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MOUTHY STUDENTS AND THE TEACHER'S APPLE: QUESTIONS OF ORALITY AND RACE IN THE URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOL

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“Lead them by their mouths.”

— *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile; or Treatise on Education*

“One’s eyes are what one is, one’s mouth is what one becomes.”

— *John Galsworthy*

Denicia won’t stop talking to Arette. I give her my most menacing stare. She flashes a toothy smile. Clenching neon blue gum within a grin that at once expresses aggression, defiance, and affection, she drawls, “I love you, Ms. Nikki,” and then slaps the arm of her confabulator, who proceeds to emit an ear-piercing shriek. The gum, that most illicit school contraband, is brazenly visible. The smile, forced and imbedded with all the aggressivity of a bite, is intended to charm and challenge. The proclamation, wholly inappropriate (yet admittedly deeply gratifying), is wielded to disorient and disarm.¹

When I make my way down the corridors to my classroom, I traverse a glittering landscape of food wrappers. In my room, graffitied desktops conceal nebulous underbellies of gum. Daily I wage battle on orange soda, chewing gum, and profanity. I dole out points for proper speech, punishment for verbal slip-ups. I model the Standard American English usage of “to be” and encourage “Accountable Talk.” After class, I stoop over to pick up waste, sifting through a multicolored testament to adolescent hunger. On my way out, I pass through the cafeteria and sidestep neatly swept mountains of half-eaten hamburger buns, plastic bottles, and the remains of Styrofoam trays. Schools are spaces marked by oral desire, and I have become a guardian of the mouth.

The scene with Denicia epitomizes the deeply fraught space of orality in the urban public school. In an age of accountability and standardization, this space is embattled by school mandates on everything from gum to participation; federal initiatives on how to nourish urban minority youth (and low-income students in particular); conflicting student and teacher desires; and, as the incident with

¹All students mentioned have been given pseudonyms and any staff or personnel mentioned do not represent my current school and/or administration.

Denicia demonstrates, deep-seated ambivalence. If a collective of students is rhetorically figured as a body, it is a body arrested in the oral stage. This psychical stalling is engendered by administrative and pedagogical imperatives that are fixated on standardizing language, controlling consumption, and regulating “appropriate” oral expression. At once encouraged and strictly controlled, orality becomes a site of what Burke (2005) deems “contested desires” (p. 576).

This paper will seek to investigate this oral fixation—especially in the context of an inner-city, low-income and minority-populated school. Why are so many classroom battles centered on control of the mouth? Why is so much teacher/student language marked by metaphors of orality? How is controlling what goes in and what comes out of students’ mouths linked to the imposition of “wholesome” moralities and white middle class ideologies on poor inner-city kids? How has the accountability movement intensified this teacher/student gnashing of teeth? This paper in the end may raise more questions than it answers, but the open questioning mouth is the first step to satiety.

Mouthing Off

“The unsaid part is the best of every discourse.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

In cinematic portrayals, poor inner-city schools are often loud, chaotic spaces where teachers struggle to be heard over yelling students, blaring boom boxes, and a background of wailing sirens. In contrast, the ideal classroom is presented as a monologic rather than a dialogic space, a quiet realm dominated by a lone teacher’s voice. In film, teacher-saviors like Hilary Swank and Michelle Pfeiffer gradually tame the aggressive orality of poor minority kids and instill the sanctity of quiet repositories of Western thought.

The threat of minority orality was recently made evident in the teacher’s lounge of my urban, public school. An educational consultant, entrusted with helping teachers integrate data-driven instruction and the workshop model,² shook her head over lunch and declared to the group of teachers around her, “This is the loudest I have ever heard this school.” Her diagnosis of the school’s deterioration was based on the noise she heard emitting from classrooms. According to her logic, a good classroom is a quiet classroom, while noise signals pedagogical

² In an effort to achieve standardization, certain regions in NYC mandated that all English classrooms adhere to the Balanced Literacy and workshop models. Ideally, according to these models, an English classroom in East Harlem should be shifting into shared reading at precisely the same moment as one in Rockaway Beach does, like synchronized swimmers.

decay. This thinking seems pervasive. A colleague of mine admitted that he had never been formally observed at his former school. His principal had awarded him satisfactory ratings after observing that his classroom was “quiet” when she passed by it.

