

Towards a Critical Performative Pedagogy: Living Museums – The Empires Project

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ABSTRACT

What follows, is conceptual and theoretical and emerged through my ongoing conversations and collaborations with the co-author Dr. Aly Elfrieich. This an extension of our work on how a Critical Performative Pedagogical (CPP) lens focused on the ways the emergence of the 'self' informed pedagogical positions in a graduate multicultural education foundations and general secondary methods of teaching course. In this piece I apply a CPP to my work with the Living Museum: The Empires Project, a five-year inquiry with a local STEM high school in the Midwest. Drawing from the work of Garion, Pineau, and Gaztembide-Fernandez, I imagine how a CPP lens may function as a conceptual and theoretical space for wonder into how and why I did what I did and struggle with the idea of just what do the arts do.



Figure 2: Young people's Arts creations for Living Museum: The Empires Project, Weltsek & Koontz, 2018

"In this time and the state of the world that it's in right now, I feel like everyone kinda has their own of suffering. It seems like no one's life is perfect... It seems like I've not met, met anyone who doesn't have problems." (Student post-event reflection, Weltsek & Koontz, 2018)

The Collaboration

Dr. Aly Elfreich and my collaboration began through the development of an online graduate course. We chose early on to concentrate our curricular engagement through collaborative arts-based strategies to engage the students in honest and vulnerable shared reflection. We wanted them to learn together, from each other's life stories. The arts-based reflections, the creation of collages, small films, and poetry (for example) were centered upon who they thought they were ideologically, politically, spiritually and why they believed that to be so. They shared these stories and compared their lives and the way they

saw the world. Continuing to work through the arts-based strategies, the graduate students connected a critical sense of ‘self’ to what they believed it meant to educate and to learn. The final element was to hear how the group thought about how a critical sense of ‘self’ connected to education, brought about through sharing stories, informed what they would do in class with young people and why.

Aly always reminds me that we never do anything alone. This statement is at the heart of the critical reflection within a Critical Performative Pedagogy (CPP). Materially, this piece grew out of text we discarded for our forthcoming article, “Storying As Curriculum: Critical Performance Pedagogy and Relational Identity Emergence in an Arts-Based Teacher Preparation Course.” That work led me into the fascination with how the deep critical self-reflection inherent in a CPP is always a collaborative event. Our work together reignited my interest in how the wonder of a CPP lens insists that we be ‘with’ rather than be alone. This is to say that although this is a first-person conceptual and theoretical piece, all my thoughts and much of the way this text emerges is a result of my close collaboration with Aly. It is impossible to, nor would I want to uncouple our collective thoughts.

My Wonder

The image and quote above were gathered from Living Museums: The Empires Project (Weltsek & Koontz, 2018). This project was a human subjects-approved, longitudinal collaboration. I facilitated this project as an associate professor at a research one Midwestern university with my host teacher and their students at a local Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) magnet school. I created this project to work to subvert what I saw/see as an essentially oppressive educational systemization perpetuated through a standardized curriculum designed to force students to pass standardized tests. In his article “Why the Arts Don’t Do Anything” (2013), Gaztembide-Fernandez problematizes:

Regardless of the approach, mainstream advocacy arguments for the arts in education typically evoke the arts as a substance with the power to influence any number of educational outcomes and individual experiences, or even to transform the consciousness of individuals. (p. 212)

Gaztembide-Fernandez's idea challenges me to struggle with the gnawing sense that I had embraced that very oppressive sensibility of which I fought. You see, due to my desire to work with young people to understand how their education was designed as imposed Eurocentric enculturation, I positioned my work as a commodity to be consumed with the goal of gain. I saw myself as using the students to achieve an end. I had stripped the young people of their personhood and reduced them to subjects to be objectified. However, like Haiven and Khasnabish (2010), I wonder about the idea that "Creating anti-capitalist alternatives, new modes of being and working together beyond the profit motive, in the present is a form of "exodus" from Empire: not so much an explosive revolution but an abandonment of exploitation" (p. 25). Through this piece I apply a critical performative pedagogical lens, (CPP) (Pineau, 2002, 2005; Alexander, Anderson & Gallegos, 2005; Giroux, 2001; Weltsek & Medina, 2007) to challenge myself to continue to think about how to view my work through the arts. I apply a CPP and view that,

classrooms are perceived as spaces where students and teachers perform and imagine multiple social realities addressing political issues, moving beyond superficial under-standings of 'difference', 'the other', or assumed 'naïve' notions of empowerment and instead explore the embedded multiplicity of discourses. (Weltsek and Medina, 2007, p. 78)

I embrace a CPP as it allows me to step back from my need to prove that the arts do something. Rather, the CPP lens draws my attention to how my pedagogy manifests itself with the young people with whom I work. I use, as a point of reflection, my experiences with the Empires Project.

