Critical pedagogy and the fierce urgency of now: opening up space for critical reflections on the U.S. civil rights movement

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Critical pedagogy and the fierce urgency of now: opening up space for critical reflections on the U.S. civil rights movement

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript engages with the U.S. civil rights movement and offers reflections on how critical scholarship and pedagogy can benefit from a robust engagement with the African American freedom struggle. While widely studied in other disciplines and despite the work of some very committed geographers, the U.S. civil rights movement has enjoyed less critical scrutiny within the broader discipline. More specifically, I outline a set of broader concepts that can be utilized and which illustrate the power of grass-roots social movements to change oppressive social conditions. This has implications not only for social and cultural geography, but also for the ways we engage in the hard and often unrewarded work of classroom engagement and teaching.

Pédagogie critique et urgence absolue du moment: ouverture d’un espace pour les réflexions critiques sur le mouvement américain des droits de l’homme

RÉSUMÉ

Ce document s’intéresse au mouvement américain des droits de l’homme et propose des réflexions sur la capacité des bourses et de la pédagogie à bénéficier d’un travail approfondi sur la lutte pour la liberté des afro-américains. Bien que largement étudié dans d’autres disciplines et malgré le travail de certains géographes très enthousiastes, le mouvement américain des droits de l’homme a fait l’objet de moins d’attention critique dans la discipline au sens large. Plus particulièrement, je présente un ensemble de concepts plus étendus qui peuvent être utilisés et qui illustrent la capacité des mouvements sociaux communautaires de changer les conditions sociales oppressives. Ceci a des retombées non seulement pour la géographie sociale et culturelle, mais aussi pour les manières dont nous traitons le dur travail souvent non valorisé de l’implication et de l’enseignement dans la salle de classe.

KEYWORDS

Critical pedagogy; Ella Baker; civil rights; black geographies; critical geography

MOTS CLÉS

Pédagogie critique; Ella Baker; droits de l’homme; géographies des Noirs; géographie critique

PALABRAS CLAVE

Pedagogía crítica; Ella Baker; Derechos humanos; Geografías afroamericanas; Geografía crítica
La pedagogía crítica y la urgencia feroz del ahora: dando espacio a reflexiones críticas sobre el movimiento de derechos humanos en Estados Unidos

RESUMEN
Este manuscrito trata sobre el movimiento de los derechos humanos en Estados Unidos y ofrece reflexiones sobre cómo la investigación crítica y la pedagogía se pueden beneficiar de un sólido compromiso con la lucha por la libertad afroamericana. Aunque ampliamente estudiado en otras disciplinas y a pesar del trabajo de algunos geógrafos muy dedicados, el movimiento de derechos humanos en Estados Unidos ha recibido un análisis menos crítico dentro de la disciplina más amplia. Más específicamente, se resumen un conjunto de conceptos más amplios que se pueden utilizar y que ilustran el poder de los movimientos sociales de clases populares para cambiar condiciones sociales opresivas. Esto tiene implicaciones no sólo para la geografía social y cultural, sino también para las formas en que nos involucramos en el duro y muchas veces no recompensado trabajo de la enseñanza.

My goal in writing this manuscript is to identify the gap in critical scholarship between the ideas of justice found in social and cultural geography and the hard and important work of employing these ideas in our classrooms. In so doing, I want to outline my vision of social justice and to make the case that in many ways the most radical thing one can do is teach. This effort stems from the realization that teaching is, for many of us, the furthest thing from our minds. In many tier-one, neoliberal research institutions, it is rarely rewarded; it is hard and oftentimes thankless work. Teaching critical geography can also be lonely work (Blomley, 2007). It places one at odds with the university administration, but critical geography is also challenging to many colleagues and students. And in my experience, critical pedagogy carries with it a set of political commitments that opens one up for all sorts of personal vitriol (Dowling, 2008). One only need to pick up recent copies of The Chronicle of Higher Education or read a newspaper to know that university professors who hold ‘radical’ views are coming under critical scrutiny. Professor Zandria Robinson, a sociologist at the University of Memphis, was fired from her job for tweeting about violence, race and whiteness (Chasmar, 2015). Perhaps better known is the story of Professor Steven Salaita, who after tweeting comments about the killing of Palestinian civilians by Israel during the most recent violence in Gaza had his job offer rescinded from the University of Illinois (Fish, 2015). These stories are two amongst dozens of examples where critical scholars have been let go or fired from jobs for holding views that were antithetical to the university administration or to top-university donors who are increasingly important in an era of austerity. This reality is part of a broader neoliberal assault on institutions of higher education that has witnessed the gutting of tenure protections in Wisconsin, the ‘reimagining’ of the academy and countless stories about how higher education is failing to produce the kinds of workers needed in the twenty-first-century economy (see: Cronin, 2011).

