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EDITORIAL

The Sixth International Mathematics Education and Society Conference: Finding Freedom in a Mathematics Education Ghetto

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In March 2010, I had the opportunity to attend and present at the Sixth International Mathematics Education and Society Conference (MES 6)[1] in Berlin, Germany. This opportunity provided a unique and rare experience for me as a relatively new mathematics education scholar, social scientist, and teacher educator, an experience that I characterize as finding freedom in a mathematics education ghetto. I use the term *ghetto* to juxtapose my professional experience of finding freedom as a mathematics educator to think (and act) differently found at MES 6 with my personal experience of finding freedom as a gay/queer[2] man to think (and act) differently found when I discovered, in the mid-1980s, the "gay ghetto" in my hometown Atlanta, Georgia, USA. That is to say, both experiences provided a sense of self-empowerment and liberation—albeit, one professional and the other personal.

Here, it is important to note that I do not intend to romanticize the often-harmful consequences of the ghetto.[3] But like many members of historically mar-

[1]MES 6 was held in Johannesstift, a planned charitable community located approximately 10 miles northwest of Berlin, Germany, March 20–25, 2010. For complete information about MES 6, including plenaries, project presentations, research papers, and symposia, see http://www.ewi-psy.fu-berlin.de/en/v/mes6/. For complete information regarding previous Mathematics Education and Society conferences, see the following websites:

- MES 5 – 2008 Albufeira, Portugal: http://www.mes5.learning.aau.dk/
- MES 4 – 2004 Golden Coast, Australia: (website not available)
- MES 3 – 2002 Helsingør, Denmark: http://www.mes3.learning.aau.dk/
- MES 2 – 2000 Montechoro, Portugal: http://nonio.fc.ul.pt/mes2/
- MES 1 – 1998 Nottingham, United Kingdom: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/csme/meas/conf.html

[2] "'Queer' can function as a noun, an adjective, or a verb, but in each case is defined against the 'normal' or normalizing" (Spargo, 1999, pp. 8–9).

[3] Sears (1991), in his book *Growing up Gay in the South: Race, Gender, and Journeys of the Spirit*, cautions that although gaining access to gay communities (i.e., gay ghettos) is often liberating that

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ginalized racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, gendered, sexual, intellectual, and so on communities, the ghetto has a different meaning to those who find themselves as members of such ghettos, as opposed to those from dominant groups. Historically, the term *ghetto* has its origin in the Jewish ghetto of medieval cities of Europe (Wirth, 1927), and, of course, the world became all too familiar with the concept with the infamous Jewish ghetto of Warsaw, Poland during World War II. The United States has its infamous, or famous—depending on perspective—ghettos as well. The most well known of these ghettos has been Harlem New York City, USA, the center of Black American intelligentsia and artistry since the early 1900s and, in many ways, the center of American intelligentsia and artistry of the twentieth century in general (Gates & West, 2000). Louis Wirth (1927), a Jewish immigrant and an American sociologist of the early Chicago School, in providing a natural history of the ghetto, noted a unique, and I might add promising, characteristic of the urban ghetto. Wirth claimed that it is within the ghetto "where one finds freedom from hostile criticism and the backing of a group of kindred spirits" (p. 60).

Langston Hughes (1945/1994), one of America's literary giants, an African American and member of the Harlem ghetto, wrote the poem *The Heart of Harlem*[4] that captures this sense of freedom and backing from kindred spirits. I provide Hughes's poem in its entirety, because it is an aspect of his poetic description of Harlem that I use to frame my discussion of the concept ghetto, and the rare experience of finding freedom as a mathematics education scholar, social scientist, and teacher educator in the mathematics education ghetto of MES 6.

The Heart of Harlem
by
Langston Hughes

The buildings in Harlem are brick and stone
And the streets are long and wide,
But Harlem's much more than these alone,
Harlem is what's inside—

> a gay or lesbian identity can be as oppressive as it is liberating, as reactionary as it is revolutionary. It promises possibilities; it poses problems. Identifying oneself as a lesbian or gay man enhances self-understanding and raises social consciousness; it also limits potential sexual experiences, reinforces the norm of heterosexuality, reifies the "homosexual," and lessens opportunities for growth of the spirit. Becoming a homosexual invites further sexual categorization…and social segregation…. within a society that too readily sorts, categorizes, and segregates people. (pp. 407–408)

Unfortunately, I fear, similar such statements could be made about other ghettos, including those constructed around professional identities.

[4] Langston Hughes's (1945/1994) *The Heart of Harlem* was written in conjunction with a musical score composed by Duke Ellington, a giant of American classical music (i.e., jazz).

It's a song with a minor refrain,
It's a dream you keep dreaming again.
It's a tear you turn into a smile.
It's the sunrise you know is coming after a while.
It's the shoe that you get half-soled twice.
It's the kid you hope will grow up nice.
It's the hand that's working all day long.
It's prayer that keeps you going along—
That's the Heart of Harlem!

