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The Eclipse of Education and Constellar Kismet

An Interview with Antonio Garcia

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Abstract

David Gabbard, a professor of education, engages Antonio Garcia, a junior independent scholar, in an interview capturing the breath and depth of the development of each other's work. In particular, Gabbard explores the growing popularity and intrigue around Garcia's work in education, as it is highly informed by his work in Žižek studies. Garcia has never held a tenure position; however, his reputation in and outside of education is acknowledged by his command of high theory and intimate collegiality supporting students and colleagues around the world. Gabbard has been working with Garcia for nearly a year intensely engaged in exploring the fantasies of education predicated on psychoanalytic theory and ideological analysis, the curious question of critical education paradoxical problems, and Garcia's development of Constellar Theory as a new social model for understanding multiculturalism, social ideology, and political discontent. Garcia's development of Constellar Theory complements Gabbard's current interest in Big History.



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Introduction

It was another warm fall evening in eastern North Carolina back in 2001. I was on the phone with Ken Saltman in Chicago, pacing up and down my driveway while hammering out the conceptual framework of what would become the first edition of *Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools* (Saltman and Gabbard, 2003). Ken is an excellent journalist, and I always thought it was a shame that *Education Week* didn't hire someone like him to keep a running track of the neoliberal efforts to capitalize on the educational disaster being manufactured as part of those same efforts. Though we obviously respect each other's work and collaborated well together, the differences in our perspectives came to the surface during the course of our phone conversation that evening.

In brief, as he has done consistently across his career, Ken was framing the neoliberal movement in education as an assault by private wealth and power on a system that had been up until the 1980s dedicated to serving the public and the common good. Through its orchestrated campaign of high stakes testing and other accountability measures to discredit—*smash*—public schools in order to legitimate the privatization—*grab*—of schooling, neoliberalism posed a threat to the public interest. While I was willing to acknowledge that we were witnessing an intensification of numerous innovations in the means of achieving the ends of state-mandated compulsory schooling, those ends had not substantively changed, and those ends had little to do with actually serving the public. The state, I remember telling him, established compulsory schooling to target the public, not to serve it and not to serve the value of education in any meaningful sense. Unlike Ken, I suppose, I couldn't draw any distinction between state power and corporate power. Moreover, though I didn't use these precise words, I told him that while I support any effort to minimize the damage inflicted by schooling, I see no hope for any substantive shift in the direction of what our species does in the name of institutionalized collective learning under the precept of schooling. And, for the record, I see less hope now than I did then.

Coming to the point, something that I said during the course of this exchange prompted Ken to pose a question that haunted me for years. "Have you been reading Žižek?" Honestly, I hadn't. His thinking that I had, or that I should have, was made more embarrassing by the fact that I didn't know who Žižek was. Respecting Ken as much as I do, his question carried an implicit suggestion that made me feel that I should look into Žižek's writings. I must admit, however, that other projects kept me too occupied to follow through on this for a number of years. Still, the question gnawed at me. When I finally did have an encounter with his ideas, it came in the form of a Big Think video that someone shared with me.

In this video, "Don't Act, Just Think," Žižek (2012b) helped me move away from merely critiquing compulsory schooling and the larger system that it helps to enforce. Drawing from his citing of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," I know that "I would prefer not to" see either the continuation of our current patterns of schooling (state capitalist regulated systems of institutionalized collective learning) or the global capitalist domination that schooling supports. Therefore, any effort put toward the reform of those schools (action), would be, in my estimation, a wasted effort. The larger system must be replaced, but with what?

It was this question that Sarah Ritter and I took up in response to Žižek’s call for a new *Leitkultur*. As we wrote at the time,

Žižek decries the standard self-loathing of those European and, we would add, American multiculturalists who, in their quickness to denounce the anti-immigrant rhetoric used by the right to mobilize ordinary citizens around nativist memes of ethnic identity “as a protective shield against the trauma of being caught up in the vortex of non-transparent financial abstraction,” (Žižek, 2012a, p. 35) offer nothing to those same ordinary citizens other than “the endless ritual of confessing Europe’s own sins, of humbly accepting the limitations of the European legacy, and of celebrating the wealth of other cultures” (Žižek, 2011) For all of her shortcomings, Žižek embraces (Angela) Merkel’s picking up “the debate about *Leitkultur* (the dominant or leading culture) from a couple of years ago, when conservatives insisted that every state was based on a predominant cultural space which the members of other cultures who live in the same space should respect.” “Sorry if I shock someone,” he told Amy Goodman in a 2010 interview on Democracy Now!, “but I think we do need what Germans call *Leitkultur*, leading culture. Just it shouldn’t be nationally defined. We should fight for that. Yes, I agree with right-wingers. We need a set of values accepted by all. But what will these values be, my god?” (Žižek, 2010)? (Gabbard & Ritter, 2014, p. 102)

In case my rejection of compulsory schooling wasn’t enough to marginalize me from the mainstream and even the leftist fringes of acceptable educational discourse, now I was also challenging the underlying premises of multicultural education. In pursuing the development of ideas toward a new global *Leitkultur* to replace that of global capitalism, I have spent many hours reading and doing my best to more fully understand Žižek, which has also meant reading more Hegel and Lacan than I’d have ever imagined doing. Through this work, my thoughts about Žižek and *Leitkultur* have evolved and deepened, though I have found very few people whose ideas have evolved or gravitated in the same direction to share ideas with and to learn from. Enter Antonio, who definitely has *something to say* on matters relating to Žižek, Lacan, psychoanalysis, and philosophy in general, particularly to me.

While Jan Jagodzinski, James Trier, Aaron Cooley, Dennis Carlson, and Peter Applebaum have all shown either significant investments or interests in developing a fortified block of study with Žižek, Antonio is the only person, to the best of my knowledge, to have grounded his dissertation in education on Žižek’s ideas. And, having read major portions of that dissertation, he accomplished that in very meaningful and powerful ways. Antonio and Kristopher Holland serve as the two principal organizers of the Žižek Studies Conference, which convenes again in May of 2018. And Antonio will soon release a number of what will undoubtedly come to be considered extremely significant publications that he’s been developing over a period of years. Most of these publications will concern his development of what he calls *constellar theory*. It’s rare that anyone contributes anything bordering on original, but I find constellar theory to offer a significant contribution toward advancing social and educational thought even though Antonio is in the early stages of its development. This is of particular interest for me because of my own research in another relatively new field known as Big History (see Christian, 2004).

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Google “Žižek and education” and you will see a page full of references to Antonio’s work and a vast network of colleagues from the US, Canada, Europe, and the Pacific realms of Australia and New Zealand. In the *Žižek Dictionary* (2014), Rex Butler acknowledged the gracious help that Antonio provided in securing contributors. I don’t think it’s hyperbole to suggest that Antonio is one of the most well-known people in Žižek studies without a plethora of books and articles on his CV, as we would see with senior professors; however, I suspect this will soon change with his prolific writing mania. It is his dedication to people—and then to the scholarship—that garners him tremendous respect from some of the highest decorated scholars, including Žižek himself, who is rumored to have written a rare letter of recommendation in support of Antonio’s search for an academic position. Unfortunately, in our present world, one in which our institutions of collective learning are dominated by neoliberal logic and the interests of capitalist empire, especially teacher education programs, such a recommendation means little to nothing.

After just eight months of conversations, my relationship with Antonio has already been a tremendous gift. Together, Antonio and I, along with a yet to be determined number of others, but most certainly including Kristopher Holland from the University of Cincinnati, will be launching a number of projects together that I believe hold great promise for making a lasting contribution, not just to our fields, but to our species and our collective survival. Through this interview we hope to document the beginnings of what we hope will be a long and successful collaboration.

David Gabbard:

To begin our conversation, I would like to state publicly that I am very glad to have come to know you and the trajectory of your work, particularly as it pertains to what you are calling constellar theory. Though you have more experience with his ideas, we share a common interest in Žižek and his relevance for the study of education. From our previous correspondences, I also know that we recognize certain connections between the development of what you are calling constellar theory and my efforts to develop the beginnings of a proposed global *Leitkultur* that ties Žižek, Lacan, Hegel, Saussure, Levi-Strauss and others to David Christian and Fred Spier’s writings on Big History.

To help us explore the intersections between our ideas, allow me to commence with a brief description of what Žižek, Lacan, and especially Big History have already meant for my work. Big Historians like David Christian, Fred Spier, Cynthia Stokes Brown, and Craig Benjamin have provided me with new insights and deeper understandings that will only be buttressed, I believe, by the ideas I’ll be pulling from Žižek and others. In the first place, their work has convinced me to make every effort toward expunging the word “education” from my vocabulary. As a value, education carries normative meanings that only serve to promote a benevolent image of the school, as an extension of what Foucault (1982) would call the “pastoral power” of the state to “lead” (manage) the flock. So, in place of education, I have borrowed a phrase developed by David Christian; namely, collective learning. For Christian,

collective learning is what makes us different. It is an entirely new and much more rapid way of “adapting” to our environment. While other species adapt through the slow, patient, sharing of genes, we adapt by sharing ideas. Collective learning is the source of our creativity as a species and the reason why we, alone, have a History. (Christian, 2010)

We need to recognize our capacity for collective learning as the evolutionary wonder that it is. I find it fascinating to consider how and why our species evolved the capacity for symbolic thought and, therefore, language that make collective learning possible. All of these capacities evolved in us, before there was an “us,” over billions of years—13.8 billion years to be exact. Ultimately, each and every one of us, like everything else in the universe, traces our origins back to the Big Bang that started this whole on-going event of which we are a part. But it took over 13.7 billion years for us to begin happening, for we, too, are events. Short-lived ones though we are. Consider this, Antonio. Situate your lifespan in Big History. Allow yourself to feel your brevity and your finitude within those 13.8 billion years since the Big Bang. Allow yourself to feel the brevity of our collective existence (approximately 200,000 years) as a species. Ponder the number of other species of homo that preceded us “sapiens,” then allow yourself to wonder if we will evolve into some new homo X? Or will we face extinction before we have the chance? This, it would appear, accounts for the tremendous irony of collective learning and its role in making us the most dominant species in the history of the planet. The level of that dominance even registers on the geological scale today, and has since the 1920s when Russian scientists recognized that the geological significance of our impact on the planet merited a declaration that our patterns of harvesting matter and energy had induced a new geological epoch—the *Anthropocene*—had arrived.

In replacing the idea of education with the phrase “collective learning,” my efforts to avert the normative implications carried by the former do not deny the normative (value-laden) qualities of the latter. If only because, as Christian (2010) states, our capacity for collective learning sets us apart from all other species and has resulted in our unfortunate dominance, I believe we need to treat collective learning as the single most important activity performed by our species. This is not to suggest that we have organized our collective learning particularly well. To the contrary, as evidenced in my numerous critiques of schools, media, etc.,... our current patterns of collective learning, like our larger social patterns reflected in them, have proven to be far more maladaptive than they have been adaptive.

