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CHAPTER 11

THE LANGUAGE OF THE ACADEMY: AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER IN A DOCTORAL PROGRAM

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I was born and raised in Napoli, in the South of Italy, in a mixed class family with a strong political working-class identity. My father was an outspoken Italian communist, a political organizer, who influenced my critical worldview and commitment to social justice. I was considered a precocious child, a “mature” child, and was deeply interested in social and political ideas from a young age. In particular, as a young girl, I most notably experienced and understood injustices based on gender and language oppression.

At the age of 12, when I was in the sixth grade, my parents thought they might move the family to the United States and sent me and my sister to an English-speaking American school (there are many such American schools in Italy) so that we could learn English. I entered the school speaking English but could neither read nor write in English. I could neither understand the teacher nor follow the lessons. An excellent student just a year before, I sat in this new classroom without the skills to comprehend or participate. The teachers, all White U.S. Americans, seemed cold and uninterested in me and what I could bring to the classroom, a stark contrast from my loving teachers in my Italian public school. Every day, I was pulled out by an ESL (English-as-a-Second-Language) teacher and brought to the library for small group instruction. The experience felt humiliating. My classmates teased and snickered at my inability to read in English or answer my teacher’s questions. I never saw a teacher interrupting that behavior or comforting me for experiencing it. The kids also said terrible things about Italians, the most offensive of all for my twelve-year-old self were “Italians are stupid,” “Italians stink,” and/or “Italians are not clean.” I felt like a smart girl trapped

in a place where no one acknowledged this fact, and, to the contrary, thought I was inferior. I felt deeply that I didn't belong, and I was mad at these presumptuous and mean American kids and teachers. These circumstances angered me deeply and also urgently motivated me to learn English, as I was intent on proving to those American kids and teachers that I was smarter than they are! However, I also internalized some of that oppression and came to often doubt my abilities, capacity, and intelligence. Like all things, this experience and the learning from it are complex. On the one hand, I became somewhat insecure about my abilities, skills, and knowledge, and on the other hand, an indignant rebellious spirit and fire sparked within me to fight the erroneous perceptions of my intellectual inferiority.

Two years after beginning my schooling in English, I was reading on grade level and earning high marks again. Again, the feelings I had about this "success" were layered and complex. I was proud of my accomplishment but felt sad and inauthentic expressing myself in a language that was not my native one. I felt that the person I had to be at school was foreign, even to me.

Decades later, in graduate school, this familiar dynamic reverberated in my experiences, first as a master's student in an Ivy League university, and then as a doctoral student at another research-focused institution. As I traveled through the classroom spaces of the academy, I experienced the all-too-familiar complex, layered, and confusing feeling of dissonance around belonging and not belonging, being competent enough and not, having the "right" language or not understanding it at all. Of course, at the start of my doctoral experience, I could not have identified, conceptualized, or verbalized this feeling, but it was with me all the time, a heavy blanket of insecurity and resentment. I often walked around holding the two conflicting thoughts and feelings related to both "not belonging" and deeply knowing that I had an important way of knowing, one that was directly related to my position at the margins as a working-class girl growing up in Italy and as a bilingual child in an American school. In time, I came to realize that this was an asset, a way of knowing and seeing that was most important in my personal, political, and academic paths. This way of knowing helped me to critically identify injustice and imagine a more socially just classroom space. It helped me to understand that academia, like most institutions, reproduces racism, classism, heterosexism, sexism, language oppression, and many other systems of oppression even while understanding itself as progressive and evolved. The alienating experience of "not belonging" was being lived by so many of us, who were often isolated and imagined it to be an individual ailment, rather than a systemic problem. As I spoke to other students (mostly

working-class women and people of color), I realized that we were experiencing similar things. And, the more we talked, we felt more connected, less isolated, and more like we belonged. We realized there wasn't a problem of "fit," but there was a problem of an institution built in classist, sexist, and racist notions of intelligence, in which "intelligent" or "intellectual" meant a specific classed, raced, and gendered language experience we did not share. It was by participating in mixed-race, mixed-class women's support groups, co-counseling workshops, and co-creating a bi-weekly women's writing group that we came to understand the problematic dynamics of academia and how to successfully navigate the process.

I wish I had figured this all out before entering the doctoral program (but how could I have done that?). I wish I had figured it all out before the beginning of my Early Childhood Education course in my first year of studies. In this course, we read and analyzed much research on English Language Learners (ELL). One week our assignment was to read two articles by a distinguished professor and researcher who then visited our class to participate in a discussion. This research examined a classroom community of ELL and their families and their engagement in the educational process. The most humbling aspect of this experience was that after reading the articles several times, I still had a very difficult time understanding the content as well as the implications. This experience engendered both feelings of insecurity (what is wrong with me that I don't understand this? Am I not intellectual enough to engage in this work? I must be a fraudulent doctoral student) and anger (research should be written in a way that is accessible to all—especially to those ELL students and families who volunteered their time to participate—how can the writing be so inaccessible that a doctoral-level student cannot understand it! This is unacceptable! This is academic elitism! This is using language to assert and reassert power and position! I cannot stand for this!). Again, a new language, in this case academic language, was creating contradictory, complicated, and layered emotional reactions for me: it fueled both deep insecurity and social-political consciousness.

While this experience of not understanding (and many others like this one) was confusing and trying in my process of adjusting to the doctoral program, I am grateful that I experienced it. Let me explain. I am not grateful as in I think it should be this way. I am grateful in the sense that I *made meaning* of this injustice. While I don't think that higher education should be inaccessible (as I felt the doctoral program was), I know that it helped me to clarify the kind of academic I wanted to be. This was like when I was twelve years old and experiencing this language oppression, and fueled me to master academic speak and then learn to make choices about when and

whether to use it. Through these challenges, I learned that I was indeed a person who belonged in academia. I learned that, indeed, I was the smart girl who mastered English once before. I learned that academic language was just another language to study and master. I learned that academia was a place of unexamined classism, sexism, and racism and that the institution was not designed as a vehicle of social justice. Sadly, I learned that doctoral programs replicate erroneous notions of “intelligence” and deficit thinking about the idea that some people are more intelligent and intellectual than others.

All of this, in turn, helped me to clarify the social justice and language liberation work that must be carried out in higher education. These experiences helped to identify the type of research and writing I would produce: work that was important and always accessible to young people, the general public, teachers, school counselors, and academics alike. The infuriating understanding of language oppression and its intent to further marginalize and alienate people who have been historically marginalized propelled me to challenge these inequities in my everyday work of teaching, scholarship, and service in the academy. Today, I am committed to creating accessible classroom spaces when I teach. I am committed to supporting my students—all of them. I am committed to communicating in a way that does not create distance and hierarchies of intelligence. I have learned that I belong in a place where I can produce knowledge—that I have always belonged. And, I am committed to supporting all of those young people who may question whether or not they belong to be successful scholars.