It's Joe Louis and Dr. W.E.B.,
A stevedore, a porter, Marian Anderson, and me.
It's Father Divine and the music of Earl Hines,
Adam Powell in Congress, our drives on bus lines.
It's Dorothy Maynor and it's Billie Holiday,
The lectures at the Schomburg and Apollo down the way.
It's Father Shelton Bishop and shouting Mother Horne.
It's the Rennie and the Savoy where new dances are born.
It's Canada Lee's penthouse at Five-Fifty-Five.
It's Small's Paradise and Jimmy's little dive.
It's 409 Edgecombe or a cold-water walk-up flat—
But it's where I live and it's where my love is at
Deep in the Heart of Harlem!

It's the pride all Americans know.
It's the faith God gave us long ago.
It's the strength to make our dreams come true.
It's a felling warm and friendly given to you.
It's that girl with the rhythmical walk.
It's my boy with the jive in his talk.
It's the man with muscles of steel.
It's the right to be free a people never will yield.
A dream…a song…half-soled shoes…dancing shoes
A tear…a smile…the blues…sometimes the blues
Mixed with the memory…and forgiveness…of our wrong.
But more than that, it's freedom—
Guarded for the kids who came along—
Folks, that's the Heart of Harlem!

"Folks, that's the Heart," is a refrain that is easily remembered, but often forgotten, even when in the company of kinder spirits. But in the *Heart of Harlem*, Hughes's (1945/1994) chief purpose, I believe, is to remind us to move beyond focusing on the structures to celebrating the people—the heart—without romanticizing the inequities and injustices of the ghetto's structures (physical and otherwise). In other words, Hughes limits his focus on the structures. I must admit, however, that after the first agora (i.e., business meeting) of MES 6, I began

to focus on the "structure" of MES 6 rather than its people.[5] In so doing, I became somewhat disenchanted with the conference, given that I perceived some aspects of the structure of the agora to be too similar to the structures found in education conferences in the United States; structures that are designed (most often?) to maintain rather than transform the status quo. (I found similar such structures within the gay ghetto of Atlanta in the mid-1980s.)

Unfortunately, and in too many ways, I believe that even for members of ghettos it is difficult to think the unthought (cf. Foucault, 1969/1972) in our individual and collective attempts to construct spaces that might be more ethical and just. In that, members of ghettos, like members of dominant groups, have been so discursively constituted within the multiplicities of unethical and unjust sociocultural and sociohistorical structures and discourses (cf. Foucault, 1969/1972) that we often—unintentionally, I suppose—duplicate the very structures and discourses that positioned us as members of ghettos in the first place. I include this brief, but important, critique of MES 6 to make clear that it was not without its flaws.

But, on the other hand, and more importantly, when I redirect my focus from the structure of MES 6 back onto its people, its folks, my participation at MES 6 was invaluable. That is to say, as a mathematics education social scientist who works to deconstruct (cf. Derrida & Montefiore, 2001)[6] "the fictions, fantasies and plays of power inherent in mathematics education" (Walkerdine, 2004, p. viii), the folks of MES 6 provided me an invaluable experience of self-empowerment and liberation. At MES 6, I found a critical mass of kinder spirits who understand and acknowledge, either explicitly or implicitly, the discipline *mathematics education* as a discursive formation, limited by sociocultural and sociohistorical assumptions, conditions, and power relations (cf. Foucault, 1969/1972). In other words, a critical mass of scholars who acknowledge the discipline mathematics education as a system of unjust and unethical capital-*T* truths "linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (Foucault, 1977/1980, p. 133). In short, the discipline mathematics education, I fear, has become a "'régime' of truth" (p. 133).

Present at MES 6, however, was an extraordinary group of scholars—from the novice to the accomplished—who use a multiplicity of philosophical, theo-

[5] I thank Paola Valero, a leading scholar of the Mathematics Education and Society conferences, for reminding me, during a private conversation held after the first agora, to redirect my focus on the people, a conversation that in part motivated this editorial.

[6] St. Pierre (2000) argues that Derrida's concept *deconstruction* "is not about tearing down but about rebuilding…looking at how a structure has been constructed, what holds it together, and what it produces" (p. 482). She further claims that because deconstruction acknowledges that the world has been constructed through language and cultural practices, it can be deconstructed and reconstructed again and again (St. Pierre).

retical, and scientific concepts as tools in their attempts to smash this regime of *T*ruth, this system of power.[7] I found it to be self-empowering and liberating—in a word, freeing—to be in the company of this group of scholars who had moved beyond "traditional" mathematics education research and were asking different questions and framing, theoretically, those questions differently. This group, most fortunately, did not represent the "growing concern among many mathematics education scholars regarding the lack of attention to mathematics in much of the current work in mathematics education" (Ball, Battista, Harel, Thompson, Confrey, 2010, p. 60).[8] In that, the question "Where's the math?" (Heid, 2010, p. 102) was not asked.[9] Which is not to say that mathematics was absent in these scholars' arguments. Indeed, *mathematics* as the discursive formation *mathematics education* was forever present, everywhere! How does mathematics education sustain itself as an institutional space of Whiteness (Martin, 2010)? How does mathematics education induce the continued marginalization of bilingual and multilingual learners (Chronaki, Planas, Setati, & Civil, 2010)? How does mathematics education produce a specific "regime of rationality" (Kanes, Morgan, & Tsatsaroni, 2010)?

