

Seeking Spatial Pedagogy: Towards an Ontological Alternative

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Annexed by the neoliberal hegemony of commercial professional training, our contemporary university system continues to exasperate a sense of communal exhaustion, a far deeper sense of cultural and political emptiness – the expansion of what Mark Fisher has recently termed ‘capitalist realism’ – than we have seen before. The United States’ increased involvement in neoliberal capitalism, for instance, as evidenced by President Obama’s 2009 hand-picking of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, former CEO of Chicago Public Schools known for his consensus building, promotes a brand of anti-democratic education and yields ruinous effects. This cultural (il)logic does not foster safe spaces for critical thinking, but rather introduces militarized models of education disguised as progressive. Duncan’s administration, one that forces efforts towards urban cleansing in some school districts, is perpetuating the nationwide malaise suffered as a result of the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the pink elephant that still loiters in many a classroom.

Yet we also find, within the histories of anti-imperialism, that social change often happens in the vastness of such very ruin, at the critical point when an encounter with nothingness is substan-

tiated. Rather than to intimate routine acts of repair as happens so frequently, this commentary is designed to explore a mode of being that provides educators with a new possibility of resistance, and to practically consider this mode of being as a viable alternative. Herein we aim to unite in what Edward Soja calls “the ontological struggle to restore the meaningful existential spatiality of being and human consciousness, to compose a social ontology in which space matters from the very beginning” (1989:7), and to generate more visibility concerning issues of social justice pedagogy and the democratic public sphere.

Developing a Left that collectively utilizes a spatial ontology will take some hard work, but we can begin by articulating the ways in which capitalist realism functions as a deictic phantom, one that refers to its own cultural haunting, foregrounds its own lack, and yet remains hidden under the aegis of ideology. As Fisher’s analysis of capitalist realism insightfully shows, what seems to happen when late capitalism undergoes a significant reconfiguration, embedding strains of the global market with concentrations of wealth while others experience massive financial crisis, is that it presents itself as the only *realistic* political-economic system available – but this

is simply not true. There are alternatives. As we will argue, building on spatial conditions through which the pedagogical act may be reframed, in conditions not so deeply tied to corporate capital and neoliberal discourse, implicates us in a spatial redistribution, a right to the inner world that is more tenable and realistic than capitalist realism.

In social justice pedagogies one often sees an affective interplay, in which it is not thought but suffering that is of central importance. With ontology, one tends to think the “what is actually there and how is it so” in a way that differs from the affective interplay of social justice. Spatial ontology is at once distinct from other social ontologies because it considers existential struggle in terms of space, but it also relies on them – one’s spatial consciousness corresponds to an equally social consciousness. When affect and thought coalesce vis-à-vis spatiality a threefold ontology, one that is “simultaneously and interactively social, historical, and spatial,” soon develops (Soja 2010:1). And if we create a new conceptual space for pedagogy by rebalancing the structure of this threefold ontology, we can develop new strategies for encountering opposition and generate viable opportunities to dissent. As such, pedagogical space is restructured within the guidelines of a philosophy of affirmation (one which negates the initial negation) by practically applying spatial theory to pedagogy, and thus transforming knowledge production into activism.

The connection between pedagogy and social ontology can be easily linked to the classroom itself, a concrete space entangled within a complex history of power relations. On one level, non-critical pedagogies are often articulated in temporal language-matrixes (economies of institution, media, policy, etc.), ones which intimidate educators to conform their speech to the normative ideal. On another level, many educators employ normative discourse in order to harmonize their own ideological presuppositions as part of an ignorant reification of popular culture. In opposition to the complex internal processes of lived hegemony, critical pedagogy has historically functioned counter-hegemonically as an articulated, organized movement wherein critique and resistance must be continually renewed and recreated, truly

effective not in the realm of ambiguous monologue but of conscientious dialogue.

