have been shaped by "dominant cultural values" that contribute to the oppression and suffering of others (Boler 176, 179, 180, 186, 192, 194; "Teaching for Hope" 117).

This proposal rests on the following premises. First, Boler asserts that education is never a "neutral activity," but "always involves a political or social agenda" (179-80, 182). The implication of this statement is that while we might have good reason to reject educational programs that espouse political or social agendas that are obviously pernicious (such as those that promote violence, bigotry, or hatred of other groups), we need not be wary of an educational program simply because it includes an explicitly stated political or social agenda.[1]

Second, Boler observes that social injustice tends not to right itself "naturally," whereby those who control and/or benefit from unjust social structures seek, of their own accord, to change these structures (183). Instead, the process of righting social injustice is a "long, and ongoing…struggle" (ibid.). For example, widespread recognition of the unacceptability of racism did not occur (at least not primarily) because white supremacists realized that "racism was a terrible injustice and decided to work to change it" (ibid.). Instead, historical efforts to eliminate racial injustice have consisted primarily in challenging and struggling against the systems of differential privileges and arbitrary social hierarchies that are the markers of this injustice, work that has often been spearheaded by

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[1] On the contrary, one might argue that it is apparently "neutral" educational programs of which we ought to be wary, given that this appearance of neutrality may be a front for complicity in maintaining existing (and, putatively, unjust) social conditions.

oppressed groups (Boler 179, 183). If history is any indication, we cannot assume that those who benefit from existing unjust social structures will naturally come to recognize the injustice of these structures and take measures to correct them (ibid. 194). Instead, Boler argues, social change requires radical and intentional efforts to destabilize individuals' existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing (ibid.).

This brings us to the third premise underlying Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort: that attending to our emotional responses to views that discomfort us is an important part of this struggle for social change (180). According to Boler, these emotions are informed by a complex network of "social values, cultural rules, linguistic framing, self-reflective introspection" (188). In other words, emotions are inextricably tied to a "social context" (ibid.). Moreover, our emotional responses of felt discomfort (such as anger or guilt) in response to a particular statement (say, about the injustice of a particular set of social arrangements) alert us to a disconnection between the content of this statement and our existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing (Boler 190). This, in turn, signals to us the need to re-evaluate our existing views (ibid.). In doing so, we may come to recognize the role that our beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing may play in affirming unjust social structures, and to consider alternatives to these existing structures that are better aligned with the demands of social justice (ibid. 187, 197).[2] In short, attending to our feelings of discomfort is a key component of the struggle for social change.

The final premise of Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort is the following normative claim: that "the *right* thing to do is risk one's own comfort for the sake of others' freedom" (193, 195, 197, my emphasis). In other words, there exists an ethical obligation to engage in the

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[2] Given that individuals may resist efforts to engage in a pedagogy of discomfort, the ability of this pedagogy to precipitate efforts to examine one's own complicity in unjust social structures and rectify these structures is never guaranteed (Boler "Teaching for Hope" 120). Nevertheless, a pedagogy of discomfort gives rise to the *potential* that these positive effects will obtain.

discomforting task of questioning one's beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing in the name of social justice. Thus, a pedagogy of discomfort is not a mere educational experiment, but rather a normative project, one that situates individual acts of critical questioning in relation to the social good writ large, and which upholds "learning to live with…discomfort" as a "worthy educational ideal" (Boler 197). Having claimed that education always contains a social or political agenda, that social change occurs as the result of a struggle that includes attending to our emotional responses of discomfort, and that there exists an ethical obligation to risk one's own comfort in order to enable the freedom of others, Boler proposes a pedagogy of discomfort as a viable approach to teaching social justice education (176, 197).

**What a Pedagogy of Discomfort is Not**

Before outlining the aims of a pedagogy of discomfort, it is crucial to distinguish this pedagogy from two other approaches: the "mental hygiene" movement and "emotional literacy" programs (Boler 49, 83). First popularized in the early twentieth-century, the mental hygiene movement "sought to control emotions," compelling students to assimilate the "civilizing" discourses of the dominant culture by replacing "irrational" modes of emotional expression with "universalized capacities for language and reason" (ibid. 38, 41, 43, 49-50). Proponents of the mental hygiene movement perceived students' emotions as a "threat to social equilibrium" and as the primary cause of "social conflicts" (ibid. 46, 49-50). Within this movement, emotion functioned as a "key site of social control," the effect of which was to subdue students with belligerent or revolutionary leanings in order to affirm "existing social structures" (ibid. 31, 37, 42, 52). As Boler notes, "social…revolution was not an option advocated by social scientists or school administrators" who endorsed the mental hygiene approach (49). Instead, the aim of this approach was to replace those attitudes and behaviours that conflicted with existing social structures with those compatible with "prevailing social conditions" (ibid.).

The second approach from which Boler distinguishes her proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort is the "emotional literacy" approach (83). Drawing inspiration from Daniel Goleman's 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence*, the emotional literacy approach upholds students' emotional responses as valuable (Boler 80-1). However, it does so only insofar as these responses can be made to conform to "existing social hierarchies and…interests in efficiency and social harmony" (ibid. 82-3). The aim of this approach is to resolve "violence" and "cultural differences" by increasing students' "diplomatic and communicative skills" (ibid. 88-9). Primary among the emotional "skills" this approach seeks to cultivate is "empathy," whereby one learns to "identify" with the suffering of the "other" in the effort to understand this other (ibid. 154-5). In essence, by instilling these skills in students, emotional literacy programs function as a form of "behavioural modification" while foreclosing analyses of "social conflict in terms of social injustice" (ibid. 103, 155).

Like a pedagogy of discomfort, both of these approaches involve attending to our emotional responses. However, the mental hygiene movement and emotional literacy programs share a reluctance to question the system of differential privileges and arbitrary social hierarchies that are the markers of social injustice. Instead, these approaches work to pacify students in the face of these injustices, conditioning them to perceive these injustices as unalterable, or worse yet, as attributable to 'natural' disparities in the characters and abilities of particular groups.

Responding to the collective shortcomings of these approaches, Boler identifies the need for an "explicit discourse of emotions," one that situates "different emotional expressions, silences, and rules" in connection with "the power relations that define cultural injustices" in order to create "educational spaces dedicated to critical inquiry and transformative possibilities" (83, 191). Her proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort addresses this need. By prompting individuals to question their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing, a pedagogy of discomfort challenges these individuals

to engage critically with the values of the dominant culture and with the system of differential privileges and arbitrary social hierarchies to which these values give rise (Boler 179, 182).

**The Aim of a Pedagogy of Discomfort**

Having defined the premises underlying Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort and having distinguished this pedagogy from what it is not, I will now identify what Boler takes to be the aim of this pedagogy: to facilitate the process of "collective witnessing," such that individuals come to recognize their status as "morally ambiguous selves" (176). Like a pedagogy of discomfort, collective witnessing must be distinguished from two other approaches. First, collective witnessing should not be confused with self-reflection, whereby critical inquiry is reduced to an "individualized process" that risks degenerating into "solipsism" (Boler 177-8). Likewise, collective witnessing is distinct from the phenomenon of "spectating," whereby one permits oneself "easy identification with dominant representations of good and evil" while establishing "comfortable safety and distance" between oneself and others (ibid. 183-4). As Boler notes, spectating is a privileged stance, a "luxury" made available to those who benefit from unjust social structures at the cost of silencing others (184). Enlisting the help of dichotomies such as "friend" and "enemy," "guilt" and "innocence," "good" and "evil," the spectator fails to acknowledge their "co-implication" in unjust social arrangements and their responsibility to correct these injustices (Boler 183-4, 186).

In contrast, collective witnessing prompts us to recognize ourselves as "inextricably intertwined" with others (ibid. 177-8). Eschewing the simple dichotomies in which spectating seeks refuge, collective witnessing asks the individual to inhabit a morally "ambiguous…sense of self" (ibid. 176, 186-7). According to Boler, this involves recognizing the complex ways in which one is implicated in the "system of differential privileges" and "arbitrary social hierarchies" that are the markers of social injustice, and to resist the urge to conceive of oneself as wholly "good or innocent" (ibid. 179, 182, 188; "Teaching for Hope" 117). By attending to the complexity of one's role in these structures,

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collective witnessing gives rise to a "more nuanced" approach to ethics, one that prompts us to recognize our "profound interconnections" with one another, and take responsibility for addressing social injustice (Boler 180, 187). By upholding collective witnessing as a means of enabling individuals to recognize their status as "morally ambiguous selves," a pedagogy of discomfort equips individuals to alter their existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing as a first step in dismantling unjust social structures (ibid. 176). As such, collective witnessing avoids both the reductive, "binary, either/or thinking" that informs much of Western ethical language, and the "rhetoric" of moral pluralism that dominates educational philosophies, but which often fails to secure "justice…or a world free from violence" (ibid. 176, 180, 187, 196).

