

THE OTHER OTHER IN DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE:
THINKING WITH JIM GARRETT'S
LEARNING TO BE IN THE WORLD WITH OTHERS

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Learning to be in the World with Others: Difficult Knowledge & Social Studies Education

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At the close of the twentieth century, a number of scholars in education began to focus their work on how pedagogy might address a legacy of historical violence and injustices that continue to haunt and define our present. Extending from Shoshana Felman's groundbreaking work (1992) on the vexed relationship between historical trauma, testimony, witnessing and pedagogy, a general concern was forged around how learning from traumatic events involves a break down in meaning, a crisis, and an encounter with what Deborah Britzman (1998) terms, "the failure of knowledge" (p. 265). Whereas, conventionally, learning is understood as the cumulative and progressive acquisition of knowledge leading to "mastery," at issue for these thinkers is how the encounter with traumatic histories necessarily implies grappling with that which cannot be mastered as knowledge, with what defies and dispossess us of epistemological certainty (see: Kincheloe and Pinar, 2001). Britzman (1998b) crystalized the issue when she coined the term "difficult knowledge," particularly accentuating the internal conflicts and psychical defences against knowing that learners erect as they become un-done by the difficult stories of others.

Over the years, thinkers, historians and researchers in curriculum have supplemented the psychoanalytically inflected concept of "difficult knowledge" through a variety of educational concerns, issues and approaches. The work of Peter Taubman (2012), notably, traces the historical relationship between education and psychoanalysis, helping us to account for the inherent "difficult knowledge" at play in education, in which libidinal and aggressive forces criss-cross the pedagogical scene. In a more humanities oriented approach, Aparna Mishra Tarc (2015) inflects

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the practice of literacy through a psychoanalytic reckoning with the “difficult knowledge” of our internal fictive worlds. We also find a number of curriculum scholars working more explicitly with how different historical traumas, traumatic sites and objects implicate and trouble any straightforward curricular approaches to teaching about events of social devastation. For example, Marla Morris (2001), discussing Holocaust education, Avner Segall (2014), engaging with museum exhibits of difficult histories, and Paula Salvio (2017), examining mafia violence in Italy, all grapple with how encounters with “difficult knowledge” complicate and vex questions and strategies of historical representation in various forums and curricula.

Contributing to the enlargement of this varied and still emerging field, James Garrett’s *Learning to be in the world with others: Difficult knowledge and social studies* (2017) carefully tends to the explosive insight of psychoanalysis in education. His book underscores how, “while difficult knowledge is situated within the economy of learning about massive social breakdown and devastation, the difficulty resides not in the content but rather in the learner’s relationship with it” (p. 110). Almost a decade of research work with student teachers in social studies education informs Garrett’s book (see: 2013; 2013a 2012; 2011). And, over the years, his work has consistently concerned itself with the complications of how the internal world meets the external world, particularly focusing on pedagogical scenes in the social studies classroom that are forged by our encounter with “difficult knowledge.”

While psychoanalysis was arguably at the forefront of defining the contours of the emerging field of “difficult knowledge” (see also: Alice Pitt and Britzman, 2003), another influential tendency was also at work in defining this area of scholarship: namely, the Levinasian concern with “alterity.” When Roger Simon (2002, 2003, 2005) writes of “difficult knowledge,” he mobilizes Levinas’s ideas to accentuate a mode of ethical attentiveness and learning. More specifically, through Simon’s deployment of the term, we find a mode of attentiveness that asks us to be susceptible, vulnerable and open to the difficulty of welcoming the otherness of the other beyond any facile “cognitization,” categorization or identification. At stake in his work is a pedagogy that strives to resist reducing the “exteriority” of the other to a version of our own story or to an object that confirms my knowledge: that would assuage the terms and logics of my identity.

While these two tendencies (psychoanalysis and ethical “alterity”), exemplified by Britzman and Simon, share some structural similarities, particularly the way in

which knowledge is problematized and how the subject is un-done by a “traumatism of astonishment,” there are admittedly, as Sharon Todd (2003) has pointed out, irreconcilable differences. Whereas in psychoanalysis what moves us in the encounter with “difficult knowledge” inevitably involves the affects and psychical complications and projections of our own emotional world, for Levinas, the ethical possibility does not involve the psychical “baggage brought to the encounter.” Rather it involves, as Todd (2003) puts it, “the potentiality to be moved [to be summoned] in such a way that the self becomes egoless in facing the Other” (p. 12). An ethical relation, for Levinas, and ethical learning for Simon, must be premised on an encounter that is free from the screens, filters, identifications and past projections that the self would graft onto an encounter with the other (p. 12).

As Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1969), “the strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics” (p. 43). Simon interprets the Levinasian ethical sensibility here as requiring us to attend to the stories of others so that we don’t reduce others to versions of ourselves. In this way, he gestures us to protect the otherness of the other (as a radical “exteriority”), so that this “alterity” can usher forth to *estrangle* me from myself and to put me into question, thus teaching me and opening me to sense what is beyond me. As Simon (2005) explains, the other “as ‘teacher,’ comes to me, comes to the present, from outside—for only that which ‘I am not’ (which I think not, which I am not already capable of speaking of) can teach me” (p. 112). Simon offers a vigilant (im)possible ethical pedagogy of “exteriority” that seeks to undo our identity-logical assurances, trouble our representations and expose us to a radical moment of learning, in which “the stories of others might shift our own unfolding stories” (p. 88).

In Chapter Two of his book, Garrett provides a detailed and eloquent account of the field of “difficult knowledge.” While, throughout the book, Garrett invokes the works of Roger Simon and Judith Butler, along with other thinkers, who are profoundly influenced by Levinas’s oeuvre, it’s interesting that he never explicitly discusses Levinas’s influence on the field. Subsequently, rather than considering the significance of “exteriority,” Garrett gives exclusive priority to the psychoanalytic understanding of the field, with its insistence on the “interiority” of learning. However, while Levinas and his conception of “alterity” and “exteriority” are cast aside in his account, I think Garrett’s concerns still contain traces of a certain Levinasian ethical sensibility although he never references him. The Levinasian

sensibility “smuggles” itself in, as it were, in the three terms that Garrett weaves together in the conceptual apparatus of his project. “Trauma,” “crisis,” and “vulnerability” are mobilized throughout his book for *the relational possibilities* they afford. All three terms (trauma, crisis and vulnerability) implicitly underscore “my” exposure and subjection to a radical “exteriority” that exceeds and challenges me. The terms, in other words, mark a relation that undoes my certainties and assurances, exposing me to an otherness (an estrangement and “alterity”) that calls me beyond myself. Garrett himself seems to suggest as much in Chapter Five, while discussing Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, when he suggests that stories can implicate me but are also radically different and can teach me because they are more than just about me. Garrett thus rightly appreciates that, “as a reader approaches *Beloved*, ... they are intentionally being pulled outside of their subject location. Estrangement is the desired effect” (p. 125).

Nonetheless, Garrett’s project is decisively a psychoanalytic one. His insistence on a psychoanalytic approach might actually help to clear up some of the vexing conceptual vagaries and impasses that the Levinasian ethical accent on “difficult knowledge” can tend towards. His approach helps us to get around the difficulty of conceiving of how a radically *exterior* other (as proposed by Levinas) can ever reach me and move me to be concerned without soliciting my internal world. While I still see much value in keeping *the tension* operative between Levinasian ethics and psychoanalysis (for helping us think “difficult knowledge”), I appreciate the focused turn to psychoanalysis that Garrett insists upon. For in following how, in his words, “the big external crisis meets the ordinary internal crisis that is learning” (p. 44), he gets us to sense how indeed the world and others can come to matter for us. Early in the book Garrett concisely puts it in this way, “in relation to a pedagogical scene in which something of the world is presented as a lesson. The outside meets the inside and blurs the boundaries between them. Difficult knowledge centers the features of such blurred boundaries and allows for a focus on the affective dimensions of pedagogy” (p. 26).

Centering on the significance of how affect is evoked in relationship to “difficult knowledge,” how “feelings occur before thought” (p. 112), how we bump up, as it were, against the world through our psychical biographies, Garrett’s book offers a powerful analytics for exploring the status of “knowledge” in social studies education. Indeed, one of the most novel and significant contributions that Garrett offers has to do with his prowess in exposing how the field of social studies needs to reckon with the “difficult knowledge” that permeates and riddles its very grounds.

