

# APPLIED BENJAMIN:

## Educational Thought, Research and Pedagogy

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OUR INTEREST IN THIS ESSAY IS HOW WALTER BENJAMIN MIGHT BE OF USE in efforts to shift the imaginary of educational thought, research, and pedagogy in the contemporary moment, what might be called “applied Benjamin” (Menninghaus, 1999, p. 200). Within post-structural work in education, Benjamin has been situated as a precursor, where he has much to say about a variety of topics: language production and translation; interpretation, allegory, and storytelling; image, representations, and the “aura;” memory, remembrance, and narrative; urban modernization and commodification; historical knowledge (truth) and discontinuity; praxis and progress (historical); and “dialectical” images.

After a brief introduction to Benjamin, the essay will survey the ways he has been, and might still and yet be, put to use in education. We will then unpack the central themes of such application in terms of how his work can be used to articulate a different sort of thought, research, and pedagogy in education.

### **Introduction: Benjamin as a Precursor to Postmodernism**

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was born into a Jewish, upper-middle-class family in Berlin, which at the time was a major economic and cultural hub of Europe. Berlin, and later Paris, would become the landscapes of much of Benjamin’s work, especially those that addressed the cityscape and urbanism. Such spatial considerations are present throughout Benjamin’s work, whether in his discussions of the *flâneur*, capitalist modernization of the cityscape, or the spatially-grounded memoirs, diaries, and other autobiographical essays. In his adult life he would become a peripatetic, struggling, literary and social critic of the early-twentieth century. Never having substantial or stable income, he managed to sojourn rather extensively around Europe. But by 1940, he had been exiled from his native country; his brother was killed in a Nazi concentration camp and the Gestapo had raided his Paris apartment,

confiscating his library and many manuscripts. After he and a group of refugees had failed to cross the Franco-Spanish border—from where, it was arranged, that he would then go to Lisbon and board a ship for America—he supposedly committed suicide.

During his life, he had relationships with Gershom Scholem, Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and other intellectuals of his time, and he would be partly subsumed by the Frankfurt School through his associations with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Before his death, he had written vast quantities of aesthetic, literary, social, historical, and philosophical theory, much of it unpublished in his lifetime. Although only a few pieces of his oeuvre address education explicitly, pedagogical concerns are implicit in much of Benjamin's work, particularly his theorization of historical materialism, or what Buck-Morss (1999) called a "materialist pedagogy." While there are no doubt some modernist qualities in Benjamin, his work has been heralded as being prescient of postmodernism, and in the last few decades Benjamin has increased in popularity. His criticism has been translated into various languages and appears in numerous academic fields including literature, history, and cultural, art and media studies.

Given the magnitude of his writings, there are numerous considerations relevant to educators, some of which will be addressed below. Many of his ideas situate him as prefiguring the postmodern. Depending on whom one is reading, postmodernism may refer to a historical moment, a theoretical framework, an epistemology, a sensibility, or a certain set of concerns. As a pioneer figure in cultural studies, Benjamin was prescient in many ways, four of which have particular resonances for education.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps primary is his critical embrace of the emergence and development of new technologies, particularly what might be termed "a new kind of engagement and a new democracy of the popular" (Peim, 2001b, p. 11). He did not fear the changes wrought by developments in his time of film, radio, photographic techniques, and other means of mechanical reproduction as applied to a range of cultural products, from art to advertisements. Rather, he was most interested in the meaning of such shifts for new forms of consumption and their effect on human perception, self-conception, and social relations. One cultural critic has even deemed him "father of the internet" (Desideri, 2005, p. 109) for his theorizing, of both the possibility of expanded human potential and the vulnerability to manipulation posed by technological shifts. In his analysis, popular pleasures were taken seriously, and the political, cultural, and psychological were brought together to understand the role of shifting culture in the construction of political subjectivity. Like James Gee's work on video games (2005), Benjamin held that there was no opposition between entertainment and the education of apperception, between intoxication and education. Given Benjamin's "hard schooling of . . . new form" (1979, p. 62)—his kind of analysis that focused on the intrusion of representation into everyday life, and the possibilities and limits of technology—culture and practice seems particularly fruitful for rethinking learning and curriculum, as well as the very idea of the political.

Second and equally fruitful is Benjamin's theory of history as more about ruins and fragments than progress, triumph, monuments, and mastery. The "perfectability" thesis so characteristic of modernism—the sense of accumulating knowledge toward greater human freedom—has run up against stuck places and standstills that interrupt tidy linearity in such areas as urban school reform.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin's shifting imaginary of thinking in response to changed historical circumstances endorsed a hybrid of the theological, philosophical, and political against the "triumphalist philosophizing" of Hegel (Hodge, 2005, p. 21) and the cultural pessimism of much of the Frankfurt School. Lather (2007) called this "getting lost" versus "getting smart;" St.