Educators can more fully negotiate their presence in personal and political space when pedagogy is situated within theories of thirdspace and described in terms of emergent identity. Purely physical or mental spaces present challenges to an educator’s sense of spatial being, and thus hinder social-pedagogical processes—such as classroom interactions, structuring activities or assignments, and teaching—that are germane to fostering student development. When it is socially produced, spatiality becomes “an ‘embodiment’ and medium of social life itself,” writes Soja, a medium which subverts traditional Western dualisms in favor of a “social incorporation-transformation” that synthesizes nature and cognition, body and mind (1989:120). Critical pedagogy, in a similar way, may benefit by opening up alternative, hybrid spaces, integrating social relations on the interdependent levels of race, class, gender, nationhood, etc.

Most recently, sj Miller has added to the spatial concept-repertoire, coining the term *fourthspace*. Miller’s position is in many ways an extension of theories on third space, yet it helpfully and appropriately adds a vertical dimension to the concept of spatial being. For Miller, fourthspace helps educators resist what Soja refers to as a psychasthenic state, “a state in which we are unable to demarcate our own personal boundaries and become engulfed by and camouflage ourselves in the scholastic milieu” (2008:7). Currently, the concept of fourthspace is regarded within the particular discourse community of English education, yet we can broaden the scope of the term to encompass all critical educators. In this context fourthspace serves as a mediating space, one which allows educators to incorporate an immense inner space with immediate practice – a continual perception existing prior to the inner experience’s sublimation to discursive intellect.

The Auto-production of Space

If our analysis is to posit an alternative spatial pedagogy, it must be geared, as spatial ontologist Henri Lefebvre would have it, toward the production of space and not toward things in space (1991:89). Pedagogically-produced space refers itself to a teacher

identity that can “either be stabilized or affirmed in a given social space, or destabilized when a social space excludes or is unwelcoming of a particular identity, or even restabilized once the individual has had time to regroup” (Miller 2010:63). The conditions of spatial creation are subject to such factors in part because fourthspace is auto-produced, an inner experience resulting from the causal relation of thoughts, desires, social milieu, and individual identity. This mode of spatial production reveals the contingency of one’s own facticity: that at any given time in a social space, whether one is aware of it or not, the interconnected elements of existential struggle circumscribe and inform an educator’s emergent identity.

In contrast to thirdspace – a liminal signifying space often marked by intersecting discourses, histories of power and struggle, and the geographies of cultural difference – fourthspace extends signifying space inwardly, similar to a moebius strip. It is the *genius loci* of inner experience, a space of escape and relocation, for even the most evocative critical pedagogies convey secret meanings: personal ethics which express cues of resistance. And given that a critical pedagogy requires an intimate knowledge of social cues that remain unknown and unknowable to capitalist realism, spatial pedagogy requires considerable privacy to found the expression of such cues. In an effort to uncover “the superlative element in what is hidden” (Bachelard 89), educators utilizing this untouchable place, completely secret and uninhabited by any process of a lived hegemony, can oppose the value-laden, symbolic space of Capital. Thus (and to oversimplify), the experience of locating and re-locating the self’s spatial presence would be slightly different – weirdly identifying with the superlative element in accessing space in itself – for everyone who auto-produces such space and is therefore joined in the vastness of inner experience.

Embodying Space

Of particular interest to our argument is exactly how emergent teacher identities are performed and constituted via embodied acts. Maurice Merleau-Ponty was perhaps the first philosopher to theorize the body as the fabric into which the world weaves itself (Bannan 1967:93), or put another way, as a

historically-mediated set of personal possibilities. According to Merleau-Ponty, the individual’s body is a constituent of perception, that body “by which man transcends himself towards a new form of behavior, or towards other people, or towards his own thought, through his body and his speech” (1962:194). Within this framework, one’s conception of spacetime is *felt*, or perceived via the body’s senses, and culminates with an affective response. As such, the body becomes a repository for all theoretical and ethical experiences of the mind as perceived by the critical educator in fourthspace, and through her body the critical educator is capable to carry out fidelity to the event¹ of their spatial pedagogy. This event is thus dialectically conjoined to one’s bodymind: “It is that point in reality where [concepts] accomplish their meaning, where they utter themselves. The body...is that strange object which uses its own parts as a general system of symbols in the world” (Bannan 1967:93). During a fourthspace journey, in which one has identified a felt moment – whether empathic, affective, or teachable – the self-in-fourthspace becomes unified with the body for the first time.