**A Pedagogy of Discomfort in Action**

Drawing on her own experience as an educator who implements a pedagogy of discomfort in the post-secondary classrooms where she teaches, Boler cites the following two examples to illustrate precisely what is entailed by collective witnessing and the act of recognizing one's status as a morally ambiguous self. In the first example, Boler discusses two cases of physical violence with her students, the 1991 beating of Rodney King, a Black motorist, by white members of the Los Angeles Police Department, and the beating of Reginald Denny, a white construction worker, by four Black men as part of the riots that ensued following King's beating (185; McCartney n.p.). She notes that

> [s]ome of the white students [in the class]…[expressed] that they [were] more deeply disturbed
> by the frequently-televised images of [Denny] being beaten than by the beating of Rodney
> King….[T]hey [viewed] the beating of [Denny]…as entirely 'unprovoked' and that victim
> entirely 'innocent' [the implication being that because King had been driving while intoxicated
> and had been trying to evade police, he was more culpable than Denny, and thus, his beating
> could more readily be excused]. (ibid.)

By invoking a pedagogy of discomfort, Boler seeks to attune these students to the ways in which their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing have been informed by a dominant culture in which racist police brutality is accepted and/or expected. In addition to urging them to "explore what they mean by 'unprovoked' and 'innocent,'" Boler prompts these students to consider the fact that "the beating of Rodney King…represents a long history of…police brutality" against persons of color (Boler 185).

Boler's response exemplifies precisely what is involved in collective witnessing and recognizing one's status as a morally ambiguous self. By asking her students to consider the ways in which their emotional responses to these cases are conditioned by a dominant culture that normalizes and condones police brutality, particularly against persons of color, while simultaneously affirming white innocence, Boler leads these students to engage in the act of collective witnessing (177-8). Likewise, by urging them to explore what they mean by "unprovoked" and "innocent," white students in the class are prompted to concede the inadequacy of binary, either/or thinking, to resist the urge to conceive of themselves as wholly good or innocent, and to confront their own moral ambiguity as those who benefit from this dominant culture by virtue of their whiteness (Boler 178). By prompting these students to engage in collective witnessing and recognize their status as morally ambiguous selves, this example illustrates a pedagogy of discomfort in action.

In "Teach for Hope: The Ethics of Shattering Worldviews," Boler offers a second example of collective witnessing. In this essay, Boler refers to her efforts to prompt students to critically examine their commitment to the so-called "American Dream," the "naïve," meritocratic hope that one can "improve their lot in life if they…only work hard enough" ("Teaching for Hope" 115). The American Dream gives rise to the belief that those who are disadvantaged are in this state because of their own lack of industriousness or initiative, the implication being that they have only themselves to blame (ibid.).

In an attempt to destabilize students' adherence to the American Dream and the damaging practice of individualizing social problems to which this myth gives rise, Boler asks students to consider the role that systems of differential privilege and arbitrary social hierarchies play in restricting the opportunities available to marginalize groups (ibid. 120). For instance, she notes that menial labour often falls disproportionately to persons of color (ibid.). Boler describes the subsequent reaction of a white student who becomes visibly agitated and angry, adamantly rejecting her claim that the opportunities available to marginalized groups are constrained in this way (ibid.).

Much to Boler's surprise, the student returns at the end of term to report that they have had a "change of heart," whereupon they issue an apology to Boler for their recalcitrant behaviour ("Teaching for Hope" 122). Attributing their anger to their "frustrations with 'this system of oppression'" and their perception of the hopelessness of social change, the student concedes that this anger "needn't [have been] directed" at Boler as the educator (ibid.). In response to Boler's query as to how her pedagogical approach might be modified to "make students…feel more engaged and less resistant" to her curriculum, the student states that they wished Boler "had told [them] that 'just by virtue of…sitting in this class, things can get better'" ("Teaching for Hope" 124). Boler's response to this student exemplifies a pedagogy of discomfort. She replies that while attending a class that aims to destabilize one's existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing may raise one's awareness of these systems of oppression and prompt efforts to create social systems that are more just, simply "sitting in this class" in no way guarantees social change (ibid.).

Like her response to students' reactions to the beatings of Rodney King and Reginald Denny, Boler's reply to the student's plea for reassurance serves as an impetus for collective witnessing and their recognition of their status as a morally ambiguous self. This reply prompts the student to acknowledge that their mere presence in the classroom is insufficient to fulfill their responsibility to right unjust social structures, and to recognize that these injustices are embedded in a particular

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history of oppression that defies easy or definitive solutions (178). As Tuck and Ree note, efforts to resolve these injustices may be mobilized by those who are complicit in unjust social structures for the purpose of 'redeeming' themselves (642). Thus, the resistance of these injustices to easy or definitive solutions compromises one's ability to affirm oneself as innocent. One is therefore compelled to occupy a space of moral ambiguity, one that defies binary ethical categories and thwarts one's desire to "resolve" this injustice once and for all (ibid. 648). Together, these two examples of a pedagogy of discomfort demonstrate precisely what collective witnessing, and the act of recognizing one's status as a morally ambiguous self, entails.

**Two Caveats**

Having outlined her proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort, Boler issues the following two caveats. First, Boler asserts that a pedagogy of discomfort constitutes an "invitation," rather than a "demand" (176, 179, 183, 195). A pedagogy of discomfort does not *compel* individuals to question their existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing, nor is the aim of this pedagogy to "enforce a particular political agenda" by demanding that individuals undertake "one particular road of action" following critical engagement (Boler 179, 195). While a pedagogy of discomfort holds the "minimal hope" that individuals will "examine their values, and…how they came to hold those values," it does not demand that they "transform" those values they currently hold, nor does it grade or evaluate them on whether they undertake efforts to alter unjust social structures (ibid. 198). Instead, according to Boler, the call to critical inquiry is issued as an "invitation" that students may freely choose to accept or reject (176, 179, 183).

Boler's second caveat is that the invitation to question one's existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing in the context of a pedagogy of discomfort is "mutual," extending to both students and the educator (180, 187, 191, 198). According to Boler, "[t]he educator's own beliefs and assumptions are by no means immune to the process of questioning and 'shattering'" (187). In other

words, the fact that the educator initiates this pedagogy does not exempt them from the task of engaging in critical inquiry. By conceiving of a pedagogy of discomfort as a process of mutual exploration, Boler aims to situate students and educators on common ground.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have reconstructed Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort as a process that seeks to engage individuals in the act of questioning their existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing, thus leading them to recognize how their views are informed by dominant cultural values. Following Boler, I have distinguished a pedagogy of discomfort from two other pedagogical approaches that take as their point of departure students' emotional responses, namely, the mental hygiene movement and emotional literacy programs. Whereas these latter approaches call students to comply with the discourses and values of the dominant culture, a pedagogy of discomfort prompts students to critically interrogate these values.

In addition, I have reiterated two caveats that Boler issues as part of her proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort, namely, that a pedagogy of discomfort constitutes an invitation, rather than a demand, and that this invitation is one in which students and educators are mutually implicated. One might wonder, however, whether these two caveats do in fact hold. In the following chapter, I seek to problematize these caveats, and to canvas alternative grounds on which a pedagogy of discomfort might be justified.

**Chapter 3: Justifying a Pedagogy of Discomfort**

Having outlined Boler's proposal for a pedagogy of discomfort, in this chapter, I consider one possible objection that critics may level against this pedagogy, namely, that this pedagogy *constitutes an imposition on students by the educator*. Such critics may claim that while the educator is permitted to inform students of the presence of unjust social structures, by prompting students to engage in critical inquiry, this pedagogy infringes on their freedom to hold certain beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing. After situating this objection in the context of "new right" critiques of politicized curricula, I then canvas two possible counterarguments (Quicke 5). Ultimately, I show that these two counterarguments fail. I then argue that the power dynamics that bear on the relation between students and the educator in the context of formal education qualify a pedagogy of discomfort as an imposition, rather than a mutual invitation. Nonetheless, I argue that where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, this imposition is justified as a 'lesser evil.'

**The Charge of Imposition**

I begin by situating the objection that a pedagogy of discomfort constitutes an imposition on students in relation to critiques, advanced by the so-called "new right," of politicized curricula (Quicke 5). John Quicke defines the new right as a political position that attempts to meld neo-conservative rejection of the "radical, left of center ideologies allegedly dominant in educational bureaucracies" with neo-liberal privileging of the value of "freedom of choice" (8-9). Among the tenets of the new right is the conviction that the "politicization" of school curricula through the introduction of "[a]nti-racist and anti-sexist education, peace studies, world studies, and various other 'newer' subjects" are examples of "the…indoctrinating tendencies of the left in education"

(Quicke 9).[1] Consequently, proponents of the new right may claim that in conceiving of "all social action and institutions…as facilitative of…an overriding set of political goals," this "'politicized' world-view" gives rise to a "lack of respect for…independent purposes" (ibid.; Scruton et al. 12).

The objection to a pedagogy of discomfort with which I am concerned is a simplified version of these critiques of politicized curricula. One who levels the objection that a pedagogy of discomfort constitutes an imposition on students by the educator need not necessarily regard this pedagogy as a vehicle for 'indoctrination.' Nonetheless, this simplified objection charges that this pedagogy infringes on students' freedom to hold certain beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing. Having thus situated this objection, referred to hereafter as the 'charge of imposition,' I will now canvas two possible counterarguments that proponents of a pedagogy of discomfort may invoke in the effort to defend against this charge.