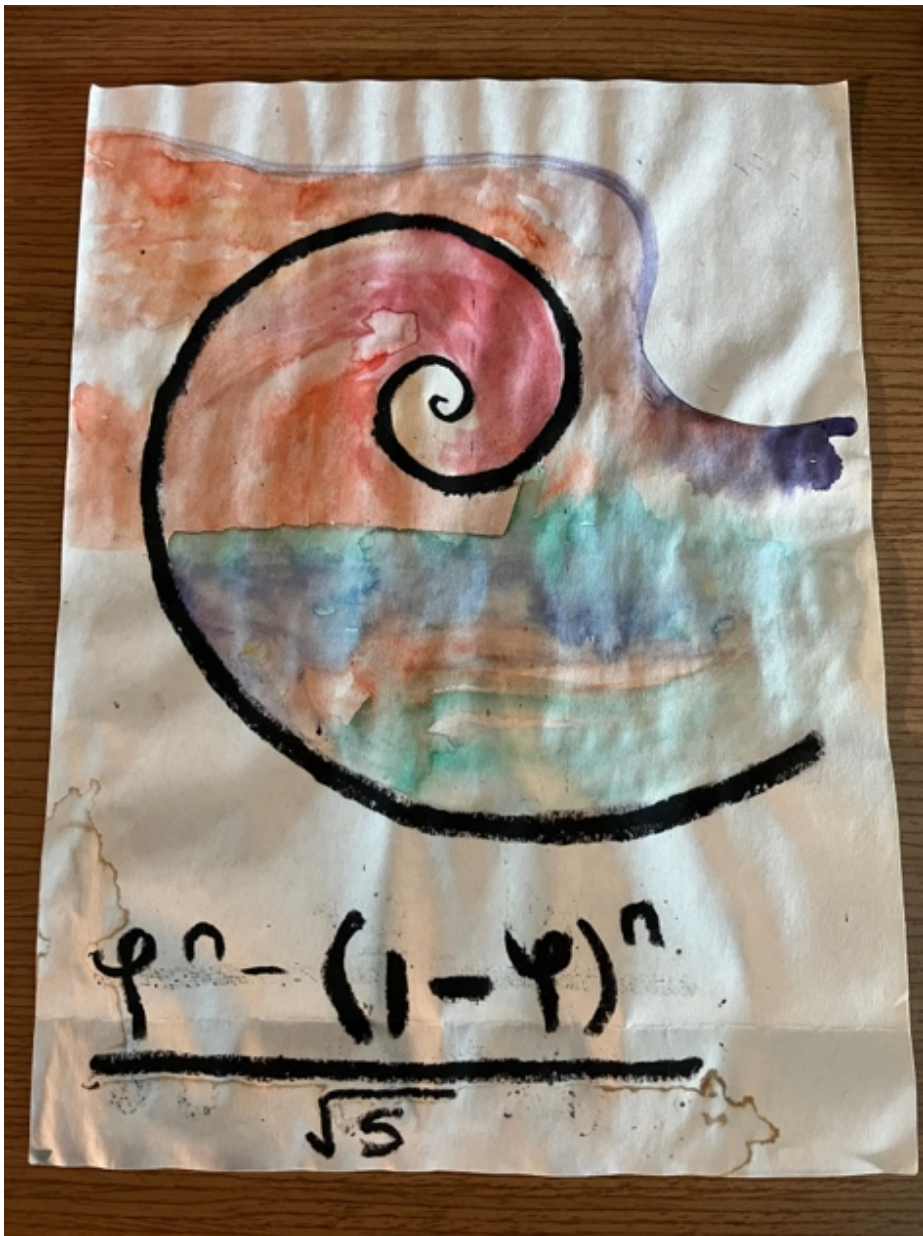


Figure 3: The Golden Ratio, Theodor Savich, 2017

Context for the Wonder: A User Guide

Through this written piece, I do not wish to prove the value of the Arts in and as education or as in the service of other subjects or outcomes. My perception of the Golden Ratio entices me to share and experience the written work outside a utilitarian dictum. I do not look for nor intend to share answers. Like the two lines of the ratio's spiral, I see my reflection here as ontologically contradictory yet proximal, as I occupy a multiplicity of temporal and spatial realities, infinite in movement. I reflect upon the Empires Project as an existential pedagogical referent and confront the collision of individual and collective realities that grow from my sense of self as a scholar, educator, artist, and activist, all the while aware of how my understanding is always a part of a larger social dialogic continuum.

As mentioned above, I started the project with a very definite utilitarian goal in mind—to subvert what I saw and continue to see as an ongoing struggle for progressive educators with the oppressive, marginalizing, and inherently racist US public school system which seeks to indoctrinate students into a Eurocentric phenomenology (Neundorf, et al., 2024). Despite the many positive, and I dare say progressive work being accomplished in our public schools, here in my hometown and the United States in general, I experience an educational system mired in political partisanship. In my own state for example, in my article [“Let’s Make Theatre Illegal Again,”](#) (Weltsek, 2022) I wrote about the 37 state bills that intended to make it illegal to teach Critical Race Theory. The Bill, HB 1134, in my home state is now State Law SEA 202 (2024) which legally eliminates free speech and critical thought under the guise of Intellectual Diversity (Critical Brief on Indiana SEA 202, 2024). Similarly across the US, a learning system called *The Science of Reading*, heralded as a cure-all for poor reading scores (Snowling et al. 2022) as Tierney and Pearson (2024) share, may actually restrict critical thought through an imposed imbalanced focus upon phonics, grammar, and mechanics. It also restricts the use of authentic literature in favor of leveled reading text sets and a curriculum overseen by the legislature that limits what words and phrases may and may not be used. This struggle is with an implicit White Supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative, ableist, and capitalist ideology designed to indoctrinate young people and marginalize and exclude those who cannot or will not be indoctrinated.

