

Biopower and Pedagogy: Local Spaces and Institutional Technologies



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Introduction

Like others on September 11, 2001, I woke to the news that the World Trade Centers had been hit by passenger planes. As I watched CNN that morning I saw footage of one of the hijacked planes collide with the second tower and later as both towers crumbled. I tried to grasp the significance of what had happened on my way to school but was still quite bewildered when I entered my office, which I shared with four other graduate students. One of my officemates frantically called her friends in New York until she confirmed they were okay. In the offices down the hall several other colleagues were having similar reactions. I went through the rest of the day emotionally numb, still unable to really comprehend the totality of the day's events but knowing it must be great.

Late that afternoon, as I sat on a large curved concrete bench outside the university's museum, a late 1960s Ford Bronco with four young passengers began to make several passes in front of me. Two males were sitting in the front bucket seats and two females were sitting in the back. The Bronco was olive green and had a faded black roll bar and no top. The students had duct-taped an American flag on the back of the roll-bar, and it stood about two feet above the upper rung. There was no cheering from any of the students, no anti-Afghani nor anti-Iraqi slogans. In fact, all four of the students seemed somber and expressionless the entire time I watched them. They drove in front of me for about 30 minutes, circling one of the main buildings on campus. It was a sobering moment as I reflected on how it compared to the images I had seen earlier on CNN that morning of newscasters and restaurant patrons in a mixture of excitement, horror, and confusion as they watched the events of 9/11 unfold. It was much different than watching my officemate anxiously dial and redial friends in New York. Watching the students drive around campus made me think about how just under the surface the strong tendency to retreat into the symbolic is.

The more I thought about it in the passing months the more I was convinced that what drove these students to parade their flag in front of school is something that is deeply embedded in our culture, which becomes more obvious in times of extreme emotion. In other words, we are already prepared to act out in specific and predefined ways when we are faced with conflict. This became clearer to me in the passing months as I watched the government and media shape public opinion by relying on tired clichés and emotional symbols of both patriotism and heroism. {1} Further, what shocked me the most was how this shift from confusion over the attack to a retreat to symbolism seemed to happen spontaneously. The threat of the symbolic is that symbolic artifacts or ideologies often do not require interpretation to be effective. The flag may have meant different things for each of the four students in the Bronco; yet at the same time it created solidarity between them. The threat of this kind of thinking is that it undermines the kind of critical thought many academics claim they want their students to pursue in higher education. When we struggle for these critical moments in our teaching, I think educators too often underestimate the degree to which students and teachers alike have already been prepared through social institutions to either resist them outright or to resort to cliché.

Foucault uses the word biopower to describe the emergence of social institutions that ever-increasingly organize (i.e. govern) the social body. Foucault calls this the "bioregulation by the state," a "regulatory technology . . . a technology in which bodies are replaced by general biological processes" (Society 250, 249). This ritualized power materialized after the rise of capitalism. Therefore, the connection to biopower and capitalism is an important and obvious one. However, what I am interested in complicating in this essay is not this relationship but the development of techniques and what effect they can have on student thinking. {2} I argue that many of the pedagogical practices that have attempted to incorporate critical or transformative curriculum are integrated into a host of production activities that exercise biopolitical power in the classroom to produce "right thinking" individuals, which obscures the kinds of open discussions they were intended to facilitate. {3}

Using the work of Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, I discuss one practical method to (at least temporarily) suspend institutional thinking in order to invent new and productive ways to articulate democratic discourse. Heidegger's use of the term thinking is crucial to understanding how it may be possible to defer thinking within

prescribed institutions—and by that deferring institutional thinking in general. Heidegger used this term to unpack his interpretation of existence itself, which he says is revealed to us through our existing technologies. It is what he calls a sending of being. These technologies and institutions define our existence. However, in terms of practical use value, Heidegger's work is more descriptive of the problem of technological thinking than prescriptive in terms of how to act otherwise. Arendt, on the other hand, is useful in that she constructs models, active processes, which human beings can enact. Arendt explores the notion of cliché to describe how societies can lose their political nature and become ever more totalitarian. She develops Heidegger's notion of thinking to describe the possibility to think otherwise.

