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## **Sites of Contention and Critical Thinking in the Elementary Art Classroom: A Political Cartooning Project**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, the author explores the concept of childhood as a social category that impedes the perception of youngsters as critical thinkers in a visual culture. The author interrogates regularities within contemporary public schooling that work to represent the intellectual and cultural development of youngsters as the project of adult industry. Contrary to this representation, the author recounts the critical awareness and personal agency exercised by a group of 4th graders who engaged in a political cartooning exercise while examining the theme of social justice. The article includes an examination of the social construction of the concept of childhood as it intersects the discourse of Western socio-cultural superiority and the opening of sites of contention as a pedagogical strategy.

## Introduction

Although it is easy to assume that critical and political awareness is the sole province of the social construct we call adulthood, this assumption is made easy only because young people are rarely given the opportunity to visualize their evolving mindsets. Schooling operates according to the same socio-cultural expectations that ultimately delineate hierarchies of power in social interactions. Social expectations are implicit, drawn from a milieu of social and cultural cues in the same ways that we first glean and absorb spoken language cues. Implicit expectations are most often brought into association without deference to critical thought as discussed at length in Malcolm Gladwell's (2007) popular book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*.

## Critical Citizenry

To be critical is to be political; however, to be critical is to insert a new dialectic into an environment of social discourses, making apparent an opinion that had previously been marginalized, unheard, untouched, unseen. Thus, to be critical is to defy expectations, no matter how fledgling that expression of opinion may be. This research article concerns itself with the relegation of the school-aged youngster to the confines of the social construct we have come to accept as childhood, a discursive construct considered to be that of a lesser capacity of human being than is encompassed by the construct of adulthood. In this article I will detail the process and products of a political cartooning project with the fourth grade classes at a New York City elementary school, part of my effort to reconceptualize the construct of childhood. This reconceptualization is addressed through a fresh look at the cultural agency that youngsters are capable of pictorializing and propagating in the elementary school art studio when the art studio is operated as a site of the transactional pedagogy outlined by art educator Brent Wilson (2005).

Contention is a seedbed of critical and political awarenesses; acts of contention find ways of eluding the socio-cultural border patrol, infiltrating a liminal space that is "unstable, indeterminate, and prone to complexity and contradiction" (Garoian, 1999, p. 40). Opinions tend towards contradiction; contradiction cultivates the differences that are necessary for the proliferation of unexplored possibilities and changes of mind. Youngsters are capable of developing their own opinions. And yet, educators expect conformity in schooling rather than contention from their students since conformity is inherent in the "concept of the child as a blank slate" or "tabula rasa" advanced by English philosopher John Locke, a concept of childhood that "greatly influenced the development of public schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Spring, 2001, pp. 31, 32).

The conception of the youngster as an independent and critical thinker defies the typical conception of childhood thinking as so susceptible, underdeveloped, and incapable as to require the shaping hand of mature adults in *loco parentis*. However, the category of childhood serves not only to justify the project of coaxing sophisticated thought processes from supposedly lesser minds, but also provides a useful template for conceiving categories of cultures and social groups that are similarly understood as susceptible, underdeveloped, and incapable of sophisticated thinking without being shepherded by Western interventions (Nandy, 1983). Categorizing childhood as a state of dependency and immature thinking has made it easy to justify institutionalized public schooling practices as a permanent intervention into the unruly frontiers of childhood—and just as easy to justify the machinery of Western imperialism and venture capitalism pursuing systematic and profitable interventions into the affairs of “lesser” nations.

In the following political cartoon created by a 4th grade student named Annie, she confronts her own middle class identity and her pride as an American. With a sophistication that is characteristic of youngsters in an era of competing narratives, Annie pictorializes the contention between her own privilege and the imbalances created by being a citizen of a powerful nation that is accustomed to consuming and possessing more than its share of the world’s resources and wealth. The caption asks: Still proud?