## I. The Charge of Imposition Poses No Distinct Challenge

The first counterargument that defenders of a pedagogy of discomfort may invoke takes the form of a dismissal. They may concede that this charge expresses a general worry about the structure of formal education, a term used here to denote educational contexts in which the educator occupies a position of authority in the classroom relative to students. However, they may claim that this charge poses no distinct challenge to a pedagogy of discomfort per se. This point depends on recognizing the central role that values play in formal education in general. Proponents of a pedagogy of discomfort may note that the educator is generally authorized to undertake such tasks as fostering a particular classroom environment and setting course content (by, for instance, highlighting certain topics for discussion and omitting others). Additionally, the educator is usually authorized to

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[1] As Richard Bailey notes, "until the second half of the twentieth century indoctrination was understood as no more offensive than concepts like education or teaching" (136). However, in this context, indoctrination is "used as a derogatory term" to describe "the sort of educational practices" considered inappropriate "in a modern, liberal democratic society" (ibid.).

evaluate student performance, both formally (by attributing grades), and informally (by praising students who meet course expectations, and criticizing those who do not).[2]

The educator's decisions with respect to these three domains of classroom environment, course content, and modes and standards of evaluation are made with reference to what they deem to be 'worthy' or 'appropriate' goals or aims – in other words, with reference to judgments of value. For instance, an educator's decision to structure classroom discussions based on democratic principles, by, for instance, prompting individuals to engage in rational debate in order to reach collective agreement, may be informed by judgements that uphold the value of pluralism. Likewise, an educator's decision to include in their curriculum the writings and thought of marginalized groups may be informed by judgements about the value of diversity.[3] The bearing that judgments of value have on the educator's decisions is most obvious in the formal evaluation of student performance, where the standards of worthy or appropriate student engagement are clearly defined (for instance, as marking rubrics) and explicitly communicated (for instance, as learning outcomes). Insofar as the decisions that the educator makes regarding the classroom environment, course content, and evaluation of student performance are made intentionally, rather than arbitrarily, they reflect judgments of value.

By appeal to this account of the role that values play in formal education, defenders of a pedagogy of discomfort may claim that rather than posing a specific challenge to a pedagogy of

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[2] One might object that not all educators are authorized to make decisions pertaining to these three domains of classroom environment, course content, and evaluation. For example, educators' authority to set course content may be foreclosed or constrained by external factors, such as the state, which may dictate what content they can permissibly teach. While I concede that the control that educators have over these three domains varies with reference to the force exerted by external factors, my intention is to identify the powers that educators *typically* possess in the context of formal education.

[3] While I invoke these examples to illustrate the ways in which values espoused by the educator may shape the classroom environment, course content, and modes of evaluation in formal education contexts, I take no position on whether 'pluralism' and 'diversity' are values to which educators ought to aspire. Boler's claim that the "rhetoric" of pluralism often fails to secure "justice, freedom, or a world free from violence," and Sara Ahmed's assertion that the language of diversity and inclusion may function to affirm those who invoke this language as the benevolent "hosts" suggest that they may not be (Boler 180; Ahmed 42, 141).

discomfort per se, the charge of imposition merely gives voice to a general worry about paternalism on the part of educators. This worry, that educators will use the classroom as a forum for inculcating in students the values they hold to be important, calls into question the justifiability of formal education as it is currently structured. To defend against this charge, one must defend against a general scepticism about the legitimacy of the authority typically bestowed on the educator in the context of formal education. Consequently, defenders of a pedagogy of discomfort may conclude that the task of refuting this objection rightly falls to defenders of formal education in general. They may therefore dismiss this objection on the grounds that it poses no distinct challenge to a pedagogy of discomfort.

While this first counterargument might appear to fortify a pedagogy of discomfort against the charge of imposition, I argue that it does not. The reason is that this counterargument fails to recognize what differentiates a pedagogy of discomfort from formal education in general: while formal education may *transmit* particular values to students, a pedagogy of discomfort is implemented for the purpose of destabilizing the views and values that students currently hold (Boler 179). While classroom environment, course content, and modes of evaluation may serve as vehicles for transmitting the educator's values to students, this does not preclude students' continued adherence to the values they currently hold (provided these values are reasonably compatible with those of the educator). In contrast, by prompting students to question their existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing, a pedagogy of discomfort potentially compromises this continued adherence. Having highlighted the impact that a pedagogy of discomfort has on students' values, those who object to a pedagogy of discomfort on the grounds that it constitutes an imposition on students may conclude that the charge of imposition does indeed pose a distinct challenge to this pedagogy.

## II. The Charge of Imposition Misconstrues a Pedagogy of Discomfort

This brings us to the second counterargument that defenders of a pedagogy of discomfort may deploy against the charge of imposition: that while this charge may indeed pose a distinct challenge to a pedagogy of discomfort, it fundamentally misconstrues this pedagogy. Specifically, proponents of a pedagogy of discomfort may argue that the charge of imposition fails to account for the two caveats that Boler issues as part of her proposal for this pedagogy. Having outlined these two caveats in detail in Chapter 2, I will restate them briefly. The first caveat states that the act of engaging in the process of questioning one's beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing constitutes an invitation, rather than a demand (Boler 176, 179, 183, 195). The second caveat states that while educators may be responsible for initiating this invitation, this invitation is mutual, extending to both students and educators (Boler 180, 187, 191, 198).

Defenders of a pedagogy of discomfort may argue that framing this pedagogy as an 'imposition' is inconsistent with the spirit of these two caveats. These defenders may observe that an imposition denotes the laying on of a demand or task "to be born, endured, or submitted to," often by wielding authority to which others are subject (*OED*). Insofar as a pedagogy of discomfort involves a request for engagement issued to all, these defenders may claim that 'imposition' and 'mutual invitation' are antithetical (Boler 176, 179, 183, 195). On these grounds, proponents of a pedagogy of discomfort may claim that conceiving of this pedagogy as an imposition is at odds with Boler's proposal. These proponents may therefore conclude that the charge of imposition misconstrues this pedagogy, and therefore does not hold.

However, this second counterargument merely *assumes* that these two caveats are true. In other words, it assumes that we can indeed speak meaningfully, in the context of formal education, of a 'mutual invitation' to engage in the process of questioning existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing. But it remains to be seen that we can. Responding to this second counterargument, one

might claim that the power dynamics that bear on the relation between students and the educator in the context of formal education foreclose the possibility of this mutual invitation.

Support for this latter claim can be found in the argument Linda Alcoff advances in "The Problem of Speaking for Others." In this essay, Alcoff argues that a speaker's social location has a "significant effect" on their acts of speaking (7). She makes two claims that are particularly relevant to the discussion at hand. The first is that the meaning of one's acts of speaking cannot be reduced to the content of what one says (ibid.). On the contrary, one's position within unjust social structures also bears on the meaning of one's acts of speaking, affecting how others perceive these acts and understand the meaning of one's speech (Alcoff 12-3). Alcoff's second claim is that one cannot "transcend" the social location that bears on one's acts of speaking (7). While those who occupy privileged social locations may take measures to minimize the dangers that arise from speaking for less privileged others (by, for instance, "constructing hypotheses about the possible connections between [their] social location[s] and their words"), these dangers can never completely be eliminated (Alcoff 25).

Together, these two claims give us reason to doubt that we can indeed speak meaningfully, in the context of formal education, of a mutual invitation to engage in the process of questioning our beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing. As noted above, in the context of formal education, the educator is generally authorized to foster a particular classroom environment, to set course content, and to evaluate student performance. That is, the educator occupies a privileged social position in the classroom.[4] Thus, those who object to a pedagogy of discomfort on the grounds that it constitutes an imposition on students may argue that the social position of the educator bears on the

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[4] Granted, the role of educator, and the authority that accompanies this role, is but one dimension of one's social location. Other dimensions may function to compromise one's pedagogical authority. For instance, educators who are members of minority groups may find that their pedagogical authority is contested on these grounds (Ruíz 201-3). While I acknowledge that contestations of educators' authority do indeed occur, the fact remains that the hierarchical manner in which formal education is structured is designed to mitigate contestations of this authority.

meaning of the call to engage in a pedagogy of discomfort, and most importantly, on how students understand this call. In light of the privileges and hierarchies that place the educator in a position of authority relative to students, students *may not perceive this call as an invitation they can choose freely to accept or reject.*

In order to substantiate the claim that students may not perceive this call as an invitation, we may begin by noting the following. While a pedagogy of discomfort does not grade or evaluate students on whether they undertake efforts to alter unjust social structures, or demand that students "transform" the values they currently hold, the educator may still deploy various methods of evaluating student performance that have a coercive impact even if the scope of coercion is limited (Boler 198). For instance, Boler's proposal appears to leave open the possibility of grading or evaluating students on whether they meet the challenge posed by this pedagogy's "minimal hope" that they "examine their values, and…how they came to hold those values" (ibid.). Even if we assume that Boler's prohibition on grading or evaluating students on their efforts to alter unjust social structures extends to the matter of their success or failure in fulfilling this minimal hope, the educator is still free to engage in processes of informal evaluation. For instance, the educator may provide positive reinforcement to students whose engagement satisfies this minimal hope, while faulting or criticizing those who fail to meet this expectation. Furthermore, even if the educator refrains from evaluating student performance in this most minimal sense, the fact remains that the educator reserves the right to engage in this process if they so choose.

