

# Paying Attention to the Order of Cultural Production Framework in Arts Education

## What are Our Response-abilities?

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THE WORDS OF MAXINE GREENE (1995) sit close by as I begin to reflect upon the piece by Rubén: “It is simply not enough for us to reproduce the way things are” (p. 1), she writes at the very beginning of *Releasing the imagination*, and further that “works of art often lead to a startling defamiliarisation of the ordinary” (p. 4). Greene’s insight and insistence into the possibilities the arts hold for crossing the empty spaces between us, for giving credence to alternative realities, and for creating openings through which we might move are sense-abilities that ebb and flow in this article by Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2020), “The Orders of Cultural Production.” They are sense-abilities that draw me in close, so close, because they speak to an ongoing commitment I have held as an educator doing arts education, social justice, and transformative learning work in relationality with difference and the search to do otherwise than repeat pedagogical practices—indeed praxis, which bell hooks (2004) might call the “dominator culture” of white-supremacist-imperial-capitalist-patriarchy (p. 17)—which close down, shut in, and silence in the name of difference along the way. In this personal-is-political-pedagogical response to Rubén’s piece, it is not my intention to labour over summarising the breadth and depth of the thinking he presents on the possibilities for using cultural production as a framework for arts education pedagogy—the words, in and of themselves, *speak* for themselves and can be read as written. Rather, I would like to pay attention to the orders of cultural production offered by Rubén for the radical response-abilities they hold for a different kind of ethico-onto-epistemological pedagogy in arts education, one that begins a dance towards decoloniality. As Rubén notes, the crisis wrought by COVID19 marks a moment when the spaces between us locally and globally are all at once enclosing and expanding and, thus, provide another moment for those of us who speak a language of social justice in arts education return to question, who is *our* arts education for? What kind of symbolic, creative, cultural, and critical work is arts education? Is it for justice or just-*us*? How might we work against repressive reproduction of white-imperial-capitalist-patriarchal ways of knowing, being, and doing that reify the self-same to depart in search of an arts education where Other ways of knowing, being, and doing might become privileged?

I write this in a jumbled up not-quite-poetry but not-quite-prose style from my position as a white-settler-colonial woman *in relationality with* Indigenous Australian peoples, as a mother to Aboriginal children, an arts educator, and an ethnographic researcher whose right to speak and write rests upon being *in relationality with*, and this singular yet shared set of subjectivities frames the way I reflect upon and respond to Rubén’s work. This braided set of personal-is-political-is-pedagogical positionalities are as central as they are problematic to anything I might write about education, social justice, ethics, decoloniality, and responsibility, particularly the four words white-settler-colonial-woman. White. There is no denying it. My body wears it, my thoughts carry it, and my heart is struck asunder into the binary of the difference it holds. Settler. The Mackinlay family “settled” in Edinburgh after being forcibly removed from their ancestral clan lands during the Highland Clearances by the English and “settled” again in Australia after acquiring land at Temora in NSW. Colonial. I am a daughter, an heir, and an agent of this system, which remains as much in the present as in the past. Woman. I am a cis-gendered, heterosexual, 49 year old female and mother to my two children, I am a gender normative, performing the social construction of the category I have been handed. I share these roots here to ground the turn my thinking and wondering takes about the take that Rubén’s order of cultural production framework in turn takes, to engage with the possible arts education pedagogy that imagines otherwise. The way in which these words are woven together here is also very influenced by the slow reading and writing work I am currently doing with feminist thinkers, and right now, by chance, it happens to be the works of Simone Weil, which sit with me in the creases, folds, and scraps of my writing. While Weil’s work does not feature in Rubén’s own, I hope that you are able to trace the ways in which I see their words touching in search of an otherwise arts education.

The questions I have posed here, then, are a riff on Rubén’s own provocation that arts education as orders of cultural production opens the door for us to enter into a particular kind of relational, affective, and political work, which pushes against discourses that dominator cultures impose, and it is to this aspect of his work I would like to now pay attention. I use the word “attention” deliberately here to invoke the work of anti-racist-colonialist-establishment French feminist philosopher and revolutionary Simone Weil. For Simone Weil, the concept of “paying attention” is at the heart of living a radically ethico-onto-epistemological life—a life that refuses to give into complacency, indifference, and abandonment of value in relation to and with that which makes us capable of love, because the disaster our time demands otherwise. She explains,

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty...it means holding our minds within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge which we are forced to make use of. (Weil, 1951/2010, p. 35)

In these words, I hear Simone Weil asking us to apprehend meaning, to put on hold all that we understand to be capital T truths, so that we might open the doorway and ourselves to another and as yet unknown ethico-onto-epistemological possibility. There are traces of Maxine Greene’s thinking in Weil’s words, and Rubén echoes similar sentiments related to the radical possibility of suspending the taken for granted when he writes,

while a cultural production framework does not oppose the arts, it also does not participate in the continued reproduction of the hierarchies the concept implies. In fact, if symbolic orders can be altered through cultural production, then it is also possible to relocate and re-signify what we mean by “the arts” in order to put the concept to work for other purposes. (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020, p. 21)

Like Weil, Rubén is gesturing to the ways in which “holding-in-abeyance sense of self to allow other ways of knowing, being and doing to breathe the oxygen in the air we have so selfishly epistemically and ontologically inhaled” (Weil, 1952/1997, p. 37) is at once a disturbance of and a directive to turn our attention outwards otherwise; there is no mastery here, no white patriarchal colonial possessive logic, no ethico-onto-epistemological violence.