Pierre and Pillow (2003) called this “working the ruins.” Such contemporary uses of Benjamin focused much on the “loss of aura” as a good thing, as making space for something else to happen, something stuck to get unstuck, as we give up on mastery and move toward an engagement with what the playwright Tony Kushner (who has made much of Benjamin) termed “non-stupid optimism” (quoted in de Vries, 1992).

A third area of Benjamin’s work that has particular resonance for educators is his insight into the complexities of communication in an information-saturated society. Such insight included the development of a materialist-philosophical frame that insisted on the constructed or mediated nature of experience and the importance of the image. This has come to be known as “the crisis of representation,” and Benjamin was early to see how the romance of experience was a limit situation. Deeply aware of the politics of culture, he developed a critique of knowledge that focused on the violence of empathy, the distinction between authenticity and reproduction, and voice as unmediated presence. Here, foundational approaches, graspable referents, and searches for origins are much troubled. Meanings shift, contexts change, reception/consumption patterns refuse to be fixed, objects talk back and refuse their containment. Such a view of knowledge might help teachers and students negotiate competing knowledges as both become aware of the necessity of selection, exclusion, and interpretation. To live in the ambivalence of uncertain and competing knowledges, to understand the multiple meanings of our experiences: this would be an expansion and enrichment of knowledge as situated, partial, and perspectival, where we might finally get over the loss of objectivism as a regulating ideal.

A fourth, useful aspect of Benjamin’s work is his modeling of engaged intellectual work. As a nomadic historical figure, he as well wandered in his theoretical mix of “Marxist messianism,” where needed incompatibilities are brought together to see “against the grain.” McRobbie (1994) called this “a model for the practice of being a cultural intellectual” (p. 99). On the edge of intellectual life, everything he wrote was “shot through with difficulty and urgency” (McRobbie, p. 99) and well outside the usual constraints and practices of the academy that refused him. He used his ability to read out the emergent, multiple, and unstable meanings of culture, in its objects and patterns of consumption and reception, not for the sake of the new but for social change and transformation. What are the implications of such thinking for the field of education?

### **Bringing Benjamin to Educational Thought**

While Benjamin has appeared here and there in educational writing, it is often merely as the figure of the *flâneur* (e.g., Hammer & McLaren, 1992) or the concept of montage (e.g., Grosvenor, Lawn, & Rousmaniere, 2000). More substantive engagement is rare. A few examples include Nick Peim (2001a, b), who probed the work-of-art essay for its implications for philosophy of education, by looking at Benjamin’s prescience in terms of the “linguistic” and “visual” turns; and Stephen Dobson (2002), who wrote a book on the “urban pedagogy” of Benjamin. Peim’s interest was in how Benjamin pioneered a look into “the intrusion of representation into the politics of everyday life” (2001b, p. 7) and a change in the very order of things. Dobson’s book was designed as an introductory text that included “a critical dictionary of fragments” and applications of Benjamin’s thought to varied socio-educational issues toward “a pedagogy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (p. 4). Dobson used Benjamin to rethink teacher education as more about the art of translation as an “existential experience” between “generations of

knowledge contained in texts, events and experiences.” This is to teach in such a way as to not deny the flow of time and history while still respecting the text, including its untranslatable elements and emotions, such as anxiety and resentment, that have to be worked through in the social relations of teaching if engagement is to flourish.

Erica Burman (1998, 2003) wrote about Benjamin’s radio programs for children in terms of pedagogic address and the political possibilities of the postmodern. Angela McRobbie (1994) articulated the place of Benjamin in cultural studies, his displacement of Althusser who displaced Marx, with his ability to read new cultural spaces created by mass culture and new technologies. Focusing particularly on *The Arcades Project*, McRobbie traced the rise and fall and rise again of interest in Benjamin outside of Germany, in contrast to inside Germany, where interest remained steady. Yasuo Imai (2003) compared the thinking of John Dewey and Walter Benjamin in the context of an anti-dualistic concept of experience and media in relation to aesthetics and social philosophy. Arguing that Benjamin illuminates Dewey’s blind spots, Imai unpacked Benjamin’s interest in the “ordering of the relationship between generations” (p. 117).

What follows attempts a similarly substantive engagement with Benjamin in the context of education, by looking closely at his rethinking of history for what it might open up in such areas as truth, narrative, and reading, particularly the reading of experience.