Much remains to be said about whether felt events exterior to the self produce manifold behaviours that were once hidden but did indeed exist *a priori* to the felt event. Thus, any further analysis of the auto-production of fourthspace must consider the role that the anteriority of the mind/body split plays in the teacher’s past and present, lived or livable experience. Repairing the scission between mind and body is important for educators because this split is the cycling presence/absence dialectic that haunts non-self-actualization. But inner experience unifies

1 Within this framework, fourthspace becomes linked to what Alain Badiou’s work on ethics substantiates: the potential for radical innovation in every situation (Hallward 2001). Utilizing fourthspace as vertical space, the critical educator upwardly bears the trajectory of her own subjective truth-formation, a formation that must be enacted via what Badiou calls an ‘event.’ An event is a happening, something that is proclaimed by a subject, which is spurred from her situation. An educator’s personal event, in our view, is her embodied practice as it is brought forth into spatial being, and, as such, is the proclamation of her truth-procedure as a break with the “ordinary” temporal situation in which it takes place. It becomes a single process of personal affirmation: through her spatio-subjective lens and by maintaining fidelity to the consequences of this event, one that takes place in a situation but not of it (Hallward 2001), her truth upholds being. As such, the educator unmasks the corresponding socio-political situation of her time. Here fourthspace is not a metaphor for truth at all, but rather an economy between embodied reality and a self-actualized event.

the mind/body split by embarking teachers on a perceptual journey, one which utilizes a verticospective gaze to look at oneself (while within) from above. Throwing out the entire metaphysical system used prior to Merleau-Ponty for a new speculative pedagogy that implicates teachers in body-mind synthesis, the vertical production of fourthspace insists upon the primacy of one's own sensory experience of a bodily act in accordance with its psycho-geographical integration. We have here, then, a new self-analytical framework – a continual progression of bodily processes at sites of intuition, classroom, and teaching, which impress upon an educator, as if bearing witness to the auto-production of space, what Merleau-Ponty calls 'fresh presents,' a flowing series of non-linear, perceptual reflections.

Enacting Spatial Pedagogy

Mark Fisher reminds us of Slavoj Žižek's assessment of capitalism in general, as it "relies on a structure of disavowal" (2009:13). So long as we know that capitalism works on us at the level of libidinal fantasy, then we are precisely accepting the very ideological pawning that capitalist realism does not try to conceal: neoliberal ideology relies on previously assumed behaviours and beliefs while masquerading as progressive. (Contemporary examples of commodity fetishism play on a reverse politics of visibility. Lady Gaga, for example, in all her iconic allusiveness, shows us everything while in fact showing us nothing.) In other words, the ideological work that capitalist realism actually does is something like trying to square a circle. As a result, many educators want a system that appeals to the pathos of our innermost desires and, yet, when the system abandons us, failing to reify those desires, any attempt to restructure the system is consequently abandoned in fear of political repercussions.

Fisher has also observed that capitalist realism represents itself not as a totality in itself but in smaller doses, namely in the form of bureaucracy (2009:49). There is a close relationship between bureaucracy and pedagogy, one often manifested via behavior, and not totally, as one might initially think, through a cognitive power play. The problems facing a newly hired educator, for instance, are at their greatest in

the task of developing a sustainable pedagogy, as it must take into account, often for the first time, an awareness of individual habits and predispositions to create an atmosphere that is receptive to the needs of each student. In order to stimulate an internal process in which each student may become capable to make critical choices based on experiential knowledge gained from interacting with others, a critical pedagogy is key yet likely challenging when met by manipulative administrators, especially those who are easily taken to capitalist realism's brand of desire deferral.