We need to recognize that our capacity for collective learning is more than just a capacity. It is a demand that originates with what I want to describe as our metabolism¹—our organic structure that we can trace down the nanoscale to our quarks and strings. Our metabolism, of course, supports and is supported by our large and highly complex brains, but we should recognize that it is not our brain alone that renders consciousness possible. We need to acknowledge the greater complexity of ourselves as organisms belonging to a particular species, and how our total metabolism consists of multiple interactive systems that function to make consciousness not merely possible, but absolutely necessary. Our metabolisms require some expenditure of energy in order to gather information from the

¹ This will immediately put off many people, because of the lengths to which we have gone to deny our metabolisms, perhaps because our metabolisms remind us of our finitude in time (the brevity of our individual existence) and space (just another primate/mammal/vertebrate/eukaryote).

material world to sustain our material being through the maintenance of the homeostasis of that material being—our metabolisms. Does not consciousness, in a most fundamental way, involve some expenditure of energy? And let me be clear, in no way am I suggesting that consciousness is peculiar to our species. To the contrary, I consider consciousness to be a central adaptive function of any metabolism, enabling a metabolism to fulfill its chief purpose: namely, to receive and process information from the external world and from within its own material being in order to maintain a condition of homeostasis within that external world.

Consciousness, then, at its most basic level, is a feature of our metabolism, conceived, in your terms, as a “constellation” within a far larger constellation—a very complex pattern of relationships among various forms and combinations of matter and energy both internal and external to our organism. What sets the consciousness of our species apart is the adaptive advantages provided by what we could describe as our relatively well-developed capacity (relative to other species) for symbolic thought. But this presumes too much about the adaptive qualities witnessed in our symbolic order that enables us to create an understanding of the world in response to changes—frequently and perhaps mortally induced or inflicted by us—that we encounter in the world that require us to adapt to those material changes for individual and collective survival.

In this sense, I think Big History lends itself to a very strong form of materialism. Through our creative power to forge symbols of our thoughts, we construct a material constellation of sounds and other material signs (e.g., our words upon these pages). Thought materializes as symbols. It is precisely the materiality inherent within symbolic thought that allows us to store our symbols both biologically and socially, internally and externally. This same materiality allows for our distribution of the products of symbolic thought. This distribution occurs spatially (across space—an infinity of exchanges of knowledge one person to another to moving in concert with the ever-expanding and ever-changing universe for as long as our collective ride happens to last). It also occurs, therefore, temporally (across time and some number of generations that would appear to be growing increasingly finite), which returns us to the “adaptive qualities witnessed in our (current) symbolic order” and the question of its ability to help us understand and adapt to an ever-changing universe. At the present, would we not judge our current symbolic order to be highly maladaptive? Given the pace and force of our destruction and self-destruction, how do our current patterns for organizing our symbolic order lend themselves to our individual and collective well-being/homeostasis? I think we see similar patterns in Robert Hare’s (1993) checklist of psychopathic traits as seen *The Corporation* (Achbar et al., 2004).

I think much of this might align well with both your Lacanian-Žižekian roots as well as what we are developing as constellar theory. How did you come to constellar theory, and, from that vantage point, how would you respond to this partial treatment of consciousness and collective learning that I’ve just laid out above?

Antonio Garcia:

Before I begin, I think it is important to understand that when we are approaching the development of a new formula, theory, etc., especially in philosophy, we are not the product of a spontaneous formation of thought. In fact, the question of original thought is common in

beginning philosophy. You know, as a Lacanian, that I do not believe in original thought in this sense of some pure thought that has never been contemplated. We live in the “Symbolic,” which imprints on us from birth all that we know and understand about social coordinates and so on. Accordingly, experiences in life structure our desire for a particular illumination or development of thought, spirit, or social concern. Simon Critchley believes “biography is important as a path into philosophy, and also a sort of test of philosophy; and to whether life and work [as a philosopher] can be integrated” (Critchley & Cerderstrom, 2010, p. 2). There are times when work is merely work divorced from influencing life and there are times when a marriage of life and work are entangled, for better or for worse.

DG:

I couldn't agree with Critchley more on this point. Since working with doctoral students here at Boise State, there are two questions of vital importance for me to pose to them, and I pose these same two questions to job candidates as well (see Gabbard, 2015b). First, what questions drove you to higher education? Second, what autobiographical experiences led you to formulate those questions? So, let me back up and reframe my earlier questions, adjusting them to how you came to philosophy in general and constellar theory in particular.

AG:

Before I came to philosophy and cultural theory formally I had always had an interest in science and the way the world worked. I have obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and as I child I would count and see patterns in things like clouds, bricks, etc. (see *apophenia* and *pareidolia*). Being a good neurotic partially prompted my interest in psychoanalysis as an adult. The earliest I actually remember really pondering this idea of “constellations” was in college. A friend had given me LSD and I went on my first psychedelic trip. We watched the movie *PI* (1998) by Darren Aronofsky, which is about Max Cohen, a human calculator and math genius, who believes that there is a pattern in the stock market. I remember in one of the early scenes of the movie Max says, “restate my assumptions:”

12:45 restate my assumptions. One, Mathematics is the language of nature. Two, everything around us can be represented and understood through numbers. Three, if you graph the numbers of any system, patterns emerge. Therefore, there are patterns everywhere in nature. Evidence, the cycling of disease epidemics; the wax and wane of caribou populations; sun spot cycles; the rise and fall of the Nile. So, what about the stock market? The universe of numbers that represents the global economy. Millions of hands at work, billions of minds. A vast network, screaming with life. An organism. A natural organism. My hypothesis: Within the stock market, there is a pattern as well. Right in front of me, hiding behind the numbers. Always has been. 12:50 press return.

LSD causes visual hallucinations and was championed by Timothy Leary as a psychotherapeutic drug. Everything that night illuminated as patterns, and I spent a great deal of time smoking a cigar outside and looking at the night sky dance around. My psychedelic

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time in college was pretty limited. Additionally, I had been reading and pondering the psychical connections that might be shared amongst people as a network of connected consciousness (e.g., quantum entanglement, Jung, MK Ultra, etc.).

Today a young man on acid realized that matter is merely energy condensed to a slow vibration, that we are all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively. There's no such thing as death, life is only a dream, and we're the imagination of ourselves. (Hicks, 2008, p. 146)

This quote by Bill Hicks, the comedian, is also sampled in Tool's song Third Eye. Tool was and is a major inspiration to me. If you look at the artwork the band uses, you will see the work of Alex Grey (www.alexgrey.com) who has this unique blend of a digital M.C. Escher on a spiritual mescaline fueled journey through the cerebral cortex. However, the psychical impression left on my mind was akin to *The Doors of Perception* in which Huxley (1956) says, "The mind does its perceiving in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of significance, relationships within a pattern" (p. 20). I think this is why I appreciate Proust (2003) when he wrote, "All the greatest things we know have come to us from neurotics" (p. 295). The neurotic must suffer this *knowing while being* while the others suffer the sublime *being without knowing*.

There is always this split proposal of having *perception* and *reality*, and the insufferable epidemic of *believing as knowing*. How we perceive a situation may not be reality on the objective level. In psychoanalysis this duality can be understood as *perception-as-pleasure* and *reality-as-truth*. But before getting into this duality, I feel it is important to understand that language plays a large part in how we frame the discourse on the development of "knowledge" (i.e., epistemology). In Spanish and French, the words meaning "to learn" are *aprender* (Sp.) and *apprendre* (Fr.). These words should look familiar to us because we use the word *apprehend* in English. I prefer the Spanish and French words to learning, schooling, or educating. "To apprehend" is most commonly used when referring to a criminal on the loose who needs to be caught. When we think of knowledge this way then we can imagine knowledge as an elusive thing to catch. Once one apprehends a piece of knowledge, then one must comprehend it, which can only be assessed by the illustration of synthesis and application of said knowledge. What is the "epistemological return" of curriculum, pedagogy, culture, etc.? It is not enough to simply know (Fr. *savoir*); we must know-how (Fr. *savoir faire*). This, I believe, brings us around to David Christian's (2004) concept of "collective learning" in Big History.

DG:

Before you go there, just let me say that, for me, this notion of apprehension holds an appeal because it communicates an actively and deliberately focused or concentrated (two words we also associate with serious study and learning) application of energy to matter, which makes it our "subject matter." This matter, of course, can take the form of symbols of language and/or mathematics. Pedagogically, I think we need to be very up front with students about our demand for their attention as a prerequisite to apprehension and, therefore—as you say—their comprehension which they must demonstrate through some form of assessment. But for us, as scholars/researchers situated on the productive side of collective learning, I think it's fair to say that our objective is to contribute something to the

materiality of the symbolic world of our field, something that will matter and not be brushed aside as immaterial.

AG:

It is not just an issue of immateriality. It is and has always been a matter of relevance. For [John] Dewey, schooling should be applicable and relevant to the life of the child. It is not surprising that popular culture has made far greater strides in educating than education proper. This is why I try to maintain a good neurotic fear of irrelevance and obsolescence. In today's capitalist production we know that things are made to break and that we live in the age of obsolescence. Did you ever see the old *Twilight Zone* (1961) episode called "Obsolete Man" (Season 2, Episode 29)? In short, a librarian is no longer needed in an age and world without books, so he is deemed obsolete.

DG:

Yes, you shared it with me. It's something I wrestle with, as well. I made the decision to enter into education after recognizing how U.S. propaganda had operated on me to condition me to view it as an acceptable thing to do to join the military (Gabbard, 2015b). I could have died and/or killed to advance the interests of multinational corporations, not—as the propaganda delivered via corporate media and compulsory schools would lead us to believe—to defend democracy and "our" freedoms. I felt a little like Neo, the main protagonist, in *The Matrix* (1999). I wanted to make a difference. The fear of being obsolete, of working for nothing, is haunting. It took years for me to successfully begin letting go of that self-imposed burden, though it remains a struggle to keep it at bay.

AG:

What has always amazed me since I was a child was the value of antiques. Old soda bottles or oil cans that were thrown behind a barn because they were garbage somehow became sought after valuables as nostalgia, but this is qualified on the social level of value beyond what might interest an archeologist or scientist of sorts. That is, no one is raving about finding a jar full of used condoms from the early twentieth century. So we do have a system or logic that guides our estimation and emotional valuations/investments in things; this is the logic of capital *par excellence*. So what we might be presenting, albeit depressively, as an island of misfit obsolescent things, is merely the repository for the not-yet-valued-as-commodified-things. That is, it is not until something is wanted that a particular value can be placed on it. This is actually an example of constellar theory and the orbital patterns dictating the valuation trends and commodities of particular social systems and broader contextualized constellations. Remember that true obsolescence requires the dissolution of a thing *qua* thing, reducing it to a thing among things that has no-thing of ability to carry out or perform. As long as you and I are obsolete together we constitute a state of being according to Heidegger. We serve(d) a purpose and only under the relegating constitution of being a McGuffin would we actually be obligated to accept that our obsolescence was evident when we were produced in the beginning. Obsolescence is in this

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way merely infence marred by the tumultuous erasure practice of capital and commodity reproduction.