Even in some of his earliest pieces (see 2000), Benjamin was an ardent critic of historical progress, and one of the more identifiable claims of Benjamin’s theory of historical materialism was that history has been the tale of the victor, suppressing the alternative histories of the vanquished. Much of his critique was leveled at a universal notion of history that views human progress as an inevitable course of human development, especially one that followed a linear continuum of history. However, it is important to note that Benjamin was attacking a certain notion of historicism and universal history, particularly the attempt to reveal the past “as it really was” (Ranke) or a history that holds a dogmatic attachment to accuracy. As a counter to the popular forms of the historicism of his time, he offered various descriptions of a politically-charged historical materialism that was a blend of Marxist and messianic redemptions (2002a; 2003b; 2003c; 1972/1999c). He criticized the tendency to present history as an epic narrative, to create linear causalities and “historical continuity,” and to otherwise present history as epic adventures of the famous and celebrated. When responding, the historical materialist cannot address this lineage—indeed, culture itself—without a certain attitude of “horror,” recognizing the “barbarism” of such texts and events (2002a, p. 267; see also 2003b, pp. 391–392; 2003c, pp. 406–407).

However, for Benjamin, remembering and retelling the tales of history’s victims was not only to save them from being forgotten. He also attempted to safeguard against how such alternative histories, if recognized at all, can too easily become the tools of the oppressor. As such, alternative histories can be considered merely unfortunate events in a progressively unfolding history, whether progressing toward a more perfect democratic humanism, the proletariat revolution, or even the messianic redemption he sometimes described. Benjamin described a counter-narrative to historical progress in the image of his now-famous angel of history, a figure inspired by Paul Klee’s painting, *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin described the angel of history as a figure who has been caught up in the storm of progress, helpless against the continual catastrophe that is history. “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed . . . [but the] storm drives him irresistibly into the future . . . What we call progress is this storm” (2003b, p. 392). As such, the remembrance of the events and stories of the oppressed can be seen as a form of testimony, or witnessing, in a way that ruptures

the continuity to the point that the historical object *cannot* fit or be “reinserted” into traditional conceptions of universal history and progress, and potentially leaves only ruins. Such “historical materialism sees the work of the past as still uncompleted” (2002a, p. 267).

As an extended example, Lather (2000) has used Benjamin to understand the Rigoberta Menchu controversy, in which “testimonio” was much troubled, in terms of issues of the “truth” of native history and its resistance value.<sup>3</sup> A lesson from that example is that there are many slippages between “a people” and their assumed representative, the non-unitary speaking subject, the relationship between knower and known, and an assumed audience. Such slippages make room for Benjamin’s insight into how “truth seems to stand in the way of truth, or more exactly, truth and its transmission get in each other’s way” (Hartman, 1999, p. 347). Here, complication and ambivalence become the very ground upon which we might learn to read against ourselves, to read for difference rather than sameness. The questions are: What kind of historical truth are we talking about here? How might the undecidability of reading Menchu precisely be the lesson?

As Lather (2000) noted, it is too easy to see such efforts as a recovery of lives lost or a knowing renunciation as we come to terms with language. Benjamin troubled either response, knowing as he did that history comes onto the scene as writing, a scene of the ruins of things/objects that become history when we write about them. His interest was in how that which escapes knowledge, the authority of the object, can be gestured toward by looking at the detour of performance. Benjamin’s interest was in a transformation of historical content into philosophical truth content that shows, in the original, a mobility, an instability that opens it to variant translations and interpretations. There is no naked and manifest real. Torn between becoming and vanishing, restoration and incompleteness, the factual is consumed by language that is “no tool to catch hold of its referent” (Jacobs, 1999, p. 11). But something remains: interested in rescuing the world of things from our efforts to know it, Benjamin’s turn was to pay attention to the way stories are told, to the presentation of the object that is a performative registration of how history courses through us in the scene of writing. This is Benjamin’s lesson about the truths to be found in history.

Benjamin can be used to demonstrate that presenting something as the real thing is not the same as to produce it. “What one thinks one sees, as though through a glass clearly” (Jacobs, 1999, p. 33)—it is always already distorted. What somehow must be said, in the Menchu case, for example—about indigenous rights and values, survival strategies, revolutionary hope, and change from the pose of autobiography—brings memory to bear in the space of a life. Benjamin theorized “the mysterious work of remembrance” (1978, p. 16) as less a repository for what has happened than a production of it: language, writing, space, a spectacle of replication in an excess of intention. Remembrance is not about taking hold, but a medium of experience, a theatre for gathering information. Here, Benjamin’s lesson is to celebrate the gathering itself and even the failure to find (Jacobs, 1999, p. 11).