In this essay I incorporate Arendt's term cliché to describe the totalistic impression our cultural and social institutions can have on how we exist and communicate with others in the social sphere. However, I am not necessarily talking about cliché expressions—even though they can illustrate cliché thinking. Ryan Stark has effectively argued that English teachers despair over the use of clichés because clichés violate Romantic notions of individualism. He argues that while clichés may in fact represent uncritical discourse, they may also be used to demonstrate connections with others in similar cultures or communities. Stark makes a good point. All cliché expressions are not representative of cliché thought, nor are all examples of clichés inherently dangerous to critical democratic dialogue. I am interested in exploring cliché thinking as a representation—that is a subsoil—of social, cultural, and political thought. I argue that cliché thinking dominates productions of discourse, and in doing so covers over the complexities of our existence. Learning how to undermine cliché thinking is crucial as our culture and institutions evolve and become more complex and intricate. This is a process that must be learned intentionally and deliberately. First, however, an understanding of *how* institutions affect thinking is important. To examine this I return to Foucault's theory of biopower.

Biopower

Biopower, as defined by Francois Ewald, is “the industrial and controlled production and reproduction of the living” (8). It is the word Foucault uses to characterize changes in the practice and regulation of life beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was largely a result of industrialization, which forced a change in sovereign power—absolute power retreated and regulatory and disciplinary powers substituted for it. Instead of simply having an absolute and normal right over life and death, in the classical age life transformed alongside several elements and mechanisms of power “working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize” the social body (History 136). According to Foucault this shift happened in two separate but consistent forms: “anatomy-politics” and “a politics of the population.” The first treated the body as a functioning mechanism—“its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces,” the second treated the body as a ‘species’, “imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes” (History 139). The first form was concerned with the manipulation and management, or disciplining, of human bodies. The key of “disciplinary power was to produce a human being who could be treated as a ‘docile body’” (Dreyfus 34-35).

While these technological changes and their significance went largely unnoticed as they evolved, in the nineteenth century they come together to produce a new kind of political technology—what Foucault refers to as “the great technology of power in the nineteenth century” (History 140). Governance of life and its relation to power were institutionally legitimated in new ways incorporating institutions such as family, medicine, psychiatry, education, etc. They create what Foucault calls the “welfare state.” Ewald clarifies, “The welfare state accomplishes the dream of bio-power—.[it] is a state whose primary aim is no longer to protect the freedom of each individual—but rather to assume responsibility for the very manner in which the individual manages his life” (8). [\[4\]](#) In a discussion of education, in *The Subject and Power* Foucault argues that

the disposal of its space, the meticulous regulations that govern its internal life, the different activities that are organized there . . . constitute a block of capacity-communication-power. Activity to ensure learning and the acquisition of aptitudes to types of behavior works via a whole ensemble of regulated communications—and by means of a whole series of power processes. (338)

One critical component to the success of biopolitics is that different and sometimes competing institutions, whether they be ideological or material, operate together as a system of coercion rather than force. This is not so much a means of mind control as it is a systematic reorganization of governing technologies. These technologies do not impose regulatory principles as much as governing institutions (re)constitute new social relations that (re)create how to live. Unless this process of biopower is interrupted, people can become so entrenched in institutional logics that those logics and the institutions that support them become invisible. In other words, the threat of biopower is the increasing retreat of analytical thought to cliché forms of thinking.

Disrupting the technology of biopolitics is a difficult task, but not an impossible one. Foucault suggests in acting within institutional boundaries “it is quite possible . . . to get to know how it works and to work within it . . . and . . . to carry out in that specific area work that may properly be called intellectual” (“On Power” 107). This includes learning how one is imbedded in a system to gain some perspective on how to act just beyond it. To struggle within real, material everyday circumstances is what Foucault calls the task of the “specific” intellectual, which he opposes to the “universal” intellectual. The specific intellectual must be able to suspend “as far as possible the system of values to which one refers when testing and assessing” (107). The task of the specific individual is to respond to local contingent sites of struggle in the context of the global. It is not to critique specific notions of right and wrong but to uncover how we are produced institutionally. This defrosting of institutional thought gets at the heart of Foucault.