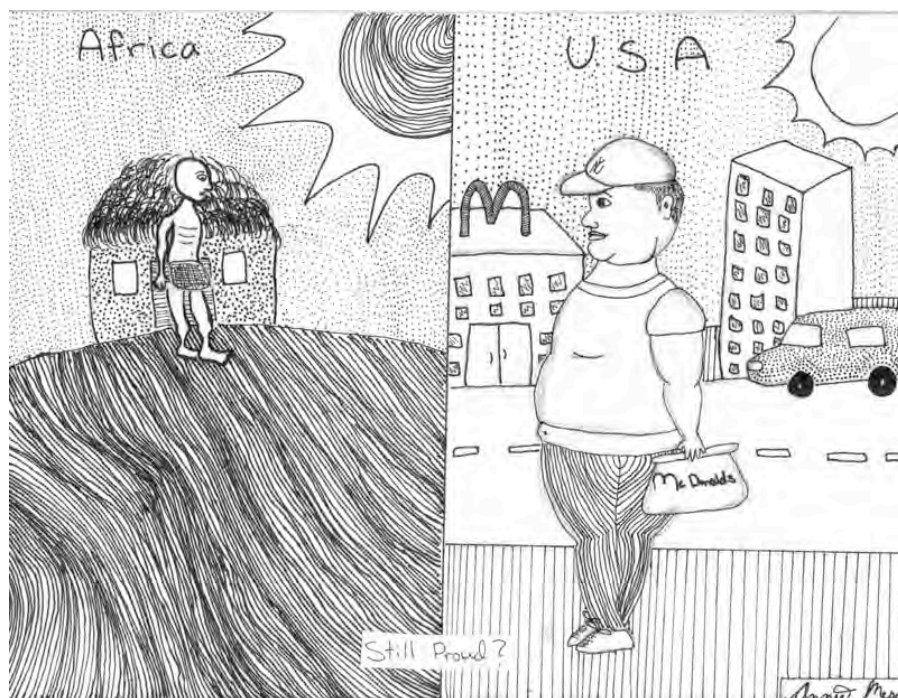


Figure 1.

Politically, Annie’s image signifies a postmodern condition wherein students are able to critically eschew the more simplistic doctrines and indoctrinations into scripts of manifest

destiny, feckless nationalism, and conservative jingoism that have historically been part of the agenda in the schooling of a zealously patriotic and unquestioning citizenry (Stankiewicz, 2001). Steven Connor (1996) summarizes the thesis of Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) book *The Postmodern Condition* as follows:

The postmodern condition comes about with the collapse of or extreme skepticism toward...universalizing metanarratives. In place of a single narrative of the unfolding of an essential humanity, Lyotard proposes a multiplicity of different histories and local narratives that is incapable of being summarized or unified into one all-encompassing story. (Connor, 1996, p. 431)

In Annie's image, one local story of want, waste, and inhospitable terrain is juxtaposed against another local story of overindulgence, preoccupation, and urban inertia. There are multiple narratives at work here, dichotomous and divergent. The boy with the McDonald's Happy Meal purchase in hand looks past the individual in the opposing narrative; the audience is left unconvinced that a vital exchange or connection can ever take place.

### **The Social Construction of the Schooled Child and Lesser Developed Nations**

The modern conception of the child in need of schooling is politicized when interwoven with another set of narrative matrices reproducing the spectacle of the delinquent child, the unregulated child, the confrontationally visible child when children are expected to remain docile and unseen, the "heathen" child in need of assimilation at missionary and tribal schools, or the modern fable of the unruly "inner city" child in need of a savior who will render all that confronts invisible. French cultural theorist Guy Debord uses the term *spectacle* "to describe how representations dominate contemporary culture, and all social relations are mediated by and through images" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 366). Spectacles of childhood are narratives of power constructing not only popular beliefs and movie screenplays of inner city youth who 'need to be saved,' but also public schooling policies and international relations with peoples and nations deemed lesser developed and in need of Western interventions to shape their destinies.

The Enlightenment ideal that emphasized the centrality and progress of Western man, also cultivated a scientific method that has become the architect of whole blueprints of meaning defining the Western worldview. But a map is dimensionless without a model to represent it. Philosopher of science Ronald N. Giere (1999) writes that models, especially *theoretical* models, are "the primary representational entities in science" (p. 5). In explaining that scientific representation is not factual in itself, but rather representative of a discourse that attempts to understand phenomena as universally factual, Giere cites the arguments of scientific historian Thomas S. Kuhn's (1962/1996). According to Giere (1999), Kuhn made the argument that "science is not a search for a true representation of

the world” but is actually “a puzzle solving activity which results in something better characterized as an *interpretation* of the world” (p. 41).

