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# Art, Social Imagination and Democratic Education: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation

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# EDITORIAL

## Art, Social Imagination and Democratic Education: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation

Lorraine Kasprisin  
Editor

Welcome to this very special issue dedicated to the life and work of Maxine Greene, philosopher, social critic, humanist, lover of the arts, existentialist, educator and a very special person in my life. When I studied for my Ph.D. at Teachers College, Columbia University, during the tumultuous years of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, I had the privilege of studying with Maxine. Actually there were three philosophers at Columbia at that time – all coming from a different perspective. Maxine gifted me an existentialist and aesthetic perspective; Jonas Soltis helped hone in my analytical skills during the heyday of analytical philosophy that still dominated the field, and the late Philip Phenix, the holistic philosopher, who was as much at home in the spiritual world as he was in the world of science (Einstein actually praised his senior thesis), invited me to partake in all the “realms of meaning” (1964). All three philosophers helped me understand the wonderful world of philosophy that I have tried to pass on to my own students during the last thirty years – a period where philosophy had to compete against an ever encroaching world of data collection, performance outcomes, accountability, and a depersonalization of the teacher-student relationship.

In those years, Maxine was teaching in both the philosophy department and the English department at Teachers College. An English teacher myself coming to Columbia to ask the deeper questions about my purpose for teaching, I became entranced by the questions that Maxine would raise. I always tell my students that philosophy begins in awe (something I learned from Aristotle), and my purpose is not only to help them become better, more critical thinkers, but also to experience the awe that is philosophy. Maxine helped me to experience that awe. But more than that, she helped me to experience philosophy as a living practice that illuminates our paths and empowers our lives.

This issue was inspired by a quotation that we took from Maxine’s website for her *Foundation for Social Imagination, the Arts and Education*. On that webpage, she wrote:

*"My vision, in launching this Foundation, is to generate inquiry, imagination, and the creation of art works by diverse people. It has to do so with a sense of the deficiencies in our world and a desire to repair, wherever possible. Justice, equality, freedom - these are as important to us as the arts, and we believe they can infuse each other, perhaps making some difference at a troubled time."* Greene (2007).

Maxine’s quotation made us realize the narrowness of the way that democratic education is often conceptualized in the public schools today. And so we formed our controversial scenario for the issue to reflect the challenge that her quotation makes to our conventional thinking. We asked authors to respond to the following controversy:

*An understanding of the role of public schools in sustaining the life of a democracy requires more than the occasional class in civic education. It requires the development of social imagination. Maxine Greene reminds us of the important role that the arts – visual art, music, performance art and literature – can play in such an education. We invite authors to explore the many dimensions of a vision for such an education within schools and colleges, or alternatively, outside these institutions. We also invite authors to contribute to a special section on Maxine Greene’s lifetime work and writings on art, social imagination and education.*

This issue follows an earlier issue titled, [\*Schooling as if Democracy Matters\*](#), and focuses on the role that the arts can play in an education for democratic life. The current issue has four sections:

Section 1: ARTICLES IN RESPONSE TO THE CONTROVERSY

Section 2: NARRATIVES OF CHILDREN’S LIVES

Section 3: CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION WITH MAXINE GREENE: REFLECTIONS ENGENDERED BY HER LIFE AND WORK

Section 4: PAPERS FROM THE 2007 AESA CONFERENCE IN CELEBRATION OF MAXINE GREENE’S 90th BIRTHDAY

Book reviews of some of Maxine’s classics follow.

**Section 1** contains articles in response to the controversy. In the spirit of Maxine's writings, the articles tend to form a web rather than a linear sequence of responses. They use many approaches, each building on, or challenging, or reinforcing the other, until we are presented a complex tapestry for understanding the issues. Some authors respond directly to the controversy. Trent Davis examines the role of fiction and cautions the reader about its use. Jane Townsend and Patrick Ryan take a more optimistic look at the role that aesthetic engagement can play in the language arts. And Ed Wall takes a "leap of faith" and dares to examine the aesthetic experience in a mathematics class.

Daniel Lamer's view of the playwright poses a challenge to a philosophical tradition that goes back to Plato. Rather than ostracizing the artists from the republic, as Plato did, Lamer calls for educating politicians as playwrights. But unlike Plato's use of the arts to establish the right disposition for the development of his philosopher-kings, Lamer calls for an arts education for living in a world of creative conflict. And contrary to Plato's disdain for democracy, Lamer argues that "educating politicians as playwrights could help create the conditions for a democratic, sustainable polity to emerge."

Many of the authors use metaphor for exploring their concerns. Tricia Kress draws on the metaphor of a game of pinball to explore the possibilities as well as the constraints in her use of art forms in creating a post-formal, democratic learning environment. Lynn Fels likens the "ethics of response" of a theatre audience in the presence of the performer on the stage to the teachers' responsibility to be present and awake to the unfolding of the child in their midst.

Maxine Greene's use of an analogy from *Moby Dick* to build a literary framework for her discussion of teacher education provides Paul Thomas with a powerful metaphor for his discussion of *mystification* in the education of teachers. And Rose Malone uses the metaphor of the *gift* to examine the curriculum, pedagogy and early school leaving in Ireland. For Malone, the metaphor enables us to infuse social imagination into our understanding of concepts. She uses the metaphor of gift and giving to challenge some of our "assumptions regarding education as a universal good and the conditions under which its intended recipients can benefit from it."