Foucault’s work often focused on the notion that human beings can defend against some forms of power. Like James E. Porter and others suggest in their own critique of institutional logic, “Though institutions are certainly powerful, they are not monoliths; they are rhetorically constructed human designs (whose power is reinforced by buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge making processes) and so are changeable” (611). [5] However, in a short discussion of resistance to biopolitical production, Foucault comments that in doing so “the main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much such-or-such institution of power, or group, or elite, or class but, rather, a technique, a form of power” (Subject 331). As an educator, the importance of biopolitics in education is that the regulation of the social accounts partially for a lack of analytical critique many writing teachers claim to be central in their curriculum. Mas’ud Zavarzadeh makes this point in “The Pedagogy of Totality.” Focusing his criticism on Michael Bérubé’s *Ignorance Is a Luxury We Cannot Afford*, in his discussion of peoples’ reactions to 9/11 Zavarzadeh suggests that pedagogically “empathy” has been substituted for the “analytical” and that what teachers seek instead of the analytical is “moral clarity.” Producing morally tolerable students (right thinking individuals) has become a staple in transformative pedagogy. [6] This is not to suggest that critical stances in education have not had positive repercussions, but I do think we need to regard them only as initial steps in beginning to understand ourselves as teachers and writers. Pedagogies that are derived from transformative projects are often treated as conclusionary rather than preparatory. Zavarzadeh argues that the “pedagogy of tears is grounded in the notion that social change takes place through a ‘change of heart’: an altering of the affective consciousness of the individual who can help, through philanthropy and faith-based charity, to create a compassionate culture” (40). Transformative pedagogy is largely based on assumptions of tolerance. This compassionate culture is also a unitary one in which everyday struggles of power and representation become subsumed under the guise of correctness.

Tolerance and Narrative Distance

In an attempt to promote tolerance, one of the most widespread methods English scholars have employed is the expansion of the literary canon to include “multicultural” texts. While expanding our literary canon is a positive notion, critics have recognized that while the literary canon is becoming more diverse technically, in reality it is still positioned within already existing structures. Quoting from Alan C. Golding, Jacqueline Bacon suggests that as a consequence these texts can be “rendered ‘culturally and intellectually harmless’ when accommodated within our ‘cultural institutions’” (503). It is important to observe that there is difference between expanding and undermining social structures. Understanding that there are cultural logics is one thing. Being able to comprehend how deeply embedded they are in our culture and supported by our institutions is another. Figuring out how we might actually undermine them is still another.

Phyllis Van Slyck’s “Repositioning Ourselves in the Contact Zone” can partly serve as an example of how expanding the canon in order to address “political correctness” or “moral tolerability” can actually reinforce what have become standardized ways of thinking—cliché thinking. Van Slyck begins the article by recounting students’ reactions to a “deflowering ritual” in Ali Ghalem’s *A Wife for My Son*, which describes how (though they have never met) a husband must take his wife by force on their wedding night while “family members stand outside the door, cheering” (149). The students’ responses ranged from complete horror of the rape to sympathy for both partners who feel forced to obey their cultural rituals. And although there was initial resistance toward sympathy, especially for the male partner, Van Slyck appears to have had relative ease getting the class to come to a more sophisticated and/or complicated discussion. Her primary goal seems not to force students to accept cultural differences but to get them to see the complexity of culture. In my opinion, however, what makes the discussion between the negotiation and complication of cultures possible for teachers who use such texts is not so much that students are exposed to culturally diverse material, but that the events read about are almost wholly disconnected from their lives. This allows students to have intellectual discussions about cultural diversity without the threat of actual contact. [7] On the surface, Van Slyck’s course may seem to bridge the analytical with the personal, but the reality is that there is a more insidious and subtle logic of care undermining a dialogic exchange. Such discussions seem like little more than intellectual tokenism to me.