Given that social studies education inevitably grapples with the difficulties of living with others in the world, and with a legacy of historical violence that still marks our present, social studies education cannot dispassionately consider its pedagogical forays and subjects “without at least brushing up against the affective registering of that experience” (p. 38).

Garrett tells us, in Chapter Three, that typically social studies education has been concerned with introducing students to difficult and controversial topics by prioritizing deliberation, rational debate, and the transmission of critical skills to discern evidence and dispel ignorance. While not dismissive of such approaches, Garrett leads us to consider the limitations at work here, particularly how the emphasis on deliberation and the acquisition of skills for grounding knowledge both lack an account of “affectivity.” In prioritizing deliberation above all else, the social studies classroom elides the significance of the emotional world, or, if taken into account at all, emotions are usually seen as a treacherously disruptive, conflictual force that needs to be contained lest it wrecks knowledge. In side stepping affect in this way, the social studies classroom misses something vitally important. For, as Garrett beautifully puts it:

Knowing has an effect. Knowing is affective. Knowledge is dangerous. Anxiety about the consequences of knowledge are part of social studies education. (...) We are more than collectors of knowledge. We also are resisters to it. We ignore knowledge. We disavow it. We project it. We use it as a weapon. We accommodate it. (p. 61)

Garret’s point here not only accentuates the significance of reckoning with affect, but goes a long way into helping us appreciate the vexing realization that, regardless of teaching people to acquire knowledge through deliberation, “people do not abandon beliefs called into question by factual information” (p. 69), rather they tend to vehemently defend their ignorance (See also: Taubman 2012, pp. 14-33; Logue, 2008).

Rather than a passion for knowledge, people are roused as Jacques Lacan once noted, by “a passion for ignorance”: a passion not to know in order to defend against anything that might disturb our self-assurances and self-perception. Commenting on Lacan’s insight here, Felman (1987) notes that, “ignorance, in other words is nothing other than a *desire to ignore*: its nature is less cognitive than performative” (p. 79). Appreciating that ignorance is not a passive act or a simple absence that can be

corrected with the right amount of facts, psychoanalysis proposes that we think of ignorance as a “dynamic act of negation”: as an act of resistance and refusal that defends and protects our self-integration from an encounter that renders us once again into an “enfant” (without words). This, of course, has particular implications for how we might ever learn from an encounter with “difficult knowledge”: with unspeakable and unmasterable events of human devastation that puncture our self-assurances and return us to a primal scene of helplessness, in which we are literally left without words. Garrett insists that the very resistances and defences that this encounter provokes is exactly where we have a chance to enact and witness a certain “learning,” indeed it is the very condition of its possibility. As Felman (1987) reveals, “the truly revolutionary insight—the truly revolutionary pedagogy discovered by Freud—consists in showing the ways in which ignorance itself can teach us something, become itself instructive” (p. 79).

We need to pay attention to our negations, resistances and denials (our “passion for ignorance”) in the face of “difficult knowledge” since negations tell us something—they render sensible not only our own inexperience or our own historical ignorance, but also our investments in certain narratives, genres, and logics that protect our illusions of ourselves. Thus, attending to how we resist knowledge gives us a chance to work-through and “own-up” to our projections, illusions, and misconceptions. Learning, here, cannot assume what the promise of deliberation offers pedagogy (reason and mutual understanding), but needs to start by understanding our practices of encountering “difficult knowledge—what gets called up and belies the terms on which we may hear and learn something about our being with others in the world—as problematic. To this end, Garrett studies the underlying structure of resistance to “difficult knowledge” at play in various pedagogical scenes in social studies, a discipline that admittedly needs to engage with issues and problems of the social world by inviting students into “understanding the self, the Other, and the relationship between the two” (p. 3).

Drawing on qualitative interviews with social studies teachers, in Chapter Four, Garrett explores encounters with an object of “difficult knowledge,” specifically, Spike Lee’s 2006 documentary film *When the Levees Broke*, detailing post-Katrina New Orleans. What Garrett manages to poignantly convey in this Chapter are the defensive processes, the psychic patterns of “re-routings” and deferrals, that steer the interviewees away from thinking through and learning from their relation with “difficult knowledge.” In other words, he traces how teachers foreclose their sense of being implicated in and responsible for race issues that are called up by the film.

