

Jean Anyon: Loss of a giant

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With Jean Anyon's death, the Left and education have lost a giant.

The undergraduates I teach come mostly from the kind of working class schools Jean's early research described as channeling students into low-wage occupations. She documented a reality they had lived but not fully experienced, explaining why their schools expected so little creative or intellectual work from them and how this related to social class. Jean's research often prompted anger, and I had to caution students not to blame the messenger for the message. By the end of the course, they see how Jean's analysis contests claims being made "neoprogressive" (the term coined by Amanda Lashaw) challengers of neoliberalism: Schools sorted students by class (and race) before the current reforms, which have made inequality far worse.

What made Jean special was the totality of her life's work: her commitment to teaching, teacher education, and her students; her seminal research poking holes in capitalist mythologies about schooling's capacity to correct social inequalities that are embedded in economic and political power relations; her presence as an activist-scholar on every important political issue of the day, from the War in Iraq to reform in the faculty union at CUNY. Few radical academics manage one of these well. Jean accomplished all of them, simultaneously. Teacher education is the "cash cow" of universities and teacher ed faculty its workhorses. Nationally, teacher ed faculty salaries are lower and work loads higher than those of arts and sciences faculty. Conducting quality research is extraordinarily difficult when one cares about the quality of teachers one's program produces, and yet Jean did just that while she was at Rutgers, Newark.

Jean's life pushed back against the institutional hypocrisies that mar the careers of many academics, radical and not, teacher educators and not. She valued teaching, made time for her students and was a caring mentor - though the academy does not value teaching and advising. She used her training and impressive intelligence to expose social realities other researchers would not. She could always be relied upon to sign statements that would be on the side of social justice and peace - though unpopular with officials apprehensive about making political waves.

Last Spring I sent Jean a message after reading my undergraduates' final exams. Almost all of them wrote that what they learned in her article on social class and the hidden curriculum of work had made an indelible impression on them. Next week my undergrads will read her work. Jean will again be opening their eyes though she's not with us.

Thank you, Jean. I miss you already.

I invite reader comments, either on this website or to me directly at drweinerlo@gmail.com. Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. And you can follow my thoughts on teaching, schools, and education on twitter , Facebook, as well as my blog here at New Politics.