DG:

Oddly, I first learned about obsolescence when I was in fashion school, just months before I joined the military. It wasn't a school of fashion design, but more retail. It was there I was introduced formally to the notion of "planned obsolescence." I've often wondered if there wasn't something about school reform that related to this idea. As the needs of the state change, last year's model of schooling must change as well. Some things do remain stable. In Foucault's terminology, there remains the need for economic utility and the need for political docility (Foucault, 1995). If you trace the trajectory of my work, you'll see a very clear descent into pessimism. In contrast to many others working in critical pedagogy, I just don't see any coming revolution that will change any of this. I think Chomsky's correct in describing schools (and universities) as parasitic institutions (Chomsky, 2003, p. 198). They depend on state power to secure a subsidy for them. As we're seeing right now, the state will cut off that subsidy if it feels its interests threatened by those institutions. The state will never knowingly subsidize its own destruction. It's only been within the past couple of years that I've matured enough as a scholar to begin developing my own ideas on a necessary alternative to our current system of schooling. But the enactment of those ideas would require a radical restructuring of society.

AG:

All of this is recombinant of the logic of capital. Things are never really discarded as a matter of disintegration into the ether. Rather, there is a psychical economy of capital that allows for old ideas or things to be rendered under new direction or "rebooted" as we have seen Hollywood do with a number of classic films bringing them into a reimagining under the solicitude of CGI and advancements in film. Education will continue to get rebooted, but what this means is that the same essence and substance of constitution remains, on the level of ideology, the same. Meanwhile, the aesthetic reappropriation puts a nice face on a dilapidated body. And this is important to understand, because we are "duped" by the aesthetic appeal of these reboots. To such a degree, you are right that the thesis usually underskirting critical pedagogy seeks to dismantle or wage revolution in the schools. The "Educational ideological apparatus," as Althusser (2008) describes it, "[is] that which has been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations as a result of a violent political and ideological class struggle against the old dominant ideological state apparatus" (p. 26). Additionally, it is worth quoting in length here a passage I believe captures nicely the issue of ideology and schooling, especially at the level of the classroom:

I ask the pardon of those teachers who, in dreadful conditions, attempt to turn the few weapons they can find in the history and learning they 'teach' against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped. They are a kind of hero. But they are rare and how many (the majority) do not even begin to suspect the 'work' the system (which is bigger than they are and crushes them) forces them to do, or worse, put all their heart and ingenuity into performing it with the most advanced awareness (the famous new

methods!). So little do they suspect it that their own devotion contributes to the maintenance and nourishment of this ideological representation of the School, which makes the School today as ‘natural’, indispensable-useful and even beneficial for our contemporaries as the Church was ‘natural’, indispensable and generous for our ancestors a few centuries ago . . . In fact, the Church has been replaced today *in its role as the dominant Ideological State Apparatus*. (Althusser, 2008, p. 31)

We would never agree with any sympathy or understanding a secular group that wanted to overthrow [as revolutionary transformation] the church and create within the institutional ideology and edifice of the church a secular atheist institution of moral and ethical platforms predicated on reason and logic. Yet, somehow critical pedagogues believe we will be able to overthrow the ideological machination of symbolic regulation created by the state for the state. We will do this under the presupposition that the state will even willingly allow and support such dismantling and overthrow. Imagine if we were to tell a child that he or she has something wrong, but we do not say what specifically. Then, we tell the child that we just need them to take a pill, but the pill may cause more damage to the inside organs and intestines while it combats the supposed malignancy. Do we expect the child to go willingly knowing that he or she may have severe nausea, intestinal cramping, diarrhea, liquid discharge and blood, and a strong pungent smell emanating from the urine that will cause a stinging discomfort due to the concentration of ammonia, blood, and other excretory waste?

Are the critical pedagogues and the Left of education psychotics or anal neurotics looking out the windows of the asylum? Or, is the asylum the place we fear and the *Thing* we seek to destroy, emancipating those encased in its clutches? In our benevolence, do we create our own ideological prisons with our neurotic fantasies? What is the ideal educational reform that the Left continually seeks but never obtains? Education, as an ideological (K12) institution and edifice, has failed to promote the utopian sphere of democratic engagement and emancipatory spirit desired by the “revolutionary” educational Left. (Garcia, 2014)

DG:

As much as I appreciate and empathize with the work of those associated with critical pedagogy and those who have breathed life into a new Marxist school of educational theory, I never fully bought into that fantasy. When I say “fantasy” I am, of course, utilizing it in the psychoanalytic sense of *objet petit a*. This opens up the notion of *infinence* that I’ve seen you address in constellar theory. To begin with, I think it’s important to note that just a year after Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2000) appeared in English, Ivan Illich published *Deschooling Society* (1971). I read Illich while I was still in the Army, before graduate school at Cincinnati. This was a few years before reading Freire, and Illich ended up having a much greater impact on my thinking. I’ve probably paid a price for that, which I’ll discuss a bit later. In my dissertation, I sought to explain why, in spite of the initial popularity of *Deschooling*, Illich was “silenced” or excluded from educational discourse (Gabbard, 1994). Using Foucault’s (1972) archaeological method of discourse analysis, I concluded that

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Foucault had violated one of the governing rules of educational discourse—what I called the messianic rule of discursive inclusion. According to this rule, in order to speak legitimately of education and be included within its *oeuvre*, you must present the school as an institution capable of delivering the individual and/or society into a condition of secular salvation. While Freire critiqued the oppressive effects of the “banking model,” he left open the possibility of schools becoming sites of revolutionary liberation from oppression. This, in my view, accounts for his ongoing popularity among people whose imaginations are still addicted to state-mandated compulsory schooling and its promises of salvation. Illich offered them no such schooled vision, and there are a number of competing visions, all of them equally schooled to hold out an illusive fantasy or *objet petit a* that can never be realized but infinitely pursued. In some sense, I think it becomes an irresponsible act of passing the proverbial buck for the critical crowd. No one says this directly, but do their arguments not imply something to the effect of “We recognize that the world is a total mess under capitalism, but if we realize our fantasy of transforming schools into sites of liberatory politics, the next generation will be able to deliver society into our vision of secular salvation?”

AG:

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek describes the notion, which I think you are suggesting here, called “ideological fantasy”:

‘They do not know it, but they are doing it’...What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they do not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy*. (Žižek, 1989, p. 32)

There is one thing that we must understand across the domain of psychoanalysis. Fantasy is fantasy by its very nature of never being realized. Once the fantasy encounters realization it has a nightmarish effect. Let me give you a good example that will fit well with critical pedagogy and the Left in general.

One of the most frequent issues I encounter with my clients is a case of counterintuitive relations. Without getting overboard with the theory, we often find a child in the case of divorced parents. Often there is a stepparent involved. Most of my clients are between 12-14 years old with behavioral issues and have been referred to me by the Department of Juvenile Justice. For the sake of anonymity, let us call our client MM (after Michael Myers). MM exhibits extreme emotional acting out and often escalates to the point of lashing out by hitting the (step)parent, which results in a police call. Well MM has a great affection for his stepmother V, but she is the object of his punishment when he becomes emotionally upset. MM’s biological mother X is an emotionally abusive topless dancer and pill popper. It is very normal to see the child, MM in this hypothetical case, juxtapose perception and emotion with the two parents. So the biological mother is perceived as a

savior and the child clings to hope that she will fulfill this impossible fantasy (*objet petit a*). The stepmother V takes the place of the unconscious anger MM has towards his mother and projects onto V this anger that belongs to X. So what happens is that when the child's fantasy of the mother begins to collide with the reality of the actual situation he begins to experience a psychical turbulence of the nightmare phase. Remember an encounter with the Real is traumatic.

We could propose a similar transference and juxtaposition with critical pedagogy. The excuse of the Left has always been that communism or Marxism was never enacted on the ethical and moral level that Marx actually set forth. You know that Ayn Rand makes the same statement about capitalism in that we have never had a completely free market. In either case, I think you would find people on both sides who would point out the fantasy of the Left that ultimately ignores the parent—in this case the United States—which may actually be the better parent. However, only an encounter of the Real would force the fantasy to become conscious. Let's think about a few things. Obama was the supposed socialist change agent who failed socialism and the Left. Now we have Bernie Sanders representing the socialist Left again, but what happens if he, too, becomes co-opted by the deep pockets of lobbyists, etc.? Every ideological system has built-in safeguards to ensure its inflexible-as-begetting and reproducing itself. Remember, under the Cuban Revolution, Reinaldo Arenas, the gay Cuban novelist, was limited in his employment. Have we not heard about "re-education" camps? No ideological system that would wish to maintain its fortitude and legitimacy would ever employ willingly or inject itself with an ideological antithetical disease that could cripple or destroy it.

DG:

Do you think this is the traumatic kernel that critical pedagogy refuses to see? Can you relate this back to the scenario with MM, X, & V?

AG:

Do you remember the classic B-movie with Rowdy Roddy Piper called *They Live* (1988)?

DG:

Oh yeah! Great film. Žižek treats it in *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2013).

AG:

Yes! But if we did not know the movie then we would assume the stupid sunglasses were the lens to see ideology, but Žižek flips this on us. We see ideology all around us, but the sunglasses simplify the Thing-in-itself. So, for example, when we see a Starbucks cup with the sunglasses on, it would say "Buy More" or something ridiculous you know. But this would apply to a million other products. The ideology is in the sauce. So if we had these magic sunglasses the world would be broken down to the essential element of its ideological

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existence: buy, fuck, kill, obey, etc. So if we are looking at how fantasy functions then we see that it is the essential core—*kernel*—that is, we know very well what it is, but we can get away with disavowing it because the appearance changes. This is why infinnence is an important concept because it brings us back around to understand what is fantasy and what would be an actual encounter with the Real. If we were in China and we were to write a book on how Chinese schools should protest and voice their dissent to governmental power then we would be imprisoned. Do you think our colleagues who do work on LGBT issues would have jobs in Russia where Putin has cracked down on the acceptance of LGBT issues? To provide an anecdotal quip: show me where capitalism works without fail and I will show you where Marxism will work without capitalists.

DG:

I can certainly see how this functions within even the mainstream or dominant ideology of schooling that Henry Perkinson addressed in his classic work *The Imperfect Panacea* (1995). School gets painted as the panacea for everything from teenage pregnancy to economic malaise. Of course, teens are probably getting pregnant as often as ever, and the economic situation for young people worsens every year, but with *just the right reforms*, schools can somehow magically fix anything. In an interview with David Cayley (1992), Illich laughingly mocks this as a “mythopoetic ritual.” He describes how

(Max) Gluckman, who was my hero at that time, says that rituals are forms of behavior that make those who participate in them blind to the discrepancy which exists between the purpose for which you perform the rain dance, and the actual social consequences the rain dance has. If the rain dance doesn't work, you can blame yourself for having danced it wrongly. (Cayley, 1992, pp. 66-67)

But let's go back to MM, V, & X, because I think this psychoanalytic perspective has something important to teach us. Let's substitute MM with an educational theorist who sometimes lashes out against and assaults his stepmother (V) who represents schools. This violent behavior could represent for us the criticism of our educational theorist who wants to view (fantasizes) his pill-popping abusive mother (X) as a saint. X, here, would have to represent the larger society that the critical educational theorist wants to transform or liberate into some condition of secular salvation, perhaps democratic socialism or whatever. Sticking to this analogy, critical educational theorists displace their anger toward the corrupt world into which they were born onto schools. Doesn't this act of displacement communicate something to us about how the Lacanian notion of the *symptom* applies to the situation?