While “negation” (or resistance) might afford us with the possibility of rendering cognizant our defenses against a certain knowledge, the book in this Chapter portrays, at least in my reading, a more entrenched psychic formula—that of “disavowal.” The ingenious “artful” ploys of routing and re-routing that we see the participants undertaking, takes them further and further away from being moved to *think* their relation to race and its wider significance, even as they witness the suffering and loss affecting people caught up in its workings. The disavowal of race, the inability to bear or think it through, seems to lead to more anxiety building up around the term “race,” consequently unleashing a greater need to defend against its very mentioning, re-routing it and disavowing it all the more. At this point, not only does Garrett guide us to notice the fact that race is deferred, but also the book implies the intricate psychic process involved in such avoidance (p. 98).

In Chapter Five, Garrett showcases an encounter with “difficult knowledge” mediated via aesthetic objects that provoke and necessitate “symbolization.” Here, Garrett offers something hopeful about learning *from* “difficult knowledge” as he follows his pre-service students’ encounters with Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. He details, in particular, how, through the aesthetic object and pedagogical intervention, students’ pine to “construct meaning from the meeting of outer and inner world” (p. 112). We also see how their encounter with the novel affords them a chance to work-through “the ways meaning becomes ... fractured, broken, and lost, exceeding the affirmations of rationality, consciousness, and consolation” (p. 21 citing Britzman, 1998). Garrett gives us a considerate exposition of how learning from “difficult-knowledge” (from an encounter that sends one back to the primal scene of their own helplessness) “proceeds through breakdowns and reparations” (p. 111). We thus see students re-visiting what and how they are learning—not only about what afflicted others in the past, but also from the internal-psychic disturbances and disruptions affected through their own reading, interpretations, and vested desires in learning to teach.

Paralleling the vexing work of learning to teach with the experience of reading *Beloved*, the chapter moves us to consider the grounds on which students can bring to “full speech” their *felt* relationship with the past, present, and future reverberations of this difficult story, creating possible conditions for meaning and sociality. Garrett thus points us to consider the possibility of hope, citing Sara Matthews’s work (2009), as “an encounter with social devastation and loss [that] might bring the self into contact with the reality of one’s emotional ties to others” (p. 111). While gesturing to the reparative and creative potentialities that might be

found when the “scene of address” is mobilized through aesthetic objects, when a change in understanding opens up into thinking, Garrett also asks us to remain cautious of any facile optimism or settled answers.

In the final paragraph of this chapter, however, Garrett admits that only half the class showed up on the day when *Beloved* was being discussed (p. 129). The effect of so many students being absent from this important discussion gives me pause to mention an impasse that psychoanalysis and pedagogy need to consider, and that in many ways is not covered in this book. This in no way is a critique of Garrett’s excellent book, but a supplemental speculative missive that opens, perhaps, an “other heading” for thinking with this book. Admittedly, much depends on the collision between the pedagogical projectiles of “difficult knowledge” and the subject’s interiority. Garrett poetically calls up the image of an “affective plume” to capture the *felt* impact unleashed as the outer world hits our inner worlds. He writes,

The unconscious is not directly knowable. What I am left to do, then, is to investigate the particles [the debris] that arise from the collision between pedagogical projectiles and the surface of the individual. Here, the projectile is a difficult film, photograph, or even memory that comes to mind through discussion. The “affective plume” (as I call it) that arises from the initial contact is emotion, or affect. In psychoanalytic theory, affects and emotions are the clues, the indicants, the sign posts, which help demonstrate the ways in which people make connections to objects in the world. (84-85)

The felt contact, which Garrett evokes, would necessitate an interested vested subject, who, in one way or another, is roused (libidinally invested) by the collision with “difficult knowledge.” Even if “difficult knowledge” is negated, disavowed or deflected, there is contact and it makes a mark, an impact on the subject and its psychic history: hence, the “affective plume” or trail of affective debris or particles that we can follow to understand the psychic investment (including resistances) that get called up in the encounter.