Yet, I am also well aware that the raising of a collective political consciousness is one of the most important tasks that we can engage in, and if we ever hope to change our present condition, it is of vital political importance. For many of us, teaching has far more potential to impact far more people than any other activity we do in a university setting (Castree, 1999; Hay, 2001a, 2001b; Heyman, 2000). As Mitchell (2008, p. 450) explains, the preparing of the
intellectual and organizational ground so we can be ready; ‘ready to be active rather than reactive’ when the next crisis hits is not only important, but crucial for preparing for the ‘next historical moment.’ The confluence of interrelated crises we now confront – from the failures of capitalism to deliver on its promises of a better future, to the increasingly dire environmental catastrophe unfolding before our eyes, to the continued state sanctioned murder of black and brown bodies, amongst other examples – convinces me that the time is approaching when the hard work of critical teaching will be rewarded as opportunities abound to rethink, reimagine and remake our present realities into something better. I fear that failure to take this moment seriously will have dire repercussions.

Building from this realization I want to discuss the U.S. civil rights movement and offer reflections on how critical scholarship and pedagogy can benefit from a robust engagement with the African American struggle for freedom. While widely studied and written about in other disciplines and despite the work of some very committed geographers (e.g. Alderman, Kingsbury, & Dwyer, 2013; Dwyer, 2000; Dwyer & Alderman, 2008; Gilmore, 1999; Heynen, 2009; Loyd, 2014; Pulido, 2006; Tyner, 2006; Wilson, 2002), the U.S. civil rights movement has enjoyed less critical scrutiny within the broader discipline. As Alderman et al. note, (2013) despite ‘the well-established body of work addressing both the need and techniques for considering social justice and economic welfare in geography’, the discipline has been reticent to fully engage or embrace the struggle (p. 174). Importantly, the critical engagement that Alderman et al. advocate entails more than the oft-repeated trope that the effort to resist white supremacy was accomplished (rather than continuously unfolding) or was the result of a few ‘great’ leaders. Instead, it entails a bottom-up understanding (Crosby, 2011) that engages with the messiness and historical contradictions brought on by the efforts to disrupt and change a settler nation born in and through white supremacist ideologies (Bonds & Inwood, 2015). This is not to suggest that somehow the civil rights movement is the only movement or moment critical geographers should be working on and through. With few notable exceptions (see: Heynen, 2009; Pulido, 2006; Tyner, 2006), the American Indian Movement, black power, revolutionary labour struggles, as well as La Raza studies, amongst other examples, have received significantly less attention in the discipline and each of these movements holds important lessons for us as we move forward. Thus, I offer the civil rights movement as one example of myriad that can inform contemporary critical praxis.

In order to advance the arguments in this paper, I first begin with a discussion of critical geography and outline my commitments as a self-described anti-racist scholar who engages with critical race theory and political economy in an effort to understand the continuing significance of white supremacy for the geography of the U.S. From there, I discuss the broader civil rights movement and articulate a set of concepts that can be utilized and which illustrate the power of grass-roots social movements to change oppressive social conditions. A central lesson from this discussion is an understanding that struggles for justice are never complete, but are constantly evolving. For many of us, this lesson might be intuitive, but for undergraduate students who have grown accustomed to thinking about the civil rights movement – or any significant social movement for that matter – in a temporal context (this happened, then this happened) rather than spatially, this is a revelation and can lead into productive and sustained discussions about the nature of contemporary justice struggles. For this reason, it should be noted that I am not advocating for a telling of the civil rights struggle from a traditional historical geographic approach that simply retells the past or engages in a teleological argument about how the movement happened. Instead, and
flowing from concepts embedded within historical materialism, I am advocating for a way of engaging with civil rights that use present conditions to study history backwards. Thus, we can use the movement to understand what ‘happened in the past’ in an effort that gives us an understanding of what has given ‘rise to this particular present’ (Ollman, 2003, p. 118). Finally, I conclude with some remarks about the potential critical geography has for expanding our understanding of the civil rights struggle.