Having been entrusted with an all-boys English class last year, I quickly had to overcome my own aversions to loud classroom spaces. Noise became part of my pedagogy. Rhythmic beats on desks, boisterous chants, and heated “Yo-Mama” metaphor contests would often shatter the celestial silence of the school’s hallways. To an outside ear, this vociferous classroom space, dominated by student voices rather than my own, probably sounded like pure pandemonium. According to the ideology of accountability that the consultant advocated, noise levels can (and should) be measured, controlled, and contained. Yet, it was at the loudest moments, where my room bordered on the uncontrolled and uncontained, that the greatest student engagement and most authentic learning—while more difficult to identify and assess than decibels—took place.

Later, the same consultant heard yells down the hallway and remarked that a teacher was being “*eaten alive*” in that classroom. (I later learned that a game of Jeopardy had been in progress there.) Although she considered herself as a “progressive educator,” the consultant was blind to the very regressive and racist ideology at work in her statement. In a school with a student population that is over 85% black and 14% Hispanic, the idea of a white female teacher being “eaten alive” evokes the classic trope of the white female body as passive and endangered by black desire. It also conjures, of course, racist fantasies of cannibalism. As Tompkins (2007) argues in an article investigating tropes of anthropophagy in antebellum literature, “Across modernity, cannibalism has signified the total primitive otherness against which (white) Western rationality measures itself” (p. 204). The consultant’s statement, although intended to insult the teacher, instead figures the students as primitive, savage, and irrational. In the same conversation another teacher described the class referred to as a “bunch of animals.”

Students seem to have internalized these racist tropes of savagery and animalization. A common epithet used for disruptive peers is that they are “monkeys.” Similarly, loud and unruly students are described by classmates as “wildin’ out” and “beastin’.” Tompkins (2007) explains, quoting Sánchez-Eppler, “that the popular understanding of children as little primitives...represents ‘the felt similitudes between the project of raising good, white, middle-class Christian, American children and raising an economic and cultural American empire’” (p.

204). These could be read as tacit projects of the accountability movement; consider how often test scores are analyzed statistically according to race and class. When black children are relegated to the categories of cannibals or animals, they can be described away as aberrations in the context of that project, and positioned as threats to American capitalist ideals. And as we will see with the rhetoric on obesity, this language also dehumanizes non-whites as bodies that, like slaves, need to be disciplined, controlled, and regulated to ensure the preservation of (white) American ideology.

“Eating alive” also evokes infantile orality, especially the cannibalistic devouring of the mother’s breast and milk. Interestingly, sycophantic students are chided by their peers for “suckin’ [the teacher’s] nipples.”³ These same students are often the ones accused of acting, sounding, or trying to be “white.” For if the white female teacher is the surrogate mother, she is also the conveyor of normative white culture. “Eating her alive,” or sucking her nipples, is a form of oral incorporation, and of willingly imbibing white culture. As colloquial wisdom has it, *you are what you eat*.

Perhaps underlying the consultant’s language, and even student slang, is Tompkins’ (2007) argument that, “black bodies, here rendered in the most extreme representation of objectification and dehumanization, must nonetheless enter into and change the white body (and thus the white body politic) if it is itself to enter into modernity” (p. 207). The idea of the white body (politic) “absorbing” blackness as a necessary step toward modernity is a central theme in Tompkins’ work. In her paper, she traces imagery of the black body as an “edible body” in white discourses. She examines the orality of white incorporation of blackness, writing:

...I wish to point critical attention toward that other cavity—the mouth—through whose metaphorical properties the porous and fictional boundaries between the races might also be represented. For in examining the alimentary, that is, oral desire for blackness exhibited by whites...we further uncover the profound ambivalence toward, and ongoing dependence upon blackness, upon which... whiteness relied. Blackness becomes something that must be absorbed into whiteness as a precondition both of white modern embodiment and of entry into modernity. (p. 206)

³ I’ve even heard the statement used about male teachers, and conversely, “sucking the teacher’s dick” used in regard to female teachers. Both configure orality as a means of gaining teacher favor.