Grosfoguel (2007) described a condition where institutional

systems attempt to marginalize other's ways of being as a "colonial power matrix" (p. 219). I see this matrix in one of its most insidious forms under the guise of equity within the US public educational system through standardized exams. As Kendi (2019) explained, "The use of the standardized test to measure aptitude and intelligence is one of the most effective racist policies ever devised..." (p. 101). Kendi's position arises out of the test's lineage from the eugenicist Francis Galton in 1869 to prove the inferiority of the Black race. This act of White Supremacy is an extension of Eurocentrism— "a dominative orientation within Western thought, which actively subjugates its periphery" (De Lissovoy, 2010, p. 285). Through the imposition of standardized tests, enforced within a standardized curriculum, I saw/see an intentional gauge where not only young people of color, but all young people are deemed intelligent or not through their ability to learn White Western thought and values. Through the Empires Project, I wanted to use the arts to engage young people to confront and subvert what I saw/see as innately racist tests—in a sense, confront the existence of a White, patriarchal, heteronormative, and ableist and colonial empire; to use a drama and arts based praxis to de-colonize the classroom (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Bridges, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016, Mignolo, 2006). As Khoja-Moolji (2019) explained, the objective of a decolonial praxis is to "take an active stance toward confronting marginalization due to colonial modes of human relationality and undertake resistive and reparative work" (p. 151). As noble and or ignoble as your politics position you to receive my agenda, it is that very intentionality of agenda that I hope to here problematize. I am not trying to prove my supposition about the US educational public school system. Rather, I use a CCP to wonder how I might understand my own onto-epistemological positioning as informed by the pedagogical space of Arts engagements with young people.

Living Museum: The Empires Project

Freire explained, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students" (1995, p.72). Freire always inspired me to think deeply about how my pedagogy and praxis may perpetuate or challenge my biased and

privileged sense of the world. Freire's concept of teacher-student contradiction continues to foreground my attention on experiencing with young people. It also reminds me, as Aly said, "We never do anything alone." To understand the young people with whom we work as co-creators of the space begins to disrupt my immersion with traditional educational hierarchies.

Through the Empires Project, I was privileged to engage with a group of young people of high school age and their three teachers in a combined Social Studies/Language Arts class in a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) magnet high school in the Midwest United States. The young people were in this combined section as part of their high school graduation requirements. The adults acted as co-curricular designers to weave together social studies, physics, and language arts through arts-based engagements. Through student-developed characters from various historical empires, the young people In Role (Booth, 2005) engaged museumgoers in political dialogues in an interactive experience we called a living museum.

To create the characters, the young people researched empires throughout history. Our goal as educators remained to listen and wonder but not direct how the young people made sense of their empires. As part of the social studies element, we guided the young people to use primary and secondary sources such as the examination of translated diaries, letters, written plays, poetry, and fiction, cultural artifacts like paintings and pottery, music, and professional periodicals, along with textbooks. With these resources, each group developed a sense of how the empire came to be, what its apex looked like, how they arrived there, and finally, what elements led to the decline of that empire. The physics element was introduced through the challenge to think about what technological advancements defined the empire, adding to its ascension to power. The language arts component wove the other pieces together through an understanding of arts literacy and its multimodal and multiliterate nature. Stemming from the young people's inquiry, characters were created based upon each group's notion of how specific empires rose and fell. These characters emerged through a series of arts-based experiences such as mural design, three-dimensional arts creations, drama improvisation, and In Role journaling. Characters of great power emerged, as well as those who were oppressed and exploited.