In short, for Benjamin, truth was what it does via presentation, performance, production. We gesture toward restoration, but, in so doing, perform the discrepancy between language and experience and how elusive our knowledge of it might be. His lesson is to see truth as that which escapes knowledge and is graspable only through the detour of its performance. This includes the performance of a reading that produces an interpretation via translation, a readerly engagement that Benjamin hoped will be not comfortable but, rather, “violently moved” (Jacobs, 1999, p. 3) by the very foreignness of the truth effect of what is read. Benjamin’s portrayal of history as a betrayal of “what is in history deprived of words” (Felman, 1999, p. 211) becomes the curriculum. Here the text becomes a kind of test for readers in terms of issues of interpretation,

where no matter how much we think we are reading voice, we are reading a text. Acts of transcription have taken place. Editorial decisions have been made. The text is never free of the contamination of language. Given this, what is knowledge and how has it been commodified, canonized, even “auraticized” (to twist Benjamin’s (1968) term for the “authority of the object,” both its [lost] authenticity in an era of mass reproduction and our investment of it with an ability to return the gaze), to unsettle us with otherness?

Traditional reading practices assume an immediacy of events recounted as real, spoken faithfully, an authentic narrative told by a reliable witness who summons truth in order to set straight the historical record. Cast in a mimetic frame, assuming a seamless text instead of a highly-mediated genre, such a reading belies the nature “that narrative accounts cannot help but falsify life itself” (Freeman, 1998, p. 27). Benjamin’s lesson here is to insist on ruins.<sup>4</sup> If Foucault was right, that “nothing is innocent” (1970/1998), what can now happen? How do we keep telling stories, knowing what Benjamin (1968) knew in “The Storyteller,” that truth can no longer be narrated because “no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation,” that any translation contaminates the text with meaning (p. 89)? How do we translate “without ignoring that translation shows the original to be dead, that it in fact kills the original?” (Moeiras, 1996, p. 223).

In his engagement with Benjamin, Derrida (1985) spoke of the problematic of translation as a passage into philosophy, given its focus on the (im)possibilities of direct, unmediated access to a transparent reality. To so speak of translation is to move well beyond interlingual or transmission issues and into a set of questions regarding representation, adequacy, truth, language, reality, knowledge, and the privileging of voice and speech over writing. What, for example, is “adequate” representation, if a pre-given real “reflected” by a transparent, unequivocal translation is precisely what is at issue? As Niranjana (1992) noted, tracing the critique of representation, truth, and presence, from Benjamin’s early focus on translation to his later interest in historiography, “the problematics of translation and the writing of history are inextricably bound together” (p. 42). Hence, translators/historians/ethnographers face the same issues of desire for transparent knowledge that provides immediacy of access to “the other” via the classical concept of the mimetic relationship between “reality” and “knowledge.”

Chow (1993) read Benjamin as warranting “the essential *untranslatability* from the subaltern discourse to imperialist discourse” that must be recognized if alternatives are to be conceivable (p. 35). Far too quickly, she argued, western intellectuals turn themselves into witnesses where they become visible, “neutralizing the untranslatability of the native’s experience and the history of that untranslatability” (pp. 37–38). Drawing on Benjamin to note the violence of modernist collecting, Chow wrote that “whenever the oppressed, the native, the subaltern, and so forth are used to represent the point of ‘authenticity’ for our critical discourse, they become at the same time the place of myth-making and an escape from the impure nature of political realities” (p. 44).

Such readings of the impossibility of translation in Benjamin spoke of it as an interpellating, containing, appropriating move, based in colonial efforts to better control, “the drive to study, to codify, and to ‘know’” (Niranjana, 1992, p. 35). From such a position, this is the scandal of translation: “tell us what you are really like. Dance for us once more and sing your songs” (Benterrak, Muecke, & Roe, quoted in Ingram, 1999, p. 82). This is commodification, turning to otherness to redeem oneself in the production of “a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self” (Spivak, 1986, p. 272). Zora Neale Hurston responded: “The theory behind our tactics: The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s

business. All right. I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song'" (quoted in Sommer, 1994, p. 531).

What would it mean to think of translation as a knowing disruption, dissemination rather than containment? This entails what Barnstone called "a duty to betray" (1993, p. 259), in that faithful reproduction is false and the task is to be loyal to the spirit of the original, not the letter. Translation becomes neither mirror nor mimetic copy but, rather, another creation that addresses that which is untranslatable in the original. Remembering, interpreting, and becoming, translation is not about likeness so much as "a transformation and a renewal of something living" that "catches fire" and changes both the original and the language of the translator (Benjamin, 1968, p. 72). Within/against assumptions of "letting the voices speak," translators/historians/ethnographers forge a reciprocal relationship with the original, aware of translation as "violent and forced, and foreign" (Derrida, quoted in Niranjana, 1992, p. 160), supplement rather than mimesis, both inadequate and necessary.