The conception of childhood that emerged from the Enlightenment purports a model of human biological and social development from primitivity to sophistication that has been a key to Western interpretation of its own place in the world. It has been argued that the developing child “is not a real entity, but a discursive construction, albeit a very powerful one” (Walkerline, 1993, p. 466). In *Emile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1979) romanticized the innocence and dependence of a child and the child’s need for an education presided over by an adult like himself—an adult capable of facilitating learning experiences and providing resources to further childhood development. In doing so, Rousseau was also elaborating on an Enlightenment model of staged and hierarchical development wherein the development of human civilizations is a recapitulation of the psychological, biological, and sociological development of the young. In the macro version of this model, the West insinuates itself as the adult at the pinnacle of the power relationship between itself and all Other civilizations (Nandy, 1983).

Characterizations of other peoples based upon a biologically deterministic theoretical model of child development are not statements of truth about the world we live in, but rather statements that hew to a paradigm of social power relations already in place and self-replicating. “Conceptualizing Indians as children,” or as blank slates, the United States Congress enacted the Civilization Act in 1819, implementing into policy a “belief in the power of schooling to culturally transform Native Americans” by using tribal schools as “the key to social control and improvement of [Native American] society” (Spring, 2001, p. 47). With the same hegemonic resolve as the Roman Catholic *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* centuries earlier, in the United States “Protestant churches organized to civilize Native Americans and to convert the entire non-Christian world” (Spring, 2001, p. 50). Missionary educators, intent upon taking “the message of Protestantism to Asia, Africa, and the South Pacific...the Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches founded the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions [in 1810]...and began sending missionaries abroad and to Native American tribes [who were considered foreign ‘heathens’] in 1812” (Spring, 2001, pp. 50, 51).

Whether in these historical models or in the contemporary elementary school classroom, those who school others position themselves as the arbiters of the curricular content necessary to usher the pupil into adulthood. But let us take into consideration now the educational content already developed and developing within the thinking of those who are schooled.

### Contention as Pedagogical Strategy

In art educator Charles R. Garoian's (1999) consideration of the liminality of performance art as transgressive pedagogy, he defines the limen as "a threshold, a border, a neutral zone between ideas, cultures, or territories that one must cross to get from one side to the other" (p.40), a contentious place where our prescriptions of persons and stories of social categories may be demarcated and held in tension, conflicting with one another to be named and un-named. Garoian (1999) is essentially describing a pedagogical site capable of broaching the contemporary political spectacle that depicts the tableau of those *accountable* for carrying out the great burden of schooling in relation to those who *must* be schooled – piercing the limen that demarcates expected roles in a typical schooling paradigm. This liminality allows those designated as students to exit expectations and explore critical lines of thought; it allows access points for new narratives to come into conflict with dominant meta-narratives. I am attracted to Garoian's performance pedagogy because of its ready acceptance of contentiousness as an ingredient in pedagogy; the affordances of contentious liminality in educational settings are akin to the unscriptedness in human experience. The life of the mind is typically rife with conflicts, ambiguity, questions and idiosyncrasies in spite of all attempts to school conformity. Contention as a pedagogical strategy may be just what is necessary to yield the unruly and pioneering innovations in thinking we desire as a result of our educational practices.

The trafficking of embodied contentions and messy minds, where identities are understood to be both/and rather than either/or, are juxtaposed within a polemical space where "meaning is contested and struggled for in the interstices *in between* structures" (Conquergood, 1991, p.184). Located in human thought practices, the site of socio-cultural contention is also then a "criti/politi/cal" identity, or in other words, a critical citizen and a social agent invested with the power to govern local sites of meaning (Rolling, 2007). Following Garoian's (1999) argument, when zones of contention becomes pedagogical strategy, educational enterprise takes a decidedly postmodern turn as spectators/students are taught how "cultural identity work functions politically to achieve agency within schooled culture" (p. 44). The teacher is transformed into the "liminal-servant," teaching students to "think and act critically in classrooms, to challenge the historical and cultural assumptions that they are taught in schools, at home, in the church, in the media, and in other sites where their identities and expressions are at risk" (Garoian, 1999, p. 49). The common school classroom is at the threshold between what critical pedagogue Henry A. Giroux (1995) has described as "the trauma of identity formation and the demands of public life" (p. 5), and requires the sophistication of critical thinking if it is to be navigated successfully.