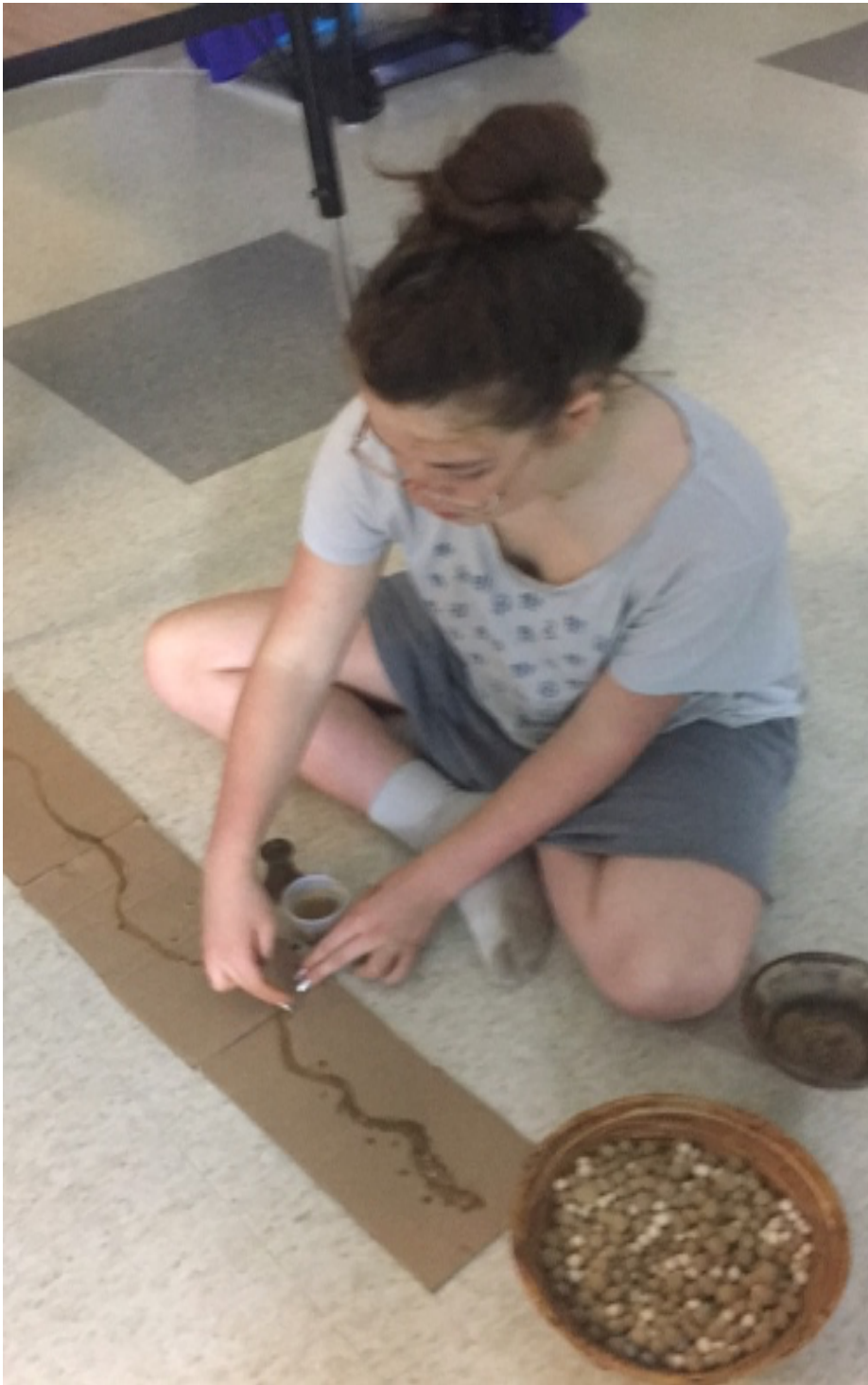


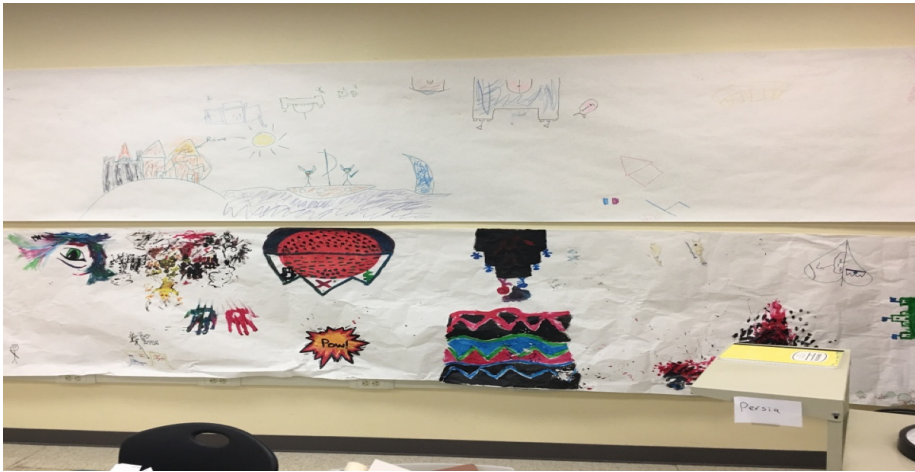
Figure 4: Student in role, Living Museum: The Empires Project, Weltsek & Koontz, 2018

The big element of the museum was that it lived. As the museumgoers moved through the space, they were greeted with sights, sounds, smells, and even tastes the young people felt created the atmosphere and culture of the empire. Through the physics element, the students built replicas of technology they felt defined that empire. For example, based on their research into the Ming Dynasty of 1368 to 1644 A.D., one young person (as seen in Figure 3) created a role of a person forced into labor to build the Great Wall of China. This young person felt that the technology of the wall not only defined how China was able to be safe but also defined the human cost of that safety. In Role, the young people would then engage the museumgoers in dialogues about the political, social, and personal injustices of their empire from the perspective of their characters. Here though is the point: my pedagogy may be seen in my provocation for political engagement. I insisted on, and assumed that a product involving some intellectual and socio-political awareness could be gained. I believed that the Arts do something, rather than really allow myself to find “with” the young people what this experience was about.



Figure 5: In role image of injustice, Living Museum: The Empires Project, Weltsek & Koontz, 2018

A Critical Performative Pedagogy



Figures 5-7: Mural creation, Living Museum: The Empires Project, Weltsek & Koontz, 2018



In their text, “Thinking Things Through,” Henare asks that we “...take ‘things’ encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something” (2006, p. 3). To struggle in this space of my intentional uncertainty, I use Critical Performative Pedagogy (CPP). I have used CPP to think about and articulate the ways a multiplicity of identities intersect and diverge within symbiotic relationships across moments of doing between self and others to create a relational presence in space and time, particularly those moments we see as educational. Again, I am not alone in this moment. As a concept, CPP serves to focus individuals and collectives within the complex phenomenological interplay of wondering about ideas of becoming, identity emergence, and alternative ways of being in and of the world. For example, in the Empires Project, our curricular design was conceptually centered on critical theory and culturally responsive practices, yet our generative strategies were emergent—devised in direct relationship to the ways

we, as a collective, (students and teachers) experienced our interactions. This is to say that artistic engagements were designed within the moment of doing as ideas and perspectives were seen to emerge across student and teacher interactions.