As Britzman (2000) noted in her work on the diary of Anne Frank, "if the story cannot end," it is due to how efforts to represent bring something more to the story, in order to use such texts as "possessing the capacity to comment upon something difficult in our own contemporary efforts" to know (p. 29). The key is to use the "breakdown of meaning and the illusiveness of signification" (Britzman, p. 29) to foster our capacity to notice the vantage of the other and the obligation of our own implication. If one uses this to look at the claim of a text on us, the very translatability of its specific significances has much to do with "living on" under the assaults of history. In the case of Menchu, for example, in terms of issues of voice and authenticity, as a subaltern who unsettles us with otherness, her voice registers what in history is deprived of words. Given the difficulties of speaking out of difference, misrecognizing such voice as transparent fails to see that meaning is elsewhere, beyond translation. All that betrays Menchu in her telling becomes part of the learning we might have from suffering and injustice. But, as Britzman (2000) noted, it is representation that lets the story continue if we can meet the demands that such "difficult knowledge" (Pitt and Britzman, 2003) makes on us.

Benjamin's portrayal of history as a betrayal of the vanquished, his view of truth as graspable only through performance and production, his insistence on the discrepancy between language and experience: such views provide rich ground for theorizing a post-foundational methodology that educational inquiry might use to contest the instrumentalism so evident in "evidence-based" practices.

## **Bringing Benjamin to Educational Research**

Our particular interest in this section is how Benjamin as "difficult knowledge" might help us in rethinking educational research. The nature of research, its subjects, objects, and modes of knowing and doing, including representing, open up vast questions of the relationship between empirical work and philosophy. This relationship has been askew since French philosopher and sociologist, Auguste Comte, after Saint-Simon, shaped the transition from philosophy to social science by limiting research to matters that could be directly tested. Associating inquiry with quantitative analysis of "objective" conditions and "essential" natures,

Comtean positivism separated the social sciences from philosophy in aligning with the “natural” sciences.

To the contrary, Benjamin saw a plethora of necessary distortions of inquiry: language; informant desire to persuade, protect, and preserve; translation; psychic stress and torment; disciplinary framing and mediation; our own reading practices; the mystery of remembrance. Maggie MacLure (2006) titled her exploration of such Benjaminian “uncertain thoughts” for qualitative research in education, “The Bone in the Throat” of a “baroque method.” Such a “productively irritating” post-foundational method resists clarity, mastery, and a single point of view, and endorses uncertainty, movement, and tension in the analysis and representation of data. Deborah Britzman (2003) borrowed from Benjamin’s cultural criticism, particularly regarding photographic techniques, to analyze the narratives of student teachers in *Practice Makes Practice*. Kevin Davison (2006) probed the uses of Benjamin’s dialectical imagery for the analysis of qualitative data through processes of fragmentation and purposeful manipulation toward representation of complexities. Davison articulated this methodological strategy out of a study of practices of gender and bodies that used an online questionnaire and assembled data and reflections in a poem form. This allowed him to embrace the contradictions in the data and also to resist a one-best interpretation in what he refers to as a “systematically tentative” direction that is an asset in gesturing toward the complexities of the postmodern world (p. 145).

In *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science*, Lather (2007) used Benjamin, among others, to ask how such a complicated and complicating view of knowledge might be put to work toward an evocation of “ethnography-philosophy” that explores how a post-epistemological scientificity can be used to contest the displacement of philosophy by social theory in terms of the legitimacy of an engaged social science. How might the refusal to concede science to scientism approach the larger project of rethinking the relation between empiricism and philosophy that posits an engagement with not knowing as an ethical and political move? This is a negotiation that structures the empirically graspable as not *not* philosophy by functioning as a careful displacement of a philosophy of presence. The goal of such a project is a double(d) science that works the necessary tensions that structure contemporary social science as fertile ground for the production of new practices. What might this mean methodologically?

Schematically, to read the data/archive as a writing whose meaning shifts over time, an archive forever reopened by writing in the present, Benjamin’s lessons of undecidability and language might be said to mean that we:

- Read against ourselves, with the presumption not of understanding but of incompetent readers, reading for difference rather than sameness, in order to be unsettled by otherness. Focus on what is “becoming” in the data: discontinuities, ruptures, the unexpected, the contingent, the stabilized configurations, and the beginnings of the possible; how they carry both repetition and “the new;” and what we make of the reach of the event in terms of possibilities rather than necessities, the cracks in history, what they meant in their time, and what they mean today.
- Assume narrator as *both* unreliable *and* bearer of knowledge, in a recognition of the price that subjects pay to tell the truth about themselves.
- Attend to how stories are told, including how we stage what we represent in the scene of writing and what an analysis makes present via a delineation of weighty tendencies, dominations, the horizon of expectations, and how categories construct inclusion/exclusion.

