



2010

Prologue to Art, Social Imagination and Action

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Recommended Citation

Greene, Maxine (2010) "Prologue to Art, Social Imagination and Action," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol5/iss1/2>

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PROLOGUE

Prologue to Art, Social Imagination and Action

by Maxine Greene

I wish to express my appreciation to Lorraine Kasprisin and all those responsible for giving me the undeserved privilege of having an issue of this unique and significant journal named after me. As some of you know, I am committed to the notion of the incomplete. Like the narrator of *Moby Dick* (Melville, 1851), I am convinced that the finest achievements of human beings have been left incomplete. His book in process, he said, should be considered but "the draft of a draft." And then-- "God keep me from finishing anything."

Like Herman Melville (and Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky and Camus and Dewey) I object to closed systems, to fixities, to finalities. Definitions of *art* are always open to questioning. Indeed, an object, an arrangement of sounds or movements, although labeled as a work of art, does not serve as art for the individual unless it gives rise to an aesthetic experience. That means moving from an ordinary, commonplace experience (walking to work, calling a class to order) to an extraordinary experience, one involving perceptions, insights, feelings that highlight details of the surrounding world, and moments of "unconcealment" that reveal unexpected lights and shadows that alter the familiar shape of things. I think of Jacob Lawrence's "Great Migration Series" (1940-41), paintings of oppressed former slaves desperate to travel north to what they hope will be a better life. Pervading the works is a sense of terrible deficiency, of lies and deprivation that call out for repair. Imagination allows us to bring alternative realities into consciousness, to look at things as if they could be otherwise, as if the plight, say, of the migrants to the north could be, might be, should be otherwise. This is an instance of the social imagination, related to but different from the poetic imagination, which might see the migration as having brought about what Adrienne Rich (1995) called "the great dark birds of history," or might see the train or its engine as a mustang moving towards the "community in the making" that Dewey (1937) called democracy.

Imagination, intention: Neither is sufficient. There must be a transmutation of good will, of what I call *wide-awakeness* into action. Yes, wide-awakeness is an aspect of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1964) view of "the highest level of consciousness" and Paulo Freire's (2005) conception of "conscientization." Both demand reflection and praxis, which are inseparable from each other. Both not only imagine things as if they could be otherwise, but move persons to begin on their own initiatives, to begin to make them so. I remember Freire (2004) saying that the peasants must be able to imagine a "lovelier world" (p. 30) if changes were to be made in this one. In what we choose to imagine as a democratic school, there must be restlessness in the face of the given, a reaching beyond the taken for granted. John Dewey (1916) said that to be educated meant becoming different--reaching towards others in a public space, achieving a community that is forever incomplete. The arts can move the young to see what they have never seen, to view unexpected possibilities. They are always there on the margins to refuse the indecent, the unjust, to awaken the critical and committed to visions of things being otherwise. There can be no final solution; but there is time--always time--to reject somnolence, to choose to begin.

Thank you, Lorraine

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