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## MAXINE'S CHOICE(S) Freedom, aesthetics, and the agôn of living in Maxine Greene's work

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**Abstract:** Maxine Greene argues that to take a position is to make a choice. This choice is concrete, free and active. It is a matter by which one does philosophy and by which one engages one's action with the world. More importantly, Greene's work confirms that we cannot essentialize our choices into a series of experiential reactions. Many seem to forget that choices are *active* decisions in that they deeply represent our ability to turn experience into forms of *anticipation*. Starting with experience, Greene asserts a Deweyian stance, especially when this is markedly posed as active, rather than passive. When it comes to choice there is a curious relationship between Greene's and Arendt's approach on the relationship between choice, freedom and action. This paper will confirm how beyond Arendt and Dewey, Greene asserts her own originality, where her philosophical approach is often mediated by her equally original take on art and aesthetics education. In Greene, one finds how choice also presents us with necessary tensions that articulate an *agôn* of living; indeed, an *agôn* of creation by which we sustain our ways of living – democratically and together – but also by struggling against what continues to separate us into isolated individuals in societies that are fragmented by obstacles and oppression.

## MAXINE'S CHOICE(S) Freedom, aesthetics, and the agôn of living in Maxine Greene's philosophy

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*The time may have come again for the painting of murals. The time may have come again for the shaping of visions of social possibility, of new kinds of art projects and forestry projects and day care programs. It may have come for new experiments with apprenticeships arrangements, storefront schools and workshops, coalitions never seen before. And surely it is a moment for engagement with newcomers, for consulting their perspectives, for extending the dialogue far beyond the agencies and offices and even classrooms, for reaching beyond the "sad opaqueness of private life."*

– Maxine Greene, "Between Past and Future" (ND, 13, added emphasis) .

The performing arts ... have a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists ... need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space of their "work", and *both depend upon others for the performance itself*. Such a space of appearances is not to be taken for granted wherever men live together in a community. The Greek polis once was precisely that "form of government" which provided men with a space of appearances where they could act, *with a kind of theater where freedom could appear*.

– Hannah Arendt, "What is freedom?" (Arendt, 2000a, 446-447, added emphasis)

In a convocation address that she gave to Teachers College, which she titles, inspired by Hannah Arendt, "Between Past and Future: The Becoming of Teachers College," Maxine Greene brings moments from the 1930s close to those of the 1960s. While the 1930s are significant to any Deweyan, specifically in the

light of his books *Freedom and culture*, *Individualism old and new* and *Liberalism and social action* (Dewey, 1989; 1984; 2000), the 1960s came to represent another turbulent time, where the Vietnam War and the student riots produced a significant backdrop of events. In these moments from the past, Greene finds parallels running between the College of Dewey's time and that of the 1960s. In turn she goes on to project a future where, by recalling Arendt, she argues that we seem to be living "in what we experience as an interlude between past and future." (Greene, ND, 1)

As Greene recalls "the time of the so-called 'police bust' on the Columbia campus after which many of the activities spilled over" to the other side of West 120th Street in Teachers College, she states that, "it is hard to forget the sound of guitars in the corridors, the notices pinned up in great disorder, the impassioned arguments in the corners, the disrupted classes (and, yes, the 'liberation classes'), the shriek (very oddly) of kazoos." (Greene, ND, 3) Recalling these events, she also mentions the sense of hope that students brought to each other in a kind of an "interruption of the ordinary."

Greene prefaces these events with a passage from Arendt, which recalls World War II and the French Resistance fighter the poet René Char, whom Arendt cites while lamenting over the "lost treasure," which was the experience created out of nothing where someone comes out of his or her private life's "opaqueness" and jumps into a future that is unknown. Paraphrasing Arendt, Green states that, "freedom is achieved only when something is consciously done to interrupt an automatic sequence of events, when persons come together to start something new and embark on what they realize as beginnings without assurances or guarantees." (Greene, ND, 2) Here the emphasis is on how these individuals made a conscious *choice* to become members of the resistance. As to whether this choice was entirely *free* or dictated out of a sense of sacrifice towards freedom, becomes central to how freedom and choice would (or could) converge.

As expected from any speech or lecture by Maxine Greene, in her convocation address she covers a wide range of moments – literary, historical, artistic and indeed educational – by which she brings the actuality of the time into vibrant force. Then, towards the end she muses, as if tempting her audience, with an idea of revolt. She states boldly: “The time may have come again for the painting of murals.” (Greene ND, 13)

### Maxine’s murals

To choose a specific art form in order to assert a political choice is very intriguing though not surprising when it comes to Maxine Greene. Yet being the avid Arendt scholar that Greene was, one wonders whether she was also thinking of Arendt’s essay “What is Freedom?” where Arendt makes a very sharp distinction between creative and performing arts, and where she states that “the creative artist is free in the process of creation, but that creative process is not displayed in public and not destined to appear in the world. Hence the element of freedom,” Arendt goes on to say, “certainly present in the creative arts, remains hidden” as it is not the process that appears but it is the art-work that remains (Arendt 2000a, 446). In contrast, performance artists, “need an audience to show their virtuosity,” where by dint of this virtuosity there is a space for freedom in the *agôn* of a *polis* where everyone is entitled to occupy, dispute and question the state of affairs by which we live.

In Greene’s defense, her choice of a creative art *is* meant to be public. Unlike Arendt, she seems to argue that there is a choice in that all art forms represent an underlying sense of freedom, by which, in that context, they could transcend the lack of choice that students may have felt when opposing the Vietnam war and the political Establishment which sustained it. Arendt’s position is different here in how she already categorizes those art forms that are capable of being shown

and others that remain hidden; in other words, where art in itself needs a specific formal context by which it could or could not express freedom to an audience.