Knowing that the educator reserves the right to evaluate their performance, and knowing that they may be subject to negative evaluation (if only informally) if they fail to accept the call to engage in a pedagogy of discomfort, students may not perceive this call as an invitation they can choose freely to accept or reject. Assuming an invitation must be perceived as an invitation by *both* its initiator *and* its intended invitees in order to qualify as such, those who object to a pedagogy of

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discomfort on grounds of the charge of imposition may conclude that the call, issued by educators, to engage in this pedagogy fails to qualify as an invitation, and therefore that Boler's first caveat does not hold.

Likewise, the formal education context in which a pedagogy of discomfort is implemented seems to preclude the "mutual" character of a pedagogy of discomfort.[5] Elizabeth Ellsworth's observations are demonstrative here. Reflecting on her own experience as an educator, Ellsworth notes that despite efforts to give her judgements and assessments "equal weight with those of students," her role as an educator inevitably conspires to weight her statements more heavily (308). This inequality that structures the relation between educators and students in a formal education context is even more pronounced in a pedagogy of discomfort. Recall that educators are responsible for both initiating this pedagogy and issuing the invitation to engage in the process of questioning fundamental beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing (Boler 179, 195). In other words, educators exert control over when, and on what terms, this pedagogy is implemented, reserving the right to determine what beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing are to be subjected to critical inquiry. Moreover, because educators are generally authorized to foster a particular classroom environment, to set course content, and to evaluate student performance, it would seem that they are also at liberty to alter the terms of this invitation as they see fit (by, for instance, keeping expectations for critical engagement at the level of the minimal hope described above, or raising these expectations beyond this minimal hope).

In contrast, students, being subject to these terms, are at no such liberty. Although students may contest the educator's expectations for critical engagement, it is at the discretion of the educator (or those superiors to whom the educator is answerable) whether these expectations are modified in

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[5] I take Boler's use of the term 'mutual' to mean "standing in reciprocal relation to one another" and/or "held in common or shared" (*OED*).

response to their grievances (Boler 193). Given that the educator sets the terms for engaging in a pedagogy of discomfort, and given that students are subject to these terms, those who object to a pedagogy of discomfort on the grounds of the charge of imposition may claim that the call to critical inquiry that the educator issues is not one in which educators and students are equally implicated. These potential objectors may therefore conclude that Boler's second caveat, that the invitation to engage in a pedagogy of discomfort is a mutual one, also does not hold.

Having shown that the call issued by educators to engage in a pedagogy of discomfort fails to qualify as a 'mutual invitation,' those who object to this pedagogy on grounds of the charge of imposition may assert that Boler's two caveats do not in fact obtain, and therefore that the second counterargument levelled against this charge fails as a defense of this pedagogy. Having established that 'imposition' and 'mutual invitation' are antithetical, these opponents of a pedagogy of discomfort may therefore conclude that the charge of imposition does indeed hold.

But while the above discussion does seem to indicate that a pedagogy of discomfort constitutes an imposition on students by the educator, it need not necessarily be the case that this imposition is *unjustified.* In what follows, I propose that there exist justified impositions. I then argue, contrary to those who may object to a pedagogy of discomfort on grounds of the charge of imposition, that this pedagogy qualifies as a justified imposition.

**A Justified Imposition**

That there exist 'justified impositions' is best illustrated by way of an example. Consider an educator who creates a classroom environment that incorporates democratic principles. Following Catherine Mills, Michalinos Zembylas suggests that the "imposition of [these] democratic principles in a classroom" can be justified "as a delimiting response to another, perhaps more severe violence"

(171).[6] My objective here is to highlight the justificatory logic underlying Zembylas's claim. This

logic appears to be that in the context of formal education, impositions on students by the educator

may be justified as a 'lesser evil' when compared to the negative effects of not imposing.

I argue that like the imposition of democratic principles in the classroom, the imposition of a

pedagogy of discomfort may also be justified as a lesser evil. To make this argument, I begin by

identifying the primary targets of a pedagogy of discomfort, a task that requires that we return to the

two examples of a pedagogy of discomfort in action cited in Chapter 2. Recall that the first example

was of a discussion Boler had with students in one of her classes in response to their claims that they

found the beating of Reginald Denny to be more disturbing than the police beating of Rodney King

(185). The second example recounted Boler's interaction with a recalcitrant student, who, in

response to her observation that menial labour often falls disproportionately to persons of color,

became visibly agitated and angry ("Teaching for Hope" 120). In both of these examples we are told

that the individuals who are subject to this pedagogy are "white" (Boler 185; "Teaching for Hope"

120). As such, they are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure (in this case, a racial

hierarchy) that this pedagogy prompts them to interrogate (ibid.).[7]

The use of the word 'particular' is important here. Given the complexity of intersectionality,

whereby individuals are impacted by "multiple…and changing structural power relations," I

acknowledge that individuals can only be meaningfully defined as 'benefitted' or 'harmed' with

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[6] Zembylas's use of the term "violence" is evocative of Judith Butler, who, following Theodor Adorno, argues that the imposition of ethical norms may constitute a violence if those on whom these norms are imposed cannot appropriate these norms "in a living way" (Butler 5). One might find the use of the term 'violence' in this context contentious (Murphy 3). However, the status of the imposition of ethical norms as specifically 'violent' is not weight-bearing for my argument that some impositions may be justified as lesser evils. One could, for instance, substitute the less contentious 'injustice' for 'violence' and reach the same conclusion. Thus, I do not defend this use of the term 'violence' here.
[7] While those who benefit from the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny may be the primary targets of a pedagogy of discomfort, they need not be the only targets. As Boler notes, far from being immune to the hegemony of dominant cultural values, those who are marginalized by a particular unjust social structure may also internalize these values, and therefore be equally in need of critically interrogating their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing ("Teaching for Hope" 118). I address the issues that arise from efforts to impose a pedagogy of discomfort on those who are marginalized by a particular unjust social structure in Chapter 4.

reference to a given unjust social structure (Collins 249). Support for this claim can be found in Roxane Gay's observation that privilege is "contextual" ("Peculiar Benefits"). Gay argues that while individuals possess multiple group memberships, one's memberships do not carry equal weight at all times (ibid.). Instead, the social context in which one finds oneself at a given moment singles out some of one's memberships, and by extension, the privileges (or disadvantages) to which these memberships give rise, as important or salient, while simultaneously deemphasizing others (ibid.).

Following Gay, I contend that while it is fallacious to speak of individuals as purely 'benefitted' or 'harmed,' claims can nonetheless be made about an individual's status as one who benefits from or is harmed by a particular unjust social structure.[8] Assuming that instances in which a pedagogy of discomfort is implemented will, generally speaking, take a *particular* unjust social structure as their object of scrutiny (as is the case in the two examples of this pedagogy in action recounted above), I contend we can in fact speak meaningfully of participants in this pedagogy as beneficiaries *or* injured parties, while nonetheless being mindful of the complexity of intersectionality.

Having shown the designations of 'beneficiary' and 'harmed' to be tenable in this qualified way, I propose that where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, to refrain from implementing this pedagogy would have the effect of reinforcing unjust structures. I take Robin DiAngelo's notion of "white fragility" as my point of departure ("White Fragility" 57). DiAngelo defines white fragility as a state of "reduced psychosocial stamina" in which "even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" that may include "the outward display of

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[8] Indeed, one may qualify as the 'beneficiary' of a particular unjust social structure even as one seeks to contest or critique this structure.

emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation" ("I'm Leaving" 214-5; "White Fragility" 56-7).[9]

As an example of an expression of white fragility, DiAngelo recalls a situation that arose in an "intergroup dialogue on racism among future teachers" where she was an observer ("I'm Leaving" 219). In response to being prompted by one of the facilitators to consider how her personal identity as white might be connected with her discomfort in engaging in this dialogue, DiAngelo recalls that one participant decided to "walk out on the process, despite pleas from the facilitators and [another] participant not to do so" (ibid. 223). DiAngelo describes this response as an expression of white fragility, whereby the participant "display[ed]…an inability to sustain even a minimal challenge to her racial position" (ibid.). As a result, this participant removed herself from the situation in which that challenge was posed while "locating the problem with others" (ibid.).

Importantly, expressions of white fragility are both facilitated by and function to reinforce an unjust social structure. For instance, DiAngelo notes that white people may perceive challenges to their racial position as unjustified on the basis of a strong belief in "individualism" that "allows [them] to distance themselves from the actions of their racial group" ("White Fragility" 59-60). This belief, which, according to DiAngelo, is a privilege "only afforded to white people," gives rise to pernicious effects. In particular,

> [t]he history of brutal, extensive, institutionalized and ongoing violence perpetrated by whites against people of color…becomes *profoundly trivialized* when whites claim they don't feel safe or are under attack when in the…situation of merely talking about race with people of color. (ibid. 65, original emphasis)

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[9] However, while white fragility may include a state of "reduced psychosocial stamina," it is not reducible to this state (DiAngelo 56). As Applebaum notes, "[w]hite fragility…is not *only about having* a low threshold for discomfort" (868). In addition, "[w]hite people actively *perform* fragility…in a way that consolidates white narcissism and white arrogance – signs of power and privilege, not weakness" (ibid., original emphasis).