My question, however, is what happens when subjects are just not there to encounter the impact of “difficult knowledge.” I mean, what happens when students are literally absent (missing from class, yes), but, also, absent in the sense of missing

“in the action”—in the ability to feel or to be moved in any which way by the encounter with others and the stories they offer. Besides the students who do not show up for class (in this case, a significant number of them), I’m thinking of the possibility of subjects who have no projections, no defences, no libidinal attachments, or what have you, because they are not roused to make affective investments with others: subjects who are just absent, whose emotional apparatus remains mute. I don’t think we are dealing here with repression or resistance, but with something perhaps like “foreclosure”—in which the encounter with stories and images of “difficult knowledge” do not pose any “difficulty” at all, since “knowledge” does not impact or mark the subject. In this instance, there would be no plume of affective debris or particles to witness since there is no contact and no impact of exteriority that could draw out the subject’s psychic biography.

While this figure might sound exceptional, I want to suggest that he or she might be more symptomatic of a contemporary malaise, or “cerebral mutation,” formed by the blows and shocks received from our exceptional present. But what makes for such an exceptional present? By way of closing, let me propose that we seem to find ourselves witnessing the emergence of a new figure who is born from and who embodies the blows of our time, a time of “historical agnosia.”

The word *agnosia*, in neurology, describes a condition of the brain—often resulting from a traumatic blow—in which, although the affected sense organ is left perfectly *intact*, a person cannot recognize or make sense of what he or she senses. People afflicted by “visual agnosia,” for example, have eyes that still technically see, however, they can’t make sense of what their eyes are looking at. We live, admittedly, in a time of “historical agnosia,” in which although we seem to “see” everything perfectly fine, and seem to have an abundance of information for seeing the past, present, and soon to come devastations, we seem more and more unable to sense or draw meaningful associations with the historical implication of what we see. We seemingly see everything, but have become largely indifferent to all that we see, resigned to our disassociations with the difficult knowledge that implicates us and that we should try to recognize as such. Our “emotional apparatus” seems to have received a severe blow, effectively muting its affective possibilities for drawing associations, making attachments, and rendering decisions about the difficult knowledge that comes our way. Extending from Catherine Malabou’s insight from her book, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage* (2012), the blow to our “emotional apparatus” impedes our ability to attach and make decisions about the world. “If this apparatus remains mute,” she writes, “decision becomes a matter of

indifference: Everything is just as good as everything else, so nothing is worth anything. The disturbance of cerebral auto-affectation produces a sort of nihilism (...), an absolute indifference, a coolness that visibly annihilates all difference and all dimensionality" (p. 50).

Similarly, Franco (Bifo) Berardi (2014) considers how, today, digital media overloads, over-excites and saturates our affective attention and our ability to draw associations and attachments through the excessive speed and overproduction of semiotic bits that we cannot possibly meaningfully metabolize. As our neural systems attempt to adapt to the onslaught of a hyper-mediated environment (that is becoming more and more intolerable to our sensibilities and cerebral auto-affectation), Berardi tells us, "not only is the psycho dimension of the Unconscious disturbed, but the fabric of the neural system itself is subjected to trauma. The adaptation of the brain to the new environmental conditions is involving enormous suffering, a tempest of violence and of madness" (p. 254). Consequently, this "blow" gives form to neural networks that deactivate the figure's exposure to its environment: rendering a radically disassociated, indifferent figure, one who severs his or her auto-affective connectivity to the world, and all the while never really realizing (or caring to register) that he or she has become transformed and/or so formed.

In her *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (2012a), Malabou's discussion of Kafka's character Gregor Samsa, in the *Metamorphosis*, captures what might be at stake in such a radically disassociated figure (pp. 14-18). While Gregor sees his own unfathomable transformation into a human size beetle, he still recognizes, understands and suffers his subjection to a grotesque process that alienates him from his human form, if not his soul. "The narrative voice," Malabou reminds us, "is not entirely that of an insect" (p.15). She goes on to sum up that, "[Gregor] pursues his inner monologue and does not appear to be transformed in substance, which is precisely why he suffers, since he is no longer recognized as what he never ceases to be." However, in stark contrast to this modernist character of alienation and transformation, Malabou brilliantly invites us to consider a different figure, "a Gregor perfectly indifferent to his transformation, unconcerned by it. Now that's an entirely different story!" (p. 18). Malabou thus gives us the beginning lines of a radically disturbing story (a difficult knowledge) for our time, populated by a new figure who does not register his or her own subjection, a figure whose very suffering manifests an indifference to suffering, who embodies the radical disassociation (the historical agnosia) riddling our contemporary moment.