AG:

I think that in the case here we might have to add a twist. You know that Marx and Engels talk about the specter of communism looming over Europe in the *Communist Manifesto*. Derrida also picks up on this “spectral” intrigue in *Specters of Marx* (2006). There is this spectral fetish with philosophers where these remnants of the past are conceptual residues—that may or may not have existed—become a kind of guilty pleasure. So the equation is not between the juxtaposition of V and X because we have to first kill V. That is, V must be the deceased and interred, but the *phantom* must be thought to be alive in the

sense of a Big Other. It reminds me of the movie *Welcome Home Roxy Carmichael* (1990). In the movie, a Hollywood celebrity, Roxy Carmichael, is going to return to her hometown. The entire town gets excited and it also causes tremendous anxiety for an old lover and a young girl, Dinky, who believes Roxie is her birth mother. Dinky spends the whole movie in this fantasy that Roxy will return and finally claim her. But, as we might imagine, the movie exposes that Roxy was not her mother, which leaves Dinky devastated.

The school is the mother who cannot be redeemed, but the fantasy is maintained. “Once an addict, always an addict,” for example. School as a public institution is relatively young. Prior to establishing formal education, private tutors and the church provided “education” aside from the apprenticeships and agricultural methods learned. The abusive mother who disappoints us repeatedly somehow still commands a large part of our energy and “faith” in being redeemed. As long as we maintain this fantasy then we can go on with the struggle and “keep the dream alive.” However, at what point do we contemplate resistance as futile (Žižek, 2007) or utile (Critchley, 2008)? So what you have is in one part a symbolic constellation of fantasy and in the second part a disavowal of the Real. But, like MM encountering the Real, when the fantasy collides with the Real and the nightmare is induced then you see this horrible existential anxiety attack.

DG:

And in this case the Big Other is the pastoral image of the school. Interestingly, many critical educational theorists have been positioning themselves as the defenders of schools. Peter McLaren this morning posted a photo of himself on Facebook holding up a t-shirt expressing a rejection of testing, accountability, and all of these trappings of the corporate state’s reform of schooling, and declaring that we should place our trust in teachers. For me, this epitomizes the problem of how critical educational theorists focus on how schools reproduce the existing symbolic order, rather than how the existing symbolic order reproduces schools and schooling. In this regard, I think the argument could be made that critical educational theory has “schooled” Freire and his notion of critical pedagogy. Hence, we could add that they are truly “enjoying their symptom.” So, however much these new Marxists/Freireans/critical pedagogues feel themselves marginalized within education and teacher education, the Big Other nevertheless interpellates them as educationalists, as school (and schooled) people. Also, I’m not suggesting that such feelings aren’t in some ways legitimate. After all, AERA did grant Henry Giroux a lifetime achievement award in 2015. So, that’s considerable legitimation from the largest and most “mainstream” body of educational researchers in the world.

AG:

The Big Br/other of schooling has far more dire implications than most would probably care to discuss. In Sunday school I was taught that God sees everything and He is always watching. This is a good way to create a “positive” traumatic kernel, if your intention is to create a good neurotic with lots of counseling in his future. Schools become this temple of the Big Other where laws are blurred under the command of zero tolerance, security and

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surveillance, and so on. The school is conceptualized ideologically as an authoritarian utopia. Moral character is a defining quality of a teacher and we fire teachers who pose for a bikini photo shoot and other things. It is a world where, even though we know that people are not perfect—people are having illicit sex, drinking, or watching porn—we must nonetheless portray this sterile moral illusion. It does not just affect students but also teachers. There is a lack of honesty, but no lack of production and consumption of fantasies.

DG:

Obviously, given the number of Marxist publications coming out these days, Marxism is enjoying a bit of a resurgence in educational theory. That could be a function of the times in which we now live and the grotesque levels of inequality fueling—in Marxist terms—class antagonisms, coupled with a new generation of young scholars discovering Marx for the first time. You've obviously taken your own work in a different direction with Žižek, even to the point of organizing a conference that Žižek himself attends dedicated to Žižek Studies. From your perspective, what relevance does Žižek's thought hold for our own thinking on schools, education, or collective learning?

AG:

I think we are in a bit of a schizophrenic period between the market, global politics, and social movements. Some days Capitalism seems to be the proper mode and others it seems like a more Marxist orientation is needed. I hate to use the word millennials, but I find the generation born in the 90s to be challenging the logic of capital as it pertains to the economy since the job outlook is very bleak.

DG:

Right! The Occupy Movement and the popularity of Bernie Sanders with younger voters make that clear.

AG:

Marxism turns into the hipster chic “cool.” I do not think it is because they really understand Marxism, but because we love dialectics. You know these people who cannot understand Atheists and insist that “you must believe in something!” Well, if you do not believe that capitalism is the ultimate answer then what is the next choice? Even this, for me, is problematic. No one seems to want to conceptualize or think what is beyond the “horizon.” It is not just capitalism and Marxism. We have to understand that Marxism is not immune to the co-option of capital. Do you remember the early 1980s punk era where “anti” was the ontological thesis that punks sought after?

DG:

I do. Punk was very much part of my “coming to consciousness,” but then we started seeing colored hairspray and faux-hawks being marketed to kids in television ads.

AG:

I am very heavily influenced by music and I have lived through some interesting times of music and popular culture. The “Grunge” era, for example, was about the rawness of angst and a backlash against the androgynous spandex wearing and permed power ballad hair bands. Somehow lots of music also emerged on the “alternative” scene like Squirrel Nut Zippers, a swing band. Ska/punk music (e.g., Less than Jake, Rancid, Mighty Mighty Bosstones, Reel Big Fish) made its way into mainstream airplay. However, There was this fear of being a “poser” or “selling out” in all of the music cultures. I remember the ska band Reel Big Fish had a song called “Sell Out” (1996) that had the chorus:

Sell out, with me, oh yeah
Sell out, with me tonight
The record company's gonna give me lots of money
And everything's gonna be alright

In the movie *SLC Punk* (1998), Stevo (Matthew Lillard) is walking through the mall breaking the fourth wall and pointing out the posermism of Salt Lake City wannabe punks who say, “Anarchy in the UK” despite living in the U.S. The whole movie exemplifies this either/or dimension where one either goes to college and “sells out” to the adult world or one is a punk with little to no money but maintains the integrity and angst of a god given free soul not being held down by “the man.”

A couple of points, however, need to be addressed. In *SLC Punk*, as Stevo is talking with his mother and father, he rejects their plea to do something with his life. As Stevo leaves the room his father says, “I didn’t sell out son. I bought in.” Patton Oswalt, a comedian and actor, explains the underlying hostility and provocation of selling out. Oswalt says that everyone wants to sell out if they are doing something to make money. It is the people who are not succeeding in making money because their music, art, etc. is shit raise their fist to the “man” and selling out. This leads to the brilliance of Tool when they talk about the consumption of music, popular culture, and so on.

And in between
Sips of Coke
He told me that
He thought
We were sellin' out,
Layin' down,
Suckin' up
To the man.

Well now I've got some
Advice for you, little buddy.
Before you point the finger
You should know that

I'm the man,
And if I'm the man,
Then you're the man, and
He's the man as well so you can
Point that fuckin' finger up your ass.

All you know about me is what I've sold you,
Dumb fuck.
I sold out long before you ever heard my name.
—Tool, *Hooker with a Penis* (excerpted)

I use this song when I am teaching cultural studies and theory to look at the notion of selling out and Marxist critique. In my opinion, what hipsters, for example, do is flip things around so that “irony” or “contradiction” become cool. Tool points out that the logic of capital is a constellation—an intersectionality of trajectories, plasma (with Latour, 2005), and vacillations—of always-already predicated cultural consumption. “The man” that many joke about is nothing more than the faceless big Other of capital, an old man in the sky keeping watch on the world with a slightly biased and racist intent.

DG:

I appreciate that this latest generation of young scholars who find themselves gravitating toward Marxism inherited a world that didn't have a real place for them. The symbolic order, in a sense, had failed them. They grew up during the ascension of neoliberalism. It's not shocking that Marx would resonate with them, but I get what you mean by the irony. I just don't think reviving trade unions so that more people can consume more iPhones and iPads is going to save anyone from a mass extinction event caused by over-production and over-consumption. If I'm hearing you right, you're suggesting that their angst would go away if capitalism would only “work” for them, too.

I don't know if it's the same for you, but, as I mentioned before, Žižek actually calls me to think of an alternative to capitalism. We know what we're against, but what are we for? This is what interests me most. We're going to have some big Other. Lacan makes that very clear. That's why I'm tapping into his work, among others, to develop the philosophical justification for this *Leitkultur* project I'm developing. You know how genetics has made it possible for people to engineer their own children? In a Lacanian sense, I think we need to engineer a new father, a new big Other. Big History has helped open my eyes to something far larger than myself to which I strive to be obedient, but it's so massive on the cosmic, so infinitesimal on the nanoscale, and so complex on every scale that I can barely comprehend it.

AG:

The generation that came up as the children of Reaganomics are now in what Bill Pinar (2004) refers to often as “the nightmare that is the present.” I think the younger people

see that if capitalism was the greatest show on earth then why has it created desperation and dispossession of the spirit? If capitalism has not worked then maybe we should give Marxism a try? But it is a little more complicated.

A few years ago I gave a talk about critical pedagogy and what place should Marxism have in critical pedagogy's future. For one, we have not seen the grand revolution come; however, this does not mean that at the social level we have not made tremendous strides. Rather, what you have today is James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) on a loop. That is, people ask what people are protesting for and it is like asking Johnny, "What are you rebelling against?" and Johnny replies like a debonair punk, "what do you got?" This is the problem with today's post-political situation. Revolution has become trendy. However, there is no revolution because what you have today is not even diet revolution but a decaffeinated revolution. And we have to remember that compared to Europe and most of the world, the US has had a relatively comfortable history of choosing to participate in global conflicts. "Revolution" has, as Etienne Balibar (1991) notes, "become trivialized in the extreme" (p. 156). We need to proceed with caution and consider Balibar's proposal that "if Marxism is going somewhere, it can only be towards its own destruction" (p. 154). For education and theory, I think Postman (1979) is essential here when he states, "Education is a culture's answer to the questions of a particular era. The hazard of 'holding' an educational philosophy is that you may be caught with a bag full of right answers to the wrong era" (p. 16).