In short, by trivializing this violence, "[w]hite fragility distorts and perverts reality" (65). By diverting attention that might otherwise be channelled into rectifying the unjust racial hierarchy at the root of this violence onto themselves, white people's expressions of fragility end up reinforcing this unjust social structure.

I propose that far from being exclusive to white people who benefit from an unjust racial hierarchy, fragility, in the sense of the reduced psychosocial stamina that DiAngelo describes, is characteristic of all those who benefit from unjust social structures. Just as challenges to one's racial position may trigger in white people a range of defensive moves, efforts to interrogate the supposed naturalness or justice of other unjust social structures, such as those organized on the basis of gender, class, or ability, are likely to provoke similar defensive moves from the beneficiaries of these structures.

Conceiving of fragility as characteristic not just of white people, but of the beneficiaries of unjust social structures in general, I argue that we have good reason *not* to heed the charge of imposition as grounds for holding that a pedagogy of discomfort is unjustified. When the charge of imposition is levelled in cases where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, this charge ought to be recognized for what it is: a symptom of the "inability to sustain even a minimal challenge" to one's privileged position that "distorts and perverts reality" (DiAngelo "I'm Leaving" 223; "White Fragility" 65).

This statement that the inability to sustain challenge, which is constitutive of beneficiaries of unjust structures, distorts and perverts reality is readily corroborated. As Marilyn Frye reminds us, in order to

> determine whether a particular suffering, harm, or limitation is part of someone's being
>
> oppressed, one has to look at it *in context* in order to tell whether it has the element of an

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oppressive structure….[N]ot every harm or damage…contributes to oppression. (13-4, original emphasis)

Likewise, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire states that

[R]estraints imposed…on…oppressors, so that [they] cannot reassume their former position, do not constitute *oppression*. An act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being more fully human….Acts which prevent the restoration of the oppressive regime cannot be compared with those which create and maintain it. (56, original emphasis)

I maintain that in cases where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, the equivocation of efforts to *destabilize* unjust social structures with acts that create and maintain these structures is, like the equivocation of "[a]cts which prevent the restoration of the oppressive regime" with acts that "create and maintain it," untenable (ibid.).

In upholding a distorted and perverted view of reality that rests on this untenable equivocation, the charge of imposition prioritizes preserving the freedom of beneficiaries at the expense of foreclosing efforts to secure the freedom of all. As a consequence, heeding the charge of imposition (by not implementing a pedagogy of discomfort) amounts to reinforcing these existing unjust structures.[10] Because these unjust social structures give rise to brutal, extensive, institutionalized, and ongoing violence, not to mention oppressive inequalities, reinforcing these structures enables this violence to continue. I contend that enabling the continuation of brutal, extensive, institutionalized, and ongoing violence constitutes a greater evil than infringing on students' freedom to hold beliefs,

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[10] My aim here is simply to show that a pedagogy of discomfort is justified despite the fact that it constitutes an imposition, rather than to defend the more ambitious claim that a pedagogy of discomfort is to be *preferred* over other approaches the educator might take to doing this destabilizing work. Thus, while I acknowledge that a pedagogy of discomfort is not the only means the educator could use to catalyze efforts to destabilize unjust social structures, I assume that in cases where the educator refrains from implementing a pedagogy of discomfort, no other approaches are taken in its place. In light of Boler's assertion that social change does not happen "naturally" (i.e., in the absence of measures that seek intentionally to destabilize individuals' existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing), I assume that where efforts to implement a pedagogy of discomfort are absent, the possibility of social change is negligible (183).

assumptions, and ways of seeing that are allied with the unjust social structures that sanction this violence. I therefore conclude that where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, the imposition of this pedagogy is justified as a lesser evil.[11]

**Two Qualifications**

To avoid being misconstrued, I issue the follow two qualifications in conjunction with the claim that the imposition of a pedagogy of discomfort is justified as a lesser evil. First, my argument does not imply that we ought to disregard the feelings of the beneficiaries of a particular unjust social structure as they engage in the process of questioning their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of knowing. As Frye observes, "it is perfectly consistent to deny that a person or group is oppressed without denying that they have feelings or that they suffer" (10-1). Consequently, the argument that the imposition of a pedagogy of discomfort is justified does not preclude measures to assist participants in this pedagogy in their efforts to rebuild a "sense of self" after that sense of self is threatened or lost in the process of engaging in critical inquiry (Boler "Teaching for Hope" 119).[12]

Second, in arguing that the imposition of a pedagogy of discomfort constitutes a lesser evil than reinforcing the unjust social structures that give rise to brutal, extensive, institutionalized, and ongoing violence, my intention is not to dismiss as any less in need of correction harms that manifest in subtler forms. On the contrary, I acknowledge, following Murphy, that "certain

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[11] One might argue that students who choose to enrol in a class that is concerned with issues of social justice tacitly consent to having their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing subjected to critical inquiry, and that this tacit consent is sufficient to justify the imposition of a pedagogy of discomfort. However, this argument does not apply in cases where students' enrolment in such courses in mandatory. In contrast, the argument on grounds of a lesser evil that I propose does apply in such cases, which is why I favour it.

[12] For instance, Boler acknowledges that students may "need something to replace" the sense of "self" that the process of critical inquiry threatens "to take away from them" ("Teaching for Hope" 123). For one potential candidate for a "productive" method of replacement ("productive" in the sense that it offers solace to students on whom this pedagogy is imposed without comforting them, exempting them from the call to critical inquiry, or excusing them from taking responsibility for their complicity in unjust social structures), see Boler's discussion of "critical hope" in "Teaching for Hope" (127).

economies of representation" may function to veil or "render invisible" certain forms of violence, and that "thinking through the myriad forms that violence can assume" is "an entirely legitimate investment" (15). My intention in this chapter has not been to imply that 'overt' violence is the only sort of violence that warrants correction. Instead, my aim has been merely to show that in cases where the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny are the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort, the fact that this pedagogy constitutes an imposition fails to render this pedagogy unjustified.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown that the charge of imposition does indeed pose a distinct challenge to this pedagogy, and that the power dynamics that govern the relation between students and the educator in a formal education context preclude a pedagogy of discomfort from functioning as a mutual invitation. I therefore argued that the claim that a pedagogy of discomfort is an imposition does in fact hold.

However, this is insufficient to warrant rejection of a pedagogy of discomfort. Having noted that some impositions are justified, I have argued that there are cases in which a pedagogy of discomfort constitutes a justified imposition. In particular, I have argued that in cases where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, privileging concerns about imposition reinforces these unjust structures, in effect condoning the brutal, extensive, institutionalized, and ongoing violence to which these unjust structures give rise.

Furthermore, I have contended that condoning brutal, extensive, institutionalized, and ongoing violence constitutes a greater evil than infringing on the freedom of those who are largely exempt from this violence to hold beliefs, assumptions, and values that are allied with unjust social structures. I have therefore concluded that in cases where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of

discomfort are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, the imposition of this pedagogy is justified as a lesser evil.

Notice, however, that this defense of a pedagogy of discomfort is a qualified one – while it accounts for those cases in which the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of a particular unjust social structure, we might wonder whether the educator may justifiably impose this pedagogy on individuals who are harmed by this structure. I address this question in the following, final chapter.

**Chapter 4: A Pedagogy of Discomfort: Tensions and Challenges**

In the previous chapter, I sought to defend a pedagogy of discomfort against the charge that this pedagogy constitutes an imposition on students by the educator. I responded to this charge by arguing that in cases where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, this imposition is justified as a lesser evil. However, this defense of a pedagogy of discomfort is conditional – it remains to be seen whether this pedagogy can justifiably be imposed on those who are harmed by such a structure.

In this chapter, I address this question by considering the challenges to implementing this pedagogy in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed rather than benefitted by the unjust social structure under scrutiny.[1] Following Boler, I begin by acknowledging that all individuals, regardless of where they are positioned in unjust social structures, may internalize the values of the dominant culture, and may therefore need to critically examine the ways in which their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing are informed by these values (118).

However, two tensions arise from efforts to impose a pedagogy of discomfort on individuals who are harmed by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny. The first tension arises from the process of critical inquiry. The second arises from the act of collective witnessing through which the process of critical inquiry takes place. In this chapter, I flag these two tensions as the basis for advocating caution when imposing this pedagogy on individuals who are harmed by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny.

**'Treating All the Same'**

For her part, Boler focuses primarily on efforts to engage the beneficiaries of unjust social structures in a pedagogy of discomfort, as evidenced by the examples of her own efforts to implement this

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[1] In particular, I am concerned with classrooms in which the majority of students are the beneficiaries of the unjust social structure under scrutiny, while students who are harmed by this structure are in the minority. I assume that when students who are harmed by such a structure are in the minority, their needs are more likely to be overlooked.

pedagogy mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis (185; "Teaching for Hope" 120). Boler's focus on attempts to prompt the beneficiaries of unjust social structures to engage in critical inquiry should perhaps not be surprising. Recall Boler's assertion that social change does not happen "naturally" – rarely do those who control and/or benefit from unjust social structures seek, of their own accord, to change these structures (183). Given that beneficiaries have a vested interest in maintaining these structures (namely, preserving their status both as beneficiaries and as "good or innocent"), they are likely to be the individuals most in need of having their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing destabilized (Boler 188). These examples make clear the expectations for participation and engagement that a pedagogy of discomfort places on the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure it seeks to scrutinize. However, given the absence of examples in Boler's work where individuals who are harmed by this structure are subject to this pedagogy, we might wonder what expectations a pedagogy of discomfort places on these individuals for their participation and engagement.

