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Local Pedagogy in a Transnational/Post-Human World

"Fifty years from now, there will only be 10 institutions in the world that deliver higher education."
Sebastian Thrun, Co-Founder of Udacity

1.

I'm going to begin this essay with the concrete, then move to the abstract—from my personal practice in the same Moberly, MO classroom I have taught in for 21 to structural trends in education. I will be moving through the ideas of sustainable economies, Affect Theory, and computational theory before returning home.

This past year, for the second time, I turned down an opportunity to move my teaching to the newer satellite campus closer to home—in fact a few blocks away, opposed to the current 45 minute commute I make three times a week. Why didn't I pounce on the opportunity to make my working life more convenient?

There are a number of reasons, but they can be summarized in a scene that takes place every spring. I'm in a classroom with tall windows facing the campus greenways to the west. It is a bright April day. It is morning, when I traditionally teach Brit Lit II. By this point in the semester, we have created a learning community--those who will fail or don't like the class have already dropped. We open up our books to T.S. Eliot's, "The Wasteland." Everyone looks out those huge windows when I point outside. I ask, "Why is April the cruelest month?" It's one of my favorite moments of the teaching year.

I ask this question to students who come from the rural areas of central and northern Missouri, who read Hopkins's line from "The Windover," "No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion/ Shine," and recognize what Hopkins envisions—plowed earth reflects light differently than the unplowed. They've seen the plow down sillion shine in the fields. They come from small farming towns named (ironically) Cairo, Paris, and Glasgow.

I have learned so much about rural American life from these students as we have learned about British Lit, Composition, and poetry. My desire to stay in Moberly is based on the affection I have for this specific place and these specific students.

Place, "where you are," has always critical to my work as a poet and teacher. It deeply informs my pedagogy as a site of invention, the first rhetorical office. (Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, Delivery) With invention, the rhetor gathers material to use in speech or writing. Invention can rely on *topoi*, already existing topics, to prompt the gathering intelligence. Of course, the root of topoi is *topos*, "place,"—both a specific site in the world and a cognitive location in the mind.

I'll give two examples of place as the site of pedagogical invention. When teaching informative writing in Composition, the topic is social classification and division. Students struggle to write about others without judging. In class we choose a survey topic then develop questions. I post the survey and the students take it anonymously. The writing assignment asks to objectively report the survey results. Recently, students have begun to ask more open-ended questions that require written answers. They become amateur ethnographers, disclosing themes—without judgment--they discover in their colleagues' responses. While they learn about each other, they generate the curriculum.

Students provide curricular content in creative writing classes as well. But that content starts in the rhetorical office of Memoria. In Memoria, the rhetor would, as if in meditation, rehearse her speech silently, relying on mnemonic devices—place-holders (topoi) in her mind.

For three consecutive summers, I wrote textbooks for the classes I teach by employing Memoria. I sat at the computer and rehearsed, in my mind, a semester's worth of teaching (one chapter for each week.) By the end of each summer, I had written a textbook. Students then receive free texts that have been homegrown in Moberly.

In poetry writing, for example, the textbook directs students to write specific kinds of poems whose examples have come from published sources as well as the work of previous students. Each year, I publish a literary magazine of student literary work that has been produced in creative writing classes. Since much of that has followed the requirements of the assignments in the textbook, the literary magazine becomes another class resource that has been locally grown. Again, while learning class content, students produce it.

No doubt that I could move operations and create learning communities which produce curriculum with the more urban and suburban students from Columbia, MO, but I feel loyal to the old red brick building which holds my office and that room with the tall windows where I have taught class for 21 years. When given the chance to move, I've decided to stick around.

In Wendell Berry's essay, "It All Turns on Affection," he cites Wallace Stegner's distinction between two species of *homo economicus*, the Boomer and the Sticker, "The Boomer is motivated by greed...Stickers, on the contrary, are motivated by affection, by such a love for a place and its life that they want to preserve it and remain in it." The affection that holds one to a place begins with the imagination, "To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it. By imagination we see it illumined by its own unique character and by our love for it."