This does not mean that students and teachers can learn nothing from such incidents as the “deflowering ritual,” or that they can’t come to some negotiated space where conversations about it aren’t simply pigeon-holed into either “we must respect other cultures” even at the continued risk of the subjugation of women, or the simplified “it was a clear act of rape.” While I think Van Slyck should be applauded for her honest struggle in grappling with her own leadership position in the classroom as a “moderator and guide,” I want to discuss the possible limitations of such classrooms and introduce how we might imagine writing courses in the context of those limitations. What is being tapped into here is a culture of political correctness and cultural sensitivity. This has more to do with the specific kinds of thinking that will be tolerated than it does with an ethics of difference. Texts and ideas such as these are generally introduced to students in order to correct or confirm good and/or ethical thinking rather than to allow students to uncover the changing political technologies that are now including an ethics of difference as a homogenizing force.

In her course, Van Slyck chooses “to teach a variety of postcolonial, nonwestern, and other so-called minority texts, in conjunction with western texts” to produce a cultural dialogue between students (apparently) unfamiliar with the cultural conditions and/or ideals represented in these texts (151). Van Slyck claims that teaching these texts opens a door

through which students can examine ways both community values and individual values function in a given culture. And even if students do not always share or fully comprehend the practices of another community, a dialogue has begun to take place in which difference is explored. Students have learned the difference between an informed rejection and a naïve or unreflective one. (157)

I agree to some extent, but while such classrooms can and do have the effect of enlarging our perspectives about cultural norms and identities, they do so in a way that does not necessarily challenge students’ institutional logics. Instead, they simply revise existing logics. Interrogating texts to broaden social acceptance can create a critical dialogue between texts and students and should probably be a common practice in English departments. However, doing so does not necessarily confront why people may initially react negatively to difference. It can be argued that generating more thoughtful and open forms of dialogue without attending to the logic that illicitly motivates naïve assumptions about others might, as well, unknowingly perpetuate destructive cultural logics in the context of resistance. In such classrooms, students are perpetually looking outward and at a great distance—engaging in good texts but not necessarily real human beings. What students do not learn to do in these types of discussions is learn how unmask the technologies of power that are at work.

Christy Friend criticizes Van Slyck’s pedagogy, arguing that

because its focus is showcasing as many different perspectives as possible, [it] tends to emphasize reading and critical analysis at the expense of encouraging students to articulate their own responses to issues. In Van Slyck’s case, “negotiating difference” involves having students read a bunch of culturally unfamiliar texts and talk about how much these differ from the values they learned at home. We never see this same critical perspective turned outward, to ask students to consider how their reading and experience might bear on other’s readings and experiences, or on related issues outside the classroom. (666)

In Van Slyck’s class, students are asked to write papers based on these differences, including one assignment that asks students to write from the perspective of the people in the stories. Asking students to write from the perspective of someone in a culture totally unfamiliar to them seems to be one of those assignments that ask students to do the impossible. Assignments that ask students to adopt and write from the perspective of another’s culture may give them *the illusion* of socio-political engagement, but I have serious doubts about anyone’s capacity to develop profound insight into marginal(ized) societies simply by imagining they are in them. So why is such pedagogy so popular? I would argue that although the motivations may be unconscious, they have much more to do with homogenizing cultural thought than with producing critical or even antagonistic ideas. I don’t want to seem overly critical since I have used many of these same techniques in my own classes, but I now also have to recognize how the emotional constraints of cultivating liberal culture in my own classrooms has turned upon itself when I constructed the curriculum. The pressure to identify and think through institutional logics is not an impulse that is either easily understood or resisted, as these institutions often cut to the core of our beliefs and, therefore, ourselves. Passion for our beliefs can readily turn into stubborn, definitive thought.