This oral absorbing of blackness can be seen today in the usurpation of “black” culture—especially at the level of language. Terms such as “beef” and “bling” and phrases such as “You go girl,” are common parlance in popular media.

Interestingly, one of the surest ways to get a laugh out of a majority African American class is for a white teacher to self-consciously use slang coded as African American. When black language is cannibalized, African American culture—particularly its threatening orality—is assimilated and incorporated into the white “body” politic and therefore neutralized.

The cannibalism of blackness is evident in the classroom as well. Just as the consultant figured the students as cannibals, students conversely figure teachers as anthropagic. A common complaint is that a punitive teacher is “thirsty”—i.e., out for blood. And an overly strict teacher can be accused of “wildin’ out,” “beastin’,” or “fiendin’,” just as disruptive students are. This language figures teachers as threatening consumers of blackness. This could be read as a resistance to assimilation—a fear of being devoured, consumed, or subsumed under white culture. Similarly, a common motif in slave narratives is the belief by Africans that European enslavers are going to eat them upon capture. The young, middle-class, and often predominantly white teachers that many urban hiring programs are employing to teach in hard-to-staff and failing inner-city schools might be viewed as a new breed of colonizers setting foot into uncharted reaches of poor and black America. In this light, it is little wonder that turn-of-the-century tropes of cannibalism are resurfacing in the present-day idiomology of the urban classroom.

Food Fights

“A full belly makes a dull brain.” — Benjamin Franklin

Perhaps nowhere are the pedagogical anxieties over orality more pronounced than in regard to food. A colleague described one of the banes of her middle school teaching experience as the daily battles with students over gum chewing. During my first year of teaching, I was oblivious to the war on gum waged in classrooms around the country. In my second year, my blindness suddenly ended. I became fixated on clenched jaws, the surreptitious passing of gum under desks, and the neon flashes in my students’ mouths. My former laxity on punishing for gum chewing was shocking to my colleagues, and they implied that it threatened to undermine the power matrix of the school. And as I soon discovered, the prohibition on chewing gum and eating in the classroom is the first rule

in my school's discipline code, more important than the ban on carrying a weapon or inflicting physical harm. This seems to be a common trend in schools and public institutions. Why is the control over student orality the founding rule in many educational settings?

In her eloquent essay investigating the history of the “edible landscape of schools” in working class England, Burke (2005) offers some insight. She writes:

Rituals and symbolic practices in all cultures involve food and drink in large measure. Social practices surrounding eating and drinking are associated with the cementing of bonds, differentiation according to privilege or status, and recognition through reward and punishment. The formal and informal edible landscape is a foundation of culture and in the school it forms in large part the distinctive culture of the institution. (p. 573)

Food spaces, she argues, are often “forgotten spaces where informal learning occurs” (p. 573). If a school, a microcosmic society, is marked by its eating practices, it becomes clear why the regulation of consumption takes a preeminent role in their discipline codes and what the hidden curriculum is. In an age of accountability concerned with the (bio)statistical quantification of student bodies, there is the implicit notion that if we can nourish urban youth, we can edify them and thus ensure a healthy social body. A school where student appetite runs wild, or gum is defiantly snapped, represents an anarchic *socius* resistant to quantification and measurement.

In an article tellingly entitled “Targeting Interventions for Ethnic Minority and Low-Income Populations,” Kumanyika and Grier (2006) discuss the obesity “epidemic.” They use the rhetoric of war to discuss “the fight against childhood obesity in minority and low-income communities” (p. 200). In their medical discourse, overeating is described as violent and self-destructive, on a par with drug abuse. Similar to arguments made in discussions of the War on Drugs, the War on Poverty, and even the war in Iraq, the researchers’ contention is that this battle “pose[s] a major challenge for policymakers and practitioners planning strategies” (p. 187). “Winning the fight” will require more than transforming black and brown bodies; it will also “depend on the nation’s *will* to change the social and physical environments in which these communities exist” (p. 187, italics added).