Critical thinking is not intended merely to improve test scores; it is not task, discipline, not culture specific. Instead, it enables students to cross historically and institutionally determined disciplinary and cultural boundaries in order to gain multiple perspectives and to participate in the discourse on educational content. Under such circumstances, classrooms are transformed into liminal spaces, sites of contestation where the struggle to learn takes place as the politics of learning is challenged with the interpersonal, interdisciplinary, and intercultural perspectives that the students bring to the school (Garoian, 1999, p. 49).

To further Garoian's argument, it should be noted that it is the discursive exchange between those who occupy *any* given physical space that charges that space with liminality. In this sense, the "classroom" can be a walk in the park, in a school corridor, or in an inadequate basement alcove where an after-school class is taking place; the traffic of meaningful cargo across liminal borderlines and the transport of unexpected human possibilities is predicated on contention as authentic cultural work, not on having a schoolroom with tables and chairs. Such liminality allows for a trafficking of reflexive critique wherein various forms of cultural work may be made manifest that is independent of school buildings.

I define cultural work as embodied knowledge that frames personal identity and displays public persona as it is reconstituted through some form of public performance, even if mundane. By exploring the real patterns of cultural work, we are confronted with "the real nature of the choices we are making" (Williams, 1961/1965, p. 69). Everyday cultural workers are able to reconstitute knowledge content primarily because each liturgy, each retelling, each embellishing object or event juxtaposes with and subtly shifts the meanings of previous embodiments across the existential continuum. Human identity peregrinates, traveling to and fro, shifting from one protective berth to another, collecting shells like a hermit crab, finding roles to play that will allow it to further develop. Growth within this contentious identity construct necessitates a continuing realignment of life events and life possibilities as they are reinterpreted through dialogical exchanges, the mind uninhibited to freely associate and nucleate new narrative meaning.

Hence, the performance of any cultural work becomes a pedagogic praxis, a navigation technique back and forth across multiple liminalities, a method for transposing versions and revisions of personal identity from one social and temporal context to another. Cultural work creates movement. Cultural work signifies change. Cultural work is meaning-making, a contentious and argumentative exercise, albeit elementary enough to be instigated whether the cultural worker is old or young.

### **Agency, Visuality, and Critical Thinking**

Garoian (1999) argues that liminal zones of contention are a desirable state, each one resisting and challenging “normative instructional strategies founded on Cartesian-based subject-object binaries, the rationalism of the Enlightenment project, and the positivism of modern art and science,” and yet working together to reclaim body and self as a “political site,” and “the principle means by which spectators/students become critical thinkers and participate in society as critical citizens” (p. 43). Visual culture – including “the fine arts, tribal arts, advertising, popular film and video, folk art, television and other performance, housing and apparel design, computer game and toy design, and other forms of visual production and communication” (Freedman, 2003, p. 1) – is also a seedbed of contention and of politics, a metaliminal space, unstable, indeterminate, and prone to complexity and contradiction. Art educator Kerry Freedman (2003) contextualizes visual culture as “inherently interdisciplinary and increasingly multi-modal” (p. 2); Freedman also notes “[v]isual culture images and objects are continuously seen and instantaneously interpreted, forming new knowledge and new images of identity and environment” (p. 3). Although the technological reproduction of images is a component of the proliferation of visual culture in an “era in which visual images and the visualizing of things that are not necessarily visual has accelerated so dramatically [especially on the Internet] that the global circulation of images has become an end in itself” (Mirzoeff, 2002, p. 8), the saturation of visual culture reproduces more than just images; it also reproduces power.

Constituted of the flotsam and jetsam churning within the metaliminal space of visual culture are the amalgams that take harbor in the human psyche to be contested as critical ideas. These ideas are as available to youngsters as they are to their teachers when students are given the freedom to act with agency in the classroom. Agency is conceived here not as the “freedom to do whatever the subject wills but rather freedom to constitute oneself in an unexpected manner—to decode and recode one’s identity” (Stinson, 2004, p. 57). This freedom to decode and recode identity takes place in the context of visuality.