In *Narratives of Social Justice Teaching*, Miller suggests that "by moving toward a vertical space, or space that cannot be seen to the visible eye, vertical space can become a haven for how to support...teachers in their conceptualization of social justice pedagogy" (2008:6). In this way, a sense of vertical space refers to being at one with the mode of spatial production during pedagogical fresh presents. This unity with the conditions through which this pedagogical act is framed gives rise to a conscientization² that constitutes the experience itself, from an awareness of one's willed systemic changes, to the acquisition of a new skill set. As the organization of academic labour moves towards the production of a vertical space that can protect educators from outside forces, and with its foundation in the democratic public sphere, we find that trans-cultural analogies are also available to aid us in generating spatial consciousness.

In shamanic traditions, spatial being is often explained through the pastime of storytelling. These stories, which upon first reading appear simply to recount a shamanic experience, are often transferable to other cultural contexts, indicating a utility of meaning that extends much further than to just one person or group. In the tradition of the Kalahari bushpeople, descriptions of vertical havens are often

2 Paulo Freire, once an advocate of the liberation theology movement in 1960s Latin America, is an admittedly utopian thinker who exhibits profound Marxian and Christian convictions in his writing. Freirean critical pedagogy strives, first and foremost, for conscientization – meaning consciousness raising within individuals – a word which is derived from the Portuguese "conscientização." Maureen O'Hara points out that "he sees human beings as responsible participants in the continuous evolution of consciousness. This vision and his work to bring it about are the basis of what he terms 'comradeship' with Christ and with Marx" (O'Hara 1989:13).

used in order to evoke spiritual teachings, expressed through the medium of narrative and necessary from their inception to prolong the well-being of a still largely oral culture. In *Shamans of the World*, Motaope Saboabue, a Kalahari bushwoman healer, narrates a spiritual story to arrive at a deeper understanding of spatial being, wherein while she heals the sick people in her village she dances, going into a trance and growing very tall. Saboabue describes this vertical growth in terms of the Great Spirit who taking the form of a rope lifts her up and takes her away.

The rope-like figures portrayed on the book's cover can be said to artistically render a configuration of this experience, one in which people stretching into the sky are those who have managed to grasp the rope of the Great Spirit. Saboabue's description of her experience here becomes important. While projected into vertical space "the spirit decides where it will take you," she explains, "and the spirit brings you back. If the spirit takes you away [up], it is your spirit that goes away and your body remains on the ground. When you come back, you return to your body. You can never tell anyone else where you went. It is between you and your soul" (2008:228). Finding a point of analogy between this story and spatial pedagogy is one example of fourthspace's bodily and cross-cultural utility. This beautiful story can be applied by and large, in such a way that space matters from the very beginning, to a fourthspace check in/out: at one with their inner world, at once penetrat-

ing space in itself via the bodymind, educators can utilize fourthspace via vertical floatation, and much like Saboabue's shamanic way fourthspace remains a pathway to safety.

The primary relation between safety and pedagogy is explainable as a validation of spatial being, an affirmation that accounts for the fundamental existential experience of seeking spatial justice. On one hand, when educators feel safe they are more apt to explore the perimeters of thought and its relation to being. On the other hand, as their will grasps the potentiality of spatial being they are able to deepen their ability to cultivate dialogical relationships with their students. If bureaucratic alienation impairs an individual's ability to create and transform, then spatial justice pedagogy, of which dialogue is a central feature, repairs the impoverishment of alienation to the level of critical consciousness.

As we strive to achieve new conditions through which pedagogical acts are framed, spatial ontology introduces something beyond the limits of ruin and in favour of the immense depth of psycho-geography; it allows us to think the most basic level of how human beings fit into the spatial domain. Not a circuit in the sense of a capitalist realist superstructure, spatial justice pedagogy provides us with an alternative ontological concept and a new field of speculative possibility: spatial justice pedagogy offers us the collective subject that neoliberalism's brand of education promised but has consistently failed to achieve.

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