The orders of cultural production as a pedagogical framework for arts education that Rubén offers us here, ask us to pay attention to the entanglements of the arts as symbolic work within the very conditions that such work emerges. Rubén makes it very clear that these orders—symbolic, material, spatio-temporal, relational and affective—are not intended to replicate oppressive hierarchies, but rather might be seen as “overlapping operations” that are brought into dialogue so that we might pay attention to the conditions and politics of cultural production in the work of arts education. Here, I again draw similarities with Rubén’s work and Weil, who sought to pay attention, serious attention, to the material and social surroundings in which we find ourselves and the ways in which our singular but shared and situated socio-material condition becomes entangled with a search to live a more ethico-onto-epistemological and response-able life. Weil originally sought to find a way through to “otherwise” than individual and collective oppression, or “as if” as Greene (1995, p. 4) might say, by engaging in a Marxian analytic, which viewed each moment in history as constructed and “ordered” around certain “modes of production” that, in their mediation of power, ultimately determined the political, social, and cultural shape of society. Influenced by her experiences as an unskilled female factory worker in Paris in 1934, Weil came to the understanding that the working class, locked into a particular kinds of social and material orders because of their work, were also locked out of engaged thinking and intellectual work. She described the ways in which industry and institutions operated as collective instruments that crushed individual thought like the grinding “cogs” of a machine (Weil, 1977, p. 40). In Weil’s mind, this was a new species of oppression to which we needed to pay attention, particularly the social and material conditions where such plays of power “played” out. The very concept of paying attention, then, as a praxis of waiting and watching and suspending and stirring within the social and material conditions of our situation, gestures towards—by necessity—living an ethico-onto-epistemological response-able life.

While there are moments when my feminist sense-abilities sit “ill at ease” with Rubén’s use of the words “cultural production” because of the dangers I sense they might hold for “fixing” arts education, in all meanings of the word, to a particular kind of structuralist (read, oppressive) version of the work we do in this space, it is the possibility the orders of cultural production he proposes hold for “paying attention” that I remain thinking and wondering about. If I unfix the words “cultural production” from their structuralist origins, it is this possibility within the order of cultural production Rubén proposes, then, that I am most drawn to—that paying attention to the necessarily entangled orders of symbolic, material, spatio-temporal, relational, and affective in arts education pedagogy holds the possibility for living a more ethico-onto-epistemological response-able life. This is at the heart of work that Rubén’s order of cultural production gestures towards; and, it is *heart work*, a pedagogy of the heart that has been whispering in my mind for a very long time. The phrase “whispering in our hearts” is derived from the work of Australian historian Henry Reynolds (1998) who provocatively suggested that all of us who stood in white-settler-colonial relationality with Indigenous peoples, needed to pause and ask deep and difficult questions about that relationality. For me this whispering has never ended, and neither do I believe it should, because it asks us to pay attention to the kinds of social, moral, and ethical response-abilities we hold within the particular symbolic, material, spatio-temporal, relational, and affective orders, the kind of which Rubén speaks, to make space for critical, just, and loving pedagogy in our arts education work. This is heart work, and it is work that is as yet unfinished. If we work to pay attention to

symbolic, material, spatio-temporal, relational, and affective orders, might we then move closer to not only imagining, but living a wiser, non-violent, more loving, and response-able relationship between ourselves as arts educators and the otherwise of the social worlds we seek to find? Is paying attention, in the way that Simone Weil urges us, a way of turning down the volume of those very forces that insist on a particular kind of arts education, which privileges the powerful, and make it possible to embrace a praxis in our pedagogy of ethico-onto-epistemological response-ability? And yet, even now as my reflections are drawing to a close, more questions sidle down next to me and make themselves comfortable, while I continue to sit ill at ease. What might such a performativity of ethico-onto-epistemological response-ability as read and made real across Rubén’s orders of cultural production look, sound, and feel like in our arts education classrooms? How do we make sure we are paying attention and *really* doing something other than “fixing” arts education to, with, and for the orders of dominator culture and the self-same? In framing arts education within the framework of Rubén’s orders of cultural production, are we colluders or rebels in the ways the discourses and regimes of arts education itself work to empower or disempower the marginalised, oppressed, and colonised to, for, and with whom we claim to work? In what ways does Rubén’s framework ask you to pay attention, and how will you respond?

### References

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