**Critical geography and the connection to the movement**

While there are many definitions of what it means to be ‘critical’ or even ‘radical’ (see: Berg, 2004; Blomley, 2006; Castree, 1999, 2000; Harvey, 2001, 2006; Lees, 1999; Springer, 2012, 2014; Waite, 2009) and debates about these meanings are politically important; I instead want to focus specifically on the classroom and to use the classroom as a site of political consciousness raising. First, because for most of us, despite our varying levels of political commitments and theoretical orientations, the classroom is something we have in common. Second, if we are to begin the process of turning out the next generation of critical scholars and activists, then the classroom is a site that is full of unrealized potential. To illustrate this potential, I draw inspiration from W.E.B. Du Bois who stated: ‘Students are not sent to school to learn to obey. They are sent there to learn to do, to think, to execute, to be men and women [sic].’ (Du Bois, 1920 as quoted in Bell, 2002, p. 39). I argue that this statement is fundamental to critical geography and to my own political commitments and emerges from the realization that by the time many of us (faculty, students, administrators) have entered the university, we have spent far more time learning to conform to social expectations and preconceived notions about the world and far too little time thinking about the kind of change agents we have the potential to be. Put another way, Gramsci explains that in any organized, modern society, there is a difference between the ‘common sense’ which is the sense held in common by people and undergirds consent, and the ‘good sense’ which is knowledge that can help policy makers, students and the general public make politically informed and critical decisions and often stands in opposition to commonly held assumptions about the way the world operates and for whom it works. My theoretical and empirical work is animated through the realization that we need to cultivate the critical, geographic literacy to recognize the good sense and my scholarship is a commitment to understand the co-production of socio-spatial difference and exposure to premature death and vulnerability that is heart of unequal social relations (Gilmore, 2006).

My political commitments are inspired by engaged scholars who refuse to accept the commonly held assumption that our present condition is the best that can be hoped for in an imperfect world and who recognize the possibilities that emerge from collective and left politics. This work has inspired me to be a better scholar and a more committed person and I owe them more than I could ever hope to repay. My efforts to cultivate the good sense necessary to reject our taken for granted neoliberal, imperialist, private, middle class, Bourgeoisie use of space emerges from a long-standing research and teaching focus around the life and non-violent social philosophy of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Over the last decade, I have engaged with King’s philosophy to outline the concept of the ‘beloved community’ (Inwood, 2009a, 2009b, 2013) as well as trying to use Dr King’s philosophical groundings in non-violent direct action to outline geographies of peace and justice (Inwood, 2009a; Inwood & Tyner, 2011). Through these projects, I argue that Dr King’s social theory offers a
contemporary geographic vision that confronts neoliberal economic policy while providing an alternative model of community development that is grounded in direct action. As part of these efforts, I have also worked to develop pedagogy and research ethics that work towards broader understandings of non-violence and the role non-violence can play in political transformation. Importantly I recognize and I also teach that non-violence is one of innumerable tactics for achieving political transformations and that in any struggle the strategies which one deploys are necessarily grounded in specific geographic conditions (Cobb, 2014; Umoja, 2013).

