

Looking to Black Studies as Liberatory Pedagogy: The Sociology of Education and the Radical Potential for A Call To Study

Within Black radical spaces, visions of liberation are constantly being shared. The liberation of all oppressed peoples is the end goal and the question of how we get there is one that must be addressed by all of us. There are key elements within the struggle for liberation, but, Pan Africanism, the Black Radical Tradition, and Black Queer feminisms have taught me that central to liberatory praxis is study *and* action— liberation cannot come to fruition without a combination of both. However, the “study” of Black radical politics is not the “study” that is embodied and enacted by the educational institutions that exist within our world. Black radical “study” is a subversive act that aligns itself with liberation rather than a “study” that centers teaching students how to become better participants within a settler-colonial state. Despite this, study still takes place within educational institutions and for me, that space looks like Black studies.

Black studies, undisciplined at its core, plays a fundamental role in the context of liberation. Black studies positions the Black student, their conscience, and their experiences at the center of their learning in a way that cultivates the development of a critical consciousness. This is the pedagogical stance that Black studies takes— a pedagogical stance that aligns itself with the politics of Black liberation. The value of this stance to the Black student—to me, for example—is unquantifiable. Throughout this paper, rather than addressing a specific sector within the sociology of education, I am broadly addressing the entire field. The sociology of education is a field dedicated to exploring how the interactions between individual experiences and institutions affect educational outcomes. However, I argue that while the understandings and conclusions that emerge from the sociology of education are important, the discipline itself must

take a pedagogical stance and align itself with liberation. To solely recognize the interactions between structure, individual, and education is not enough. The sociology of education, as a field, has the potential to demand a radical pedagogical shift within education that is responsive to student's experiences and sends out a call: a call for study.

Black studies has given us so much since its inception, and while recognizing these contributions is important, this paper uplifts Black study as liberatory pedagogy. Black studies as a field emerged from the Black Power movement of the sixties and for that reason, many Black studies university programs are the direct result of student activism and organizing. From its outset, Black studies has aligned itself with liberation and continues to do so in the manner in which it has carved out space within the university. Calling on the work of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, Black studies rejects the university as a site of enlightenment and makes its home in the undercommons (Harney and Moten 26). The relationship that Black studies has to the university is one of theft—this is the only available relationship to have with an institution that is steeped in blood, exploitation, epistemological violence and the “undisturbed perpetuity of this [settler-colonial empire]” (Harney and Moten 26; Jordan 48). Black studies exists in the “undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still [Black], still strong,” (Harney and Moten 26). This is central to our understanding of Black studies as pedagogy—Black studies has always been a site of study for Black folks to engage in knowledge production that is rooted in themselves and consequently, the Black freedom struggle. The knowledge production in which Black studies engages in, to me, is the only form of true knowledge production I have experienced. I repeat: Black studies, at its core, is undisciplined—it rejects the notions of disciplines as a measure of intellectual rigor. A critical analysis of disciplines reveals that they are “principally self-serving professional bodies

whose existence is based primarily on the coordinated exercise of power over certification and academic legitimacy,” (Davidson and Weaver 341). Black studies, as it exists, is completely antithetical to this—Black studies reinserts Blackness into every and all conversations in which it has been left out. It is for this very reason that the Black student comes to Black studies; we come in search of truth in response to the very visible “blackout of Black life” that we see in our education (Jordan 50). June Jordan, in her essay “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person”, writes of the Black studies teacher, saying,

...we do not say we know the truth: We are the Truth: We are the living Black experience, and therefore, we are the primary sources of information. For us, there is nothing optional about ‘Black Experience’ and/or “Black Studies”: we must know ourselves. But theories and assertions do not satisfy, anymore. Studies are called for. ...We look for community .We have already suffered the alternatives to commitment. We have borne the whiplash of “white” studies unmitigated by the stranger ingredient of humane dedication. Therefore, we cannot, in sanity, pass by the potentiality of Black studies: studies of the person consecrated to the preservation of that person. (Jordan 52 – 53)

Black studies, as a source of truth, speaks to the pedagogical importance of genuine knowledge production that is rooted in the self. Because of its alignment with Black liberation, this rediscovery of the self is a deeply personal process that looks like critical reflection, knowledge production, and study that is aimed towards the radical transformation of our world in all spheres.