DG:

So, has Žižek helped you see another way of approaching issues?

AG:

Yes, of course. I do not know if it was because the literature I was exposed to was not sufficient or what the real reason. All I remember is that I felt like I had reached an intellectual impasse with the scholarship in education trying to get at certain questions I had. Žižek opened up a whole new world beyond the Frankfurt school and critical pedagogy. To be clear, I still use the work of the Frankfurt school and critical pedagogy; however, what I have sought to do is expand on these conceptually to present possibilities for the present. What I think is important to acknowledge is that the US does not have a history of philosophers in the perilous trenches of social unrest and political savagery.

No matter how many times one might read *The Motorcycle Diaries* by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, we can in no way ever approach identifying with such oppression witnessed with the miners and the leper colony. It seems like we yearn for a revolution or real upheaval to cast some kind of legitimation. You know, you need "street credit."

DG:

Credit? Or Credibility? We're back to posers, aren't we? I mean we see how this becomes just another set of patterns of consumption and a new suit of uniforms.

AG:

Credibility. This works both ways too. By moving beyond the education discourses I also began feeling that I was moving outside the safe and secure parameters. However, I began to see the formula for acceptance and it was a hegemonic ideology pandering to identity politics and superlative notions of a “fantasy prolonged.” You know when you are dreaming and your alarm clock goes off, but you hear it in your dream incorporated as some element of the manifest content? The pleasure of the dream is prolonged as a resistance to the Real/ity. Kris [Holland] and I never tried to be this “anti” embodiment to avoid being posers or selling out. Once at a conference I had a weird moment with a colleague who was pretty drunk and almost lamenting shamefully that he knew a certain body of Lacan and Žižek’s work, but he could never know the scope of what I had read. It was a weird occasion that to this day I do not really understand, but I think it is the fear of every “expert.” Raymond Williams (2001) wrote about the “selective tradition” where a defined canon of literature or acceptable theories was the constitution for acceptance in a discipline. At the same time, we need these adherents to the selective tradition to look back on outdated, dead, or trivial theses that need to be reviewed or expanded on. What happens when one has been trained to recite Plato by heart and know the Greek tradition with a theological commitment, and is asked about the spirit of ‘68 scholars in France, but cannot respond? This is the moment every academic fears because it means admitting that one does not know despite an astute training in philosophy.

DG:

I know exactly what you mean by that “formula for acceptance.” The pressures to publish or perish are very real and very intense, which makes it tempting to just find that formula and adhere to it. I entered into academia to pursue certain questions that I had about the world. My pursuit of those questions, as you’d expect, only led to more questions. I never concerned myself too much with whether they were the right questions for anyone else but myself. I’m grateful that my attempts to answer those questions have resonated with people. Working at Boise State has given me the chance to finally work with doctoral students, which I see as an opportunity to help others learn to pursue their own questions. Hopefully, they’ll have different questions by the time they graduate, but I’m very excited that three of them will be joining me in presenting at the 2016 Žižek Studies Conference. From what you’ve told me, you created it and continue organizing it because you wanted to foster a certain approach to scholarship.

AG:

The conference was something I wanted to do for several years, but I was still in my doctoral studies and beginning preparation research for my dissertation. After I got to SUNY Brockport as a Presidential Fellow, I was determined to have some type of convention for Žižek scholars. I had no idea who would come and I used a speculative budget of \$5,000 to pay for everything. At the time, I had been reading a lot of history around the Psychoanalytic circles and Vienna Circle of the logical positivists in philosophy. Where were the circles of today cultivating and supporting intellectual engagements? Kris [Holland] and I had discussed for several years our disappointment in conferences where we paid some exorbitant

amount of money for the conference fee, hotel, and travel, but did not get much intellectual value in return. In addition, we found an irony that most of the conferences we attended were committed to issues of social justice, equality, Marxist critique, and so on. In short, they were supposed to be Left-oriented groups, but they were operating like China, that is, capitalists with socialist faces. I did what I had done in the past cultivating the kind of teacher I wanted to be for my students, which, like my teaching, was to do the opposite of what, in my opinion, the other conferences had done poorly. I set out to engage in a “really existing” socialist project with the conference.

I took the model of one conference I had attended and dissected it down to the socialist parts it had the potential to offer. One, attendees should have as many resources made available as possible to attend. This means that I am often writing letters for university funds, looking for fundraising opportunities, and so forth. You have to realize that these other conferences have bank funds in excess of \$100,000. Most important for me was helping graduate students, especially foreign student attendees get into the conference. Second, many conferences use the conference fee to force memberships, journal subscriptions, and catering that may or may not be consumed. Our conference fee is used to break even as we estimate costs in conjunction with our budget each year. We are fortunate that we have had the personal, academic, and financial help and support of people like Adrian Parr who directs the Taft Research Center at the University of Cincinnati. We have managed to attract more support each conference because we maintain the goals and integrity of why the conference was started and held as a biennial event.

DG:

The conference has a very strong reputation and an internationally known presence. What makes the conference stand out and draw international attention? Can you explain the goals or “pillars” of the conference?

AG:

When I originally decided to do the conference I was in a place of feeling like I had no intellectual home. I yearned for a group like the Vienna Circle to come together and engage seriously with the work of others. Other than the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* (IJZS), those heavily invested in studying Žižek and the intersectionality of disciplines that use a Žižek inspired framework and “style” had a fairly limited space. You know you cannot go to, for example, the American Philosophical Association (APA) and try to discuss Žižek without great resistance from the analytic philosophers. American philosophy departments are dominated by analytic philosophy, so those invested in the continental tradition or method (see Critchley, 2001) must find homes in the humanities, foreign languages, or other disciplines.

The conference has several principles that guide it. Many know that if these principles are compromised I will cease to do the conference, which almost happened this year. We strive to be an integrated group of scholars coming from all disciplines. The primary goal is to share our work and build collaborative relationships and cultivate an intellectual community that works on projects between each conference. In addition, the conference is a

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place for Slavoj to feel at ease and among friends. I am very stern about Slavoj not being inundated with activities or forced to attend gatherings because this is his time as much as it is ours. If Slavoj wants to stay in the hotel room and write or rest, I tell him to just call me or let the hotel know if he needs anything. Slavoj means a lot to me outside of academic relations and we have been friends since the first conference. At the end of the day philosophy is not always your friend, but your friend will always be able to comfort you with some philosophical inspiration. As a friend, I will never subject Slavoj to being exploited for opportunistic gains or otherwise.

One of the best things about the conference is the network of relations and support it has set up for people and the projects that have been produced. For example, Garrett Busshart was a freshman at the university when he attended the first conference in 2012 and has since been in regular conversations with colleagues and Lacanian networks. Matt Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis got together and edited the *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader* (2014). The conference network also helped Rex Butler in compiling the *Žižek Dictionary* (2014). The latest project that I know of is Russell Sbriglia's edited *Everything You ever Wanted to Know About Literature, but Were Afraid to Ask Žižek* (2017). And, of course, my edited collection, *Žižek and Education*, is being completed for publication in 2017 sometime. No one looks down on anyone for being in a particular discipline or for being a certain educational rank (e.g., undergrad, grad, or other), and if you need help there are plenty of people who will meet on Skype, Facebook, etc. to talk over projects or read chapters. I think this speaks to the level of intellectual engagement and commitment to embodying the socialist ideal of the conference influenced by Žižek's discourse.

DG:

Sometimes, the amount of popular culture references you use, especially with movies, feels a bit overwhelming. This also seems characteristic of Žižek's work, and it helped me to watch *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2009) and *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2013). I'm curious to know if you adapted this pedagogical employment because of Žižek's affinity to use films to exemplify, explain, and make connections with high theory on the level of the colloquial and sublime?

AG:

I have this compulsion where I feel I need to quote or capture something that is accessible as a subjective experience with objective implications. Movies and popular culture are widely available and do not obligate the adaptation or agreement of a particular position by consuming them. In the extreme, we can even propose a vicarious lifestyle lived through the life of the celluloid. Do you remember the movie *The Cable Guy* (1996) with Jim Carrey? Jim Carrey plays a cable installer who befriends Matthew Broderick and begins this psychotic adventure. However, Carrey's character reacts or references in accordance to a TV show or movie. The way people use the Bible and quote it to help guide their life and thoughts; I do the same albeit through movies and popular culture. I think this approach is similar to why we see so many popular references in Žižek's work.

Why do I resort so often to examples of popular culture? The simple answer is in order to avoid a kind of jargon, and to achieve the greatest possible clarity,

not only for my readers but also for myself. That is to say, the idiot for whom I endeavour to formulate a theoretical point as clearly as possible is ultimately myself: I am not patronizing my readers. (Žižek, 2005, p. 56)

We are at a time technologically where we can interact as a group with various people across the world through, for example, Skype or Google Hangouts. The ability to gather knowledge on a topic is as easy as “googling.” When I was in elementary school and through high school, we never had the verb “to google”; however, we had early Internet search engines like Yahoo (est. 1994) and Ask Jeeves (est. 1996), but no search engine had the impact like Google to be so integral and prominent that it became a certified verb. What amazes me today is that with such expedited ability to learn about something, my students have exhibited the greatest deficiency in wanting to know. In 2011, Apple made it even easier to search by introducing Siri (acronym for Speech Interpretation and Recognition Interface) as an advanced voice recognition technology bordering on a pseudo-artificial intelligence. (Remember the movie *Her* (2013) that was about a man falling in love with his female voiced and persona operating system?) But there is a fundamental oversight we should acknowledge here that returns to my previous thought on *knowing* and *knowing how*.

Despite the evolution of search engines and information “at your finger tips,” knowing about Google differs from knowing how to use Google. In my observations of high school classrooms (mine and others) I was amazed at how many students did not understand how to add, change, or even begin search words. This requires a type of logical reasoning and deduction, and this is where [analytic] philosophy provides a way to think about the language used when googling. This brings us to some important notions that Freire outlined. One, “there is no learning without teaching” (Freire, 2014, p. 83). Teaching can take place autodidactically, through media (e.g., hidden or outside curriculum), or in the traditional sense of a sentient person. Second, we should avoid the “banking method” of education (Freire, 2000) that does not obligate any synthesis or application.

The concept of collective learning, as Christian (2010) explains, as a specific ability amongst homo sapiens should go one step further. In the realm of identity politics, any talk of “being human” is critiqued as being particular to a set of beliefs that could fall into the universal exception via ideology. We have to be cautious with this idea of human because it must be conceptualized by its universal exception, that is, not human. In my research, trying to ground a universal idea of human is complicated; however, I find Heidegger (2008), despite his Nazi involvement, to be more helpful in exploring the concept of Being-in-the-world. For Heidegger there was a fundamental separation between humans and all other things, which was that humans are the only ones with the mental faculties to (a) contemplate their own mortality and (b) understand time as a construction. Understanding where we were, where we are now, and where we are going is a unique cognitive ability that humans possess. However, Heidegger, as an individual, provides a good example of the problem of humanity; that is, even our greatest intellectuals are not “good” by nature nor are their works to be “good” by nature. For example, the bastardization and manipulation of Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch* and *will to power* were used by the Nazis as a rationale for their rise and power.