Visuality has alternatively been defined as “how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein” (Foster, 1988, p. ix), and as the subjective “quality or state of being visual” in an “everyday space [that] is increasingly dominated by visual images” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 370). Art historian and cultural theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (2002) theorizes a “visual culture [that] does not depend on pictures themselves but the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence” (p. 5). Visuality is implicated in the discourses in which identity is socially situated, discourses through which we may exercise the agency to shape and constitute our subjectivities. How does the young learner exercise agency if the reigning conception



of children does not afford opportunities for them to demonstrate their agency in schooling practices?

### **Constituting Agency Through Transactional Pedagogy**

In the second half of this article I would like to reference a particular form of agency that manipulates visibility. An awareness of and facility with the manipulation of the visual culture affords a cultural worker the agency to shape and reshape the aggregate symbols that constitute social significance and personal identity. Mirzoeff (2002) argues that visual culture is a new phenomenon largely “because of its focus on the visual [event] as a place where meanings are created and contested” (p. 6).

Contention should not be confused with conflict – contention does not inflict mortal wounds. Contention is a form of struggle, a striving to surmount through means that wield and argue differing points of view. Contention is not armed combat, but rather a means of avoiding that extremity. Acknowledging points of contention and agreeing to disagree is an important aspect of conflict resolution. Contention precedes healthy debate; debate culminates in new understandings. Therefore the freedom to generate contentious and uncontained ideas becomes a pedagogical method requiring only that the teachers in the room are willing to cede significant responsibility over learning outcomes to even the youngest of their charges and partners in pedagogy.

Brent Wilson (2005) describes three pedagogical sites, the first site being “the vast ‘territory’ containing many informal spaces outside of and beyond classrooms where kids...both construct their own visual cultural texts and consume the visual cultural texts made by others” (p. 18). This site of pedagogy involves to a great extent the parsing of contending media images and messages altogether representing “a multiplicity of purposes with much accompanying ambiguity of meaning and many resolved contradictions and tensions” (Duncum, 1989, p. 252). Wilson describes the second pedagogical site as “conventional art classrooms in schools (or museums and community art classrooms) where teachers direct student artmaking” (p. 18). Finally, Wilson’s “third pedagogical site” is described as “a site where adults and kids collaborate in making connections and interpreting webs of relationships...among the images that kids make for themselves and the images that adults ask them to make” (p. 18). Wilson (2005) makes the argument that in the third pedagogical site, students are equal partners and agents with teachers in making sense of ideas and their meanings across a plurality of thresholds of pedagogical interaction. This interaction across multiple pedagogical sites can have a profound governing influence on our thinking about how “children’s images...art and art education, narrative, [and] popular visual culture” relate to the world (Wilson, 2005, p. 18). Wilson thus outlines what he calls a “transactional pedagogy” that crosses the

boundaries between the three pedagogical sites as constituted in the lives of multiple agents, transactions consisting of “teachers’ values, students’ values, texts, images, interpretations, and conflicting interpretations” in a network of “*visual cultural texts*” wherein any “text that members of learning communities deem sufficiently important to either interpret or create is given status” (2005, p. 19, emphasis in original). In spite of this multiplicity, students are argued to be quite selective in their agency, choosing “from the abundance of stimuli afforded them in those subjects which, either because of their direct or indirect association, lend themselves to the examination of what is immediately relevant” (Feinburg, 1973, p. 38). I will turn now to more specific examples of students transacting in matters of immediate relevance in the elementary school art studio.

### **A Political Cartooning Project**

When the 4th grade-level teaching team at my former school all agreed on a third trimester theme of Social Justice one year, I became interested in viewing the opinions of my students both on matters we had been talking about in our classrooms and also on matters important to them which were invisible to me. Since we were still in the wake of the 2004 presidential election and the buzz of conversation about the candidates amongst the children and families at home and at school, I proposed the idea of having each student create his or her own political cartoon. I explained a political cartoon to be a commentary on current events that expresses an opinion and serves to persuade others by its appearance in the public conversation. I further explained that political cartoons are drawings representing current public figures or important social issues symbolically and often satirically, and that art was very much about the ideas my students thought were important. My conception of this political cartooning project depended a great deal on my conception of my job as a teacher—to open the pedagogical space for students to be as critical, as perspicacious, and opinionated as they choose to be.