Following the Jeffersonian ideal, affectionate (and economic) attachment to the local by the Sticker is the foundation of a vital democracy. Opposing this is the Boomer who has no local attachment but to the ledger:

> And so it has seemed to me less a choice than a necessity to oppose the boomer enterprise with its false standards and its incomplete accounting, and to espouse the cause of stable, restorative, locally adapted economies of mostly family-sized farms, ranches, shops and trades.

For our purposes, we'll designate the view espoused by Berry as the Liberal position—the autonomous individual, with an imagination enlivened by its relationship to nature, working bounded property with the unified self.

Berry cites the fugitive poet Allan Tate's contribution to a 1936 volume *Who Owns America,* while arguing for the Liberal position. In "Notes on Liberty and Property," Tate argues the owner has responsibility for, and can control, the only decent kind of private property, "For the extent to which a man or social group controls the property by which its welfare is insured is the man or group possessed of liberty" (80). In other words, liberty is found in responsible, local ownership. For Tate, stocks don't afford that kind of liberty because, unless you have huge holdings, you have no control over what you own and those who do have control are only abstractly "responsible" to you as a shareholder, and certainly have no regard for your locale.

Tate is responding to two current: the first is the temptation towards collectivism during The Great Depression; the second is the oligarchic control of the state by large, too-big-to-fail, corporations.

According to Tate's definition of private property, the large corporation is as much a threat to Liberal democracy as collectivism is, "So a defender of the institution of private property will question not only the collectivist state, but also the large corporation" (81). In fact, Tate argues, it is easier to defend against the forces of collectivism because if they come to take the farm, you, the owner, know who to shoot (83), but if you lose your economic liberty to a large corporation, you don't know who to shoot and, if you did, they probably live a long ways away!

In another essay in *Who Owns America?*, "Small-town Middle-westerner," William Fischer contemplates his life growing up in a small town like Winesburg, Ohio and draws the conclusion, "If we are to have democracy at all, it seems obvious we must have a state populated not by anonymous economic units, but by men and women who can know, or be known by, one another" (228). Like Berry and Tate, Fisher believes a healthy democracy is one where stakes in the state are held by the small property we own and the local community members, themselves property owners, with whom we have an economic and personal relationship.

Berry, Tate, and Fisher note the communal value of binding property to place and community. They warn us about Neoliberalism where property has no relation to place. Indeed, if we look at the current investment strategies of large corporations and wealthy individuals, we see them hiding their property in offshore tax shelters in order to decrease their tax burden. Their affectionate attachment is to their wealth.

Berry acknowledges it's troublesome to base an economic and political stance on the idea of affectionate ties, "obviously, there seems some risk in making affection, the pivot of an argument about economy…But the risk, I think is only that affection is personal. If it is not personal, it is nothing: we don't, at least, have to worry about government or corporate affection."

Perhaps we don't have to worry about government or corporate affection, but, increasingly, we do have to worry about the affectionate stances *caused* by the state and corporation. Lauren Berlant, in her book *Cruel Optimism*, employs Affect Theory to diagnose the anxiety and alienation in our Neoliberal state. Affect Theory determines that affective states result from confronting a historically mediated present. The present is mediated by power, and as Deleuze and Guattari note, "The organization of power is the unity of desire and the economic

infrastructure" (qtd in Berlant 78). To be a member of the body politic is to negotiate the emotions caused by the regulating powers of that membership.

For Berlant, Cruel Optimism "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Berry discusses an apt example—upward mobility where subjects pursue placeless wealth:

> The cost…has been paid also in a social condition apologists call 'mobility,' implying that it has always been 'upward' to a 'higher standard of living' but which in fact has been an ever-worsening unsettlement of our people, and the extinction or near-extinction of traditional and necessary communal structures.