The above mural (Figures 5-7) is an example of the intended fluidity of the process. In a classroom focused through a CPP, assignments are looked upon as interactive strategies designed to engage young people in critical meaning-making. The mural strategy was the first strategy within the Empires Project. On day one, the young people entered the room and found a long white piece of paper. The young people were asked to use the markers and crayons laid about to play with their notions of what power meant through image and/or word. The pedagogy behind the event was that the young people would create meaning based upon their sense of truths connected to the idea of a word—power. The obvious complication is my imposition of the forced provocation of having young people think about power. Now of course as teachers we must do something. Yes, that is not the point, it is here that I problematize how we arrive at that moment of praxis.

A CPP approach intends that a classroom be a place where identities are viewed as being performed in time and space. Like Barad (2007), who understands the self as an ‘onto-epistem-ology,’ agential realist account where it is “possible to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to the optics of transparency or opacity” (p. 812), in a CPP, identities are in a constant state of emergence rather than residing in some stoic sense of a fixed and pre-established self, operating through predetermined schema and conscious sense-making. A CPP lens is not an excuse for my agenda-laden focus on power. A CPP lens rather allows me to see that agenda, own it, and challenge me to experience how my and others’ performed ‘selves’ emerged around that agenda. This is to say that, yes, I did impose the focus. Yet, I wonder how my ‘self’ appeared. How did my emergent ‘self’ manifest, and how did that moment inform the next engagement with the young people?

A Note on Self-ness

When I wonder about the ‘self,’ I am drawn to French existentialist philosopher, playwright, novelist, and political activist, Jean-Paul

Sartre. I imagine a space of artistic and educational creation where an existential 'I' emerges from unreflected consciousness into consciousness (Sartre, 1960) giving an account of oneself (Butler, 2005) to action within socialized reality. Sartre dove deeply into notions of how the 'self' becomes. In his work *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, he postulates, "The problem, indeed, is to determine the conditions for the possibility of experience" (p. 32). This is to say that in order to determine if a 'self' indeed exists being able to place that 'self' within an 'experience' is essential. The Arts and Drama rely heavily upon the belief that those who participate in the event 'experience' something. What, however, are the conditions for naming an Arts event as an 'experience'? Sartre thought of 'experience' that "One of these conditions is that I can always regard my perception or thoughts as mine, nothing more" (ibid., 32). It is possible to say that, as I engaged with the young people and considered which arts-based strategy to engage the group in next, our artifacts and dialogues were evidence of our ownership of the event and proof that we had an 'experience'. The acknowledgement of 'experience', however, still does not address my potential to position the young people as objects to reach my goal of subverting what I saw/see as an systemized oppressive educational institution. The acknowledgement of this moment does, however, become a springboard into a conversation into how the individual comes to the pronouncement 'I' have had such and such 'experience'. In my case this pronouncement of 'I' allows me to at least consciously own my presence. It is the 'conscious' acknowledgement of my 'self' as an active agent that becomes that through which I might actually take a critical look at how my sense of the arts-based moment moves me to select/design the next arts-based strategy.

Although consciousness may become the sense of existence, Sartre is careful to remind, that this conscious sense is not knowledge of a thing, things or self it is rather "...purely and simply consciousness of being conscious of that object" (p. 40). In other words, consciousness does not suggest a knowledge of a thing, an engagement with a thing or with and of the 'self' above a basic sensory awareness. Even though I was aware of a 'self' and aware of the young people, it did not mean I knew or understood them. Sartre terms this moment as the unreflected consciousness. It is a moment before an 'I' enters and begins to name, react and respond. The unreflected

conscious is the rudimentary moment of human consciousness where there is no consideration of the object's qualities or how that object informs a notion of 'self' and or reality. So how do I come to know a person outside of objectification so I can even begin to consider the complex performance that take place as we engage across realities, as supposed/proposed through a CPP?

In our 2019, graphic novel style piece, *Notes from Nowhere*, Dr. Clare Hammoor and I take on this very wonder as we consider the dissociated space. The dissociated moment of the creative, whether that be an arts piece, the creation of a lesson in Arts education, or a piece of scholarly work is for us a leap into the unknown. This dissociation is just prior to Sartre's unreflected consciousness, a moment prior to even this rudimentary sense of existence. A moment of non-being. We theorized that it is in this dissociated space where the journey to experience an 'I' begins that leads to a later re-association and to the later pronouncement and performance of the creation of self as in a CPP.

What does the moment look like when the 'I' begins to reflect to re-associate back into a socialized and reality, in relationship to the wonder of this paper, it is when I chose which strategy to use next. How does the moment of creation of 'I' occur? Sartre believed, "The me appears only with the reflective act, and as a noematic correlate of a reflective intention" (p. 60). The noematic correlate in this moment being an actual complete sense of the other as a full a complete being outside of the 'self'. It is a moment where the 'self' realizes it is a complex embodied whole with its own very specific sense of the world that may or may not align with other complex whole 'selves'. The alterative pronouncement of that is not me occurs. This moment, the ability to actually embrace the wholeness of another person, body, mind and spirit, is unfortunately often culturally denied, specifically as I am a product of the very oppressive systematized educational institutions of which I write.