DG:

This brings us back to the intersections of your work in constellar theory and the work I'm doing to approach Big History and collective learning through Lacan and Žižek, and vice versa. As I mentioned at the outset of our interview, Sarah and I wrote a piece for *Policy Futures in Education* where we take seriously Žižek's call for a global *Leitkultur* (Gabbard & Ritter, 2014). Beyond his jokes and provocations, Žižek is obviously a very serious scholar with an uncanny ability to demonstrate the importance of deep philosophical thought for reflecting on our past, understanding our present, and deliberating on our future. I find myself in complete agreement with his observation that

Things look bad for great Causes today, in a “postmodern” era when, although the ideological scene is fragmented into a panoply of positions which struggle for hegemony, there is an underlying consensus: the era of big explanations is over, we need “weak thought,” opposed to all foundationalism, a thought attentive to the rhizomatic texture of reality; in politics too, we should no longer aim at all-explaining systems and global emancipatory projects; the violent imposition of grand solutions should leave room for forms of specific resistance and intervention . . . If the reader feels a minimum of sympathy with these lines, she should stop reading and cast aside this volume.

Even those who otherwise tend to dismiss “French” postmodern theory with its “jargon” as an exemplary case of “bullshit” tend to share its aversion towards “strong thought” and its large-scale explanations. (Žižek, 2009, p. 1)

Any effort toward putting forth the foundations for a global *Leitkultur* would have to be viewed as an example of what he's talking about here as “strong thought.” When asked about the usefulness of speaking about the common good, Žižek (2013) defends the politicization of ethics:

politicized in the sense that you cannot simply presuppose some common good. Rather, it is a matter of decision . . . For me, politics has *priority* over ethics. Not in the vulgar sense that we can do whatever we want—even kill people and then subordinate ethics to politics—but in a much more radical sense that what we define as our common good is not something we just discover; rather, it is that we have to take *responsibility* for defining what is our good. . . . What I like to suggest, based on my basic position, is not politics in the sense of what people usually associate with politics—such as cheap manipulation, corruption, power struggles, etc.—but politics in the sense of fundamental decisions about our life on earth, and collective decisions about our life on earth, and collective decisions for which you have to take *full* responsibility. (pp. 1-3)

I am, in this sense, in favor of the *politicization of ethics* in the sense that we are not only responsible for doing our duty or for working for the good, we are also responsible for deciding what the good is. (p. 10)

For me, we seem to have difficulties acknowledging *what* we are. First, Big History helps us understand ourselves as a species—just one form of life among many, and many of those species preceded our own. At a more basic level, we are metabolisms. Together we form a

collective metabolism. As such, whether individually or collectively, the function of our consciousness defines not just our being but also our collective moral purpose; namely, maintaining the homeostasis of our individual and collective selves within an environment that is not always friendly to our survival. At the present time, however, through our incessant war with that environment, we have achieved an unprecedented degree of dominance and sustained it by the death and destruction it leaves in its wake. Just look at the world we are bequeathing to our children!

In many ways, I think multiculturalism's fetishization of "difference" has been pushing us in the wrong direction. Identity politics represents a kind of tribalism. Its focus on "who" we are ties us strictly to our social construction as members of separate ethnicities, nationalities, sexual orientations, genders, and so on—all of which are social constructions. I'm not suggesting that these things lack significance, but the fetishization of "difference" ignores something far more basic that I think could serve as a basis for greater solidarity. That is, and this is why I find Big History to be so exciting, we ought to be addressing our commonalities. We share the same universe, the same galaxy, the same solar system, the same planet. I am totally in favor of viewing ourselves first and foremost as earthlings. Moving down the nanoscale, we are comprised of the same chemical elements first created with the exploding supernova that, over millions of years of accretion, formed our planet. It's not just some new age sentimentalism to say that we are "star dust." While it may be awe inspiring and, therefore, humbling to think of ourselves on these scales, there is nothing romantic about it. The processes that made the universe and everything in it possible were extremely violent in the sense that creation emerges from destruction.

Like all metabolisms, our homeostasis is contingent on our ability to deploy our matter and energy upon the matter and energy that we find in the external world in order to consume that matter and energy to fuel our metabolisms, which reproduces our own matter and energy. Every meal we eat is precipitated by acts of violence. We must kill other forms of life, other metabolisms, to sustain our own. Likewise, there are other metabolisms that would consume us in order to sustain their own. There is nothing romantic about this, and we shouldn't sentimentalize it. But we must come to terms with it. We must come to terms with *what we are*.

AG:

Constellar theory comes from looking at the various intersections of history and the influences of one thing on another. This is a new line of research and direction for me, so it is still very infantile in its development. As you mentioned, my work and reputation have been largely developed in the field of Žižek studies, psychoanalysis, and educational theory. Those areas, especially with Žižek, have built a foundation to now move to new projects and trajectories. I feel like Foucault in this way because I have a diverse set of interests that I weave together. It is very anxiety provoking to embark on new pathways, especially in philosophy, which has the dreadful misfortune of operating in vacuous dark tombs rotting with corpses and old paradigms waiting to come to life. This is why Rorty has started to grow on me more as I advance projects. Particularly, Rorty (2009) discusses this institution of messianic stagnation in contrast to scholars of admirable quality. He says, "imaginative vision is, of course, just what distinguishes the first-rate scholar or scientist from the hack"

(p. 406). We have a number of good people and academics that follow the formula for tenure and promotion success, but we have too little found the cultivation of imagination in the young scholars that would free them of the chains of the university. For this very reason I agree with Terry Eagleton (2003) when he says that academics are the opposite of intellectuals. In other words, “To be inside and outside a position at the same time—to occupy a territory while loitering skeptically on the boundary—is often where the most intensely creative ideas stem from” (p. 40).

In philosophy it is common to see someone refer to a “constellation” or “coordinates.” We have this kind of residual mathematical topography that I would attribute to Descartes, but also to the oldest of antiquity, the Egyptians. It is interesting to note how the stars and cosmos were very much observed and integrated into the beliefs about the world in the earliest of advanced societies. The pyramids of Giza, for example, align with the stars, so they were built with a specific relationship to celestial orientations (see Hedman, 2007). Many of the religions around the world look upward to the sky and cosmos for their god[s]. If you think of our little planet, we are a blip on the map of the universe; yet, we have this narcissistic obsession with conceptualizing our planet and species as bigger or better than any possible Other.

Not to digress too much, but we see these ridiculous science fiction movies where an alien species attacks and somehow our species wins in the end. This is fantastical wishful thinking, but it raises an issue that Big History and Constellar Theory would possibly strongly agree. Humanity lives in this paradox of dialectical relation governed by the logic of capital that will inevitably lead to the greatest advances in medicine, science, and technology in the worst of sustainable [material and humanistic] conditions (see Marcuse, 1964).

You will often hear in philosophy classes “Does the center hold?” or something to this notion. In the historical context, philosophy and the nature of belief have changed dramatically over time. We used to believe that bloodletting was a beneficial medical practice. The saying “blowing smoke up one’s ass” comes from the actual medical practice of blowing tobacco smoke up one’s ass as a supposed cure. We know the earth is not flat and so on. As we develop and evolve through research, we marginalize outdated modes of thinking that were once the central point of agreement. What is interesting, however, is that we still have people that believe certain things despite the fact that we know that they are not true or do not work. I see public education as having this same symptomatic issue between believing and knowing.

DG:

I agree. The same symptomatic issue between believing and knowing plays out in teacher preparation programs in ways that create very real tensions for those of us committed to knowing and unafraid of knowing. Of course, the symptoms we are speaking about are not restricted to these spaces. Examining how the manner in which they play out in schools mirrors their functioning in teacher education is important. Much of my work over the past few years has addressed what I’ve identified as a “cycle of compliance” that has helped me appreciate the significance that Lacanian psychoanalysis holds for our understanding of these things. That is, why do so many choose to remain willfully ignorant of the world around them, how did it get this way, and why does it stay this way? We can readily see that they do

not know what they don't know, but how can we explain why don't they want to know what they don't know? What makes them ostracize and even willing to punish anyone whose knowledge threatens their belief? Aren't these kinds of questions at the core of Morpheus' description of the Matrix in the 1999 Wachowski Brothers' film of the same name?

The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you're inside, you look around, what do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters. The very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are still a part of that system and that makes them our enemy. You have to understand, most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inured, so hopelessly dependent on the system, that they will fight to protect it.

And protect it, they do—albeit frequently in ways that escape their conscious awareness that what they are doing reproduces the panoptic system that enforces their own utility to that system and their own docility to that system. Their job, which we ought to view and treat as a Lacanian symptom, is literally to play the role of an agent, like Agent Smith in *The Matrix*, of this disciplinary system. In keeping with the principles of panopticism, they become the eyes and ears of that system, and they function to reproduce an army of teachers who will become the same—agents for the production of economic utility and political docility in their subjects. As such, they must also remain vigilant to identify and punish anything or anyone who would question or threaten that system or their own perceptions of the benevolence of that system or their role in reproducing it. It's sickening to watch those responsible for the preparation of people who will take their place as agents of the collective learning of our species revel in their complicity in this system and celebrate their successes in appeasing those agencies commissioned to “accredit” their programs, effectively rewarding them for their compliance. As one administrator told me, he found the whole accreditation process to be “exhilarating.” I don't think they understand the depth of the moral imperative and deep responsibility of our work as willful agents of collective learning.

But make no mistake, in their eyes, we are those who dare to question and challenge the legitimacy of the system and, therefore, their role in reproducing it. At the very least, they see no utility in our theory/theorizing. At worst, insofar as our theorizing unveils the origins and evolution of compulsory schooling as a form of state control of collective learning for the purposes of harvesting and harnessing energy—biopower—(see Foucault, 1990) from useful and docile bodies, they regard us as a threat—not necessarily because they are dutifully committed to this system of control, but because they know that their complicity in such a system would be wrong, and they don't want to question the benevolence of their actions or intentions. This is precisely the point at that which belief comes into play. While they may genuinely believe that they do what they do because they *love* children, rarely will you find “intellectual honesty” or valuing “the pursuit of truth”—both of which should be central to our principles of collective learning—listed in any professional educator's *code of ethics*.

I was naive to much of this while I was going through my doctoral program, but not all of it. Or maybe I was unconsciously trapped in what Žižek would probably see as a “fetishistic disavowal” through which I sustained my belief in the possibility of transforming

teacher education and our system of compulsory schools. But I have lost faith in any such possibility.

What do we see around us? Colleges of education around the United States have been steadily eliminating coursework in educational foundations from their graduate and undergraduate programs in teacher education over the past 20 years, making it hard for people such as us to find or maintain jobs. They judge our utility in terms of what we contribute to the imperatives of high stakes testing and accountability in K-12 schools, whether we support the aims of those school reforms or not. To the extent that we exercise what remains of our independence to critique such reforms, teacher education programs view us as dysfunctional to the institution.