- Revalue how sources speak to us as readers/translators/researchers and the traces of meaning upon which interpretation works, as a transformation and renewal of something living in the text. Here interpretation is a supplement rather than mimesis, both inadequate and necessary in its impossibilities.

In such a schema, the task of data analysis becomes mediating traces through concepts that structure and are structured by the data. As translators, historians, and ethnographers, our subjective implication in the question of categorization is assumed to be saturated with value judgments, positioning us not in transcendence but in situated knowing within an analytic practice, where the forms of normativity that an analysis implies are seen as both enclosure and a living on. Benjamin's focus, on how performance becomes a detour that questions historical truth, interpretation, and translation, foregrounds the undecidability of how to read across differences as not about the reality of reference but the need to reinvent language as part of political struggle. Perhaps in these times of the political economy of the sign, the (un)reliable narrator gives us what we need instead of what we think we want: not truth delivered to us in a familiar framework, but the truth of the play of frames and the dynamics of presences, absences, and traces as all we have in the unrepresentability of history.

It is the necessity of translation as impossibility that is Benjamin's lesson here. The key is not to stop translating, but to begin mourning the kind of translation that is no longer possible, given his lessons of language and indeterminacy, power, and historicity in recognizing the heterogeneity of meaning and the contamination of translation.<sup>5</sup> Translation is always producing, rather than merely reflecting or imitating some "original." Given the transformative nature of translation/interpretation/reading, our hope is for practices that enlarge both our own language, and that of the original, through echoes that reverberate the original's claim on us to engage with history in a way that puts the original in new motion, ripe to this present.

### **Bringing Benjamin to Pedagogy**

Up until his early 20s, Benjamin was actively a part of the Youth Movement. The Youth Movement was made up of myriad disparate pedagogies, ranging from progressive modifications of method, to naturalistic explorations of the outdoors, to radically nationalistic and/or anti-Semitic models. Much of Benjamin's earliest work from this period addressed the "spirit and solidarity of youth," but he also addressed issues of school reform, particularly attacking an educational system that had occupational objectives as the main purpose of schooling. At the age of twenty-three, Benjamin (2000) wrote, "The perversion of the creative spirit into the vocational spirit, which we see at work everywhere, has taken possession of the universities as a whole and has isolated [the students] from the nonofficial, creative life of the mind" (pp. 41–42). Although he was critiquing the universities, one could argue that these issues are just as relevant in public schools at lower levels. He lamented that, "where office and profession are the ideas that govern student life, there can be no true learning," and "[b]y directing students toward the professions, it must necessarily fail to understand direct creativity as a form of communal activity" (p. 42).

"Communal activity," "the creative spirit," and the "eros of creativity" are all phrases Benjamin used as an alternative to the vocational spirit, and each pertains to student activity as it relates to a communal process. If educational achievement is not measured materially or valued by the vocational spirit; if educational achievement is not measured by class rankings and test

scores, and not measured in employable skills and attitudes; if educational achievement is not equated with financial success, material acquisitions, or social prestige; and, if knowledge is not commodified so that its value is not measured in economic profitability or exchange value; what measure of evaluation would take their place?

Benjamin answered thus: “There is a very simple and reliable criterion by which to test the spiritual value of a community. It is to ask: Does it allow all of an individual’s efforts to be expressed? Is the whole human being committed to it and indispensable to it? Or is the community as superfluous to each individual as he is to it?” (2000, p. 42). Such questions from the young Benjamin asked educators to imagine how their classroom would look if every individual were “indispensable” to the larger community, in and out of schools. Benjamin (2000) went on to say that love “must be the source of [the students’] creative activity” (p. 42), and, as such, education becomes a process of communal investment and reciprocity in the interests of all individuals. To connect the existential experience of students to their learning, Benjamin also suggested that philosophy be infused into the curriculum, particularly “the great metaphysical questions of Plato and Spinoza, the Romantics and Nietzsche” (p. 43). Such lines of inquiry, especially if developed from questions that the students raise, would relate the curriculum to the lived experiences of the students and thus “prevent[s] the degeneration of study into the heaping up of information” (p. 43). We also see an early form of Benjamin’s attention to the importance of production, as he wrote that the student should be “an active producer, philosopher, and teacher all in one” (p. 42). Although this clearly lacks the critical edge of his later works, one can see pedagogical attitudes that resonate with progressive and critical models of education.

For various reasons—including the coming of World War I, the Youth Movement’s growing nationalism, and his desire to pursue a doctorate in philosophy—he would eventually distance himself from the Youth Movement. Benjamin decided to pursue his doctorate at the University in Bern, where he graduated *summa cum laude* in June of 1919. The second dissertation, the *habilitation*, required of German professors, still had to be written and accepted by a university if Benjamin was to pursue a career in academia. But after spending a few years writing his *habilitation*, he submitted it to the University of Frankfurt, where it was rejected. Although Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (play of mourning) would be published in 1928 to a widely favorable literary audience in France and Germany, it did not suit the Germany academy in 1925. It is possible that, had he entered the academy, he would have produced even more explicitly pedagogical material, but much of his earlier work on school reform is unavailable or lost. Nonetheless, later in his life, he wrote some explicitly pedagogical texts; but these are mostly, overtly Marxist, and rather brief (1999b; 1999a).