Here, Greene transcends this formal distinction, and while she celebrates the performative ways by which the students expressed themselves through music, she chose the visual medium to explain the magnitude by which she expressed the student's protest and the sense of freedom and struggle that they manifested – that of painting murals.

Though not performed, mural art needs an audience. One would recall the radical role of murals as these emerged from many struggles across the world. During the struggle for freedom against the tyranny of Augusto Pinochet, Chilean muralists produced some of the most memorable murals that have become emblematic of both the memory of Salvador Allende's shattered dream and the dream of those who ultimately won back their freedom. Their choice was visibly done and celebrated. Their freedom, or rather their claim to freedom, was chosen by the expression of the visual. Likewise, one recalls the murals that emerged in Northern Ireland during the "Troubles" that spanned across thirty years between the 1960s and the 1990s. Both Unionists and Republicans used mural art to memorialize their heroes and to accentuate the struggle for what each regarded, from their opposed perspectives, as a call for war. Here the choice was far from hidden.

Remarkably, since the 1990s when the Northern Ireland Peace Process successfully stopped the violence between Catholics and Protestants, mural art was transformed into another kind of historical memory. New murals are now found on the so-called Peace Walls, where artists from across the communities and even from other parts of the world, come together to transform the walls that once divided the city into spaces for peace.

Making one's claim to peace and freedom is widespread. The emblematic notion of a wall and how communities of artists take it over, recalls the many walls that are still erected in the world. If Maxine was still with us she would talk

about the walls that Hungary recently built around its borders to keep out refugees from Syria where indeed choices clash and the sense of freedom is separated from what the Hungarian side calls *security* and the refugees see as a need to survive. To that, we would add more walls, such as the wall that divides Palestine and Israel, and other physical divisions that claim to guarantee security, while in effect, they are meant to keep people out while asserting the choice of the powerful to suppress the freedom of others—a closer to home wall, would be the one that became a center of dispute over the US-Mexico border. Now on that, Maxine would have been very vocal!

Once the muralist claims her space, individually or as part of a community of artists, the claim is a choice that becomes a matter of freedom and inclusion. Here Greene is asserting that to choose to perform in the agonistic space of the polis is to choose to assert one's democratic right for freedom. It is also a claim for an associated form of living that Dewey famously equates with democracy (Dewey, 1966). Against this democratic backdrop, Greene reminds us that to take a position is to make a choice—a choice of freedom that exits the opaqueness of a self-centered life by breaking the walls that surround it. This is a choice that is always done freely, over and beyond any context—which is where, as we will see, Greene may differ with Arendt, whose assumptions of choice are limited by specific contexts, and which depend on how the degree by which humans engage in an active life, which in and of itself, leaves us with no choice as it is bound by the community.

Arendt argues that,

Action as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act. Action and speech need the surrounding presence of others no less than fabrication needs the surrounding presence of nature for its material, and of a world in which to place the finished product" (Arendt, 1998, 188).

Moreover let's not forget that Arendt (2000a) also argues that "the *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action" (440). In terms of experience, it is important to note that Greene's work confirms that we cannot order our choices into a series of experiential reactions. Choices are active decisions that deeply represent our ability to turn experience into forms of *anticipation*, as Alfred Schutz reminds us when, after Husserl, he makes a case for what he calls *protention* (Baldacchino, 2009, 100). Schutz states, "any experience refers likewise to the future. It carries along protentions of occurrences expected to follow immediately" (Schutz, 1970, 139). More so, when one engages with Greene's notion of choice and how she lays it out to her diverse audiences, one senses a clear convergence. It feels that she is almost bridging her Schutzian reading of Dewey's notion of experience and her take on Arendt's approach to freedom through her notion of action.

Yet, here, it seems that Greene moves one step beyond Arendt in that for her choice is regarded as an action that pertains to the human "spirit" as it travels on the dual track of freedom (qua action) and intelligence (qua choice). In this light, one needs to be careful not to conflate Greene with either Dewey or Arendt, as if she simply follows suit from them. In many ways, here one could see how Greene emerges as an independent thinker and more so an original one who takes us into new ways of approaching experience and choice vis-à-vis the idea of freedom.

Greene also confirms how choice as action presents us with necessary tensions. Choice never comes without a cost even when we aspire to choose freely and intelligently. The tension presented by choice is an integral part of an *agôn* of living, indeed an *agôn* of creation by which we sustain our ways of living. This happens within the contexts of democracy as a form of associative living, but also through the risky leap that one takes into the unknown, as when one decides to struggle against what continues to separate humanity into isolated individuals in societies that are fragmented by obstacles and oppression.



While I do share my experience with those who cherish the image and memory of Maxine Greene the optimist who believed in possibilities and who shared with everyone a sense of continuous hope, I also bear in mind and remind others that Greene's work never presents an assured form of positing the world with unfounded hope or with an obsession of happiness at all costs – which so often characterizes the wholesale alienation of so many individuals with the deluded promises which, more often than not, distort the realities of contemporary society.

Greene was not an identitarian thinker, and she never succumbed to the positivistic assumptions that remain rife in aspects of education and the arts where somehow people think that baseless optimism is better than nothing. One will be seriously undermining and misunderstanding Maxine Greene if one were to fail to appreciate how her philosophy of the self and the imagination represents an *agonized* approach to the world that is marked by paradox. Even though many of her adulators somehow always expected her to be evangelical about the imagination and the role of the arts in education and the world, her foundations firmly rest in the existential sobriety by which she greeted her audience with her early books *Existential Encounters for Teachers* (1967) and the *Teacher as Stranger* (1973).