Through these efforts, I hope to give my students the ability to understand their present circumstances and the realization that not only do we not have to accept our present realities, but we have the political potential to change these realities. Recognizing this capacity to change is one of the most important skills we can impart to our students and our colleagues. Namely that throughout human history, the ruling classes have used their positions of control to increase their wealth and power over others and if you look hard enough and think long enough about your present condition, you can discover how society works and for whom it works (D’Amato, 2006, p. 41). In an era controlled by neoliberal economic programs that continuously shift the burdens of social reproduction from the collective to the individual and with the intent of restoring class-based relations surrendered through Keynesianism (Harvey, 2005), it is clear that our present condition works for the few at the expense of the many. What is important about these realities is the way the economic revanchism of neoliberalism is made palatable through latent appeals to white supremacist ideologies that are designed to build on the resentments of working class whites (Inwood, 2015; Melamed, 2006; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010). Thus, part of my job as an educator is to help students not only reject and repudiate the white supremacist thinking that governs our contemporary era, but to also recognize the powerful ways white supremacy continues to dictate the making of economic and political relationships in the U.S. settler state (Hixson, 2013; Veracini, 2010). By pointing out how our contemporary geographic landscapes are the product of white supremacy (Inwood & Bonds, 2013), I am trying to create the political consciousness necessary not only to understand this reality, but also to give my students the intellectual tools necessary to take on white supremacist realities. This is of vital importance as the white supremacist chickens have come home to roost in numerous locals across the United States – from the fires of Ferguson, Missouri to the unjust arrest of Sandra Bland in Waller County, Texas – racialized violence, discrimination and white supremacy demonstrate the power racism has over the lives of our communities, including most prominently the students in our classrooms and at our institutions.

While many people and academic disciplines can understand the interrelated exploitations that are central to our contemporary conditions, for me, social and cultural geographies show students in a profound way, how white supremacy continues to payoff through the continuously unfolding making and remaking of space and place. In other words, it is the ability to suture the racism of contemporary society to a longer and deeper analysis that places our contemporary capitalist realities into a racialized framework that is critical to cultivating the Gramscian good sense necessary to engage with contemporary social inequities. As Du Bois pointed out in 1920 in his essay *The Souls of White Folks*, when one begins to examine the long arc of industrial and colonial development, black and brown bodies do the work while white bodies reap the rewards (Du Bois, 1920, p. 25). These settler realities are as prescient today as they were when Du Bois wrote those words 95 years ago.
Yet, as many of us are fully aware the ability to diagnose a disease without also being able to treat the disease is no cure at all. Make no mistake, contemporary racialized–neoliberal–capitalism and its attendant racialized politics confine millions of our brothers and sisters to lives of unremitting toil and hardship and is neither killing us softly nor quietly, but is quite blatant about it. Yet despite the fact that many of us are well aware of these realities, our contemporary geographies often root us ‘within particular static perspectives that do not necessarily allow for a different kind of dreaming about the future’ (Mahtani, 2014, p. 366).

Turning more specifically to critical geography, the reality of the disappearance of black lives from our classrooms stems in part from the fact that many white leftists do not put race and class on equal footing (Pulido, 2002, p. 764). This reality has real implications not only for the kinds of geographies we do as critical scholars, but also for the communities we reach out to and the teaching we do in the classroom. Turning again to Mahtani, she argues that an opening up of geography to a more complex methodological approach that challenges our current theoretical and empirical silos is necessary if we want to move beyond the superficial forms of knowledge that allow many white colleagues to adopt the benevolent, but ultimately politically destructive stance, that because I recognize race, or gender, or sexuality I am doing ‘good work’ (2014, p. 364).

Katherine McKittrick, in an essay that appeared in this journal, expands on these themes when she argues that understandings of ‘blackness’ in Geography often and almost always locate it in historic terms that ‘naturalize the disposed (black subjects) and render the spaces of the dispossessed (black geographies) as always already violent and violated’ (2011, p. 961). This reality associates blackness with what McKittrick describes as ‘black death’ that has the material effect of ‘making black geographies disappear’ (Mahtani, 2014, p. 361). These kinds of geographic displacements and the concretizing of identity reproduce a ‘particular kind of static knowing – a supposedly objective material determinism’ that naturalizes the continued displacement and marginalization of the African American experience and the central role it plays in the continuously unfolding processes of the making of space and place (Mahtani, 2014, p. 361). I would argue that this reality is especially present and arguably most destructive in our classrooms as we engage with and interact with students from a variety of backgrounds and who in many cases are being exposed to Geography for the first time in their academic lives. Sadly, by not giving students the tools needed to disrupt our present destructive reality, we do them a disservice. As I outline below thinking critically about the civil rights struggle and the geographies that made the struggle possible not only offers us a different kind of future, but explodes contemporary geographic boundaries that continue to marginalize and discount the lives and geographies of persons of colour.

