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ARTICLE

A Greene Imaginary

Michelle Fine

Maxine has just blown out the candles on her 90th birthday cake. With expected brilliance, she speaks to an adoring crowd, surrounded by swelling applause. And then, characteristically, she whispers to me: “Was that okay?” This is Maxine’s signature ending to a speech.

Without fail, every time I introduce Maxine or we speak together on a panel, just as she stops speaking to the audience, she turns to me and asks the same question. I always think it’s absurd. Her talks are consistently more than okay, ranging between fabulous and classic, awesome and breath taking, brilliant to Maxine-brilliant. But today – on her birthday – I focus not on the problematic “OK,” but the problematic “was.” I can’t believe that Maxine thinks the talk really ends when her lips stop moving. The room is vibrating and transfixed; simultaneously shaken and still, flooded with ideas, affect, images and awe, rippling over time. Even as she takes her seat, she doesn’t seem to notice that her talk has not ended.

Indeed. I want to talk about Maxine and time; Maxine and her delicious refusal to be finished, an object, settled, done, certain; Maxine and beginnings, over and over again.

Have you ever read a Greene essay and thought, “This is really old?” Probably not, because her writings echo over time. They don’t age—they ripen. An existentialist who is a time traveler, situated in the moment, even if the moment was 35 years ago, Maxine is always in the present.

In 1982 she wrote with eerie prophetic talent: “We *have to be present*, personally present, to works of art if we are to constitute them as meaningful; . . . we are all aware that *the passive gaze* has become the hallmark of our time” (p. 132). The idea is to *remain vigilant, consciously vigilant, against statistical thinking and distancing* and carelessness and abstractness, all of which [Camus] associates with the plague” (p. 133). Twenty-five years later we witness the sprawl of the passive gaze, as it threatens to colonize our schools, our elections and our muted outrage at a war blazing on, in our name.

For Maxine, *to be present* is to refuse fatality:

Looking back in time from the present most individuals see a necessity in their past lives. Very often they see a fatality. What has happened almost always seems necessary: because it happened, it had to happen, although no one may have realized it at the time . . . To defy determinism, then, is to become *fully conscious of one’s freedom*, with all its risks, with all its dread responsibilities. It is to break with the crowd, to know one’s own inwardness, to be wide awake with respect to the world around and its ‘iron laws,’ its limitations, its causes which need not compel. (1982)

No Child Left Behind comes to mind.

Beginnings

Writing and speaking for almost half a century, Maxine has published and gathered us all in ways that invoke a radical imaginary of space and time. An architect of spaces for possibility, Maxine hosts salons in her living room where she dares to incite the conversations and weave the communities we were supposed to hatch in schools. Her desire is to provoke a diaspora of conversations about inquiry, awakenings, being fully present and in relation.

Like waves in the ocean, Maxine’s writings return to *beginnings*.

I believe that, in education, *the idea of beginnings* is especially important. This is partly because it focuses attention on living human beings, feeling their particularity and concreteness, reaching out from their own situations, their own vantage points, to make sense of their lived worlds. At the horizon of those lived worlds, I like to think is the larger world” (1982, 84, p. 1).

Twenty-five years later, Maxine invites us to consider the freshness of beginnings, especially at the end: “*It is best to end with a beginning*. And what is a beginning?” She draws from Edward Said, “a beginning . . . must be thought possible, it

must be taken to be possible before it can be one. The mind's work, in order to be done, occasionally requires the possibility of freedom . . ." (2007, p. 3, democratic vistas). As if in conversation with Said, Maxine elaborates, "the mind's work, yes, if mind is seen *as a verb and not a noun*, a human mode of acting in and upon the world – of acting along with others, or in response to others, since there can be no mindfulness without relationship" (2007, democratic vistas p 4).

Beginnings and community. Just when you think that Maxine is going to break into "Kumbaya," she forces us to confront pain, loss and the dark side of imagination: the dialectics of freedom, indeed. There is nothing romantic about Greene beginnings. She knows too well that beginnings often sprout in the tears of loss.

In the late 1990s, I asked Maxine to join me in a graduate methods course with fourteen women, taught at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison for women. The women had spent 10, 15, 20, 25 years and life locked up, away from their children, fresh air, flowers and freedom. Anxious about her visit, "How do I connect with the women?" and before I could answer, she knew she would teach Tillie Olsen's *I Stand Here Ironing*. She references her 1976 essay on the book:

Consider the following, the beginning of a short story called "I stand here ironing" in Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle* (1961):

I stand here ironing and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.

"I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me about your daughter. I'm sure you can help me understand her. She's a youngster who needs help and whom I'm deeply interested in helping."

"Who needs help?" Even if I came, what good would it do? You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me.

"And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total?" [from Olsen]

Maxine writes,

The words themselves are simply words; readers might receive an impression of blank factuality upon first reading once they realize the nature of the speaking voice. But if readers were to be conscious of this as a deliberately created voice, . . . they might be freed to focus on the question of moving tormented with the iron, on the expanding meanings of "time" – the time of the iron, the time of the questioner, the time of the young girl's life, the time of the speaker's remembering. As I ponder the sentences now, I find myself elaborating on my own experiences with them. . . . I find myself moving deeper and deeper. . . ." (1976, p. 66)

And then she turned to the women in the prison and asked them, and herself, "Who needs help? And in here, when is the time?"