Greene's work is agonized by dint of its provenance. It comes from and resides in the public square while it also aspires to move beyond the walls of the city, the *polis*. Those who have known Maxine personally often find it difficult to separate her image from that of the sage who warmly welcomes everybody in her apartment on 5th Avenue, where in the last several decades of her life, she held her classes and her famous *salons*. Beyond this very metropolitan image of Maxine the New Yorker, in her work, she makes choices which clearly partake of disputes, of thoughtfulness, and of a creative risk that harnesses every notion of possibility, in all its imagined good, bad and ugly aspects, where the city itself is dismantled and where we are invited to exit with her into a much wider world.

Not unlike Arendt, Maxine could disappoint those who wanted to see in her the benign sage that would fulfill a sense of inclusive happiness. Her sense of choice and freedom were steeled by a dialectic that was never happy with synthetic results.

Unlike many of those who write about her and who rightly cherish her work, I do not regard Greene's choices and possibilities as some *Pentecostal* moment where suddenly the gathered are touched by the Spirit. Rather, I consider Greene's work as being moved by a Stoic duty towards the *demand* to exit into society but without the excessive fervor of the spirit, and where by their own commitment humans confirm once more that the social remains integral to the choices and possibilities that we create for ourselves *together* and *through our actions*. In fact, Greene's work insists that nothing should be taken for granted and that there is no guaranteed spirit to come and liberate us from oppression.

If the imagination is released, it is not because its spirit fills us with blind courage. On the contrary the courage comes from the sober realization that we are to speak of such a wide-awakening because it is a release that operates through tenacious and rigorous processes of self-reflection that are distinctly marked by the challenge to live with and care for others.

Not unlike Arendt, Greene never defers the human condition to a divine order or to a secure ideology. Some might see her as a "liberal" (understood in the American sense of a progressive thinker), but she was more of a radical who would stand to anyone who might come with an ideological recipe, whether this happens to regard itself on the Left or the Right. Greene moved beyond such provincial domains, and though one cannot simply equate her work with Arendt's philosophy, one could see a similar resolve in terms of how an active life for both philosophers leads to a sense of stoic freedom, burnished by the realities of the world. Both women suffered from dissent towards them and when one follows back Greene's struggle within the educational and academic establishments, the image of a revered gentle nonagenarian is no longer mild and

accepting of everything. To cite Agnes Heller's *Radical Philosophy*, Maxine Greene was a radical philosopher, who "attempts to make everyone conscious of their *right* and their *duty* to *think for themselves*" (Heller, 1987, 135).

This explains why Greene is so critical of those assumptions that preset liberty as a negation of obstacles – what Isaiah Berlin (1998) calls negative liberty. In Greene's work, liberty comes from the acts by which a sense of existential futurity (to use a term she borrows from Sartre) urges us to own up to associated living by constantly attempting to liberate ourselves from what Virginia Woolf likens to being numbed by cotton wool (See Woolf, 1985, 73; and Greene, 2000, 27). This call to freedom is never guaranteed by blind hope. Nor is it secured by a facile sense of liberty. Rather, the only hope that is generated through choice comes from a suffered sense of duty by which we act as citizens, and where freedom is articulated by those associated forms of living by which we gain the ability to live with others in a republic of equals.

### **To occupy philosophy**

Greene's style of pedagogical and philosophical *disputatio* was very different from what was expected of a philosopher teaching or making an argument. Often she appears to speak *exousia*, where her argument takes strength and is elaborated by dint of her own power of conviction and choice – a choice and conviction by which she invites her students to contextualize, dispute, and own their thinking. This was her strength, though one could argue that this was also her weakness in that her generosity was often mistaken for an opening to engage on one's own whims when in effect this was a wrong perception that came from those who failed to understand how Greene engaged with her own sources and how she developed her own original philosophical argument within the poetic spaces of the political imaginary.

Even in her writing, one needs to be cautious because the material she used often went into the background. Thus while her voice emerged as a unique blend of several ideas that always appeared new and fresh, those who mistook or missed her sources quickly attributed notions to Greene that weren't hers (her use of Schutz's notion of *wide-awakeness* and her engagement with Sartre's theories of the imagination and the imaginary are good examples – not to mention the confusion that is often caused between her and Arendt's treatment of the same concepts).

Because many failed to check how Greene's work relates to an identifiable set of arguments, they also failed to appreciate how she carefully constructed her own position, especially when she was clearly building on a much wider horizon of ideas. Upon missing Greene's sources, some would simply dismiss her as yet another teachers' theorist. Others adulated her to extents that were clearly absurd and which irritated her on end (even though she did not show it). Many critics and adulators alike failed to understand and distinguish between the moments when Greene spoke on her own strength and when she was framing the context of her argument in rich literary, artistic and philosophical traditions that often moved beyond American shores but still commented on the development of American lives – as she often did once she was at that desired vantage point of philosophical argument.

This was the main reason that prompted me to write a book on her work (Baldacchino, 2009), and to focus on her philosophy of the self and the aesthetic imaginary by having a "conversation" with her own sources rather than with the consequences of her writing (as others preferred to do). Hearing those who cited her blindly or those who quietly showed their discomfort about her work, it was evident that many chose to short change Greene's work.