The Cut: Or I Want My Body Back

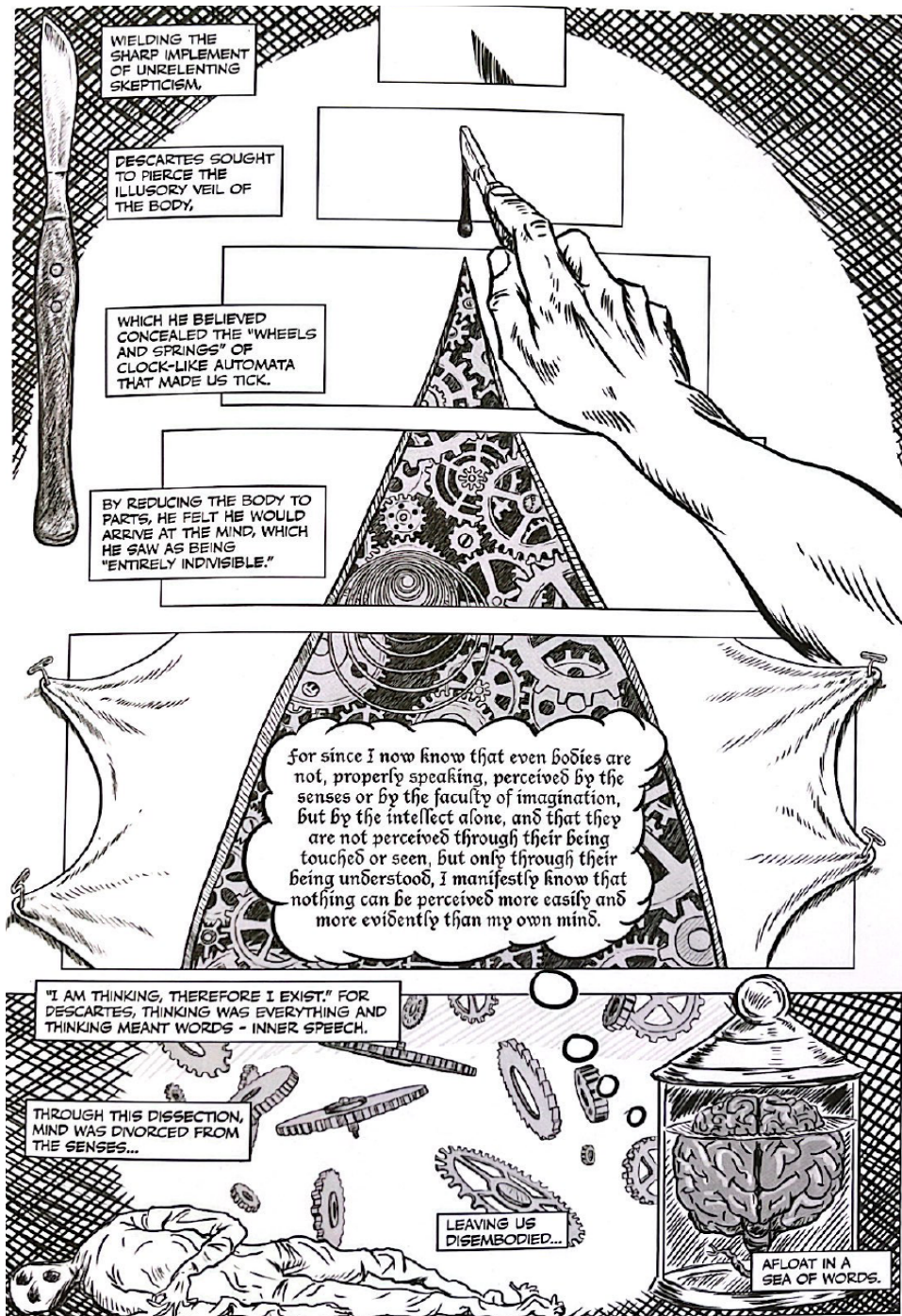


Figure 8: Unflattering, Sousanis, 2015, p. 55

In “Unflattening,” Sousanis (2015) explained how, in 1637, in “Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences” (*Discours de la Méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*), Rene Descartes with one catchy phrase cogito, ergo sum, “I Think therefore I am” (Olscamp 2001, Part iv), literally cut the body out of Western phenomenology. Sousanis went on to playfully ponder how that brutal cut created an environment that made Western thought primary over cultures that value the entire embodied experience as knowledge. My wonder about how my ‘self’ showed up is connected to this existential laceration.

A CPP, for me, relies heavily upon deconstructing a Cartesian dualism, that separates the mind from body, intellect from sensations, and instead owning the embodied self (Perry and Medina, 2015). In a CPP, an embodied experience is not to be viewed as something fixed outside of the experiential that can be read and acted upon and through but rather as the corporal manifestation of a non-representational emergence (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Here, as Leander and Boldt explain, “life is understood as Emergent, having no natural directions of growth or boundaries or barriers” (2012, p. 4). The notion of the embodied self is in this way in a constant state of flux performing spontaneously re-forming and re-defining the ‘self’ in the moment of doing through an intimate and sensual embrace of the corporal world, through the sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and spirit. The idea that the body is marked or written upon in a static and defining and definable way becomes anathema to a vibrant and dynamic emergence that is making meaning rather than re-making tropes and social inscriptions. Through a CPP lens, in this moment of doing as I performed my role as teacher, although I had chosen the word *power*, the fluidity of my own emergent embodied ‘self’ informed how I uttered the word *power*. Due to the very presence of the young people in space and time, my performance of ‘self’ as teacher was impacted by the complexity of the moment in so far as I was critically reflecting upon the potential influence this strategy and that word might have with a group of young people I had only just met. Garion explains:

Within the context of educational practice, performance represents the teacher’s pedagogy, the students’ interactions with that pedagogy, and their mutual involvement in school. Significant to

cultural politics, however, is whether this expanded field of performance manifests the oppression of cultural workers or their political agency (1999, p.8).