In an attempt at “Understanding and Closing the Gap” (p. 191) between low-income African American and Hispanic and “advantaged” (p. 187) white and

Asian children, Kumanyika and Grier (2006) point to poor critical literacy skills as being at least partly responsible for the health crisis. This demographic split interestingly mirrors the racial divisions in the frequently cited educational gap. Kumanyika and Grier write that, according to research, “African Americans and Hispanics spend significantly more time watching TV and movies and playing video games than do white youth,” and that “Consumers in low-income households...are more likely to view television advertising as authoritative” (p. 192). By possessing what the authors deem inferior media literacy skills, disadvantaged minorities are posited as passive and willing consumers of destructive media and marketing. Education (to borrow the researchers’ medical discourse) is offered as a possible ‘cure’ for the ‘deficiency.’ “[S]chools can reduce the negative effects of advertising on minority and low-income children by teaching media literacy courses” (p.193), they argue. By linking obesity to inferior critical thinking skills, the medical experts mirror the subtle racist ideologies proclaimed by the educational consultant. Minority students are again configured as more body than mind, with unchecked appetites for both food and dangerous media.

Kumanyika and Grier (2006) argue that, in addition to honing literacy skills, schools can further address the epidemic by infiltrating Burke’s (2005) “forgotten spaces of learning”—food spaces. The school cafeteria is an ideal battleground for the fight against obesity and for force-feeding “wholesome” ideologies. As Burke observes, in the United Kingdom:

Certainly there was a concern to instruct, through feeding, ‘correct’ modes of behavior in relation to food and drink consumption and the imposition of discipline and control around the school meal was regarded as one important means of challenging working-class habits and replacing them with middle-class norms. Children brought with them practices around food learned often in homes... were considered by educational professionals to be uncouth, coarse and ill-mannered. (p. 574)

Schools today provide “alimentary” education to poor minority students under the aegis of federally sanctioned programs, rather than through a hidden curriculum. And as Burke notes, “the project of mass compulsory education...afforded the state the opportunity to measure, know and shape not only the mind but also the body of the child” (p. 574). A body that is measured and known is an easier body to discipline and control, and inner-city schools have long struggled with how to

best “manage” their minority populations. For urban educators, it is not enough to control what comes out of our students’ mouths; we are also charged with controlling what goes in.

Dyspepsia

“Indigestion is charged by God with enforcing morality on the stomach.”

— Victor Hugo

The scene with Denicia is an apt example of how the projects of accountability and standardization create deep-seated teacher and student ambivalence. My own relationship with orality is thus highly conflicted. At the level of language, I must be continually on guard—carefully monitoring the utterances I let loose and controlling and deflecting those of my students. Students, on the other hand, use inappropriate exclamations and foodstuffs as tools of play and power. Their remarks are often intricately tied with race and often play with whose body is the subject of observation: “Ms. Nikki can I touch your hair?”, “Look at Ms. Nikki’s face getting red!”, “Ms. Nikki you’ve got a booty for a white girl!” As Foucault (1995) observes, the “political technology of the body” (p. 26) is always slippery, and the teacher’s body is never immune in the classroom. Today’s culture of accountability, standardization, and data-driven instruction has positioned the classroom as a place where the rule is eat or be eaten. Teachers are pushed to observe and quantify, to medicalize and pathologize, while they and their students reach numerical benchmarks or risk being deemed unfit or left behind. The teacher’s apple—that conflated symbol of both teacher and student orality—hangs precariously in the balance.

Gasping for Air

“The Americans are violently oral.” — W.H. Auden

Toni Morrison describes the bleating cry of white baby dolls. A student drops an empty soda bottle. I stoop over to still its jarring reverberations. The doll is dismembered, its metallic voicebox found and destroyed. Denicia sticks out her tongue at me. I look away. “I’m not talking to you anymore,” she threatens. I don’t ask why. We read on about rape, blackness, and blue eyes. Denicia’s book is closed, as usual, a deafening silence. She blows a big pink bubble and looks at me mischievously. Her mouth curves into a huge smile.

The bubble pops.

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