Often adulators and detractors alike did not bother to understand where Maxine Greene's rich philosophy was coming from. Many still choose to forget that Greene's strong background in literature cannot be ignored in her

scholarship and method of analysis. This method informed philosophy in a unique way. Many wrongly assume that Greene had a smooth ride with philosophy and philosophers. Yet she did not, as she was often treated as an outsider. Reading her early work, especially the papers she wrote about literature and its relationship with education, one finds the literary critic meeting the philosopher of education, often on the grounds of a political argument for existence. So while she would cite existentialists, Greene does not offer the philosopher's approach to the subject, but comes to philosophy as a literary arts specialist, who, with a critical eye, also reads the narrative by which the philosopher comes across the world, politically and as an educator of sorts. Likewise, when engaging with education, Greene does not follow the expected educational trajectory, which one would find in the traditional fields of education—especially those prevalent in NYU and then Teachers College where she taught for a long time. Greene's position within an education school was never an easy or comfortable one. While towards the end of her life she was considered with a degree of reverence, in the education community Maxine was never what one would call mainstream. This what makes her unique, and this is where she is revered but equally misunderstood, and at times ignored.

Sometimes in Greene's work the teacher plays the role of a character, as if she were to come out of a novel. This does not make the teacher a fictive construct. Far from it! Rather, by putting the image of the teacher in her unique intellectual genealogy, Greene elicits from the figure of the teacher a stranger who is intentionally kept away from benign or easy familiarity. Often her teacher is indeed a literary critic engaging with one of Sartre's characters, or a figure coming out of Camus's novels. So the *stranger* in a book of hers like *Teacher as Stranger* plays various roles and typically wears different masks, just as Kierkegaard did.

Greene's educator is a philosopher, a teacher, a literary and artistic character, living and trying to make sense of the latter half of the 20th century. Likewise she

positions herself in education from within other parameters, which are not always recognized by many educationalists. In this respect, like her image of the teacher, Greene remains a stranger to education in that she refuses to foreclose education with the conditional assumptions that are found in the schooled narratives of positivist methods and approaches.

This further explains why Greene often recalls her struggle to claim and assert her role as a philosopher. While her first obstacle was her gender, more than her gender, there was her way of doing philosophy. Her approach irked many philosophers as much as it irritated literary critics, art theorists and educationalists alike. Greene often approached philosophy by way of privileging those spheres that are found *beyond* philosophy. She is in the category of philosophers amongst whom Richard Rorty (1980) considered himself to be – philosophers who are more inclined to be artists and poets, philosophers like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and indeed Derrida, to name a few. This is a philosophy that would edify, but which is no less rigorous and stoic where it matters.

There is also a political reason, and by *political* here I mean a state of affairs that belongs to the *polis* as we have come to know it in the classical sense of the Greek city state, whose republican foundations were later tempered by Romanic law. Greene somehow turns the agora, the marketplace of philosophy, into an artist's studio and a factory's shop floor where *making* takes place as a distinct form of radical poetics. This is where she would become a "philosopher in residence" just as an "artist in residence" would occupy a space and transform it into a studio open to a community of practitioners. As if this were not enough, in the space of *philosophy-turned-studio-shop-floor*, Greene brings along with her an audience of arts practitioners, readers, teachers and many students who would normally have no business with philosophy.

However, here I would put in a caveat, as I want to clarify that just as the artist does not democratize the arts by simply being "in-residence," I do not see Maxine Greene as simply *democratizing* philosophy. Rather I see her as asserting

the philosophical space into a relational location of autonomy. Like Nietzsche, Greene would not approve of “those hodgepodge philosophers who call themselves ‘philosophers of reality’ or ‘positivists’ – *just the sight of them is enough to instil a dangerous mistrust in the soul of an ambitious young scholar*” (Nietzsche, 2002, §204, 95). If you want, Greene’s work is a bit like the Occupy Movement. It takes over the square, the agora, to return it to what it once was: a space of arguing *qua* making, an *agôn* whose *agogia* gives us a unique meaning to ped(ago)gy.

As someone who uses the space of philosophy as an artist’s studio, I know very well that this often irritates philosophers and is often considered to be an *unphilosophical* transgression. But I would hasten to add that this also irritates artists, especially when artists who try to pose as pseudo-philosophers fall flat on their face by their half-baked ideas in studio critiques. Like Maxine Greene, I came to philosophy from equally ambiguous areas of arts practice, where philosophy is privileged. However, this privilege is not given to philosophy as a subject or discipline, but as a different space which one could populate with other than philosophy. Inversely, one can see how Greene does the same with the spaces of the arts and education, where she in turn opens these spaces wide so that the crowd would own the agora.

This is clearly seen in education, where Greene defies all conventions and what educationalists still privilege over anything else. In bringing together a community of practice into the space of philosophy, Greene rejects those circumstances that would limit education to a *practicism* that is often hollowed out of any criticality. She is equally opposed to the measured functionalism that creeps in to suffocate any attempt to articulate action with contemplation and vice-versa. “We are interested in education here, not in schooling”, she states in the opening pages of her *Variations on a Blue Guitar* (Greene, 2001, 7).

Yet we must be vigilant not to confuse Greene’s notion of education with that which is often limited to the precepts of those social scientific assumptions by

which education continues to be impoverished and instrumentalized. Greene's definition of education is never invested by formulae of preordained development. Once I was told by an art education colleague that "Maxine does not do research ... she only does Maxine Greene." Clearly the colleague wanted to dissuade me from writing about Greene. This backfired, because to me what she said turned out to be the best endorsement and motivation to engage with Greene's work and to write about her.