I must speculate, however, were the students and I actually engaged in the mutual and embodied creation of the educational experience. Were we all focused and exchanging ideas that in some way took the totality of our 'selves' as complete and complex spirits in time and space to inform each moment of creation? What was I doing?

Doing, Not Do: Research?

The idea of what I did or did not do transcends a meager attempt at a critical self-reflection. My point here is to bring attention to the impossibility of stating what drama does and bring into focus how the intention to prove that drama and the arts serve a purpose has problems. This begs the question of whether inquiry into, upon, with, or through drama and the arts that situates itself as in support of a quantitatively and or qualitatively supporting a 'doing' is existentially flawed or at least situated in an onto-epistemology of positivism and a deliberate statement of reality as ultimately knowable? Was I that critically in tune with the moment and aware of the complex interplay of self and other as a defining variable on how the word *power* was uttered? Patraha pointed out it is impossible to name with any sense of purity the moment of doing, as our onto-epistemological socially imposed tropes intrude in the naming and "represents particular discursive categories, conventions, genres and practices that frame our interpretations, even as we perceive the present moment of doing" (1999, p. 6). A CPP presents the idea that moments, particularly those understood as performative, exist in the doing and are gone even as they are done. Naming these moments, let alone proving that they do anything other than what we creatively imagine they do, is akin to trying to catch air with a butterfly net. What the experience did or did not do, what I did or did not think, and being able to read what occurred in the classroom, or 100% fully and accurately inquire into and report on what happened would necessitate that I view any one moment in time, any one curriculum as a static temporality fixed moment in time and space. I would have to state that the multiplicity of individually collaborated performances within this fixed moment could

be positioned and articulated as fact and truth.

In a CPP, barring the ability to dwell within a multiverse or quantum reality where I could continually revisit the moment of doing, naming the doing is replaced with a perpetual sense of emergence on onto-epistemological interpretation. In other words, an opinion. Through a CPP, the value of the event as educational lay not in being able to name its value but rather in unknowability and an embrace of the experiential. In a CPP, learning becomes experiencing and action and not naming or showing value through some material, quantifiable, or intellectual outcome. As a teacher in this space, I see myself as vulnerable, malleable, and ultimately unknowable as the young people themselves and more the intangibility of a curriculum and or research that positions itself as fact and truth. At best, I am merely an inquisitive provocateur who, like the young people who entered the room and saw a big white piece of paper and had no idea what was going on or what might happen.

CPP Does Not Deny Responsibility

CPP is offered here, not as a cure-all or fix to the complexity of personal imposition into any moment. Nor is it presented to deny teacher and or student responsibility for the moment. On the contrary. A CPP demands a much more rigorous responsibility to the complex interplay of ways of being, knowing, and acting in and upon the world. Again, CPP is a conceptual lens that invites teachers and young people to see the moment of doing as a performance and an invitation to see any interaction with someone else, especially in those moments we label educational, as the collective creation of reality. In our forthcoming article titled, “Storying As Curriculum: Critical Performance Pedagogy and Relational Identity Emergence in an Arts-Based Teacher Preparation Course,” Aly and I struggle with the notion of how relational perspectives inform responsibility within a CPP guided course. We felt that a relational perspective shaped the theoretical and methodological engagement with student creations/coursework as “encounters with difference... *in relation to*—rather than apart from—the self” (Asher, 2003, p. 235), where experiences are always in relation to the experiences of others (Huckaby, 2013). Indeed, meaning-making is collective, relational, and always becoming. This moving away from the Cartesian cut, as relational thinking suggests,

centers on how meaning is developed within entangled relations, of moving knowledge, and conceptions of meaning that are not fixed or static (Kuntz, 2015). This idea is crucial to understanding how a CPP may provide a space for a critical self-awareness that creates opportunities for much more intimate understandings of what occurs to inform responsible actioning.

Relationality is an inherently ontological feminist tradition, including Black Feminist Thought, Chicana/Latina Feminism, and Indigenous and Queer feminist epistemologies. Indeed, Canella & Manuelito (2008) posit to challenge patriarchal and colonial oppression is to recognize the relational and connected. Anzaldúa expands upon this further and incorporates a radical interconnectedness as the “deep common ground and interwoven kinship among all things and people” (2002, p. 565). Anzaldúa’s radical interconnectedness through a relational worldview pushes against binary-oppositional frameworks and creates a collective responsibility toward issues of social justice, equity, and activism (Keating, 2008). In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Sara Ahmed parallels this responsibility towards creating relationships “with others that are more equal; how to find ways to support those who are not supported or less supported by social systems; how to keep coming up against histories that have become, histories that have become solid as walls” (p. 1).