One might argue that the call to question one's beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing ought to be extended equally to all students in the classroom, regardless of where they are positioned in unjust social structures. In other words, the educator ought to 'treat all the same.' In "Teaching for Hope" Boler expresses support for this approach by way of the following statement:

> One should not make the mistake of assuming that a pedagogy of discomfort seeks only to destabilize members of the dominant group. A pedagogy of discomfort [also] invites…members of marginalized cultures to re-examine the hegemonic values inevitably internalized in the process of being exposed to curricula and media that serve the interests of the ruling

class….[N]o one escapes internalizing dominant cultural values despite the fact that these values take different forms in different individuals. (118)[2]

Boler's assertion that all individuals, regardless of where they are positioned in unjust social structures, may internalize the values of the dominant culture is reminiscent of other proponents of critical pedagogy. For instance, Freire asserts that through "their submersion in the reality of oppression," marginalized individuals' recognition "of themselves as oppressed is impaired" (45).

Consequently, individuals who are harmed by a particular unjust social structure may, like beneficiaries, need to critically examine the ways in which their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing are informed by these values. By 'treating all the same,' a pedagogy of discomfort may free marginalized individuals from the dominant cultural values they have internalized. For this reason, one might think that this approach ought to be endorsed. Notice, however, that while all individuals inevitably internalize the values of the dominant culture, "these values take different forms in different individuals" (Boler "Teaching for Hope" 118). Before we consider the tensions that arise as a result of these differences, we need to identify precisely what these differences are.

**Epistemic Marginalization**

While all individuals internalize the values of the dominant culture, these values function to advantage some and disadvantage others. We might conceive of disadvantage in terms of a series of denials. Often, these denials are material. For instance, one may be denied access to certain employment opportunities as a result of being discriminated against on the basis of race, gender,

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2 This claim that "no one escapes internalizing dominant cultural values" coheres with the claims Alison Wylie makes in her discussion of feminist standpoint theory in "Why Standpoint Matters." Wylie observes that marginalized individuals may, by virtue of having to "negotiate the world of the privileged," come to "know things that those occupying privileged positions typically do not know, or are invested in not knowing." However, these individuals do not "*automatically* know more, or know better, by virtue of their [disadvantaged] social, political location" (28, my emphasis). While Wylie cites lack of access to "key epistemic resources," such as "certain kinds of information," and "the analytic skills acquired through formal education" among the reasons that individuals who are marginalized by a particular unjust social structure may not possess this knowledge, the internalization of dominant cultural values may also play a role (37).

class, or ability, judgements which are themselves informed by the values of the dominant culture that hold certain identities and characteristics to be superior to others.

However, disadvantage may also manifest as denials that are *epistemic*, whereby one is denied one's status as an epistemic agent (Fricker 145). Some examples may help to illustrate this point. One way in which denials of one's status as an epistemic agent manifest is through what Hana Baba and Leila Day refer to as the "angry [B]lack woman" stereotype ("Angry"). With reference to their own experience and the experiences of some of their peers, Baba and Day observe that when Black women "speak [their] mind[s]" or express "strong opinion[s]," others, particularly white people, may perceive them as "angry" (ibid.) This perception may then be used as grounds for dismissing the knowledge claims these women make, particularly in "corporate, non-diverse spaces" (ibid.).[3] hooks corroborates this claim, noting that [B]lack women may find that their "efforts to speak, to break silence and engage in radical progressive political debates" are vehemently "opposed" (68).

Situating these dismissals within unjust social structures (which include both a patriarchy and an unjust racial hierarchy), we see the role that dominant cultural values play in perpetrating these dismissals. The epistemic denials incurred by Black women who inhabit corporate, non-diverse spaces are likely to be informed by dominant cultural values that uphold norms of "rational discourse" and the qualities "self-containment, self-mastery, and control" with which this discourse is associated (Bordo 209). As Susan Bordo notes, these qualities are allied with the "accoutrements of the white, male world," and thus, with patriarchal structures (ibid.). But, as hooks's claim implies, denials of the status of Black women as epistemic agents may also be informed by dominant cultural values that function to conceal the complicity of whites in an unjust racial hierarchy by affirming their non-culpability or "innocence" (DiAngelo "White Fragility" 62"). This status is threatened

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[3] 'Knowledge claims' refer here to claims made by the individual that they believe to be 'true,' in the sense of according with fact or reality.

when Black women attempt to "break silence" or "engage in radical progressive political debates" (hooks 68). In both cases, the values of the dominant culture inform white people's responses to the knowledge claims of Black women in ways that function to deny these women status as epistemic agents, thus ensuring that existing unjust social structures are maintained.

Lest we think these denials of individuals' status as epistemic agents are perpetrated exclusively against those marginalized on the basis of race or gender, it should be noted that these denials may also be perpetrated on the basis of dominant cultural values that ground other unjust social structures, such as those organized on the basis of class. For instance, Iris Marion Young observes that despite efforts to create more inclusive democracies, in which "the doors of the city council chamber open to poor people and their advocates wishing to testify at budget hearings,"

> those still more powerful in the [political] process exercise, often unconsciously, a new form of exclusion…[ignoring these individuals'] statements and expressions. Though formally included in a forum or process, [these individuals] may find that their claims are not taken seriously….The dominant mood may find their ideas…not worthy of consideration….their views…discounted….[such that they] lack effective opportunity to influence the thinking of others… (55)

Once again, the denial of the status of epistemic agent to members of the working class or the poor unemployed can be traced to the dominant cultural values and practices that underlie the particular unjust social structure that conspires to marginalize them. For instance, these individuals may find that their status as epistemic agents is denied on the basis of the commitment of "those still more powerful" to the meritocratic hope that one can "improve their lot in life if they…only work hard enough" (Boler "Teaching for Hope" 115). Alternatively, norms of "dispassionateness" that govern public speech may be used as grounds for dismissing these individuals' "modes of expression" as "silly or simple" (Young 55-6). Granted, Young refers specifically to those denials of one's status as

an epistemic agent that are perpetrated in the context of the political forum. However, given that interactions that occur between individuals outside of this forum are often *not* governed by formal principles of inclusion, one might argue that these latter interactions are even more likely to give rise to such denials.

As these examples demonstrate, a key way in which the values of the dominant culture "take different forms" in individuals who are harmed by a particular unjust social structure is by denying these individuals status as epistemic agents. Having highlighted this difference, we can now consider the tensions to which efforts to impose this pedagogy on these individuals give rise.

**The Problem of Critical Inquiry**

The first tension that arises from efforts to impose a pedagogy of discomfort on individuals who are harmed by the particular unjust structure under scrutiny lies in the call to critical inquiry. The process of critical inquiry involves subjecting one's claims to knowledge (in this case, one's beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing) to doubt (both one's own, and that of others, such as the educator, who may serve as the interlocutor in this process) (Boler 176). Where the would-be participants in this pedagogy are the beneficiaries of the particular unjust social structure being scrutinized, this act of casting doubt on one's beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing may serve as a much-needed antidote to the conviction these beneficiaries may hold, having internalized the values of the dominant culture, that their views must necessarily be authoritative or 'correct.' However, while the imposition of a pedagogy of discomfort may aim to free marginalized individuals from the oppressive grip of dominant cultural values and, by extension, from the denial of their status as epistemic agents to which these values give rise, the process of critical inquiry by which this pedagogy seeks to emancipate these individuals risks reproducing this denial.

One might counter this claim by drawing a distinction between denials of individuals' status as epistemic agents that are 'pernicious' and those that are 'benign.' Whereas the former are committed

in compliance with the values of the dominant culture that uphold unjust social structures, the latter are committed in opposition to these values. From this distinction, it follows that the denials of one's status as an epistemic agent that Baba and Day, hooks, and Young describe are pernicious. In contrast, one might argue that the denials to which the call to critical inquiry gives rise are benign.

However, one could argue that this distinction between pernicious and benign denials of individuals' status as epistemic agents overlooks the distinction between the *intention* according to which the call to critical inquiry is imposed and the *effect* of this call on those on whom it is imposed. True, the call to critical inquiry may be imposed on individuals who are marginalized with the intention of freeing them from the values of the dominant culture according to which their status as epistemic agents is denied. But regardless of the intention according to which the call to critical inquiry is imposed, as a *process*, it has the effect of reproducing this denial. I therefore conclude that imposing this call on marginalized individuals is in tension with the aim of affirming these individuals as epistemic agents.