As stated before, much of his later work had an implicit pedagogy, especially his theory of historical materialism, what Buck-Morss (1999) referred to as a “materialist pedagogy.” She wrote, “If all historical continuity is ‘that of the oppressors,’ this tradition is composed of those ‘rough and jagged places’ at which the continuity of tradition breaks down . . .” (p. 290). Obviously, such language resonates with many educational theorists, particularly those associated with critical pedagogy. Acknowledging that traditions of “talking back” to dominant legacies of history have always been present, Benjamin’s emphasis of these issues is evidence of his position as a precursor to many of the critical lenses associated with the postmodern that have brought previously under-represented voices and histories to the attention of mainstream education. In critical pedagogy, considerations of alternative histories find expression in notions such as “border pedagogy,” “counter-texts,” “counter-memory,” and even “insurgent commemoration.” For Aronowitz and Giroux (1991), counter-memory is a democratic discursive

analysis that critiques and disables particular subjectivities while empowering others, and understanding how “difference” is organized variously in assorted configurations of power within the public sphere.

In a more specifically Benjaminian take on alternative histories, Simon (1992) derived the title for his book, *Teaching Against the Grain: Texts for a Pedagogy of Possibility*, from a phrase of Benjamin’s, who wrote that the “task of historical materialism is to brush history against the grain” (Benjamin 2003b, p. 392; 2003c, p. 407). Additionally, Simon’s co-edited book (2000), *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*, situated the work of Benjamin as influential. Simon’s (2000) chapter attended to how and why we teach historical memories to those students who feel such events are “what has never been my fault or my deed” (a phrase he cites from Emmanuel Levinas). In doing so, Simon drew on the Jewish notion of *zakhor*, which he said can be translated as “both an imperative and an obligation: ‘remember’” (p. 10). Bearing witness to the past becomes a “space of intervention” in the present, as “to witness as an act of *zakhor* is to constitute this intervention as a realignment of memory and the present” (p. 11).

In the introduction to *Between Hope and Despair* (2000), Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert advocated a “*remembrance/pedagogy*” that engages people in “particular forms of historical consciousness,” which they describe as an “indelibly social praxis, a very determinate set of commitments and actions held and enacted by members of collectivities” (p. 2). For them, remembrance, as a “*strategic practice*,” endeavors to bring forth into presence specific people and events of the past, in order to honor their names and to hold a place for their absent presence in one’s contemporary life” (p. 4). For them, this is not an invitation, but an “assignment.” Such production of knowledge also involves a “difficult return” that challenges students with regard to “what it might mean to live, not *in* the past but *in relation with* the past, acknowledging the claim the past has on the present” (p. 4, emphasis in original). Not only does this attend to the performative production of knowledge, it also insists that “remembering well” involves a humbling with regard to student attentiveness to testimony and that being called as a witness is not to testify, but to *listen*.

Kitchens (2007) described more connections between Benjamin’s “materialist pedagogy” and progressive education, and critical pedagogy and other contemporary curriculum theorists. In doing so, he investigated Benjamin’s notion of “critical constellations” as they apply to history education, particularly as a means to connect history to the present as it relates to the lived experience of students. Buck-Morss (1999) wrote that “dialectical images as ‘critical constellations’ of past and present are at the center of [Benjamin’s] materialist pedagogy” (p. 290). Benjamin wrote about historical materialism and critical constellations in a few places, especially “On the Concept of History” (2003b) and *The Arcades Project* (1972/1999c).

According to Buck-Morss (1999), *The Arcades Project* was Benjamin’s attempt to develop “a highly original philosophical method,” which she called a “dialectic of seeing,” and as such, “it experiments with an alternative hermeneutic strategy, . . . one that relies, rather, on the interpretive power of images that make conceptual points concretely, with reference to the world outside the text” (p. 6). Indeed, at times Benjamin seemed to be describing a new way of reading the world, a historical consciousness that he referred to as “the Copernican revolution in historical perception” (1972/1999c, p. 388). Attacking the notion of historical continuity described earlier, Benjamin (2003b) wrote that the historical materialist “ceases to tell the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. He grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one” (p. 397). However, for Benjamin, these

reference points of the past were not fixed or essentialized, but the meaning comes out of the interpretive and performative acts of production. And again we see Benjamin's emphasis on production and the process of (re)presentation. Benjamin described this as a new "dialectical method of doing history [that] presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking the world," and for Benjamin, "remembering and awakening are most intimately related" (1972/1999c, p. 389). This illustrates the Benjaminian influences in Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert's (2000) description of a "*remembrance/pedagogy*" that engages people in "particular forms of historical consciousness" (p. 2)