As a precursor to their political cartooning exercise, I asked each 4th grader to name and pictorialize an injustice in the world today that he or she wanted to help make better. In doing so, I was asking each student to delve into the first pedagogical site and to draw out and unpack visual cultural texts already rooted in mind, apart from any intervention on how to best represent their thinking. I wanted to see what ideas students had already consumed from general media awareness and family discussions and how those ideas had catalyzed their critical awareness. Although many political cartoons were executed, I have chosen to focus on only two for no other reason than that they help to tell this research narrative. In Figure 2, a youngster named Ian represents his affection and concern for wild animals as their space is invaded. Those who wield weapons and hunt for sport also cause the home of these forest creatures to be engulfed in flames.

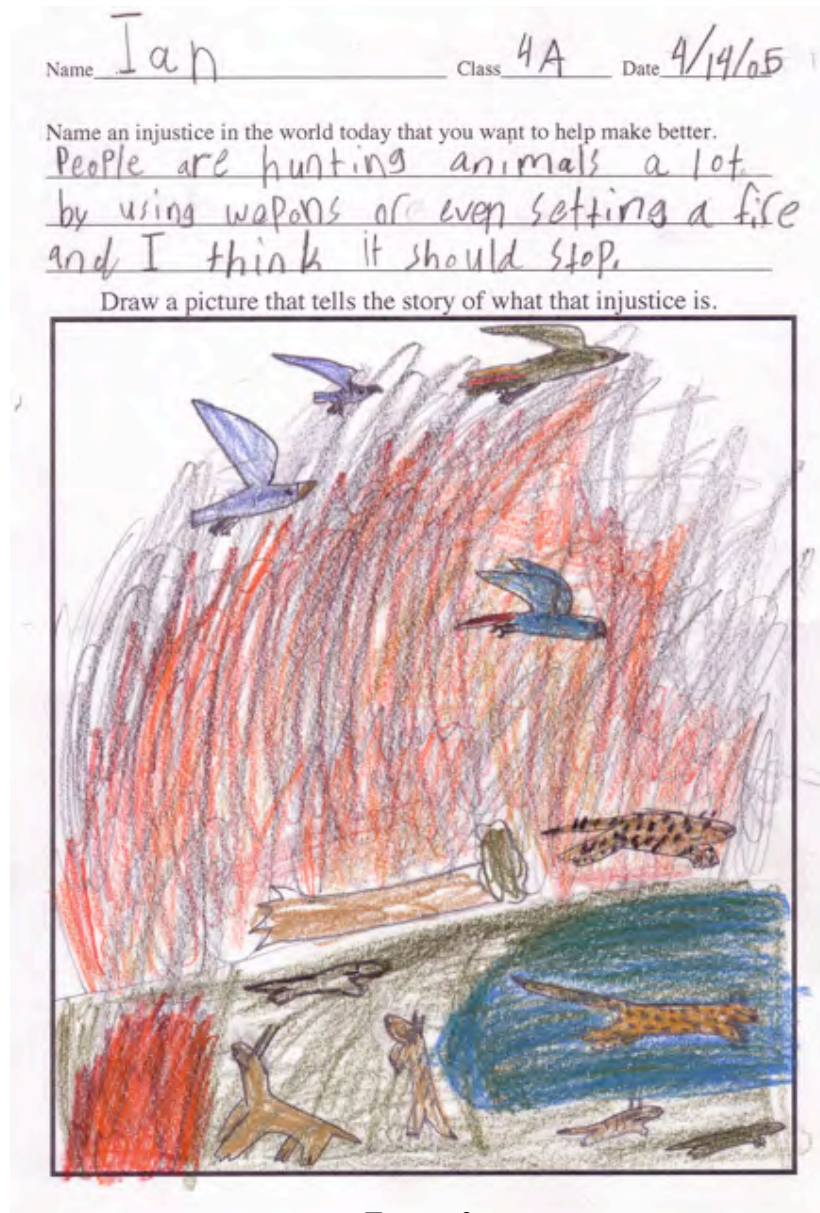


Figure 2.