**Section 2** focuses on narratives of children's lives and their lived experience. Kathryn LaFever describes a sixth grade field trip to an art museum. With quotations from Maxine ringing in her ears, she has a firsthand experience watching the reality of young people as they encounter their first art experience, an experience that challenges her expectations at first but with a surprising twist at the end.

Susan Donnelly gives us a penetrating description of young children negotiating their way in the world together, each bringing their own unique way of being in the world. In their imaginative community and play, she finds a microcosm for the democratic way of life that her school is trying to foster.

Susan also contributes a second piece to our understanding of children's lived experiences with a slide show of one child's evolving artistic expression. This is a first for our journal. We wanted to exploit all the features that this new electronic media can offer, so in place of the usual printed article, we are providing the reader a slide show with Susan's voice describing to the readers the significance of what they are viewing in the child's drawing. Chas Hoppe, a graduate student on our editorial staff during 2008-2009, prepared the slide show. In his introduction, he writes:

*In this slideshow presentation, Whatcom Day Academy instructor Susan Donnelly analyses the artwork of a former Prospect Center student, nicknamed "Iris." By tracing motifs found consistently in Iris's art over the course of several years, we are able to gain insight into children's imaginative communities, their values, and their dreams.*

Some of you may recognize Susan Donnelly's name from our website and our blog. Susan is the head of the Whatcom Day Academy, our partner school in the Educational Institute for Democratic Renewal, the institute at the Woodring College of Education here at Western Washington University that houses the journal. One of the Institute's goals is to supplement the ideas generated and disseminated in our journal with real-life experiences in democratic living in the schools. Readers can find a link to our Institute's website on the menu of our journal, along with other articles, videos and YouTube clips.

**Section 3** is a series of articles reflecting on the influence of Maxine's life and work. Authors here continue the conversation Maxine has started. Karen Goldman talks about the dynamism of Maxine as an educator by tracing the intellectual influences on her work. While Goldman covers a wide range of influences, Chris Higgins focuses on a close reading of the works of Rainer Maria Rilke and Hannah Arendt, two writers with whom Maxine "has frequently been in dialogue." Higgins focuses on the concept of natality, "the human capacity for beginnings," its meanings, tensions, contradictions and complexity.

David Hanson struggles with a question that a new book on Maxine's philosophy has raised in his thinking. The book is *Education Beyond Education: Self and the Imaginary in Maxine Greene's Philosophy* by John Baldacchino (2008). In his

article, Hanson enters into a dialogue with the author, and takes issue with one of Maxine Greene's deepest convictions. Essentially, Hanson argues that there are some things we can know in this world with some certainty.

It is difficult to describe Ray McDermott and Meghan McDermott's piece. Their article brings together James Joyce and educational research. What other educational journal provides its readers with a critique of educational research by utilizing the work and technique of James Joyce? The result is a fresh encounter and critique of the political context in which educational research functions and on the dichotomies that so often shape educational discourse.

Finally, William Pinar adds his own variations to Maxine's "variations on a blue guitar" by "sounding" some notes of his own to her concept of aesthetic education, a conception that, he argues, extends to education itself. *Variations on a Blue Guitar* is a collection of lectures that Maxine delivered at the Lincoln Institute for the Arts in Education. The metaphor of the blue guitar came from a poem by Wallace Stevens and provides a powerful metaphor for both Maxine's work and for the articles in this issue:

*They said, "You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are."  
The man replied, "Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar."*

(1990, p.165)

**Section 4** is a set of invited papers that were originally presented at the 2007 Annual Conference of the American Educational Studies Association in Cleveland, Ohio. The papers were presented at a special session called *Imaging the Future of Educational Studies: A Commemoration of the Work and 90th Birthday of Maxine Greene*. The session included papers by Jim Giarelli, Michelle Fine, Mary Griener, and Jim Palermo. Special thanks to Jim Giarelli for gathering these papers in celebration of Maxine's then 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

We would also like to thank Hancock Productions for giving us permission to show an excerpt that we selected from the film made about Maxine's life in 2001, called, "Exclusions and Awakenings: The Life of Maxine Greene." We highly recommend that you view the entire film. Information on the film can be found on the website of Hancock Productions at: [http://hancockproductions.com/films/docs/exclusions\\_awakening](http://hancockproductions.com/films/docs/exclusions_awakening)

We would like to take this opportunity to also announce the upcoming publication of a new book that is fortuitously coming out around the same time that our special issue is going online. Entitled, *Dear Maxine: Letters From the Unfinished Conversation*, and edited by Robert Lake, the book brings together a collection of letters written to Maxine and has given me an opportunity to write in more depth about the influence Maxine has had on my life. Readers who would like more information can contact the publisher, Teachers College Press in New York City.

Finally, thank you, Maxine, for allowing us to give you this tribute to your life and work, and for playing such a significant role in so many of our lives. It reminds me of what an enduring influence a great teacher can have.

We invite our readers to continue the conversation with us on our blog and/or contribute a formal paper for our journal's rejoinder section. The unfinished conversation continues.

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