### **To do philosophy**

As we recall how Greene's work often jarred with colleagues in the field, we know that unlike Arendt, Greene does not reject the appellation of being a philosopher. In her interview with Günter Gaus, Arendt was blunt, stating: "I have said goodbye to philosophy once and for all. As you know, I studied philosophy, but that does not mean that I stayed with it" (Arendt, 2000, 3-4). While Arendt seems to be more comfortable with being called a political theorist, as we have seen above, Maxine Greene deals with philosophy in a different way, though many would agree that Greene's approach to philosophy is strongly influenced by Arendt.

Greene's way out of and back into philosophy is to claim philosophy as a *doing*. As she states,

[T]o 'do' philosophy in the domains of the artistic-aesthetic is to think about one's thinking with regard to the ways in which engagements with the arts contribute to ongoing pursuits of meaning, efforts to make sense of the world. It is to reflect upon perceived realities as well as those that have been conceptualized, and to ponder the phases of remembered experiences with the arts (Greene, 1991, 123).

Here, the reader must hold onto the notion of *doing* and what it implies in Greene's work. I would emphasize that the notion of a philosophy that is *done* does not only belong to action and choice, but also to a context where in action



and choice we *find* outlooks that bring freedom to domains of meaning which cannot be assumed with certainty.

There are necessities that speak out when confronted by the contingencies from which the arts invariably emerge. This also begins to explain the radical pull of Greene's work, which moves beyond the critical pedagogical shortcuts by which some tend to characterize her work on aesthetics education. More importantly, Greene's work urges us to question – indeed, *interrogate* – the time and certainties by which we live the references that inform her work. This happens not because her examples and her theories continue to hold relevance today, but because her approach to action and choice remains open to the contingencies that characterize history as a horizon on which human beings work together by making things and by insisting on acting together.

This prompts us to ask whether the assumption of a “transitional time” is a reflection of insufficient description, a convenient invention, a sense of helplessness, or indeed a sense of hope. Given Greene's existential provenance and her immersion in modern literature, one cannot avoid wondering whether she is also inviting the reader to consider time as an expression that assumes a desired *in-betweenness*. Here, we need to ask what we mean by the time *we live in* and how this sustains and articulates what we see as *possibility* – what Greene, after Sartre, calls the *futurity* by which the imagination becomes a tangible way of taking ownership of history and how we do it.

This also prompts us to test the frequent assumptions we make of a time we deem to be in “transition”. Often people speak of how everything is in a state of constant change. Even the attempt to problematize the world is difficult because there seems to be nothing grounded enough to be critiqued. Several questions are left dangling, suspended. If by the transitional we mean that our descriptions remain insufficient because they seem too convenient (or even too inventive), does this warrant a sense of helplessness or does it simply call for a new approach to how we speak of hope and possibility? How do we articulate our

history? Why do we construct our stories? Where and by what means do we (re)imagine our day-to-day living?

Some would claim that this is an expression of a desired *in-betweenness* by which we live and survive the tedium of everyday life. This takes the shape of *contiguity*—which could be political or pathological, social or educational, religious or secular. Confronted by these arguments, Greene takes a unique approach. At first, she appears to go with the flow of a contiguous approach, only to then stop mid way and begins to critique and question the assumptions by which the argument is made.

After Greene, we begin to realize that perhaps the best way to pose such questions and interrogate the certainties that seem to sustain our hopes and possibilities, is to take a look at (a) how various imaginaries are being constructed, (b) what we seek to converse about and why, and (c) how do we identify an imaginary that becomes comfortable enough to assume itself as a horizon of choice and possibility while, in effect, it becomes an obstacle if not a form of outright oppression.

This goes to the very question of what we *learn* from what, where and how. Often assumptions in the arts, in philosophy and in education begin to look like viable ways of bypassing the difficult questions of the philosopher or the artist. A tangible example is how some exponents of visual culture have argued that visual culture amongst youth could counter what they regard as the elitist foundations of aesthetics and art, with the consequence that some have even come to the conclusion that the arts in education should give way to visual culture and media as effective forms of “learning.” One argument that is often flagged up is that this would provide a ground for better inclusion and student empowerment. Yet Greene’s work confirms time and again that such shortcuts are short-lived and indeed disingenuous. To take such shortcuts is to reinforce those forms of representation by which obstacles to freedom and action are reinforced.

As we appear to ask questions for which many educators seek a quick answer and are often too happy to content themselves with the false assumptions that the here and now is always closer to the child's aesthetic imaginary, we must stop and ask: What do we mean by the certainties by which educators must *find* answers and by which they would insist that education is bound to *give* such answers?

### Confronted by "the gas chamber of life"

As we seem to go against the flow, and as we begin to articulate sufficient questions that would normally support inclusion, equality, and social justice, we find ourselves in a quandary. The obstacles are unexpected. Oftentimes, they remain hidden under the reassurances by which we take on what we regard as a difficulty of *origins* – that is, as a difficulty found in what we might consider to be a *progressive* point of *departure*.

In other words, we find that the more radical or progressive we appear (or want) to be, the more we sustain a system that is oppressive and inherently hegemonic. This is also where the quandary of choice becomes crucial and where we can see how Greene once again takes choice in a different direction from either Arendt or Dewey – not to mention the conscious distance that she keeps from the assumptions made by progressive, liberal and critical pedagogies by which, more often than not, many try to mistakenly characterize Greene's own work.