**The Challenge of Collective Witnessing**

Having flagged the tension that arises from subjecting marginalized individuals to the call to critical inquiry in the context of a pedagogy of discomfort, I will now identify a second tension that arises from imposing this pedagogy in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed rather than benefitted by the unjust social structure under scrutiny. Recall from Chapter 2 that the process of critical inquiry is not an "individualized process," but rather one in which participants recognize themselves as "inextricably intertwined" with others, thus giving rise to a "more nuanced" approach to ethics that defies binary categories of "friend" and "enemy," "guilt" and "innocence," "good" and "evil" (Boler 175-6, 178, 180, 184).

Far from denying those marginalized by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny the status of epistemic agents, the intention of the act of collective witnessing seems to be to affirm all

participants, regardless of where they are positioned with reference to this structure, as epistemic agents. However, as a collective, rather that individualized process, the act of collective witnessing seems to require that all participants in this pedagogy recognize one another as epistemic agents. We have reason to think that this recognition may not be present in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny. Having been subject to denials of their epistemic authority, these individuals may be perceived by the beneficiaries of this structure to lack status as epistemic agents. As Freire observes, beneficiaries who "cease to be…indifferent spectators…of exploitation…bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and *to know*" (60, my emphasis).

In light of these conditions, efforts to impose a pedagogy of discomfort in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed rather than benefitted by the unjust social structure under scrutiny give rise to a second tension. The act of collective witnessing through which this call takes place requires precisely the conditions in which all individuals are recognized as epistemic agents that it seeks, through prompting participants to critically interrogate the values of the dominant culture, to obtain. However, in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny, these conditions may be absent.

Having flagged these two tensions that arise from the call to critical inquiry and the act of collective witnessing, I argue that efforts to impose a pedagogy of discomfort in classrooms where individuals are harmed rather than benefitted by the unjust social structure under scrutiny must be supplemented by other efforts to affirm marginalized individuals as epistemic agents. However, it is unclear what these other efforts should be.

One might think that the key to affirming marginalized individuals as epistemic agents lies in creating opportunities for these individuals to speak, so that their voices might more readily be heard

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and misperceptions of their lacking status as epistemic agents corrected. This proposal is in line with one that Boler puts forward in more recent work for an "affirmative action pedagogy." Responding to the fact that "social hierarchies confer unequal weight and legitimacy to different voices," an affirmative action pedagogy intentionally "privileges…traditionally silenced voices" in order to address the "historically embedded inequalities" to which unjust social structures give rise (Boler "All Speech" vii). This pedagogy is grounded in the conviction that "[u]ntil all voices are recognized equally, we must operate within a context of historicized ethics," one that disrupts patterns that operate in the classroom in which the voices of those who benefit from unjust social structures are privileged and validated at the expense of silencing marginalized voices (ibid. 13).

While an affirmative action pedagogy might appear to hold promise for affirming marginalized individuals as epistemic agents, I argue that it is ill-equipped to serve this aim. In cases where marginalized individuals have internalized the values of the dominant culture, the classroom in which an affirmative action pedagogy is implemented may end up serving as a forum for the voicing of beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing that reproduce and reaffirm dominant cultural values.

Perhaps most troubling is the fact that an affirmative action pedagogy risks *tokenizing* marginalized individuals, a term I use here to refer to cases in which these individuals are compelled to take on the role of 'representative' of the groups of which they are members. In the process, these individuals may end up shouldering the task of raising awareness, among outsiders to this group, of the impact that a particular unjust social structure has on them. The fact that the task of raising awareness is a labour-intensive "burden," one already disproportionately shouldered by marginalized individuals, tells against using an affirmative action pedagogy as a means of affirming marginalized individuals as epistemic agents (Dotson 15).

As the presence of these risks demonstrates, the tensions that arise from implementing a pedagogy of discomfort in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed rather than benefitted

by the unjust social structure under scrutiny admits of no easy solutions, thus giving credence to Boler's reminder that "[t]here are no prescriptions for one effective pedagogy" ("All Speech" 13). With this in mind, I flag these two tensions as the basis for advocating caution when imposing a pedagogy of discomfort on individuals who are harmed by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I sought to articulate the challenge that classrooms in which some individuals are harmed by the unjust social structure under scrutiny pose for efforts to implement a pedagogy of discomfort. I began by acknowledging that all individuals, regardless of where they are positioned in unjust social structures, may internalize the values of the dominant culture. Thus, individuals who are harmed by a particular unjust social structure may, like beneficiaries, need to critically examine the ways in which their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing are informed by these values.

However, two tensions arise from efforts to impose a pedagogy of discomfort on individuals who are marginalized by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny. The first tension arises from the process of critical inquiry. While the imposition of a pedagogy of discomfort may aim to free marginalized individuals from the oppressive grip of dominant cultural values and, by extension, from the denial of these individuals' status as epistemic agents, the process of critical inquiry by which this pedagogy seeks to emancipate these individuals risks reproducing this denial.

The second tension arises from the act of collective witnessing through which the process of critical inquiry takes place. I argued that the act of collective witnessing requires precisely the conditions in which all individuals are recognized as epistemic agents that it seeks, through prompting participants to critically interrogate the values of the dominant culture, to obtain. However, these conditions may be absent in classrooms in which some individuals are harmed by the particular unjust social structure under scrutiny. In what follows, I consider the broader

implications of these two tensions for the desirability of using a pedagogy of discomfort to teach

social justice education.

**Chapter 5: Conclusion**

In "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" Donna Haraway calls for "a doctrine of embodied objectivity" that recognizes all vision as built on "specific *ways* of seeing" (581, 583, original emphasis). In arguing for this "feminist version of objectivity," Haraway rejects the disembodied "view…from nowhere" that seeks to "represent while escaping representation" (578, 581, 589). According to Haraway, the view from nowhere breeds irresponsibility for one's knowledge claims, insulating one from being "called into account" (583).

In contrast, by acknowledging one's location as "limited" and one's knowledge as "situated," one becomes "answerable" for what one learns "how to see" (ibid.). However, mere acknowledgement of one's "partiality" is not enough (Haraway 585). One is also "bound to seek perspective from those points of view…that promise…knowledge…for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination" (ibid.). By acknowledging one's own location as the maker of knowledge claims, one "resists the politics of closure" that is an obstacle to achieving this "larger vision" (Haraway 590).

In this conclusion, I clarify the issues that arise when individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures are implicated in a pedagogy of discomfort. I then nuance the account of the power dynamics operative in the classroom, provided in Chapter 3, by drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality. In each instance, I am called to account for issues that my own "situated" knowledge and "limited" social location, as the beneficiary of a variety of unjust social structures, have obscured. I conclude by reflecting more broadly on the desirability of using a pedagogy of discomfort to teach social justice education.

**Epistemic Privilege and Critical Inquiry**

In this thesis, I propose that the power dynamics operative in formal education qualify a pedagogy

of discomfort as an imposition on students by the educator. However, I argue that prompting students to question beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing that are allied with unjust social structures is a lesser evil than reinforcing these structures, and the violence and inequalities to which they give rise. I conclude that this imposition is justified in cases where the would-be participants in a pedagogy of discomfort are the beneficiaries of the unjust social structure under scrutiny.

By contrast, the imposition of a pedagogy of discomfort on individuals who are harmed by this unjust social structure gives rise to two tensions. The first tension arises from the call to critical inquiry. The second tension arises from the act of collective witnessing through which the call to critical inquiry takes place. I argue that these two tensions give reason for caution when imposing a pedagogy of discomfort on these individuals.

In Chapter 4, I offer the following account of the tension that arises from imposing the call to critical inquiry on individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures. By prompting these individuals to question their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing, the call to critical inquiry subjects these individuals' knowledge claims to doubt. I therefore argued that the call to critical inquiry reproduces dominant groups' denial of these individuals' status as epistemic agents. However, to get to the root of the tension that arises from imposing the call to critical inquiry on these individuals, we must examine the assumption based on which this imposition is presumably warranted.

Boler claims that because all students, regardless of social location, "inevitably" internalize "hegemonic values," all ought to be subjected to the call to critical inquiry (118). However, individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures may already possess critical awareness of the dominant cultural values underlying these structures. Alison Wylie observes that an individual who is harmed by unjust social structures "has no choice, given her social location, but to negotiate the world of the privileged," understanding "the tacit knowledge that constitutes a dominant, normative

worldview" (34). But these individuals also internalize the norms and values of the oppressed groups of which they are a part, "whose marginalized status generates a fundamentally different understanding of how the world works" (ibid.).

Through "having to know…the world…from more than one point of view," these individuals have "at hand a set of comparisons that throws into relief the assumptions that underpin…a dominant world view" (Wylie 37-8). As a result, individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures may acquire "epistemic privilege" (ibid. 32). In other words, they may come to know things that those who are privileged do not (ibid. 34). In particular, they may come to possess critical awareness of existing power relations and the "effects of [these] relations on their own understanding and that of others" (ibid.)

Having flagged the call to critical inquiry as a point of tension in Chapter 4, I argue that the root of this tension lies in the assumption that individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures are *necessarily in need* of this call. As Wylie's account of epistemic privilege indicates, individuals may already possess the critical awareness this call seeks to instil. Thus, imposing a pedagogy of discomfort on these individuals is redundant.