The U.S. civil rights struggle and the pedagogy of struggle

Writing in 2002 Ruth Wilson Gilmore challenged Geography to work towards a more sustained and critical engagement with racism and the structural conditions that continue to produce unequal life outcomes and exposure to premature death for persons of colour. In an effort to move debates forward, she noted that the object of such an engagement ‘is to figure out what […] makes oppressive and liberatory structures work, and what makes them fall apart’ (Gilmore, 2002, p. 17). Since she wrote those words, many important and critical engagements have been written that help us to explain and understand the oppressive conditions of race, and to a lesser extent geographers have begun the process of engaging
with emancipatory struggles for freedom. Yet with a few notable exceptions, the teaching of the movement and the lessons it holds for radical and critical praxis have not been so nearly worked through. This stems in part I suspect from a continued celebration of struggles for justice that fit neatly into interpretations that are related to classical social theory and that fit within a set of social and cultural narratives familiar to critical scholars. Quite simply certain emancipatory struggles fall within the ‘critical tradition’, whereas the contradictory, often radical, but sometimes conservative, movement to secure black freedoms does not. Yet, it is precisely the messiness of the movement that makes it of vital importance to social and cultural geography.

When utilizing a more thorough examination of the civil rights movement as a means of cultivating in students, the political capacity necessary to implement social change Alderman et al. note that there are at least two important points to consider. The first challenges students to consider the decades of organizing that had gone into the movement before it achieved any kind of political success (2013, p. 179). Historian Payne (2007) argues that the key to understanding the civil rights movement is not to focus on the major efforts of the 1950s or 1960s but to turn back to the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. It is in these decades when everyday men and women working in dangerous and lonely conditions did the hard and thankless work of organizing themselves into a coherent political organization. As he explains, it was this work that Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other civil rights organizations were able to harness when political conditions developed that allowed for more wholesale and radical political change. As critical geographers perhaps more than anything, this is a lesson that should be at the centre of our critical pedagogy.

We live in an era dominated by the ‘right here, right now’ expectation of change. Yet, if we are to take the civil rights movement seriously, the reality is that it takes decades of work in communities and institutions to democratize them in the kinds of ways civil rights activists were working towards. A central lesson from the U.S. civil rights movement is that this work is politically necessary and ultimately productive. Thus, as many of us struggle in our classrooms in often lonely and at times hostile conditions, we can also take note that it is this kind of hard work that is absolutely vital to creating the next great generation of radical thinkers and organizers who will be in a better position to take advantage of opportunities as political conditions change.

A second lesson from the movement is the idea that somehow the movement was ‘inevitable’ (Alderman et al., 2013, p. 179). The reality is that the movement was the result of work and according to Alderman et al, centring the work of the movement is central to drawing a richer set of lessons and bringing those into the classroom. This also directly connects to the classroom as well because we need to move more centrally to see the classroom as a productive space and the work that we do in the classroom through the same productive lens. Despite the realities of working in institutions that do not reward classroom teaching as much as they should, this is not the same thing as saying the institutions and those that fund them do not take the classroom seriously. Witness recent events at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and efforts to police the kinds of activities that go on in classrooms on campus. A 2015 New Yorker articles details efforts by state legislators requesting teaching materials and syllabi and faculty even receiving phone calls from state officials asking about the nature and content of their courses (Purdy, 2015). The Pope Foundation, an organization that has given millions of dollars to UNC and is funded by conservative businessman Art
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Pope, has led these efforts. An official with the Pope Center was quoted in the article as saying:

If they (Conservatives) really want to change the culture long-term in this country, it’s not going to happen through politics … the way you change culture is through ideas …. If we’re giving tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars to political campaigns and we’re giving one-tenth of one per cent to trying to change the intellectual culture of this nation, you are by definition going to lose. (as quoted in Purdy, 2015)

We are living through perhaps the largest and most sustained assault on higher education (at least in the United States) since the Vietnam War and the political clashes that characterized university campuses in the 1960s (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014). For this reason, it is imperative for us to reconnect with and reengage in our classrooms in ways that are transformative and supportive and give students the tools necessary to cultivate the good sense to think differently about their world and their place within it. The civil rights movement and the work of activists demonstrate the power that can come from such an engagement. Additionally, by refocusing attention on the ‘physical, emotional and intellectual labor’ of the classroom, I found that the space of the classroom is opened up to new and important encounters with students and activism (Alderman et al., 2013, p. 179).