Greene does this by first of all taking her own view of what free choice may or may not be. She does not accept that experience and practice are, *in themselves*, guarantors of a free and intelligent choice. In this respect, Greene is not the pragmatist whose sense of reassurance comes from the fact that we are all, in some ways, free to choose what to practice. On this she seems to be closer to Arendt. Yet unlike Arendt she sustains a dialectical assumption, which however

is neither thrust against inevitable historical facts nor split by some private-public arrangement. Rather, in assuming freedom as intrinsically dialectical, Greene takes on the gravitas of the quandary of choice by sustaining it as an aporetic stance. Greene (1988) explains this quandary as follows:

It is difficult to posit obstacles in such an interpreted world. Ordinary life provides distractions and comforts for those who might be expected to go in search. *They live among representations, images, symbolic renderings of what might seem (if it were felt and smelled) "the gas chamber of life".* (15, emphasis added)

The image of the gas chamber is not easy to handle. It is too potent, and one could even go as far as saying that it could work against what Greene means to convey. However, what makes this analogy distressing is not just the context from where it originates – the Shoah – but in how it compels the senses. In other words, Greene is making an *aesthetic* argument. The analogy of the gas chamber – “(if it were felt and smelled)” – correlates to the “images, symbolic renderings of what might seem” – and, more importantly, the *representational* character by which we construct, feel and sensitize all that we do, including the obstacles that we create for ourselves.

The qualm with the quandary of representation is not uncommon. Here, rather than Arendt, I would recall Gillian Rose’s discussion of representation and what she calls the binary relationship between the *fascism of representation* and the *representation of fascism* in her book *Mourning becomes the Law* (1997). In this essay, Rose is discussing Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (Ishiguro, 2010), where she engages in quite a complex discussion of legality and representation (see Baldacchino, 2014). In Rose’s essay, the general tenor of what Greene is here calling the “obstacles of an interpreted world” similarly emerge in how representation signifies a fascistic ordering by which legality is entangled with the precariousness of our moral and aesthetic decisions.

Though I have mentioned it elsewhere, I never looked closely into a direct and possible correlation between Rose and Greene. This is not the first time that I found parallels between their work, particularly in their separate readings of Arendt, and in how, like Arendt, they find themselves revisiting fascism and are not fearful in using very difficult analogies which many cannot handle, especially when both Greene and Rose do not appear to seek specific resolution(s) (See Baldacchino, 2009, 13ff).

Though it is all too easy to argue that like Arendt, Greene and Rose were Jewish women of a certain philosophical formation, one cannot ignore their rejection of quick answers or convenient short cuts. There are some considerable differences in that, for example, while Arendt and Greene never seem to be taken by Adorno, Gillian Rose wrote a classic book on his philosophy, focusing in particular on his non-identitarian approach (Rose, 1978). And yet whenever I read their work, I am always engaged by how they never fail to disturb those all too comfortable patterns by which commentators and analysts of the Left and the Right are quick to deliver their answers. And as we speak of comfort zones, let's not forget that education is also a zone in which all too many want to find reassurance – a reassurance which Greene rejected. To further articulate Greene's exposition of the obstacles of our represented life, we cannot ignore education, by which she further gives context to the gas chambers of life:

In schools, like other institutions, there are memos, not actual barriers to reflective practice. There are conference and commission reports, not barbed wire fences in the way. There are assured, helpful, bureaucratic faces, not glowering antagonists to growth and freedom and an enlarged sense of being in the world. (Greene, 1988, 15)

Here, one could see how the fascism of representation begins to emerge in its reality (and its lived experience). Like an odorless gas, fascism returns unannounced. Oftentimes, the fascism of representation remains concealed behind the benign assumptions of matters like growth, freedom and care. This

makes the quandaries of education acute. Such quandaries do hurt and many are never ready to accept them. They become tortuous when we realize that what we deem to be a liberal and progressive attempt to eliminate obstacles has developed into a form of *groundedness* that forecloses any possibility of reform. This would in turn reinforce the representation of fascism through the very social expectations by which we try to build a democratic consensus. As Greene reminds us “the ‘weight’ is only dimly felt; yet, for many it is accepted as what Milan Kundera describes: It *must be; es muss sein.*” (Greene 1988, p. 15)

### **When obstacles become artifacts**

The impossibility of positing “obstacles in such an interpreted world” (Greene, 1988, 15) partly comes from the fact that the obstacle becomes an artifact and that we fail to understand the correlation between the creative yet oppressive *nature* of representation. The correlation between creativity and oppressive representation is contingent on the fact that it is a human construct. Those who would insist that representation is received as some natural necessity of creativity, fail to understand the relationship between experience and nature. As Dewey (1958) reminds us

[T]he assumption that nature in itself is all of the same kind, all distinct, explicit and evident, having no hidden possibilities, no novelties or obscurities, is possible only on the basis of a philosophy which at some point draws an arbitrary line between nature and experience (21).

Greene (1988) clearly states that, “these obstacles or blocks or impediments are, as it were, artifacts, human creations, not ‘natural’ or objectively existent necessities” (9). As artifacts, obstacles could move from being instruments or relations, to become objects crafted by tools of reason or of oppression, indeed of *instrumental* or *critical* reason. Yet, almost as if by some Cartesian instinct, we

often miss the direct relationship between what we think and what we make, and where thoughts are more reified than a tangible object.

As artifacts, these obstacles pertain to the poetics of the imaginary – by which, in other words, we are the very makers of the obstacles that we put in our own way and that of others. Greene’s characterization of obstacles as artifacts is crucial, especially when we come to discuss her position on aesthetics education. Greene’s contribution to this field is found in how she represents the imaginary, what it means to us who construct such an imaginary, and how it radically differs from the universalistic and naturalist postures by which the arts and creativity in education are often assumed.