In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy actively invites students and teachers to bring their entire selves to the classroom, both their intellect and their spirit, as they examine ways of knowing with habits of being. Thus, the relationship of both students and teachers becomes part of the curriculum and builds a different history through communities of responsibility. hooks (1994) further suggests that to be responsible educators, just as teachers encourage their different students to embark on their journeys of learning and growth, so do they need to engage consciously in their own self-reflexive process of growth. Such a recursive, pedagogical process allows for the development of synthesis across the differences we and our students bring to the classroom. This recursive process maintains an ethical accountability that we are always already in relation, and thus, can create new ethical imaginings of relating with one another (Elfreich & Dennis, 2022). For example, McKittrick (2021) suggests that we may “read outside of ourselves not *for* ourselves but to actively unknow ourselves, to unhinge, and come to know each other” (p. 16)

beyond the self, there is a collective capacity to build social change. In this way, questions of individuality that shift to relations with others also involve rethinking responsibility (Pearce and MacLure, 2009).

Re-Positioning The Empires Project

By re-positioning the students through a CPP lens, as the active responsible producers of themselves and their sense of knowledge rather than responsible consumers of Eurocentric epistemologies and ontological schema found in the standardized tests, the possibility existed to imagine, like Seth (2007), that “knowledge was always in the plural, always took the form of so many knowledges and practices” (p. 34). One of the mainstays of the Western White educational system is the imposition of their phenomenology through limiting the ways of knowing. Primary to that ability to limit and define reality for all is the US Eurocentric reliance on written literacy as the preeminent form of meaning-making to the negation of any other embodied way of knowing or being. Perry (2020) described these “normative constructions of literacy education as Eurocentric and neocolonial, effectively supporting a pedagogy that normalizes certain practices and people...” (p. 1). Extending out of the field of critical literacies (Janks, 2020; Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013; Gutiérrez, Larson, & Kreuter, 1995), Perry’s position is that a pluriversal sense of meaning-making “acknowledges forms of meaning-making, experience, and knowledge that exceed the normative, Western or Eurocentric onto-ethico-epistemologies. An epistemology of pluriversality requires a framework of pluriversal literacies” (ibid. p. 4). What this means is that to create a classroom dynamic that allows for a multiplicity of ways of knowing and being within the world, all participants would focus on how those understandings were made and embrace the range of epistemologies and relative ontologies present within the classroom as well as the range and varieties of ways those phenomenologies were performed. That is not an easy ask and possibly an impossibility. So again, what is it that truly happened throughout the Empires Project? What did I do, or not do?



Figure 9: Proximity to the Problem, *The Empires Project*, Weltsek & Koontz 2019

Continuations

In this piece, I have reflected on my agenda to design the Empires Project to work with young people to confront what I believed to be a standardized public-school curriculum that was/is inherently racist. I wondered how my pedagogy and praxis may or may not have fed into it. As a continuation of these thoughts, I believe that my interest lay within a commitment to understanding Western colonial domination. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said explains that:

[t]here is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. (pp. 27-28)

My interpretation of Said's comment above is that the US educational system and my own pedagogy and inquiry practices remain heavily structured around ideologies, philosophies, religious beliefs, spiritual beliefs, and cultural standards. These structures will always further the perpetuation of hegemonic centers through the manipulation of individual ways of being and becoming through pedagogies that focus upon curriculum over individual ways of knowing—through a culture of

utilitarianism. I see the Western White perspective as couched in an ontological belief that the universal exists and that universal truth exists solely within the superior Western White culture and race or, as Escobar (2018) states, “the hegemony of modernity’s one-world ontology” (p. 4). Ultimately, the colonial power resides in an ability to force the belief that the universal may only be gained, if at all, through educating the biologically inferior races (Wynter, 2003; Glissant, 1997; Said, 1978; Fanon, 1963). I feel this reflection has brought me once again to the space where I see the event horizon at the end of the Golden Ratio. I feel more than before that to subvert the ability of institutionalized education and its scholarship to perpetuate the domination and colonialization of the other through bigoted educational paradigms cemented within positivistic pedagogies, and research paradigms, a radical shift towards the unknowability of the performative is needed in my pedagogy and scholarship.

The point of this piece was not to explain my process of creating an interdisciplinary arts-based experience, nor was it to highlight some sort of critical discourse analysis of what the young people said, did, or produced and draw a conclusion about what they learned. Through this piece, I attempted to explain and use a CPP lens on the performance of my ‘self’, pedagogy, and praxis. To that end, and relevant to this piece, was the identity I performed as teacher in the creation of the Empires Project. In this reflection, I took the struggle against Freire’s Banking methodological approach to education seriously, where the “teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” (p. 53). Through the emergent sense of a performed self within a CPP, like Mohanty (2003), I challenged myself to “explicitly link a historical materialist understanding of social location to the theorization of epistemic privilege and the construction of social identity” (p. 524) or as Mohanty (2003) explains, the objective of this theoretical dive became for me to subvert what “imperial rationality [has] convinced us to be real, and that the real is accountable by only one rationality” (p. 13).

I leave this space, not alone but with a hope to be with you the reader, and offer this inquisitive provocation. What is it you think you’re doing? Is it possible to turn your gaze away from the other as subject/object and instead turn it inward upon your emergent self? How are you responsible for the reading of the moment, for the conclusions you draw, for the ideological and political positions you

impose/introduce/bring, what responsibility to you take for your power in the situation and the actions, you and young people may take within arts based engagements? And more, why do you believe this to be so, to be, dare I say the truth?

Peace and well-being.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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