Mobility sunders local relationships; it makes well-being more difficult to obtain—and we are encouraged to pursue it to our detriment.

Berlant positions Affect Theory as a way to negotiate the impasse of frustration and anxiety when confronting the false promise of an historical moment, "Knowing how to assess what's unraveling there is one way to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelming present moment" (49). It should be noted that Berlant is not endorsing, "The 'good' life as a liberal optimistic goal" (15), for Affect Theory rests on a Marxist critique of Liberalism and Neoliberalism. Indeed, the last fifty years of literary theory have problematized the idea of the stable self on which Berry and Tate make their stand. (It is hard "Confederacy" when Tate talks about knowing whom to shoot when they come upon his farm.) But both approaches see how culture establishes the market as the ontological grounding for the body politic, "The pushing out of the political from concepts of publicness, now saturated by the logic and activity of markets" (Berlant 111).

If affect is the key to the mediation of the historical present—the site where the subject meets the objectified marketplace, we cannot ignore the extent to which that subject's affective stance has already been pre-determined by market forces. We turn here to a place where the subject's affective response is manifest—the face. This manifestation can have two causes—the impasse of cruel optimism, and the result of market manipulation.

When discussing the French film *Human Resources* (directed by Laurent Cantet), Berlant focuses on the expressions of cruel optimism shown on the faces of the main characters. She, again, recalls Deleuze and Guattari, "[Their] much-commented-on concept of faciality posits the face as a porous relay between the chaos of subjectivization and the clarities of signification, an

always failing barrier between the subject's composure and the affective instability" (210). Yet, often, the market, with a startling degree of success, sees that facial expression as a clear signifier of affective orientation to be turned into a data point and used in marketing.

William Davies book, *The Happiness Industry*, chronicles the way theorists from Jeremy Bentham to the economists of the Chicago School treat humans as machines programmed to seek the affective state of happiness in personal exchanges. They attempt to render, "subjective experience tangible and visible, and therefore comparable" (37). Davies locates the theoretic foundation of Neoliberalism in the Chicago School (itself a descendent of utilitarianism) that analyzes our choices based on economic price theory, and choice theory. As it turns out, Neoliberalism has been working on empirical Affect Theory all along.

Davies sees this utilitarian view as saturating our historical present, "Everything that was once external to economic logic, such as friendship, is quietly brought within it; what was once the enemy of utilitarian logic, namely moral principle, is instrumentalized for utilitarian ends" (212). Berry warns us of the same thing when he states, "The market thus assumes the standing of ultimate reality."

The Neoliberal view is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more we see our personal lives as a series of market exchanges, the more data is generated on our behavior in those markets, the more effectively those markets target our specific affective states in order to sell and sedate us. Managing data becomes a way to enforce social control:

> The great virtue of the market, for Neoliberals as the Chicago School, was that it acted as a constant survey of consumer preferences that extended across society. But mass digitization and data analytics now offer a rival that potentially extends ever further, engulfing personal relations and feelings which markets do not ordinarily reach. (Davies 223).

In essence, the subject becomes a "quantified self" (221).

When we view human relations through the specter of "big data," the local disappears and is replaced by a vast web of interlocking global electronic relationships—where we shop, congregate, socialize, get our information…do almost everything but sleep. Our life becomes digitized and programmed rather than the result of organic relations within our analog surroundings and community:

This is because of the increasing abstraction and unconsciousness of our connection to our economic sources in the land, the land-communities, and the land-use economies. In my region and within my memory, for example, human life has become less creaturely and more engineered, less familiar and more remote from local places, pleasures, and associations. Our knowledge, in short, has become increasingly statistical. (Berry)

Of course our knowledge becomes statistical; we ourselves are the statistical site of our choices that have been surveyed, analyzed, marketed and sold.

3.