AG:

It is unfortunate that the market has not been favorable for many in and outside of education. Many of my colleagues that work in schools of education tell me that the numbers are down in regards to the number of students pursuing bachelor degrees in education. This should tell us something without beating around any bush. What has and is happening to the discipline of educational studies? Why do so many abandon teaching in favor of other employment opportunities with a better range of earning potential? At the level of educational scholarship, why has educational theory imported a large extent of its ideas but failed to export contributions to a degree of significance and recognition (with the exception of a few) in areas outside of education? (In curriculum studies, for example, Malewski (2010) raised this issue on the future of post-reconceptual curriculum studies as having any effect on the humanities and other disciplines.)

If education produced really good innovative work then we would see a greater incorporation and utilization in fields like cultural theory, ethnic and multicultural studies, and the humanities in general. In my view, philosophers outside of education do not take philosophy of education seriously because attaching “education” to your field of study is stigmatizing. Sam Rocha explains the position that philosophers of education occupy.

My field probably isn't gonna thank me for this, but I think we're probably like the least respectable of the philosophers from the point of view of the humanities and of philosophy. And in some cases there's probably some good reasons for that, but some of the reasons for it are just I think a lot of the assumptions about what philosophy is within the humanities and within academic philosophy. That [*sic*] expect it to be detached to a certain degree... We're kind of misfits in both spots. We're too theoretical for the educationalists; we're too practical for the philosophers...(Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015)

We fall into this Rodney Dangerfield “I don't get no respect” area despite the fact that many of the philosophers of education are trained in their graduate programs in the same courses as those pursuing a masters or PhD in philosophy. Remember, too, that the American philosophy departments are dominated by analytic philosophy, which has isolated the practice of philosophy to the university (Rorty, 2009).

DG:

This is unfortunate and symptomatic across any area in education where “theory” is evoked as a primary concentration. Can you talk a little bit about some of the challenges you’ve encountered? I know these pressures transcend teacher education. We also see the elimination of courses and programs in the arts and humanities across higher education.

AG:

I will share an example of the type of resistance and utter disdain that analytic philosophy departments have for the kind of work that I do in the continental tradition. I will keep the nature of the sender anonymous, but I think it is important to see that we are not paranoid neurotics with fractured egos and devout narcissistic personality disorders. The issues we face are real and exhaustingly frequent. A professor in philosophy sent the following message to me.

In our Department, we are trying to teach our students intellectual discipline. More precisely, we are trying to teach them that some ways of thinking are better ways to pursue the truth than other ways of thinking. I believe that everyone believes this, whether they realize it or not.... So how does all of this relate to the Philosophy Club, and your participation in it? Well, my impression is that the way that you do philosophy tends to undermine the habits of thought -- the intellectual discipline -- that we are trying to teach our students. They [the students] just sit around and pontificate about things, without ever having to present reasons or arguments for their opinions. Those practices of just sitting around and "shooting the shit" tend to inculcate habits of thought that are intellectually lazy and self-indulgent. Now, I honestly don't think that this is your fault, since I don't think that you have been exposed to really good work in philosophy. I realize that you have read some of what I would call good work, but I just don't think that you have seen it done on topics that would interest and engage you. I think that if that actually happened, then you might (*might*) change your mind about how you think and do philosophy.

There is tremendous animosity and unapologetic condescension. The outcomes of my engagement, of course, are not mentioned. First, the philosophy club under the initial direction of the philosophy department had an average attendance of three to five students and very little involvement with the faculty advisor to provide direction and facilitate interest around campus. I raised attendance and interest around campus with average attendance ranging from about ten to twenty on occasion. Second, I organized the undergraduate philosophy conference, contacted local universities and philosophy clubs for involvement and submission, and worked with the student government to have Bill Ayers as a speaker. If we wanted to get some publicity and interest for philosophy club there seemed like no better candidate than Bill.

DG:

I wish I could say that I am surprised by any of that. It sounds like you did some exceptional work to inspire student interest in philosophy. You'd think that the department would have seen this as an opportunity to recruit more majors. Across the country, neoliberal reforms in higher education tie funding to the numbers of students majoring in the various programs. Reactions such as the one you describe reflect suicidal tendencies in so far as these programs seem committed to killing themselves. It reminds me of the Ouroboros, the mythical serpent that devours itself—tail first!

AG:

Exactly! But this also goes back to the freedom I am afforded right now since I do not have the provisions and prohibitions of the university on my work. So the issue of having articles in top tier journals is not as much of a concern or consideration for me. Additionally, I do not favor the current journal-publishing imperative that so many academics are reduced to. For one, journals have limitations with word counts and so on. If you are developing a project like Constellar Theory in my case or otherwise, you really need the ability to compile the thoughts into a volume. For example, Peter Sloterdijk's *Bubbles: Spheres Volume I: Microspherology* (2011) would be a frustrating reading if it were subjected to being spread as articles only across various journals. Sometimes a scholar is lucky to be able to contribute a series of papers to one journal that form the body of a major work in progress. In the early days before technology allowed the expeditious submission and review of papers, the exchange of and compilation of papers at organizational meetings allowed scholars to review prominent works and projects. Today this mad obsession with publishing and being able to fulfill the demands of the university have unfortunately produced a large amount of "perishables" that can be intellectually putrid and banal.

Nausea fills me when I think of banality. You know this is the worst kind of thing for me where substance has little to no substance, the etchings were already etched, flavor has become stale and one-dimensional, but exceptional banality has the tendency for reward under the current system. Let me provide an anecdotal saying we have in the poker world: "We rarely remember the pots [money] we have won; however, most players have a keen sense of memory when it comes to the pots lost." I emphasize this sentiment for its issue of amnesia and resentful nostalgia. Losing is an important lesson because it means that we (a) took a chance or (b) made a mistake that will hopefully not make again. If you want to say something then say something. Banality is a criminal act robbing one [the reader] of time, imagination, and cultivation.

I do not write because I expect to get paid. I write because, like Nietzsche, I have no other way to exercise the thoughts in my head. Writing is a useful process of painful pleasure that consumes me like heroin, the exigence of ecstasy. Have you ever felt that orgasmic anguish pulsating intensely from the brain to the twitching rectum of expectation? One might "purge" the mind very well by writing or talking, but when one truly writes and talks, at least for me, it tends to instigate nausea, dyspepsia, and the ultimate evacuation via peristaltic rush. There is a lot of shit to contend with and only so much time in between that can be endured before I hunch over and begin either in ecstasy or excrement. Lacan had it figured out and made no apologies for language. "Eating shit is all very well," Lacan (2008) says,

“but you can’t always eat the same shit. So, I try to get hold of some new shit” (pp. 69-70). I appreciate Anaïs Nin’s observation that

The role of a writer is not to say what we can all say, but what we are unable to say...Writing should develop our senses, not atrophy them...The secret of writing. The experience resembles the knot one brings to therapy, where one learns to unravel it. Analysis begins with the cryptic phrase out of a dream, usually. The phrase is the key to a condensed tangle. Then there is the process of untangling by a method of associations, chain-reaction sequences, analogies. (Nin, 1975, p. 171)

Equally relevant, Emmanuel Brahmsstein once described sanity as “a brief interlude to madness.” If one wants to be a writer, especially an intellectual, then one has to be willing to open a few veins and let others know that there is no infliction greater than that of the self-inflicted intellectual. I like how Palahniuk (1999) frames it in *Invisible Monsters*, “The only way to find true happiness is to risk being completely cut open” (p. 86). You know I admire greatly the work and courage of Kay Redfield Jamison. Most of the “madness” we find out about people comes posthumously, but in her book *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (1995), she talks about how draining it was to hide her mind and emotions, so the book was a coming out that carried with it the possibility of consequences from societal stigma. The fear of being dishonest about *who* we are and why write is a kind of castration and deception. However, I think this is how many play the game of “status quo” in order to keep up the illusion of who they appear to be rather than who they *are*. Thus, for me, I think we should plead for more exhibitionism and let it all hang out. Unfortunately most do not have the decency to maintain the full frontal [Bakhtin] carnivalesque. There always seems to be a reservation that many intellectuals and scholars hold *sacred* to avoid the schism of the *profane*.

DG:

Listening to you, I’m reminded of something that someone—a senior scholar at a major research institution—reportedly said of me some time ago. They said that I could never get a job at their institution because I was too much of what they called “a generalist,” meaning that my work isn’t easily categorized into one discipline or another. I took that as a backhanded compliment, because I don’t view the best social theorists like Foucault or Žižek as pure specialists in any given field. They’re very non-traditional academics in that sense. It seems rather purposeful that you keep this distance from falling into this or that category. For example, your PhD is in Curriculum Studies, but I think your reputation and work is better recognized outside of education. Is this part of your goal, as you’ve mentioned, to reclaim the value of educational theory and philosophy as having significance to other fields?

AG:

We have shaped education at the university to a narrowed selection of expertise. I think Big History and your elaborations on Christian’s notion of collective learning represent good ways to reclaim the larger intersectionality of the world. In addition, constellar theory is a direct result of this rejection of linear trajectories where one must maintain a singular

course of expertise and any other interests are more intellectual hobbies than serious incorporations. As I have mentioned, this intersectional application to the world and epistemological development is what drives analytic philosophy mad because the world itself is not neat despite the algorithmic desire of analytic philosophy. So those that are able to cross multiple fields and apply their work in various ways are derided as being “a jack of all trades, but a master of none.” This is a poor argument, but a real fear I see instilled in young scholars.

I never sought to necessarily traverse other disciplines; however, it was by the very nature of my work that obligated me to move about nomadically. The fact that my PhD is in education shocks people as much as finding out that I am Spanish despite having red hair and fair skin. One of my mentors encouraged me to pursue positions in sociology, another advised me to pursue foundations in education, and others thought I should pursue a position in the humanities where other continental philosophers can be found. Although it was not my conscious intention to export education (and more specifically pedagogy and praxis), I became an ambassador for education. However, you are correct that I would say my work is probably more well known in areas of continental philosophy, humanities, and so on. This is not to say that my reputation is not established in education. I am, as you know, part of the critical pedagogy discipline and work with those in that area. In addition, I am known in curriculum studies by the relationship of my early work in curriculum theory and work in multicultural education. I was fortunate to work with some good scholars in my graduate studies even if I was not in agreement with their ideas at times. Much like life, I think it is far greater to evaluate the totality of work and contribution at the end of one’s life. The goal of being a scholar is to understand the process of research, investigation, and assess propositions. So, for example, despite one having obtained a degree in literary studies that does not, in my evaluation, exempt one from having a successful and meaningful scholarly career in the field of philosophy, history, or law. It is not unusual to see a university take advantage of, what we refer to in philosophy as, the area of specialization (AOS) and areas of competency (AOC) for dual appointments. As you know, my first university position was not in education but in the humanities as a Presidential Fellow and visiting assistant professor. It was quite an honor to have this position as recognition and validation of my talents and potential in developing as a scholar in education as well in humanities.