In a course I taught recently, I was reminded of how emotional and persistent our beliefs can be when we are confronted with difference. One afternoon in a reading course I was teaching, we were talking about cliché thinking. I had taught a basic list of fallacies and discussed how students needed not memorize them but only have a basic understanding of fallacies in terms of how they applied to “false” kinds of thinking. I was lucky that this semester

happened to be an election year and several transcriptions of the presidential debates were available online. To teach students how to apply the fallacies, I selected several passages from the presidential debates and made a handout for the course—trying to equally weight each of the candidates' arguments. Students were instructed to take them home and identify and describe what was either deceptive or erroneous about each section. I tried to be as clear as possible that we were not taking sides to any of the arguments. Whether we agreed with the opinion was irrelevant to the discussion of whether or not the arguments being made by the candidates made *logical* sense. We discussed them the following day. We had about twenty minutes left in class when we finally began to discuss the example I had copied concerning stem-cell research. [8] When the class began to discuss the fallacies in both Bush and Kerry's arguments, one student compared stem-cell research to abortion. Another student immediately raised his hand and replied that "abortion is wrong because it's murder." "Okay" I replied, "but how does the way either Bush or Kerry's argument not necessarily make *logical* sense here." "Well," Manuel replied "because abortion is killing a baby and murder is wrong." Because abortion is such a sensitive subject I normally do not discuss it in class. However, I was sure that additional probing could get the discussion back on track. I replied again, "Let's say that's true. Can you explain to me how these arguments don't make sense—even if I grant you that your opinion is right?" I continued to discuss how murder is a concept that we apply, not a clear-cut concept we can simply use.

This student looked at me attentively as I explained what I wanted him to do as if he was both listening and understanding what I had been saying and replied, "Yes!" he replied, "because women need to be more responsible and not have babies unless they're going to take care of them." While a few students snickered at his response, realizing the dissonance between our conversations, many of the women in the course were visibly upset. There is a large Catholic influence where I currently teach, so the argument about abortion touched nerves that other subjects in our debates hadn't. When a female student finally couldn't take it anymore, a spontaneous argument erupted between her and the student trying to make an argument against abortion, Manuel.

"What about rape?" Jessica screamed. "You think if a woman is raped she should have to have her rapist's baby?"

"But abortion is murder," he replied.

They continued their "rape" and "murder" debate for the remainder of the class and neither moved beyond their original points. Although I tried to intervene in the argument, it was very clear to me that at this point I could do no good. These students continued to yell at each other the same cliché points over and over, and I could not get them to entertain the possibility of each other's responses or to give up their original positions. Whereas Manuel could not separate his argument from his religious beliefs, arguing that abortion was murder and murder is wrong, Jessica could not separate her beliefs from being a female and having strong views about women's rights. Once these students had entrenched themselves in their positions it was impossible for them to give up any part of their argument to the other. Moreover, it was impossible for either of these students to hear what the other had to say. I would argue that both of these students had immediately become not politically but emotionally committed to their argument. Since our classroom had all the makings of a barroom brawl, I decided to end class early that day and try to figure out what had just happened.

While this may be an example of what William Thelin has called "blundering," I couldn't interpret this moment as anything other than a failure. As Thelin suggests in "Understanding Problems in Critical Classrooms," this event may have been a "necessary component" to understanding my own problems in teaching. However, that doesn't get at why these students lacked the skills to defrost the institutional logics of Catholicism and feminism to come together in a dialogic conversation. Both of these students could only produce cliché thinking in response to subject matter that personally and emotionally affected their immediate social space. Both students took instant extreme positions and as a result both ended up getting overly emotional too quickly to even begin to consider the other's point of view. As a result, there could be no true conversation in the classroom.

Instead of teaching students about the diversity and richness of other cultures in order to foster grand (though I suspect often contrived) social acceptance, as is the case in the Van Slyck example, we also need to consider ways that we can construct classrooms to encourage students to engage in critical, dialogic conversations that have to do with the local, contingent, spatial boundaries that already define them. We need to think more about how to get our students to use writing both to critically analyze the world around them *and* to learn how to engage that world without simply submitting to convention. If teachers want to teach students how to nurture thoughtful and productive communicative relationships outside the classroom, students also need practice negotiating more intimate relationships between value and social systems in conflicting local situations. Often writing teachers operate under the assumption that students are socially or cognitively deficient and it is up to the teacher to show them the right way to think and act. This is pedagogy's biopolitical promise. What often happens though is a more sophisticated extension of what school systems have been increasingly teaching—the culture of "Can't we all just get along?" Using cultural situations that can only be abstractly imagined and not experienced or lived seems to me to be one of

the most effective ways to produce hackneyed, clichéd responses to the unfamiliar, where life is always more complicated and values and opinions are never so easily determined.