In this section, I want to read Sebastian Thrun's statement that serves as epigraph for this essay in three ways. I'll read it first as a Neoliberal sentiment.

"Fifty years from now, there will only be 10 institutions in the world that deliver higher education" (qtd in Ferster 144) is the Neoliberal belief par excellence. Thrun proposes efficiencies in higher education through technology and pedagogical effectiveness through data analytics concentrating the "disrupted" market to those few companies that have the vision and innovation to monetize higher education effectively.

Thrun, a professor of Computer Science at Stanford University, founded Udacity—the for-profit purveyor of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) with Google's Peter Norvig. Thrun sees MOOCs as a way to cure higher education's cost disease ("cost disease" is when greater technological efficiencies do not lead to production efficiencies).

There is indeed something wrong with the status quo when students graduate college with $28,000 worth of debt and enter uncertain job markets. The proclamation that you *must* get a bachelor's degree in order to succeed in life is an example of cruel optimism (particularly when the public sector invests less and less in higher education).

When it comes to educational technology, the Neoliberal view of the quantified self in economics merges with the behaviorist view in psychology. Both Neoliberalism and Behaviorism view the self as a kind of machine—Neoliberalism as one programmed to maximize happiness, behaviorism one that can be programmed to respond to stimuli (the ideology of advertising). Also, the current "neuroscience" focus on education is supported by these "brain as machine" assumptions. The belief is that education technology can be developed and used to effectively maximize learning while lowering costs. The behaviorist programs the

machine; the Neoliberal delights at the savings in labor costs (teachers, of course, are the labor costs).

Bill Ferster's *Teaching Machines* surveys the use of automatic procedures to teach students, from the advent of correspondence schools in the late 19th century, to game-based learning and MOOCs in the 21st. One of the book's themes is the way behaviorist principles have operated in the development of many of these machines

Consider Thrun's ambition. If the "industry" of higher education becomes concentrated like, say, the cable industry, and is mainly delivered via MOOCs or is machine-based (as in competency-based programs), then the big data gathered can in a macro sense algorithmically organize a student's academic path *(if you liked Brit Lit II, you may like The History of the Short Story)*. In a micro sense, the machines can provide instantaneous feedback to the students' work as well as adjust the pedagogical delivery based on the student's affective response to what he or she is learning.

Although it lags behind advertising in creating, and exploiting, the affective states of consumers through facial recognition, education is attempting to catch up. A paper by a group of educators, "Automatic Detection of Learning-Centered Affective States in the Wild," describes the attempt to develop interfaces that respond to students' affective states while learning:

> The goal of these interfaces is to provide a computerized learning environment that responds to the affective needs of students, whether by redirecting off-task behavior, providing encouragement, or altering learning materials to better suit the student…At the core of such systems is the ability to detect or anticipate the affective states of students. (Baker et al)

In "the wild," (a computer lab in a school), the researchers developed a program that was able to determine students' affective states based on their Action Units—their facial expressions and posture. This is fairly inexpensive because most computers already have web cams. The program then videos student responses while working on a computer module and compares their facial expressions to a data set like MIT's Facial Expression Dataset. Tracking their affective states while they work and immediately changing the pedagogic approach closes the learning feedback loop.

The researchers found that their program achieved a success rate of 65% accuracy in identifying student affect. Although still in the developmental stage, it is possible that machines can achieve increasingly more accurate detection of affective states used in delivering education.

What happens if the teaching machine becomes as adept as the human teacher at reading affect and more effective at immediately changing pedagogical approach in response to affective states? What if a machine were a better teacher of the humanities than a human? Perhaps Thrun's Neoliberal prediction about the concentration of power in higher education is less shocking than the possibility that machines render human teachers completely obsolete. This is the second reading of Thrun's quote--Thrun may be missing the point. If they first come for teachers, they'll come for Neoliberal market disrupters next.