DG:

That must have been a great experience, and it raises another question that I’d like to move toward closure with, and that is the notion of “intellectual red lighting.” It’s similar to the more familiar idea of “marginalizing,” but I think it’s also different in some very important ways. Where does the idea come from? How does the metaphor of the red light district work here?

AG:

In 2009 Kris Holland and I presented “Welcome to the Intellectual Red Light District” at the Bergamo Conference for the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. Both Kris and I had reached a point in our work where we had questions about the extent to which we could really embody the “anti-body” of academic work. Kris, was invested in the question of

how discourse and scholarship were constituted, and if there can be a text without text (e.g., “The Habermas Machine”). I was interested in the idea of [aesthetic] provocation as text. We were conceptualizing texts as text/ures in which a kind of topographical mapping of provocation meshed with an anemic nausea supplied a response as to the validity and valuation but also to the dispossession of “style.” Our concern was more than a communication of ideas; we wanted to explore the (an)aesthetic, that is, how objects, sounds, and other things that could provoke an experience whereby ideas/things took on psychical textual mapping unmitigated by the creator. So, what you come to is not just the communication of an idea, but also its effectual condensation. For example, when we read a book we might pose, “what if the book is reading you?” This would be ridiculous for most; however, when we have a relation with objects we can pose both (a) “I am looking at the lamp” and (b) “The lamp is looking at me.” We take for granted that the world is intersectional and constellar, not linear. So, in theory, we can easily propose this type of philosophical discourse question that perhaps would be more agreeable in the work of, for example, Graham Harman and “Object Oriented Ontology” (see Harman, 2010).

Normally we use “anti” to mean against something. However, Kris and I have come to employ “anti” as more malleable, rejecting a rigid linear construction, and de-centering authority. In his *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, Groys (2012) says, “A traditional philosopher is like a traditional artist: an artisan producing texts” (p. xiii). Remember that art was originally associated with the Greek idea of mimesis where the reproduction of nature was traditional art, as opposed to Dadaism, Surrealism, and Cubism That sought to engage the subject with an object of subjectivized intention (i.e., aesthetic provocation). In place of traditional philosophy, Groys believes the “antiphilosopher is like a contemporary art curator: he contextualizes objects and texts instead of producing them” (p. xiii). Here we have to make a distinction, as Kris and I do, between the traditional discourse of written texts and those texts more properly situated as con/texts with fee/i/l/ing. This latter sentiment allows for the plasma, a concept I believe Big History would find useful that Latour uses in *Reassembling the Social*.

I call this background *plasma*, namely that which is not yet formatted, not yet measured, not yet socialized, not yet engaged in metrological chains, and not yet covered, surveyed, mobilized, or subjectified. How big is it? Take a map of London and imagine that the social world visited so far occupies no more room than the subway. The plasma would be the rest of London, all its buildings, inhabitants, climates, plants, cats, palaces, horse guards. Yes, Garfinkel is right, ‘it’s astronomically massive in size and range’. (Latour, 2005, p. 244)

This concept of plasma I think can also be used in conjunction with the logic of capital, maybe “the plasma of capital.” In other words, the idea is that we are always-already embedded in and connected one way or another by those things un/seen and un/known. Conceptualizing the Intellectual Red Light District is a matter of (a) style or *écriture* and (b) the limits we accept. In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes (1977) says, “Style has always something crude about it: it is a form with no clear destination, the product of a thrust, not an intention, and, as it were, a vertical and lonely dimension of thought” (p. 10). Style is only one part and it is not necessarily something that will completely ostracize one from a

discipline. When Nietzsche (1989) says, “I am one thing, my writing are another matter” (p. 259) there is this implication that the author, especially a philosopher, is dead as a subject to be considered. I think in the sense of philosophy, Nietzsche was implying that we could study subjects without being subjected to the nature of them. For example, one can study music or poetry, but it is not an ontological obligation to be a musician or poet.

It is certainly common to uphold the idea/l of the university as an intellectual Mount Olympus where Gods can be found exercising power and surveillance over the world’s activities. However, the university or academy can also be a place of malignant mimesis where obedience to a big Other authority strips the technicolored dream coat for the reduced inconsequential black and white austerity of social and intellectual sterility. We see this interplay in the movie *Pleasantville* (1998) where two teenagers are transported into the magical TV Show *Pleasantville* where the fantasy of morality is espoused through a kind of *Leave it to Beaver* motif; every basketball thrown makes it in; and the implications of sameness, rigorous obedience to what *is* forecloses any opening of what *was* or *could be*. This is the ultimate fantasy ruptured by the Real when Jennifer’s (Reese Witherspoon) succubus indiscretions fracture the once inert coordinates holding Pleasantville together and visibly begin to “stain”—like a stained glass window—the landscape of the once colorblind montage. However, what we are proposing here is Pleasantville as its obverse doppelganger. In other words, the brightly colored ideas brimming from the skulls of young scholars must be reduced to an easily manageable and replicable *mise-en-scene* of destitute banality. Those who manage to rebuke the removal of the stain are either exiled to the Intellectual Red Light District or continue with the stigma of being an “at-risk” scholar.

At the simplest level of the academy and gaining tenure rank and promotion, it is important that one be innovative up to a certain point that one does not threaten the existing guard. Cusset (2008) explains,

In order to succeed, the only cardinal rule is to be constantly intellectually innovative, sowing an originality indefinable according to endogenous criteria (because *new* thought is not always easily recognizable as such), and whose sole yardstick measures one’s capacity to walk over the competition, to force successful colleague’s thesis into obsolescence, to alter the previous status of a discipline by showing up, while minimizing risk to oneself, its least successful and least well-used ideas. (p. 194)

In *Teachers As Intellectuals*, Giroux speaks to the concern Kris and I have as “at-risk” scholars and card-carrying members of the Intellectual Red Light District.

If one ceases to speak within the discourse of the discipline, one will no longer be considered part of it. This does not usually mean that heretic will be prohibited from teaching or even from publishing; rather, they are simply marginalized. The situation is similarly severe for the new Ph.D. for whom the price of admission into the academy is the same conformity with dominant academic discourses. (Giroux, 1988, p. 146)

Being relegated or exiled to the Intellectual Red Light District is a damning sentence for some. Others relish in red lighting as a badge of intellectual (dis)honor that affords them some type of revolutionary credibility that marks an acknowledgment of their defiance to the big Other. Similarly, others present their situatedness in the Intellectual Red Light District as

the only home they have ever known, for better or for worse. For example, Peter McLaren says,

I continue to stray rather far from the frontiers of the acceptable. I seem always on a collision course with acceptability. I have remained outside the mainstream, in the margins, in the folds of legitimacy or even credibility by normative standards. I think radical intellectuals work better in the borderlands, between worlds. (McLaren, 1997, p. 226)

At first, McLaren speaks to our issue at hand; however, is there not a paradox that should appear to us? One cannot claim to have substantial issues of acceptability and legitimacy, yet hold a university position at a highly regarded public institution; publish with dominating academic publishers (e.g., Routledge, Pearson, etc.); and receive numerous awards, invitations for speaking engagements, and so on. I am not trying to pick on Peter because he is a friend and I do like his work. However, how does one claim to be a card-carrying red light district *auslander* in light of what would appear to be a profound and prolific academic career? We might look to McLaren to pose the question, “Can one really survive as exiled red light intellectual?” Or, “Has the stroke of politics and decaffeinated revolutionary luck allowed the big Other to permit resistance as a spectacle to still be rewarded akin to Milli Vanilli—they lip sync for our enjoyment and we do not know it because this is ideology functioning beautifully?” So does one write, research, or even proceed knowing that the Intellectual Red Light District will be a stain that cannot be removed? Žižek remarks,

The great majority of today’s “radical” academics silently count on the long-term stability of the American capitalist model, with a secure tenured position as their ultimate professional goal (a surprising number of them even play the stock market). If there is one thing they are genuinely afraid of, it is the radical shattering of the (relatively) safe life-environment of the “symbolic classes” in developed western societies. (Žižek, 2002, p. 171)

If I had not been a philosopher, I would have gone to film school. Even in the celluloid arts one must contend with the issue of authenticity and saying something. Werner Herzog provides an antithetical reason for the academy implicating a kind of retardation of ability and robbery of the creative spirit.

Actually, for some time now I have given some thought to opening a film school. But if I did start one up you would only be allowed to fill out an application for after you had travelled alone on foot, let’s say Madrid to Kiev, a distance of about 5,000 kilometres. While walking, write. Write about your experiences and give me your notebooks. I would be able to tell who really had walked the distance and who had not. While you are walking you would learn much more about filmmaking than if you were in a classroom. During your voyage you will learn more about what your future holds than in five years at film school. Your experiences would be the very opposite of academic knowledge, for academia is the death of cinema. It is the very opposite of passion. (Herzog, 2002, p. 15)

Herzog suggests a theme that Henry Rollins once said, which was “knowledge without mileage is bullshit.” Kris has often critiqued philosophers for talking about a world that they have never seen or experienced. It is not just what they call “armchair” scholarship, it is a return to the allegory of Plato’s cave where the shadows represent the world, albeit falsely. The university is not the center of intellectualism. Remember I said we have long had this question, “Does the center hold?” For me in constellar theory, what would be called centrality in this respect is in constellar theory not something governed by people. Constellar theory would suggest any kind of “center” is only a coordinate among coordinates forming a larger interconnecting constellation. Experience and the condensation of metaphysical topographies frame the existential [Dantean] inferno—“abandon all hope ye who enter”—of the intellectual red light district. We are *beyond* hope; that is, we are at once looked at as hopeless miscreants refusing to conform to the symbolic regulations of the university. On the other side, hope as a fantastical thing-without-thingness allows a proposition of reality and epistemological quest for the unknown-unknown or that which lies beyond and having thus no name *yet*. The red light district intellectuals are very much a grouping of not-yet or a Derridean sense of to come (*l’avenir*). We, the card-carrying members of the RLD are always in the process of becoming and coming into. I will end my thoughts with this excerpt from Maxine Greene.

Who am I? How does my becoming look to those who are strangers? What do they find in my writing, as they lend that writing some of their lives? How do their interpretations connect with my original intentions? In what ways do they relate the things I have said and felt and written to historical contexts, to my biography, to class, gender, ethnicity? Are my ideas, my enthusiasms, my commitments to be viewed as contingent on the culture as I have lived it? Where are the spaces in which I am viewed as free, with power to choose? (Greene quoted in Pinar, 1998, p. 256)

DG:

It’s interesting that you find yourself looking for a way inside a college of education, while I’m trying to find a way out. In both of our cases, we’ll never be truly “in” under the regime of teacher education. I’m just grateful to have found another red light district intellectual to share this space inside the plasma of our becoming. I’m sure our conversations will continue. Thank you.

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