More so, to recognize the *artefactual* nature of obstacles is crucial to how we engage with philosophy, particularly in the fields of pedagogical aesthetics, philosophy of education and political philosophy. If we are to speak of philosophy as a *doing*, and if by implication we go on to actually *do* philosophy, then as in a poetic state of affairs philosophy becomes itself an artefactual affair. As Greene puts it, “We cannot teach freedom or autonomy directly, anymore than we can teach a common decency; but we can do something to enable people to achieve them, something not unlike what we do when we teach literature or chemistry. Certain acts must be performed, certain tasks accomplished *if individuals are to be enabled to choose themselves as free*. They are acts involving the posing of problems and *the referring of such problems to the context of action*” (Greene, 1975, 11).

In this scenario, we begin to feel the discomfort that Greene creates when she brings into the spaces of philosophy other makings, primarily those by which we construct imaginaries of possibility, and by which we speak of *doings* whose remains are found out with the assumptions of philosophy as assumed by the philosophers. For Greene, this presumed state of estrangement between philosophy and education is not an issue. As we have seen, unlike Arendt, she does not bid goodbye to philosophy in order to exercise her right to be a political

theorist or an artist or educator. Rather, Greene tells the philosopher that she is announcing other deeds within philosophy's space and that she is claiming the right to do so by dint of the choice of action, and thereby that of freedom.

At this point, one might want to ask why is it necessary to glaringly intrude and even transgress the spaces of the arts, philosophy and education? Couldn't one effect such a transgression by simply opening these spaces beyond their location, by moving them *into* each other? Greene refuses to do so because while she transgresses such spaces she insists on the specificity of art, philosophy and education. She is no less rigorous as a philosopher than she is as a literary critic, or teacher. By dispelling the absurd argument that art and philosophy would simply make an instant liberating hybrid, Greene shows that the intervention of *making* in philosophy is never easy and it is a matter by which the agôn of making becomes a form of disputation – a dialectic for which she is not even seeking a synthetic resolution.

Here, I want to enter into a dialogue with these possibilities and with Greene's work. I also want to take on the implications by which an obstacle as an artifact could move beyond the instrumental motivations of its reified self. Claiming art's specificity while retaining the specificity of the deeds of philosophy, one should be able to "fold back" the presumed hybrids by which art, philosophy, and education are often confused and neutralized.

In presenting how transgression is impossible without the specificity of art, education, and philosophy, I would like to articulate what Greene's implication of an aesthetics education really implies. Greene's aesthetic education is a choice of action that resorts to an understanding shared by Arendt, who tells us how "independent existence marks the work of art as a product of making; utter dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks the state as a product of action." In contrast to this, Arendt (2000a) adds that, "the performing arts, on the contrary, have indeed a strong affinity with politics" (446).



This begins to explain how, as we have seen with her case for murals, Greene focuses on the performative side of the arts and while tagging along with Arendt, she parts company in asserting her wider assumption of choices as a plural state of affairs. When Greene engages the arts in her work on aesthetics education at the Lincoln Centre (where her classes are recorded in her book *Variations on a Blue Guitar*), her approach to the performative constructions of realities that make things possible does not reduce them to simple ideas or projections. In Greene, we find distinct echoes of Arendt when she states that, “whatever occurs in this space of appearances is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of action” (Arendt, 2000a, 447).

The tangibility by which Greene regards obstacles as artifacts almost mirrors the way by which Arendt regards the realm of performance and politics as states by which freedom becomes a worldly reality, where it is “tangible in words that can be heard, deeds that can be seen ... events that are talked about ...”. However for Greene, within these stories the tangible predominates in how we can handle – almost literally – both freedom and the obstacles that we make in our active life.

One could argue that as artifacts, obstacles gain an intimate tangibility that pertains to *making*, to *poiein*. As this takes us straight back into the performative narratives by which we partake of the freedoms and obstacles that characterize our stories and life, we also find that an intimate tangibility is most effectively an aesthetic event. We must remember that this aesthetic event is not simply hijacked by the romantic’s investment of aesthetics with beauty, but where aesthetics remains visibly and concretely positioned within the realms of feeling.

More so, as artifacts, obstacles are created. Obstacles become instruments by entering the realm of *poiesis*, as they also belong to our ability to create. Let us not forget that created objects imply actions whose tangibility is not simply received, but is partaken of by human action. Also we must bear in mind that here we are

speaking of artifacts and therefore of creations. As artifacts both the performative action of freedom and the *artefactual* nature of obstacles are *created*.

This takes us back to the myriad assumptions made in art and in education where we hear a lot about *creativity*, *innovation* and *the imagination* as if they were shibboleths that are supposed to give us free entry into the realms of the so-called “creative and knowledge industries”. Yet we know that we always enter this realm at our risk. It is a risk that we need to take unless we are to allow instrumental reason to continue to do the representational work for us.

Created objects imply actions whose tangibility is not simply received, *but partaken of* by human *action*. Mindful that when we engage with the institutionalized discourses of creativity and innovation, we are approaching the “gas chamber of life”, we must remember, once more, Greene’s description of “those who might be expected to go in search”, who “live among representations, images, symbolic renderings.” If this gas “were felt and smelled,” the call to the managerial assumptions that turn aesthetic instruction into a standardized tool would cease. Yet as “the gas chamber of life” remains odorless it has succeeded to enter the discourse of education in a tangible way.