In his essay, "The Storyteller," Benjamin (2002b) wrote: "*Memory* creates the chain of tradition which transmits an event from generation to generation" (emphasis in original, p. 154). What remains paramount is that "the storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (p. 146). Elsewhere, Benjamin (2003a) wrote, "A story does not aim to convey an event per se, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds the event in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the trace of the storyteller, much the way an earthen vessel bears the trace of the potter's hand" (p. 316). Kitchens (2007) argued that not only does this emphasize the creative role of the producer, it also suggests that, as students study, recount, and produce the collective memory of historical events or other spatiotemporal subjects, such interpretations must connect and incorporate the lived experiences of students.

For Kitchens (2007), critical constellations help situate and orient students in what he described as an educational system that alienates students from history, institutionalizes a "pedagogy of placelessness," and misorients students by directing their energies toward competitive and self-interested motivations. To address this, he described a "spatial curriculum theory," and while much of his emphasis was on situating and orienting students by connecting curriculum to the everyday experiences, events, and places of their lives, he also advocated "disorientation," or getting lost. As such, Kitchens elaborated on Alan Block's (1998) invitation that "education might be understood as the opportunity of getting lost" (p. 328). Block believed that such a sense of lostness "is the experience of decenteredness and the perpetual realization of identity in relations" (p. 336), relations that are neither fixed nor stable. As such, transformations of identity become possible in a process of internal reflection and public performance after a dislocation from the known or previous associations. By relocating the self amid the annihilation of previous subject-centeredness, Block said, curriculum can be seen as "an engagement with the experience of lostness [so] that the opportunity of being found may occur" (p. 336). Additionally, Block advocated a form of "curriculum as affichiste" or "intellectual vagabondage" (p. 330) that resonates with Benjamin's attempt to "carry over the principle of montage into history" by "assembl[ing] large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precise components" (1972/1999c, p. 461), and Kitchens (2007) suggested that this is further evidence of Benjamin's position as a precursor to the postmodern. Such considerations ask educators to encourage their students to relinquish fixed understandings of content, of people, and of knowledge, and to explore uncharted territories of intellectual discovery.

## Conclusion

Reading Walter Benjamin reminds us that engaging with knowledge is an interminable process. New biographies arrive (Eiland and Jennings, 2014), auras come and go, history happens, technology shifts, frameworks of sense-making rise and fall, sometimes with the “destructive character” (Benjamin, 1978) necessary to make room and clear away. In a short essay published in 1931, “The Destructive Character,” Benjamin (1999d) wrote, “The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away” (p. 541). In the midst of this, education attempts to pass on the “selective tradition” in preparing its charges for the present and the many futures that are possible. It has been our contention that this man, whose life was so nomadic and shaped by the burden of history of his time, can speak to us here and now, in myriad useful ways. As his work has opened up space for new directions in art, the study of popular culture, urban geography, philosophy, and literary and historical analysis, might he do the same in education?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For Benjamin as a prescient figure in relation to post-structuralism, see Eagleton (1981), Jay (1994), McRobbie (1994), and Burman (1998).

<sup>2</sup> Just ask Bill Gates, who has spent \$4 billion toward the reform of secondary schooling and still finds “[e]ducation is this mysterious thing” that he is trying to “grok” (Levy, 2006). See Lather’s (2010) final chapter, “Dear Bill,” which urges Gates to think against progressivist ideas of science and that which is tidily and easily measurable in school reform.

<sup>3</sup> *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (Menchu, 1983/1984) was an ethnographic life story compiled by Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray and produced in Paris in twelve days of what Menchu calls “recording my testimony” (Menchu, 1998, p. 113).

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin posited the ruin as the historically-charged structure and detail of an object that allows the cultural critic “to make historical content . . . into a philosophical truth” (1977, p. 182). In the wake of the demise of transcendent meaning, working with the fragments, which is all we ever have, we can read the ruin “either as a subversion of the unifying grasp of systematic philosophy or as a remnant waiting to be redeemed” (Hanssen, 1998, p. 83) For a reading of Benjamin and ruins in the context of contemporary theory, particularly the exhaustions of ideology critique, see Dirks, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Britzman (2000) wrote of “the fragile work of mourning” as “this interminable work of making a relation to loss” (p. 28). From Britzman’s Freudian vantage point, the “working through” of mourning is necessary in the face of loss if idealization is to be displaced by engagement.

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