However, students (and teachers for that matter) are so institutionally conditioned against such conversations that it can be almost impossible to undermine that logic. Shirley Wilson Logan discusses the difficulty of creating authentic conversations. Logan suggests that as a black woman, her very presence in the classroom often causes students to “submit stifled prose that sticks to *stock responses* to racial issues, issues that beg for critical consideration” (emphasis added 50). Even when Logan consciously attempts to have students complicate simplified opinions of acceptable discourse and values, students are already so biopolitically conditioned against such a task they don’t know how to react to her suggestion. Often teachers who deal with issues that more accurately reflect the dilemmas students face in real life regard their own moral stance as if their politics and values are the benchmark from which other opinions must be judged. Not surprisingly, this is one of the quickest ways to silence student opposition. Logan suggests, on the other hand, that “we need to engage in democratic conversations about divisive topics like race and gender, and in a variety of public spaces, especially in classes designed to enhance effective communication” (52).

Biopolitical Drama

When challenges to our liberal social agreement are openly displayed is when the effects of biopolitics are most apparent. Wendy Hesford discusses such an event, which took place during her tenure at Oberlin College. One morning residents woke to find that someone had spray-painted “Death to Chinks Memorial” and “Dead chinks, good chinks” on Oberlin’s Memorial Arch that commemorated the missionaries who died in the Boxer Rebellion. At first the graffiti was thought to be a result of “an anti-Asian hate crime,” but it was soon discovered that an Asian-American female had written it to bring attention to the arch, which “glorified white accomplishments” and made no mention of the “thousands of Chinese who were killed or raped” (72). This student made what I would consider a valiant effort not only at bringing attention to unsettled cultural disputes at the college but doing so by positing the incident in a way that begged for critical dialogue. Reactions varied. The result, however, was that

Many white students felt they had been unfairly positioned as perpetrators of the hate crime. Several Asian-American students felt that the graffiti reinforced essentialist racial politics by generalizing the Asian-American standpoint. A number of Feminist sympathized . . . but they thought that by concealing her gender identity . . . she had missed an opportunity to reimage Asian-American women as activists. (Hesford 72)

Unfortunately, as Hesford argues, the student’s “graffiti reified a racial position—white defensiveness—that the graffitiist hope to dislodge” (73). Peoples’ reactions to the graffiti raises a couple of important points. The first of which is that biopower is accommodating; it meets the needs of multiplicity. It allows people to operate from a multitude of subject positions. Secondly, while these subject positions seem to be at odds—and therefore give the appearance of diversity—what they share is technique. All of the people who Hesford describes retreated immediately into their comfortable and safe subject positions. When confronted with a situation that required genuine and sincere dialogue, these participants proved to be so unskilled at forging such a discussion they had nothing to rely on but tired, clichéd discourse. Many of these reactions are examples of what has been allowed to stand in for critical thinking.

I would like to return to Zavarzadeh’s earlier argument that moral clarity and sympathy have been substituted for analytics. Biopower is one way to contextualize the (re)creation of culture. It is the process by which institutions define and manage life. It accounts for diversity at the same time that it homogenizes through its technologies. In the humanities, the result of this process has been the institutionalization of certain behaviors that on one hand seem to broaden thinking but on the other homogenize it. One of the problems with critical forms of pedagogy is that the teacher’s opinions about right and wrong are the standard by which student opinion is measured. Whether or not we are conscious of the ramifications, Zavarzadeh argues, when the goal of education becomes to change the minds of students “to create a compassionate culture” (40)

The teacher becomes a psychoanalyst who is institutionally appointed to help the student to become autonomous, but, in actuality, the student will never become critically sovereign: the student has to go back to the analytic session over and over again to obtain authority for his or her acts (33).

One of the tasks then of Foucault’s specific individual might be to learn how to disrupt the process of reacting to difference through our existing traditions.