As the tangibility of the obstacle is concealed and as we are asked not to touch or smell what we are not able to measure, we continue to withdraw by entering even deeper into these gas chambers and with us we drag the assumptions that we make of the arts. In effect, what we are doing by a lot of what passes for aesthetics education, is the stripping down of the creative arts by conveniently rejecting their political inherence and their existential immanence.

### **Resistance’s aesthetic tangibility**

So what are the threads of resistance that lead us to the “apparition of freedom” (Char, cited in Greene, 1988, 15) where, like the French poet and resistance

fighter René Char, we could escape from the opacity of the private sphere and gas chambers of life?

Greene argues that when she brings up Char's example, she is not implying that the world is in the same imminent dangers as was Nazi occupation. Rather, it is because the apparition of freedom implies "an opening of a space" for those who opt to partake of this struggle for freedom. Those who choose not to retain the closure by which they seek to remain – not unlike Ishiguro's butler Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* who, out of his loyalty to his employer, sought to suppress his own private indignation towards those who appeased and supported fascism. In this respect, Greene sees in Char's approach a sense of freedom immersed in the community, a choice to live a *vita activa*. This kind of freedom is political inasmuch as it is a personal claim that converges and becomes real by dint of the community within which it is made.

Greene (1988) argues how being "ostensibly free French citizens" before the war, Char and his comrades "might have simply complained that their antecedent rights and liberties were being infringed" (16). She adds how they could have resorted to negative freedom, indeed "the right not to be interfered with or coerced or compelled to do what they did not choose to do" (16). This was a kind of an option, albeit impossible to sustain unless one decides to keep one's head down and isolate him or herself in the opacity of an isolated private life. But Char and his comrades could not do what Ishiguro's Stevens did, because they believed that "the 'apparition of freedom' was visiting them for the first time in their lives." Greene (1988) clarifies that "not only does this suggest that they did not view freedom as a gift or endowment; they did not feel *free* in some interior dimension of their beings" (16).

In *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988), Greene takes this scenario into education and how in so many ways freedom remains distanced from the "apparition" that happens in the public space, within the community, as a form of associated living, and how instead, this form of freedom is internalized into a private

matter. This is where themes that belong to the *laissez-faire* notion of freedom and capital have returned. They reappear in the approach to how one conducts him or herself in a community. They are endorsed by the discourse of schooling and by a system of education based on competition. I would add that this also sustains a distorted version of meritocracy, which awards those who appear to have made it by denigrating and forgetting those who have not “succeeded” because their disadvantage gave them no chance. “Deregulation, noninterference, privatization: All are linked to the development of ‘character’, to consumption, to merit, to (deserved) material gain” (Greene, 1988, 17). In this construction of liberty, one is assumed to be left to his or her devices, as if that would guarantee someone’s success and more so one’s engagement with the community.

If anything, this approach to liberty has left us all isolated, all cooped in the closed assumptions of individualism with no support system that works. “Public servants seldom acknowledge any longer what was once considered a ‘right’ to income support when needed, or to housing, or to medical attention. And, quite obviously, the wealthy, the advantaged, benefit from this new attention to freedom” (Greene, 1988, 17).

I happen to consider Maxine Greene’s *Dialectic of Freedom* as one of those canons of educational thinking. I would put it up there with Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), Illich’s *Deschooling Society* (1999) and now with Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). I wouldn’t be the only academic who would set these four books as core texts for education students. And this is done for a reason: If we are to speak of resistance, of being willing to contribute to the “apparition of freedom”, these four texts bring together a number of foundational questions that comprehensively ask what education and freedom are all about. More so, they assert in their divergent ways that liberty and education are not casual partners, but that they *immanently* inform each other to such a depth that one cannot speak of one without the other, and where

situations in which education turns out to be *unfree* this would negate education's own claims to exist as such.

At the end of the day, unless students and teachers are convinced that we are the makers of resistance, and that the apparition of freedom cannot happen unless two or three of us engage with each other in the very name of freedom, then we would never understand how resistance comes to assert its tangible and haptic situatedness through us. If the self were to simply *inhabit* in its own space without any relatedness to other spaces, its sense of being would lack both freedom and intelligence. Freedom will never appear in such a state of affairs. This is because freedom is impossible without our exertion of our choices from within a relatedness by which we can make such an assertion. It is equally true that unless these choices are made within the public spaces of the community, they remain opaque. They may be comfortable to individualists, but their sense of freedom would be as effective as one surviving totalitarianism by forfeiting one's own sense of being. This will be like a world without an opportunity to engage with the ugliness and beauty that make it; or like a piece of music that could never be played or heard.

Greene's unique approach to education is primarily exciting because before she ever engages with teaching, or learning, or a school or classroom, she engages with human beings who live in a society and who partake of its senses — the good, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. Before she engages in the mechanisms of education, she begins with how teachers and students feel; how, as existing beings they confront their life and make sense of it. Schools that won't give us the opportunity to engage with our sense of self would be nothing more than a factory where learning is computational and programmatic.

Education without a sense of aesthetics is like a painting that we all know about but we could never see or experience. It is here that Maxine urges us to start painting murals once more, and to extend our dialogue and situatedness "far beyond the agencies and offices and even classrooms". What education

should stand for is not that different from freedom. In Greene's sense of the word, this freedom is a means by which we reach beyond the "sad opaqueness of private life," and I would add, by which we find a way of exiting the chambers in which we have stood still and accepted the benign opiate that makes us consent to all those forms of direct and indirect oppression. As we leave the closure of a schooled society and move out into the freedom of an educated life, the public externality of a mural grasps at one go what it is to be free through one's own performative agency by *doing* and *being* at the epicenter of the public realm.

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