## "Checking and Questioning"

In writing Chapter 4, I wanted to avoid endorsing what Wylie calls the "thesis of automatic epistemic privilege" (28). This thesis states that individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures automatically "know more, or know better" simply "by virtue of their [disadvantaged] social, political location" (ibid.). In doing so, it ignores the fact that individuals may be denied access to "key epistemic resources," such as "certain kinds of information" and "analytic skills acquired through formal education" (Wylie 37).

However, in my efforts to avoid endorsing the thesis of automatic epistemic privilege, I assumed that individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures automatically *internalize* the values of the

dominant culture. This move constitutes what Mariana Ortega has called "loving, knowing ignorance" (60). Loving, knowing ignorance refers to the tendency, by those in positions of privilege, to substitute one's own "theoretical constructions" of the lives of oppressed individuals for the process of "checking and questioning about [these individuals'] actual lives" (Ortega 61, 68-9).[1] Considering accounts of epistemic privilege is one way of checking and questioning about these individuals' lives, thus countering loving, knowing ignorance. Moreover, considering these accounts pinpoints the tension that arises from imposing the call to critical inquiry on individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures, namely, that these individuals may already possess the critical awareness this call seeks to instil.

In addition to checking and questioning, by acknowledging my own social location as "limited" and my knowledge as "situated," I am, in Haraway's words, "bound to seek perspective" from other "points of view" (585). These other points of view include those espoused by individuals of social locations other than my own. This, in turn, means that I am bound to consider the negative impact that a pedagogy of discomfort may have on these individuals. I undertake this task in the following to sections. First, I consider the negative impact of this pedagogy on students who occupy oppressed social locations. Then, I consider the negative impact of this pedagogy on educators who are subject to intersectional discrimination.

**Compounding Harms**

Recognizing that individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures may already possess critical awareness, the educator may impose a pedagogy of discomfort only on those who lack this awareness. This group is likely to be composed primarily of those who benefit from unjust social

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[1] Ortega's "loving, knowing ignorance" draws on Marilyn Frye's essay "In and Out of Harm's Way, Arrogance and Love" (Ortega 56, 60-1). In it, Frye distinguishes between the "arrogant perceiver," who organizes "the world" with reference to their own "desires and interests," and the "loving perceiver," who takes the time to "look…and listen and check and question" (75).

structures, as they have a vested interest in maintaining these structures (Boler 188). While the choice to impose a pedagogy of discomfort only on those who lack this awareness takes into account the epistemic privilege that individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures may possess, it fails to address their pedagogical needs. Moreover, it leaves these individuals to witness and become targets of beneficiaries' anger and guilt as the latter undergo the process of critical inquiry.

Barbara Applebaum describes an example of such targeting in a classroom where she spoke on the topic of "Discourse, Truth, and White Strategies of Denial" (862). After her presentation, "a lively conversation ensued around white denials of racism and complicity that was led primarily by…students of color" (Applebaum 862-3). In response, "[a] white…student, clearly agitated, said he didn't understand why the students of color were so 'angry'" (ibid. 863). When several students of color "reacted to his comments with frustration," the white student responded in "anger," insisting, "he was not racist" (ibid.). As this example shows, in the process of discomforting students who benefit from unjust social structures, students who are harmed by these structures may become the targets of anger and guilt, thus compounding the harm they already experience.

In my thesis, I argue that educators have reason to be cautious when imposing a pedagogy of discomfort on students who are harmed by unjust social structures. However, the fact that these individuals may already possess critical awareness of dominant cultural values, and the fact that they may be compelled to witness or become the targets of beneficiaries' anger and guilt, suggest that a pedagogy of discomfort is intended *exclusively* for privileged students. I address this claim and its implications at the end of this statement.

**Intersectionality**

Having clarified the issues that arise when students who are harmed by unjust social structures are implicated in a pedagogy of discomfort, I will now consider the negative impact this pedagogy may

have on *educators*. To this end, I draw on Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality. "Intersectionality" is a theoretical framework for analyzing discrimination (Crenshaw 140). It rejects "dominant conceptions of discrimination" that conceive of "subordination as…occurring along a single categorical axis," such as race or sex (ibid.). As Crenshaw notes, this single-axis framework is useful for capturing "the experiences of those who are privileged *but for* their racial or sexual characteristics" (151, original emphasis). However, it "marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened" and "obscures" claims that cannot be traced to "discrete sources of discrimination" (Crenshaw 140). As a result, "[n]otions of what constitutes…discrimination" are "narrowly tailored to embrace only…the experiences of the most privileged," while those outside this category are "theoretically erased" (ibid. 139, 151).

By contrast, intersectionality acknowledges that individuals may be "marginalized on multiple axes, and/or by the intersection of these axes" (ibid. 154). Crenshaw likens intersectional discrimination to a traffic accident at an intersection (149). Just as a traffic accident "can be caused by cars travelling in any number of directions, and sometimes, from all of them," so to can individuals be harmed because they are "in the intersection" of multiple axes of discrimination (ibid.).

Intersectionality also acknowledges that discrimination is not additive – it cannot be reduced to "the sum of racism and sexism," for instance (Crenshaw 140). To illustrate this point, Crenshaw observes that Black women may "experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices that discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex" (149). However, they may also experience discrimination not as "the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women" (ibid.). In these latter cases, the discrimination that Black women face defies the "general categories" of "discrimination discourse" (ibid.). It is in these cases that intersectional analyses are most desperately needed.

**A Nuanced Account of Classroom Power Dynamics**

In the forgoing chapters, I assume that individuals can be categorized as benefitted or harmed with reference to a particular unjust social structure. However, like the single-axis framework that Crenshaw rejects, this assumption marginalizes students who are multiply-burdened. It also obscures the fact that individuals' marginalization on one or more axes (such as race, gender, or class) may compromise the extent to which they are formally privileged on others. This has important implications for the account of a pedagogy of discomfort offered in Chapter 3. In that chapter, I argue that given the hierarchies that structure formal education, in which the educator occupies a position of formal authority, a pedagogy of discomfort constitutes an imposition on students. However, in cases where the educator is marginalized on one or more axes, conceiving of a pedagogy of discomfort as an imposition fails to provide a full account of the power dynamics operative in the classroom.

George Yancy's reflections on his experience as a Black educator are instructive here. Yancy recounts how, during a class on multiculturalism, a white student claims that Yancy's analysis of being perceived by whites in "social spaces" as a "criminal" or a "threat" is "bullshit" (*Bodies* 217; "Elevators" 844). In doing so, the student "created a dialogical space" in which she became the "discerner" of truth who "ought to be believed," while he, the educator, became the one "who [had] absolutely no interest in the truth" (Yancy *Bodies* 218). In short, she failed to "take any steps toward conceding" the legitimacy of Yancy's "understanding of the social world" (ibid.). The student's response undercut Yancy's "authority" as a Black man, and by extension, as an educator: "[b]y…denying that he could be telling the truth, the student [embodied]…white dominance and racist superiority, while not recognizing that she herself was also enacting racism" (Harbin 75).

Though not invoking a pedagogy of discomfort explicitly, Yancy's elevator example nonetheless serves this function. By presenting an alternative understanding of the social world, the example

compels white students to question their own beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing, particularly those that conceal the reality of their own racism (Yancy *Bodies* 28). Yancy's experience in the classroom supports the claim that where the educator is marginalized on one or more axes, the fact that they possesses formal authority is insufficient to insulate them from contestations of their authority by privileged students. Thus, like students who are harmed by unjust social structures, educators who are marginalized on one or more axes may also become the targets of beneficiaries' anger or guilt. Analyzing the role of the educator through Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality highlights this fact, thus providing a more comprehensive account of the power dynamics operative in the classroom than conceiving of a pedagogy of discomfort solely as an imposition.

**Broader Implications**

All this leads to the following question: is a pedagogy of discomfort only for white (and other privileged) students and educators? I have begun to think this is indeed the case. Where individuals who are harmed by unjust social structures already possess critical awareness of dominant cultural values, the imposition of a pedagogy of discomfort on these individuals is redundant, and fails to address their pedagogical needs. Likewise, the fact that students and educators who are marginalized on one or more axes may witness or become the targets of beneficiaries' anger and guilt weighs against imposing this pedagogy in classrooms where individuals occupy differing social locations.

That a pedagogy of discomfort appears to be only for privileged students and educators gives rise to the following, troubling implication. As Yancy notes, "[d]oing theory in the service of undoing whiteness comes with its own…comfort zones" (*Bodies* 220). Whites may take whiteness as "the object of critical reflection," deploying "theory in the service of fighting against white racism" (ibid.). However, these efforts always risk "recentering" whites as possessing "the only real point of view" (Yancy *Bodies* 220; Yancy "Elevators" 832). Similar claims could be made about efforts by other privileged groups to examine critically their own privilege. By singling out the beneficiaries of

unjust social structures as the primary targets of the call to critical inquiry, a pedagogy of discomfort risks reinforcing the assumption, prevalent within the dominant culture, that these individuals possess the only real point of view.

In the essay "We Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know" Kyla Wazana Tompkins reminds us that the aim of critical engagement is to "move from theory to the world, *and not back to you*" (n.p., original emphasis). While a pedagogy of discomfort may claim to be aligned with this aim, its prioritization of the needs of those who benefit from unjust social structures gives us reason to doubt that it is in fact conducive to this aim.

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