One way to create a transformative environment might be to learn how to (re)create ourselves not as docile bodies,

that is not as bodies that simply react according to our institutional logics, but as active bodies interrupting the process of biopolitics. Such a task might begin not by questioning institutions so much (whether they be actual institutions or ideological ones) but technologies. A transformative pedagogy that asks this type of question should adhere more to the spirit of transformative pedagogy rather than the technologies of control that dominate many of the pedagogical practices in postsecondary education.

Thinking Beyond Technology

An appropriate model of what I am trying to describe here is Hannah Arendt's interpretation of Martin Heidegger's concept "thinking." In *What is Called Thinking?* Heidegger claims that "*Most thought-provoking in our thought provoking times is that we are still not thinking*" (italics in original 6). Heidegger means that society is drawn away from thinking by the ideologies and institutions that define our age. Heidegger suggests that we live in accordance to our epoch. What Heidegger describes in *What is Called Thinking?* is the human will becoming subordinate to the essence of technology—what he called the "danger" of technology. Technology was the term he used to define our current period; it can best be described as modern metaphysics or modern man. It does not refer to machine technology although he does say that modern technology is the most obvious evidence that we are in the age of technology. Instead, Heidegger says that technology is a "way of revealing" (Question 12). Heidegger uses the term "saving power" to refer to human beings ability to develop a "free relationship" to technology. For Heidegger, to think within the structures and confines of our epoch is to deny thinking. Heidegger argues that to begin thinking "authentically" the identity boundaries of our age must be subordinated. For my argument here, the problem with Heidegger is that too much of what he proposes is preparatory. And however skillful and capable Heidegger is at describing our current condition in terms of thinking, Hannah Arendt's work broadens it insofar as she more concretely defines and applies the term thinking, which makes her work more active.

In "Thinking and Moral Considerations," Arendt argues, "clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence" (160). Cliché in discourse is the symbolic representation of institutionalization. Arendt describes thinking as an activity which enables us to momentarily suspend our technologies (institutions). She applies three metaphors to Socrates in order to define this process: the gadfly, the midwife, and the electric ray. To understand the activity of thinking, we need to understand these three overlapping images. The gadfly arouses thinking; the midwife represents sterility; and the electric ray paralyzes. Thinking needs to arouse rather than simply be reactionary; it is sterile in that it purges people of their opinions; and it paralyzes by stripping away conceptual and worldly foundations. The activity of thinking pushes us to reconsider our thoughts and opinions (gadfly) and at the same time both takes away how we have come to understand them (midwife, sterility) and the very network under which we do (electric ray). This does not mean that we purge ourselves of our institutions—our moral and ethical barometers. We can interpret this paralysis as a momentary suspension (176). While institutions can create subsumptive models, thinking destroys that kind of universalism. But what it gives in return is an activity that creates the ability to react to singularity. We think by letting our claims to facts become open to singularity. The responsibility to thinking is responding to particularity in its particularity. According to Arendt, this is a more natural way to exist, and institutions cover over this process. The activity of thinking then, although initially suspending the worldly, can be applied to the worldly.

Arendt does not equate *thinking* and *intelligence*. In fact, she argues quite the opposite that the inability to think "can be found in highly intelligent people" (164). Intelligence can be measured in our society in a number of ways, including what Arendt describes as a "storehouse of knowledge." Thinking is different in that it is a reflective process that can result in knowledge (or action), but it is neither knowledge nor intelligent. Moreover, just as Arendt argues that thinking can be translated into products, [\[9\]](#) it can also be translated into critical dialogue. But this critical dialogic conversation is not one that can yield long term results. As Arendt suggests, "The need to think can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts which I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I can think them anew" (163). Even if the process of thinking is productive, the activity of thinking does not allow for any "final code of conduct . . . least of all a new and new allegedly final definition of what is good and what is evil" (167). This is the essence of Foucault's "specific intellectual" and Heidegger's notion of developing a "free relationship" to technology.