As she carried us through the short story, she spoke of the death of her daughter Linda. Tumbling out of bodies and souls, tears and pain, the women narrated their losses. Maxine held all of our stories. She insisted that we all refuse objectness, as we come together to begin again.

"The point is, however, that all this must follow from self understanding . . . from a refusal of objectness, from a decision to be with others in a sphere that is intersubjectively meaningful. On this ground there can be *new beginnings, efforts to surpass, to go beyond.*" (1982, p. 135)

Moving between Olsen, her writings from 50 years ago and the cold floor of our prison classroom, she stood firmly in the present tense, with all of us stripped bare. She smuggled into the room a we-not-yet, huddle together with literature, tears, memories ironing, and a desperate longing to "go beyond."

Spaces

First a muffled crash, not unfamiliar among the sounds of the city; but then a silence seeped in like fog under the doors. . . . Along with it comes the recognition of incompleteness. There are always *unanswerable questions* and, because they are presently unanswerable, the need for new perspectives, freshly minted methods, the persisting *overhang of doubt*, the unlikelihood of any final proof. And the ongoing questioning, the *vibrancy of dialogue.*"

Maxine reminds us, “to tell the story is to search for its meaning without ever being sure of the end. It is to imagine who might lie beyond the presently incomprehensible, to keep the tower from falling over and over, to begin building answer. (Greene, 2007, p. 3)

In prison, at Lincoln Center, Teachers College, in museums, and in her living room, Maxine carves enclosures with words and unspoken caresses; an invitation full body; a pause that insists, “Please be with me.” Then she speaks, in dual dialectics, of human tragedy and collective possibility, grounded in dialogue, so that we all might tell a story.

The Plague

In the Greene imaginary, however, fear, death, endings – the plague – also represent choice: the choice to surrender to statistical thinking; to embrace the dis-eased comfort of determinism; to relinquish responsibility.

In the early 2000s, Maxine Greene was asked to sponsor a small public high school on arts, imagination and aesthetics. A number of friends conspired to warn her gently that the Greene vision might curdle in “partnership” with the Department of Education. Headstrong, tempted and delirious with possibility, she met with the educators, fell in love with the idea and together they birthed a school.

But over time, she smelled the plague approaching, just a few bureaucratic mandates away. The metal detectors, high stakes testing, scripted curriculum, the very objectness of the project were too much. Maxine stepped away, just a bit, and gracefully launched a[nother] beginning. She didn’t exit but invited teachers, students and artists into her home for more talk. She designed precious spaces, thick relationships where she could engage in dialogue. Meeting educators in her living room salons, gathering with the students to talk about art and possibility, she distanced from that object that would be called school – the flat, overdetermined machine of statistical thinking where children are fixed before/while they are [being] broken. Beginning again, she returned us to the shared sense of responsibility, as if lip synching her 1982 essay on education and disarmament: “People should be urged to reflect on our share of the responsibility for the arms race... on the *statistical thinking that eludes all moral constraint*. This is what represents the plague to me...” (p. 135)

Reclaiming the verb, *educating*, Maxine shed the noun, *school*; honoring the question, she refused the answers; imagining alternatives. she humbled those of us crusted over in despair.

I can’t resist telling one last story about Maxine: Sometime in the late 1990s, Maxine and I were invited to a meeting of New York City feminists. In the quiet of 30 women gathered in Gloria Steinem’s living room, Gloria was speaking, gorgeous, brilliant and provocative. Maxine whispered to me – in a quite loud whisper, “She slept with Henry Kissinger, didn’t she?” I stifle a giggle which only seemed to encourage her to amplify, “Did you ever do that?” We left, with me trying to escort her out without drawing attention to us. As she wrote in 1982, “one must seize the moment, choose the road.” And I did.

How do you know when it’s finished?

Probably in the early 1990s, Maxine wrote her first essay on the computer. She called me and asked: “How do you know when it’s finished?”

I asked, “How have you known in the past?”

“With a typewriter, when I finish up a bottle of Wite-Out®, I know I am done.”

And so, Maxine, as you have taught us with your words that travel and spaces that embrace, the dialogue is never finished. It is only, always, beginning.

There are no endings. You are not timeless, but time-ful; not redundant, but responsive. Reaching deep within us you find the child who wants to be known and the adult who seeks to know; the scared soul who yearns/fears to be touched and the mature educator who wants/is terrified to touch. You invite us to question and be (dis)comforted. With your guidance we refuse to be finished and desire to become again. You make visible and audible yearnings that stretch across time, through bodies, circulating across zip codes, dancing on wireless air waves, painted on a canvas, carved into wood and sculpted in clay, only to be revised again and again.

As you say at the end of your video: *I am what I am not yet*. . .

Across four decades of ink and talk, laughter and tears, and always food, you continue to give us a map to the soul and away from the plague; a path to another tomorrow that refuses fatality; a journey to ourselves in community; fully awake to what has been and what could be.

Move over Ralph Nader and welcome to the Greene party!

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