In wanting to understand our time of “historical agnosia,” I wonder how pedagogy and psychoanalysis might respond to the (unthinkable) possibility of such a detached and de-libidinalized contemporary figure, who is impacted at the neurological level and not only at the symbolic level. A figure that embodies, as Berardi (2014) notes: “a disturbance which is affecting [its] neurological hardware not only [its] linguistic and psychical software” (p. 253). This figure is profoundly materially transformed by the onslaught of a panoramic exposure to difficult knowledge, but unlike Gregor, cannot or perhaps fundamentally cares not to register the impact and implication of its own grotesque transformation. Given this new wounded figure, what would a pedagogy and psychoanalysis concerned with “difficult knowledge” think about its implication with this most difficult impasse in knowledge? How would psychoanalysis engage a figure whose “absence” and neural disassociations would necessarily put into question the very possibility of the transference? Can pedagogy and psychoanalysis help to give (narrative) form to such a radically re-wired figure, one who is indifferent and disengaged at all-levels? Can this unthinkable figure help us to think (at least metaphorically) about that *other half*: that half of the class, and maybe even ourselves, who we (perhaps in our hearts) fear is becoming absent in all senses of the word?

The above questions and speculative missives are, admittedly, not explicitly part of Garrett’s concerns in his book. Indeed, in the last chapter he discusses how his students affectively work with the “difficult knowledge” encountered in Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine*, through which students confront not just an alternative historical account but “recontextualize and reframe what [they] already know or at least heard of” (p. 140). This closing chapter does not address the issue of absent students, and whether they are literally or figuratively absent from their encounters with “difficult knowledge” in the class. Garrett is clearly not reckoning with the *historical agnosia* beseeching our time—for, the “difficult knowledge” that is this contemporary wounded figure has not yet been fully understood or even properly registered in the field. Generally his commitment is, rather, with tracing how previously disowned information (working at the level of psychic defences) can become properly incorporated so as to partake in the formation of a psychically rehabilitated subject: one who is affectively invested in the pedagogical scene and rescued back into history (via symbolization). This is of course an admirable and significant concern, but it rehearses a characteristic move in the psychoanalytically inflected field of “difficult knowledge” that constricts our need to consider other “difficulties” beyond a particular circuit of psychoanalysis. In other words, Garrett, in closely following the work of Britzman, privileges a certain “interiority” in

learning, which is concerned with how we encounter the world (its difficulties and traumas) through our psychical biographies and regressions. This move assumes and relies on a subject that is always already libidinally invested and psychically roused by the collision with “difficult knowledge.” However, the commitment to such a subject misses, as I have gestured above, an *other* perhaps “deeper” sense of “interiority” which has become profoundly disturbed (wounded) and that renders the subject indifferent (absent) to the lifting of repression or to forging any attachments with regards to “difficult knowledge.” Consequently, it might be that the overreliance on this certain subject of psychoanalysis forgoes a more elemental matter with regards to “interiority,” a matter that can help us to speak about a new type of wounding and a new wounded figure (one who is no longer and not yet a subject), and who, in turn, raises a profound, baffling and even a ridiculous difficulty, which has yet to be registered as a “difficult knowledge.”

In the closing pages of his book (pp. 145-148), Garrett invites us to tolerate our “going without answers”: our needing to work with questions that can only remain questions and that provoke us to think the unthinkable. Extending Garrett’s invitation here to the field of “difficult knowledge” itself would mean we would have to bear the difficult and even outrageous questions emanating from this more elemental matter of an “interiority” that has been severely impacted (materially transformed) from the particular blows and shocks of our time: from a “new age of political violence... itself void of sense” (Malabou, 2012, p. 155). The invitation, in turn, implies engaging with baffling questions that have yet to become properly thought of as even posing a “difficulty” in the field of “difficult knowledge,” and for our learning to be with others in the world today.

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