In order to illustrate exactly how the movement is important, I want to focus on a narrower set of concerns. First, given the breadth and depth of the African American freedom struggle, it is impossible to do justice to the full scope of social actors and events that unfolded. Second, by examining the role of Ella Baker and her views on radical democracy, I hope to show that taking the movement seriously can provide the discipline with a set of themes that expands on current geographic scholarship and can concomitantly inform radical praxis in the classroom. These concerns emerge from my commitments as an anti-racist scholar.

**Ella Baker and the potential of a ‘Radical’ classroom**

Any effort to understand Baker’s work and contributions needs to begin from what Bob Mosses, civil rights leader in Mississippi, describes as the two great civil right movement traditions. The first is associated with what he describes as the community-mobilizing tradition. This tradition is most closely associated with large-scale civil rights protests like those that occurred in Selma, Alabama or the March on Washington and are largely associated with Martin Luther King Jr., (Payne, 2007, p. 3). For many students and for the general public, this is the most well-known version of civil right history. In describing this approach, a civil rights veteran noted in an interview that I conducted with him that the mainstream perspective was ‘Dr. King showed up and led a march and now we have our freedom.’ While the interpretation misses much of the nuance and power of the community-mobilizing tradition, it is true that this perspective obscures other approaches to civil rights justice work and what Mosses describes as community organizing. Community organizing is associated with the work of the SNCC, the Black Panther Party and other community-centred civil rights organizations. This tradition of civil rights activism is focused on the ‘long-term development of leadership in ordinary men and women’ and is strongly linked with Ella Baker and Septima Clark (Payne, 2007, pp. 3–4).

While myriad organizers gave birth to the community organizing approach, no person is as closely associated with it as Ella Baker. Born in 1903 in Virginia, Baker moved to North Carolina as a young girl. She graduated from Shaw University and went to New York City
where she worked with George Schuyler, an African American anarchist, who founded and ran the Young Negros Cooperative League (YNCL). The YNCL encouraged the growth and use of local consumer cooperatives in African American communities and in particular in the New York City area. She later went on to work with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the civil rights organization founded by Martin Luther King Jr. After becoming disillusioned with the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the SCLC, she left and helped found the SNCC which is where she possibly made her biggest impact; becoming a mentor to several prominent and important community activists and organizers, not least of whom was Bob Mosses.

Ella Baker’s political philosophy was grounded in a fundamental commitment to radical democracy. Ransby (2003) explains that Baker’s commitments resulted from a belief in local movements that could be tailored to actually existing on-the-ground realities. As Baker explained, it was necessary for political organizers to ‘understand and decode the culture of everyday life, and to tap the reservoir of resistance that resided there, in order to pull people into collective action’ (Ransby, 2003, p. 194). Quoting Septima Clark, historian Laurie Green argues the kinds of movement Clark and Baker helped build was about ‘broadening the scope of democracy to include everyone and deepening the concept to include every relationship’ (p. 58). Key to understanding this approach is the way it focused on managing conflict and built consensus through personal interaction and discussions. Through my own work and in interviewing former SNCC members, the organization was characterized by all-night sessions in which ideas were hashed out and alternative viewpoints were heard and debated. It is not uncommon to hear SNCC veterans retelling stories about how especially contentious meetings could go on for hours and would not wrap up until the early morning hours when SNCC workers would grab two or three hours of sleep then hit the road to enact their project. These realities found their way into everyday movement practice in SNCC and were a direct result of Baker’s leadership style and her reaction to the hierarchical and patriarchal approach adopted by King and the SCLC. Payne (2007) explains that perhaps Baker’s most important lesson was rather than telling students what to do, she would engage in aggressive questioning of their motives and actions which forced students to reject the dogmatic approach of other civil rights organizations (p. 97). This forced students to confront the limits of their own political development and facilitated a politics that engaged with people’s needs and desires.