Arendt's thinking is a political call to action. It seems then that thinking can be satisfied most productively by withholding or suspending our emotive responses. To understand the nature of thinking as I interpret Arendt, one has to understand that what my two students who were arguing about rape and the students at Oberlin College who were arguing about race had in common was a process by which their immediate activist reactions to opposition simply deposited clichés. This process is the key to understanding how it might be possible to react to singularity. Thinking

is the process by which we respond to each other as singular events. I am not arguing that the positions took by the students in my examples did not have political implications. They in fact did. Nor am I implying that there are not political repercussions to arguments about gender, race, history, etc. no matter how cliché they may seem. However, I am arguing that to take a position institutionally, whereby thinking is filtered through social ideologies and becomes solely their result, undermines the kind of thinking I consider most productive in getting students and teachers alike to have productive critical dialogue.

To be political in the way I am describing it here would mean that in both of these examples students would have had to find ways to create an actual dialogue about their oppositions rather than rely on cliché ones. This is what can be taught and learned. However, as Arendt suggests,

By shielding people against the danger of examination, it [cliché] teaches them to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society. What people then get used to is not so much the content of the rules, a close examination of which would always lead them to perplexity, as the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars. (178)

Finding pedagogical processes that allow democratic dialogue is similar I think to Hesford's idea of "critical witnessing." As Hesford suggests in her discussion about the ethnographic method, "knowledge becomes generalizable through the accumulation of related inquiry and that the only things transferable are the methods themselves, though even they change as they are animated in new contexts," so too does the experience of others' narratives only bring with them possibilities of understanding contingent singularities that will then vanish into obscurity (155). It is precisely those moments of singularity that institutionalization restrains. But those are the moments that we must come to understand and appreciate as teachers. Such a dialogue has the capacity to constitute a literacy in which subjects can become negotiators of knowledge and begin to understand how institutional practices are contingent on the discourses and communities that grant them value. What I like about the functionality of Hesford's "critical witnessing" is that it orients readers and writers in active roles. She calls "critical witnessing" an "interventionist practice," which suggests that students and teachers alike take active political stances to use writing for social change—to transform the public spheres of which they are a part.

What I am describing here is a process that is not itself political, but one that allows the political to happen. Because my two students did not have the ability to utilize their subject positions, they simply had to revert into cliché. The process of thinking, on the other hand, would have forced them into a dialogic conversation. Therefore, the problem is not that we have values or that these values are constructed through our institutions. The problem I am describing is our comportment toward our values as they are defined by our social institutions. Thinking allows a fluidity rather than a rigidity of thought. According to Arendt, this fluidity liberates "the faculty of judgment . . . the most political of man's mental abilities. It is the faculty to judge particulars without subsuming them under general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules" (36). This will be quite difficult to do in that it would mean we would have to treat ourselves and our peers as subjects in constant emergence and discursiveness. This could mean that in the end our most valuable asset is not the doctrines we hold dear, but our ability to think without them.

Notes

1. One well known example of the tenuousness of the symbolic and public opinion was prompted by Pulitzer Prize winner Peter Arnett's statement in an impromptu interview for Iraqi Television "The first war plan has failed because of Iraqi resistance." As a result of this "unpatriotic" statement, Arnett was immediately fired from NBC. ([Return to text.](#))
2. A longer discussion would account for how biopower is a result of the rise of capitalism and would demonstrate how capitalism is the profiteer of biopolitical production through the creation of docile bodies. ([Return to text.](#))
3. Biopolitical power is somewhat opposite to overt acts of power—a distinction Deleuze makes in his discussions of disciplinary societies vs. control societies. ([Return to text.](#))
4. Hannah Arendt discusses the same phenomenon in "What is Authority?" ([Return to text.](#))
5. Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Libby Miles. ([Return to text.](#))
6. I am using the term transformative pedagogy to broadly refer to recent movements in scholarship that

generated largely from the early work of Paulo Freire which argue that education is a context of social, democratic action. These would include the school of critical pedagogy of well known scholars such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Michael Apple and others but also the theoretical influence of Feminism and Critical Race Theory for instance. ([Return to text.](#))

7. I don't want to dismiss the fact that there was in fact cross-cultural discussion in Van Slyck's class, but my point is that the discussion of reading significantly dominates discussion rather than the antagonistic moments between students. ([Return to text.](#))
8. For one transcription of the second debate go to www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6209704. ([Return to text.](#))
9. See "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" in *Responsibility and Judgment*. ([Return to text.](#))

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