As someone who has felt the very real impacts of Black studies in my life and on my personhood, I want nothing more than for every other Black person to come to Black studies. However, I recognize the impossibility of this desire because after all, the university employs every and any means to ensure perpetual investment in the security of its empire, while Black studies embodies an active disinvestment. It is here that I address the sociology of education. Sociology, as a field, has always held revolutionary potential and there is an innumerable amount

of Black sociologists who have completely honed in on this potential—think W.E.B. DuBois, C.L.R. James, or Frantz Fanon. However, my argument is not addressed to sociology as an entire field, but specifically to the sociology of education. Thinking through the lens of liberation, the sociology of education has a unique positionality as it relates to its capability for influencing the general field of education. Black studies demonstrates to us the value of knowledge that critically engages with the very real circumstances of Blackness and Black life. The sociology of education is a field dedicated to understanding the complex interactions between individuals, structures, and institutions and how they affect educational outcomes and that work *is* incredibly valuable. At the same time, one can't help but wonder about the realm of possibilities that would exist if the sociology of education, as a field, made the intentional pedagogical move of aligning itself with liberation. Through its communication of how the complex interactions between institutions and individuals shape educational experiences and trajectories, the sociology of education exposes the chasms that exist within the educational system as we know it. Rather than simply calling attention to the multiple realities of students' experiences, I argue that the field must act. To recognize how systems of oppression and domination impinge on the educational experiences of Black students and simply do nothing is not the revolutionary work that many think it is. The circumstances of Black students can and will change; their educational experiences can and *should* be radically transformed in service of dismantling the very structures and systems that negatively affect their educational experiences.

So I ask, what would it look like for the sociology of education to align itself with liberation? I look to Black studies for the answer. Black studies tangibly demonstrates what it looks like to honor and respect students' deepest sense of knowing—Black studies affirms that Black students, themselves, have and have always had the agency and ability to understand the

ways that white supremacy and its many apparatuses show up in their lives. The specific vocabulary and language used to name specifically how systems of oppression and domination exploit and bring violence into their lives might not be available to them, but they know. Thus, education needs to start from here. The sociology of education as a discipline itself *is* proof of the need for education that develops within students a critical consciousness. Freire writes that the term “conscientização [or critical consciousness] refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality,” (Freire 46). This is the direction that the sociology of education needs to be moving in; the discipline exists in the perfect position to make a call for real education—for real study.

As an individual who politically aligns with Black radicalism, Pan Africanism, and Black Queer feminisms, I recognize that liberation will not be achieved with singular efforts. Black studies has allowed me, as a student, to recognize the revolutionary potential that exists within all spheres of our world. Looking at the sociology of education as a field, I clearly see this potential to radically transform education as we know it in service of liberation. A call to study on behalf of the sociology of education essentially says: We recognize the ways in which white supremacy brings violence and harm into the lives of our students, and rather than speak of them as objects and subjects, we will respect them as people. Our students deserve truth and we must move to “give”¹ it to them.

Spaces of truth cannot be confined to Black studies. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, liberation can only come into a fruition through both study and action. As a Black student who aspires to be an educator within Black studies—within the undercommons—I

¹ By give, I mean students deserve to be given an education that is responsive to the very tangible realities of their lives.

recognize this importance of maximizing the number of spaces of critical Black study in any way possible. I want as many Black students as possible to have access to truth— to fully know themselves the way Black studies allows us. To close, I share an excerpt from Sonia Sanchez’s 1994 poem, “Catch The Fire”. She writes,

Where is your fire?

I say—

Where is your fire?

You got to find it and pass it on.

You got to find it and pass it on

from you to me from me to her from her

to him from the son to the father from the

brother to the sister from the daughter to

the mother from the mother to the child.

Where is your fire ? I say where is your fire?

Can’t you smell it coming out of our past?

Works Cited

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