The aforementioned are a mere sampling of questions explored, scientifically, at MES 6. Broadly speaking, questions explored at MES ask: How does mathematics education function as a discursive formation? How is it produced? How is it regulated? How does it exist (cf. Bové, 1995)? But even as these (and other) "how" questions are explored from a multiplicity of socio-cultural and -

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[7] Similar to Foucault (1975/1996), I like to think of philosophical, theoretical, and scientific concepts as tools to smash or short-circuit systems of power:

> All my books…are like, if you like, little tool boxes. If people want to open them, use a particular sentence, idea, or analysis like a screwdriver or wrench in order to short-circuit, disqualify or break up the systems of power, including eventually the very one from which my books have issued…well, all the better! (p. 149)

[8] I thank Danny Martin and Maisie Gholson for bringing my attention to the 2010 National Council of Teacher of Mathematics' Research Presession symposium titled "Keeping the Mathematics in Mathematics Education Research"; the quote is extracted from the symposium's description found in the 2010 *Program for the Research Presession* (p. 60). As listed in the program, Deborah Ball, Michael Battista, Guershon Harel, and Patrick Thompson were the symposium presenters; Jere Confrey was the symposium discussant.

[9] I hope that the statement and question by Ball et al. (2010) and Heid (2010) are not marking the being of a new "war" within mathematics education (Schoenfeld, 2004). History demonstrates that, in the end, such wars are unproductive. Given the extreme focus on mathematics education within the current political environment, as a community of mathematics education social scientists, we should be encouraging the expansion of the science of mathematics education, not attempting to contract it. In short, as the disciplined science mathematics education continues to expand beyond cognitive psychology (Kilpatrick, 1992), we must allow each generation to "address anew what doing research in mathematics education is all about" (Sierpinska & Kilpatrick, 1998, p. 527). The chief purpose of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* has been, and continues to be, to not only encourage expanding the disciplined science mathematics education but also to provide an intellectual and accessible outlet for the dissemination of such expanding disciplined science, specifically, within urban contexts.

political theoretical paradigms, Pais, Stentoft, and Valero (2010) caution that we should not forget the "why" questions. They argue that placing too much emphasis on how questions takes mathematics education for granted and limits radical alternatives. To engage in why questions can ultimately lead to the question *why mathematics education*, which implies a critical exploration of its very existence (Pais et al.).

Exploring how and why questions from a multiplicity of socio-cultural and -political theoretical paradigms, however, might be too much discomfort for some (many?) mathematics education social scientists. But like Lather (2006) who suggests that a proliferation of theoretical paradigms is a good thing to think with when conducting education research, I believe that mathematics education social scientists need a proliferation of theoretical paradigms to smash the systems of power inherent in mathematics education. As I and others have argued elsewhere (Stinson, 2006; Weissglass, 2002), for those social scientists who are focused on issues of equity and justice within mathematics education, the critiques and explorations of mathematics education must become much broader than those found in the confines of the instructional triangle (Cohen & Ball, 1999; also see National Research Council, 2001, p. 314). As a community of mathematics education social scientists, if we wish to take an ethical stance, adopting a degree of social consciousness and responsibility in seeing the wider social and political picture of mathematics education (Gates &Vistro-Yu, 2003), we must continue to take the social turn (Lerman, 2000) or, better yet, the sociopolitical turn (Gutiérrez, in press) in our research, exploring not only questions of how but also questions of why (Pais et al., 2010).

If taking up and supporting such an ethical stance relegates me (and others) to a mathematics education ghetto because such a stance resides outside the simplicity of the instructional triangle—so be it. I am happy that I discovered a mathematics education ghetto at MES 6. After all, my personal experience as a member of a gay ghetto, as well as the history of ghettos generally, has demonstrated that kinder spirits relegated to ghettos can (do) build empowering and liberating communities, and, in the end, transform society at large. That is, if in the process of building such communities, the folks—the heart—are maintained as the focus. I encourage you, as a reader of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*, to plan to attend MES 7 in 2012,[10] so that you too might have a similar such experience as I did in finding freedom in a mathematics education ghetto (just remember, keep your focus on the folks). And in the meantime, I suggest that you explore past MES proceedings,[11] so that you might become familiar with

[10] The location of MES 7 in 2012 has yet to be determined.

[11] My first introduction to the Mathematics Education and Society conferences was in 2002, during graduate school in the Department of Mathematics Education at the University of Georgia, when two of my then fel-

a critical mass of kinder spirits who are conducting "good" education research (Hostetler, 2005), producing different knowledge and producing knowledge differently (St. Pierre, 1997).

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low doctoral students, Amy Hackenberg and Brian Lawler, attended and presented at MES 3; upon their return, they gave me a copy of the *Proceedings of the First International Mathematics Education and Society Conference*, edited by Peter Gates and Tony Cotton (1998) (the copy was inscribed by Ole Skovsmose). This edited volume has been an important resource in both my research and teaching. I thank my current institution, the College of Education at Georgia State University, for providing the travel funds to experience the Mathematics Education and Society Conference firsthand.

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