If, God help me, I'm still on the assessment committee when some of my colleagues are teaching machines that have passed the Turing Test, I've got a Post-Turing Test assessment for them to take. As you know, a Turing Test takes place with interlocutors on one side of a curtain; on the other side is either a Turing machine or a human. They communicate with each other via a keyboard and screen. A machine passes the Turing Test if interlocutors consistently identify it as human.

In the Post-Turing Test assessment, a teaching machine that has passed the Turing Test (Machine1) is on one side of the curtain; on the other side is either a human or an exact replication of Machine1 (Machine2). If Machine1 can tell if it is Machine2 or a human on the other side of the curtain, it fails. If it cannot tell, it passes (it passes with honors if it can identify the entity on the other side but says it can't—it has achieved humanness if it lies to further its self-interest).

Not everyone believes that machines can achieve this kind of intelligence. Noam Chomsky is a member of the Professionals against Machine Scoring of Student Essays in High Stakes Assessment. Chomsky states:

> Computers cannot read. They cannot measure the essentials of written communication: accuracy, reasoning, and adequacy of evidence, good sense, ethical stance, convincing argument, meaningful organization, clarity, and veracity, among others. (qtd in Ferster 153)

Yet, if there is found to be no difference in how a machine grades and how a human grades, it really doesn't matter if the machine is not reading in the sense that Chomsky reads. There's an

easy way to test Chomsky's thesis—have Chomsky read an essay and the essay's grade report that has been generated by Machine1 or a human—if Chomsky cannot tell the difference, then it really doesn't matter how a machine "reads." Indeed, even local references in examples can be easily programmed into a teaching machine so that the specific place of the student is engaged as she learns. The machine can engage the specifics of the metric student in ways that we never can—we don't have access to all the data the student has generated in her online life.

So, the first way to read the Thrun quote is to see it as a harbinger of the triumph of Neoliberalism over Liberal education. The second is to see at as missing the point of computational evolution—even the way that Thrun foresees education will be radically disrupted by teaching machines.

I'll end the essay by reading the Thrun quote a third way. Maybe in 50 years' time machines have not yet taken over the world. It is also possible that Neoliberalism will not triumph completely. Maybe 10 institutions will be delivering education to, let's say, 60% of the population. Where will the other 40% get their education?

Could humanism be retained in a world of Neoliberal metrics and computational intelligence? Davies believes that local congregations can help people resist current de-humanizing trends:

> The reduction of social life to psychology…and behavioral economists, or to physiology as achieved by social neuroscience, is not necessarily irreversible…Individuals today may be brought together for their own mental and physical health…social congregations can develop their own logic, which is not reducible to that of individual well-being or pleasure. (214)

The logic and telos in this place of social congregation emerge from discourse that encourages listening, for, as Davies notes, the power to listen is radical in a culture which privileges the eye (268).

It is interesting to note that Davies cites one such example—where patients dealing with mental illness find more relief working on a small farm than traditional instrumentalist therapies:

> Evaluations have shown that those who spend time working at the farm experience clear improvements in their conditions which tend to be more sustainable than those improvements offered by medicalized forms of treatment" (Davies 246).

Berlant also believes that one way to negotiate the impasse brought on by the historical moment of Neoliberalism is an "intimate public" where

> one senses that matters of survival are at stake and that the collective mediation through narrative and audition might provide some routes out of the impasse and the struggle of the present, or at least, some sense that there would be recognition were the participants in the room together. (226)

Certainly the classroom, peopled by teachers and students, is already a place of social congregation, an intimate public space where the values of interpersonal communication are encouraged and developed, inoculated by proximity against Neoliberal market values that turn humans into datasets. The local classroom doesn't have to carry the prescriptions and proscriptions of Liberal matter to carry on Liberal manner—discourse, reflection, shared endeavor in a community that encourages responsibility to each other in the place we are. Where will the other 40% of the population gain their education? I espouse the cause of stable, restorative, locally adapted classrooms.

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