This reality holds lessons for the modern university classroom and in a contemporary climate in which students are often forced into majors and degree programs because they have been led to believe that it will lead to gainful employment. As universities and politicians have focused increased attention on majors and STEM disciplines that are ‘necessary’ to the material reproduction of the neoliberal economic order, there is pressure to move away from the kind of critical reflection and deep reading that can help students reject common sense understandings of how the world operates. Baker’s approach not only cultivated the good sense necessary to address the most pressing social justice issues of her time, it was based on empowering student activists to figure the movement out for themselves. This often entailed a rejection of taken for granted understandings of the movement’s scope and scale and forced students to engage in a material critique of the society. Perhaps most centrally for critical geography Baker’s method was grounded in an historical materialist approach that sought to ‘assess the specific historical parameters of exclusion, especially racism, sexism,
and class exploitation’ that was at the heart of oppressive practice in the United States (Ransby, 2003, pp. 368–369).

As Baker explained during an interview,

The major job [of community organizing] was getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how group action could counter violence. (Baker, 1972)

By articulating an intersectional approach (long before the concept was developed in the social sciences) and in grounding that approach in the historical geography of the United States, Baker engaged in deep social analysis that is connected to ‘specific historical moments.’ Similarly, this is what critical geography can offer our students and our institutions at the precise moment when these analyses are vital to overcoming the alienation and sense of hopelessness that many students grapple with as they begin to make their way in the world. This not only rejects the take for granted understandings that predominate in many core university courses and which are central to the reproduction of injustice in society, but the approach she outlines helps students see the ways in which the struggle for justice is never ending, but continuously unfolding. One of the limits to the way many students come to understand the U.S. civil rights movement is that it began and ended in the 1960s instead of seeing the roots of the struggle in the very founding on the U.S. settler nation.

In addition, by actively cultivating political actions that not only sought to halt oppressive practices, but to reverse those realities through political consciousness raising that forced ‘individuals to rethink and redefine their most intimate personal relations and their identities’ (Ransby, 2003, p. 369) Baker further outlined an approach to activist education that challenges white student’s sense of supremacy and provides an opportunity for students of colour to directly confront classroom and university microaggressions. Turning again to the classroom, the process of ‘othering’ in the classroom has implications that go beyond scholarship. Hay notes, ‘processes of domination and oppression that many critical geographers study […] play out daily in our classrooms and other institutional spaces’ (2001b, p. 142).

This reality is especially important when we begin the process of disentangling processes of racialization and oppression – what Mahtani describes as toxic geographies – which is an all-too-familiar reality for students of colour (2014). The foundation of the toxic climate for students of colour in our classrooms is of course the very materials we use to teach geographic concepts. This perhaps more than anything answers the question posed by AAG president Mona Domosh when she asked: ‘Why is our Geography curriculum so white?’ (2015). By engaging in classroom practices that are centred around an active deconstruction of identity and that moves beyond recognizing privilege to actually grappling with the political work that is necessary to undermine these realities, we can create a classroom environment that integrates the experiences of a multiplicity of identity positions into our curriculum.

Importantly, to make this approach most effective requires that the classroom experience is grounded in student’s actual lived experiences and connected to broader economic, social and cultural structures that reproduce oppression in society. What is particularly promising about Baker’s efforts are the way they are grounded in a radical democratic spirit that emerges from geographic realities and from spatial and social communities that are often ignored by and through most geographic textbooks. This is a key lesson and one that directly connects with social and cultural geography. As a result, Baker’s approach has implications not only for the ways we can think through our own political projects, but should be at the
centre of our critical pedagogy. Perhaps the most important thing any professor can do in the classroom is to help students confront the limits of their own life experiences and their own political orientations. For me, the heart of cultivating the Gramscian good sense necessary to take on the entrenched, purveyors of neoliberal ‘free’ market education approaches lies in our ability to create in our students the capacity to reject taken for granted assumptions about the world and for whom it works. Critical approaches to education must not and cannot reproduce the very same negative structural inequalities that so many of our students react to and reject.

Building on these insights, at the heart of Baker’s approach was a belief that everyday people – ordinary men and women – possessed enough knowledge about their lives and economic situation to be the driving force of political change. Expanding on this message, Green explains (p. 58):

Baker [and Clark’s] message was that oppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, had the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see that world for what it was and to move to transform it.

