Critical pedagogy as interrupting Thingification

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Critical pedagogy as interrupting Thingification

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This article suggests that a critical pedagogy meets students where they are and recognizes the ideological conditions of existence of both teachers and students as subjects. Using a set of examples that range from the author’s own experiences both inside and outside of the classroom, an Emile Zola novel (The Ladies Paradise) and Timothy Mitchell’s world-as-exhibition, the article suggests that critical pedagogies expose, and potentially disrupt, contemporary knowledge practices. They are experiments in intimacy designed to unseat practices that yield to processes of thingification.

Keywords: critical pedagogies; security; subjectivity; orientalism; thingification

I was a fourth grader at Manarat al-Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, when Beirut – the city of my birth – was the site of the Sabra and Shatila massacre (1982). For the first time, it seemed, the world burst open the family bubble in which I was reared, but this burst did not touch the front of my brain as did the Oklahoma City Bombing (1995) when I was older and in university. Sabra and Shatila touched me in a space difficult to isolate with words. I do not remember when it happened or where I was when I learned of it. Instead, I remember fear and images. I do not remember how I got the thick booklet of photographs (maybe at school?), but it was given to me – page after page of large colour photos of piles of dead bodies, of bodies as small as mine. I still have the booklet, but the images live in my mind’s eye. They represent my first crushing sorrow about the horrors of this world against which parental power was helpless. More than actual death, I learned to fear the knowledge of certain death. I learned that children with young and skinny bodies like mine were lined up against a wall and shot dead. The idea that people positioned their bodies, or were forced to physically position them, for certain death shook the chambers of my heart and made me nauseous; it still does. I imagined the bullying, amused, macho soldiers with automatic weapons spraying the bodies with the bullets. I found it incomprehensible that people could do ‘that’ to other people, yet I had seen the pictures. I learned that the way people are in-the-world is consequential. I realize now that I learned then about the dehumanizing practice Césaire (2000) calls thingification and about orientalist distance and disconnectedness. I brought this understanding to the classroom as a student, and it underpins my pedagogical practice. For me, a critical pedagogy meets students where they are and recognizes the ideological conditions of existence of both teachers and students as subjects.

When I started teaching, I found that students’ early memories were overshadowed by 9/11 and the sense of terror and insecurity the images brought to the space behind their eyes. Today, my students are too young to have been personally shaken by 9/11, although (like my experience with Sabra and Shatila) they may have some sense of it depending on where...
they were located. Instead, they tell me that their sense of insecurity comes from concerns about the financial crisis and student debt, uncertainty regarding their future (jobs, family, buying a house), increasing security presence in communities, airports, schools, gun violence and their assessment of high levels of ambient violence. I hear students express anxiety about their physical (and sexual) well-being in gendered ways and about healthcare more generally. It is difficult to anticipate the conditions under which students come to be students. Instead, I ask the question, what can I offer them that will allow them to develop intellectually? My answer: a space with strong but flexible contours within which we can challenge our imaginations, develop our understanding and feel discomfort.

Critical pedagogies expose, and potentially disrupt, contemporary knowledge practices (hooks 1994; Freire 1974, 1998). From the experiences that students articulate, I note several common threads that link their concerns: alienation and estrangement (or a disconnected relationship with the world), a distracting consumerism and an information overload that inhibits complex thought. Emile Zola connects these conditions in his novel about the social transformative aspects of Paris’ first department store, *The Ladies Paradise*. He documents a transformation in the very processes by which people are in-the-world. The store was constructed to offer an entirely spectacular (in Debord’s sense of the word, see Debord 1994) shopping experience. Throughout the novel the sanitary, but cruelly disconnected space of the department store is juxtaposed with the interactive space of the small shop faced with the increasing certainty of going out of business. In the latter space, people are touching, feeling, seeing, looking, hearing and listening to each other. When a transaction occurs, it is between people who have shared an intimacy. While in the department store, humanity and humaneness are subordinated to the task of moving merchandise and increasing profits.

The idea of world-as-exhibition offers another way to think about how people are in-the-world – how people come to see themselves in-the-world and in relation to others in-the-world (Mitchell 1991). For example, World Fairs furthered the incorporation of people in specified positions and the development of a world view of global dimensions, i.e. Egyptian people, donkeys, carts and dust were shipped to Paris from Cairo in order to reconstruct a ‘chaotic’ and ‘authentic’ Cairene street scene. The fair brought the world to the metropole and charged the public for admittance. Fairgoers of all classes enjoyed an entertaining day out; they consumed food and sights of the world encased in diorama-like exhibitions. Altogether, this had the effect of consolidating a national or metropolitan world view in which subjects come to stand outside of the thing they are looking at. It facilitated a world view premised on binary self/other, inside/outside relations, and flattens objects through simplistic readings of, for example, a Cairo street scene as chaotic rather than revealing an alternative order. To be sure, the educational and entertaining World Fairs helped transform the very lenses through which people came to see the world and themselves in it in conjunction with other institutional infrastructural developments, such as public education, railroads, social policies – such that intimacy (of the small shop, for example) is subordinated to a more alienating social order.

Given the commonalities threading students concerns, and the contemporary knowledge practices that privilege standardized modes of learning to produce students as test takers, my first task in a critical pedagogy is to expose students’ way of being/learning. I have done this in a number of ways, but I note two here. First, after a conversation about concentration and the (Virilio-ean) speed of the world in which today’s 20-year olds exist, the class did an experiment. They placed their phones in another room with an alarm set for 1 hour and they sat with a book. I asked them to note what happens. Generally, they sat in their seats feeling edgy, but when the alarms went off they found that they had...
‘entered their book’ or ‘entered their brains’ and daydreamed. Regardless, they reported surprise at the experience of having got lost in their heads. Second, I brought in a record I had purchased in the 1980s. In class, I mimicked the exciting process of opening a new album and listening to the A side and the B side. Students are busy consuming songs on the Internet and flicking from one to the next. I thought it showed in how they read texts, shallowly and not allowing for surprise (see Adler and van Doren 1972). They went home and listened to an album from one end to another in the order intended by the ‘author’. Again, they expressed similar experiences of anxiety over the ‘lack of control’, after which a ‘letting go’ allowed them to see and hear, free from ‘driving expectations’. I use these types of techniques to reveal the obscured linkages between them and the world in which they are ‘engaged’ (Elizabeth Dauphinée does this expertly in her recent book, see Dauphinée 2013). But this is not enough. The other part of a critical pedagogy is giving them the tools to find their own footing or to understand what they bring to their work. This means a focus on reading, writing and revising – ‘creating’, broadly conceived. It also means attention to practices of (and tools for) thinking (see Salter and Mutlu 2013).

While teachers and students must negotiate disciplines institutionally, critical pedagogies are not first and foremost about teaching a discipline. The images seared into my memory years ago motivate me in my work and animate my pedagogical practice. I have watched students come to recognize, struggle with and accept powerful motivations driven by their varied experiences that are connected, in complex ways, to global politics and (in)security. I have heard about coyotes in the desert, legacies of wartime violence, rapes, limited access to (health)care, foreclosure, homelessness, child pornography, depression, drug addiction, as well as more and less dramatic personal narratives. In the best scenarios, I see students’ surprise as they develop confidence in their own ideas and in their own work that includes thinking carefully about how they are in-the-world. Mostly, though, it is an experiment in intimacy designed to unseat practices that yield to dehumanizing processes of thingification. And I am often also surprised.

Acknowledgements
I acknowledge the support of an Irish Research Council Fellowship, and thank Naeem Inayatullah and Jacob Stump for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

Notes on contributor
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References