These lessons extend well beyond civil rights organizing, directly connecting critical human geography, radical democracy and the classroom, and closely mirror geographers’ own work on radical democracy (e.g. Purcell, 2008). Yet by continuously ignoring these arguments or remaining blind to their implications as critical scholars, we miss opportunities to build bridges and, perhaps more importantly, present more inclusive geographies that present the possibility for change and are represented through black freedom struggles. Recall from the previous discussion that McKittrick argues by ignoring the richness of black life ‘geography (the discipline) and geography (the spaces and places)’ come to ‘naturalize the dispossessed (black subjects) and render the spaces of the dispossessed (black geographies) always already violent and violated’ (2011, p. 961). She goes on to argue that this reality creates subjects that are almost always dead and dying, the condemned and “without”, [who] apparently have nothing to contribute to our broader intellectual project of ethically reimagining our ecocidal and genocidal world’ (McKittrick, 2011, p. 955). In other words by ignoring or (re)creating ‘the other’ in ways that are one-dimensional or devoid of agency, we continue to render these subjects as always and everywhere less than human, thus replicating the very geographies we seek to overturn.

Complex engagements with the movement as I have outlined above provide the intellectual grounding necessary to understand how the struggle for freedom is made possible by everyday people – the same kinds of people with whom we interact every day in our classrooms and on our campuses. A question I ask myself before entering the classroom on the first day of class at the start of every semester is: ‘which of these students is going to be the change that we need and what role can I play in facilitating their efforts?’ My students and their passions constantly amaze me, and more importantly, I am surprised by how those who you least suspect have the most to offer. Ella Baker was a genius at seeing the political capacities of men and women that the rest of society – even those people who were supposedly on the correct side of an issue – would so casually dismiss, ignore or dehumanize. Bob Moses when asked to reflect on Baker’s most profound lesson stated she taught him:

When you want to really do something with somebody else then the first thing you have to do is make this personal connection, you have to find out who you are really working with. You really have to be interested in that person to work with them … You saw that all across the South in
the grassroots and rural people. That was their style and Ella carried that style into this other level … (as quoted in Payne, 2007, p. 98)

If we are serious about changing our present condition, then we need to begin by getting to know those individuals with whom we interact an almost daily basis, but for whom we might not know much about: our undergraduate students. Perhaps more so than anyone our collective futures are in their hands. As I noted above, failure to take this moment seriously will have dire consequences and part of taking this moment seriously is productively engaging with our students.

Conclusion

My goal in writing this manuscript was to identify the gap found in critical, social and cultural geographies, between the idea of justice and the hard and thankless work of actually employing the concept in the classroom. These insights build from Minelle Mahtani’s recent call to place discussion about the teaching of anti-racist scholarship more centrally into the geographic conversation in an effort to undermine the toxicity of our contemporary geographic pedagogical approach, particularly as it relates to persons of colour (2014, p. 366). Like her, I am often surprised by the lack of focus on critical pedagogy in our discussions and in our meeting spaces and in the way we attempt to employ the concept to create conditions more conducive to political and social change. Building from this, I also argue for taking civil rights geographies more seriously in our work. In the wake of the continued assault on persons of colour, this is of vital importance. While there are many ways to accomplish these goals, I would argue that any effort that does not take the classroom seriously is doomed to failure.

Central to these efforts should be a reimagining of the kinds of topics we employ in our textbooks and in our teaching materials. As a colleague recently observed, in a major and supposedly critical textbook in a chapter that deals with forced human migration, never once is the topic of slavery or the slave trade mentioned. This is one of numerous examples in which the lives of persons of colour are routinely ignored in our texts. This reality does not just extend to the classroom, but is also from my perspective, perpetuated in meetings and in scholarship that fails to do the hard and significant intellectual lifting necessary to fully appreciate the ingenious and revolutionary ways oppressed peoples have survived in the face of continued efforts to marginalize, exclude and destroy their lives. By more forcefully engaging in and with the U.S. civil rights struggle (as well as other struggles), we can significantly enhance our classrooms and create space necessary for a more forceful and needed retooling of our contemporary curriculums.

Notes

1. This is not to suggest that critical scholars have missed this point. Going back well into the 1980s, there has been at times a robust discussion about the role teaching and critical pedagogy can play in critical geography (see: Castree, 1999, 2000; Heyman, 2000; Inwood & Tyner, 2011; Johnson, 1990; Morgan, 2002; Pepper & Jenkins, 1983).

2. This is a much different conception of geographic literacy than the one proffered by the National Geographic Society.
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