In Figure 3, Ian expresses what needs to be done to establish a new order where, under the watchful eye of animals, men hose down the conflagration they have ignited. Hegemony is confronted. Ian's anatomically and proportionally correct renderings of these animals suggest his visual culture interests in observing nature, nature photography, nature media programming, and perhaps even the animation of creatures of the wild.



*Figure 3.*

In their agency to oversee and manage their own domains, the animals take on the power to resist the encroachments of hegemony. In the lower right-hand corner, as a wild spotted cat speeds to overtake what will likely be its next meal, one notes that in the midst of the more obvious focal points in any given spectacle, other important transactions are taking place. Ian sees life unfolding. Do I see what he sees? Do I value it as he does?

In Ian's foray into the first pedagogical site as situated within our 4th grade art class, I was not in a position to tell Ian what to draw, or what to draw upon. My curricular objective was to have students render political cartoons, using pen and ink, and to learn something about the historical relevance of political cartoons. And yet, in the midst of my curricular objectives, other important transactions are taking place. In this case, Ian's interests govern the first pedagogical site and I sought to learn from Ian what Ian alone could teach me. As a teacher, to conceive of Ian in a position of power over his own domain of ideas, a domain that does not require my cultivation to "ecologically" thrive, posits a student identity that transgresses modern norms and assumptions.

Pedagogical work across transactional spaces is manifested as the "co-construction of knowledge and identity opening up new possibilities...[which] can be viewed as contributing to the exercise of freedom, understood in a Foucauldian sense as being able

to think critically—to think [in] opposition, to promote ‘reflective indocility’—and by so doing to take more control of our lives, through questioning the way we view the world and increasing our ability to shape our own subjectivity” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Spence, 1999, p. 79). In the transaction between Ian and myself, the resulting co-construction emerges into the third pedagogical site in the space of the shared discourse generated by this article.

In the earliest of the pictorialized iterations of his social justice concerns which would ultimately culminate in Ian’s final political cartoon, one views a large spotted cat in a position of domain authority looking down from a tree branch and confronting a man holding a chainsaw with the words “What are you doing?” (Figure 4). Coincidentally, this drawing also characterizes the willingness of educators to undercut what students already know how to do and are familiar with in deference to the industry of public schooling. We recklessly clear-cut the old growth individual curricular trajectories emanating from student lives in favor of more predictable classroom curricular projects, denuding the learning landscape of opportunities for students to explore the agency to critically innovate apart from incessant, if well-intentioned, teacherly interventions.

In the next images, we view the position of the large cat validated by a diversity of animals, presenting a representative majority in opposition to the lone man with the chainsaw – while the cat’s cubs, arrayed with black belts, noisily practice their martial arts repertoire in the tree’s protective canopy (Figure 5); we view an impending war against the machines of hegemony, all the animals stolid in their preparation to defend their domain (Figure 6); and finally we view Ian’s finished cartoon, titled “Stay Away From The Tree” (Figure 7). The dialogue from one of the cubs in the tree changes from the posturing statement, “Don’t make me come down there!” in Figure 5, to the more confident “Can we get the man with the chainsaw?” in the final rendering. These iterations were made possible in the context of the second of Wilson’s (2005) pedagogical sites, the classroom, which benefits the students most as a place to refine the raw material they have already mined from the first pedagogical site.

Ian’s title, “Stay Away From The Tree” serves as a caution to educators who carry their own undercutting curricular equipment so dangerously near the first pedagogical site; the roots of Ian’s mental imagery stem from domains of personal experience which are likely far removed from the classroom’s formal boundaries. To protect these domains, students often keep them secret, scribbling only sparse indications of a forest of mental images and meanings in the margins of their notebooks and the covers of their binders. As Ian made each of these classroom renderings, I recall that I could audibly pick out his usually quiet voice in the murmur of the busy art studio, rehearsing to no one in particular the

resistance he had placed in the mouths of the characters he had created, and chuckling to himself in obvious enjoyment.



Figure 4.



Name Ian Class 4A Date 5/2/05

### Political Cartoons

Sketch a political cartoon that persuades others to see the value of your opinion about an injustice in the world or in your community.



Figure 5.

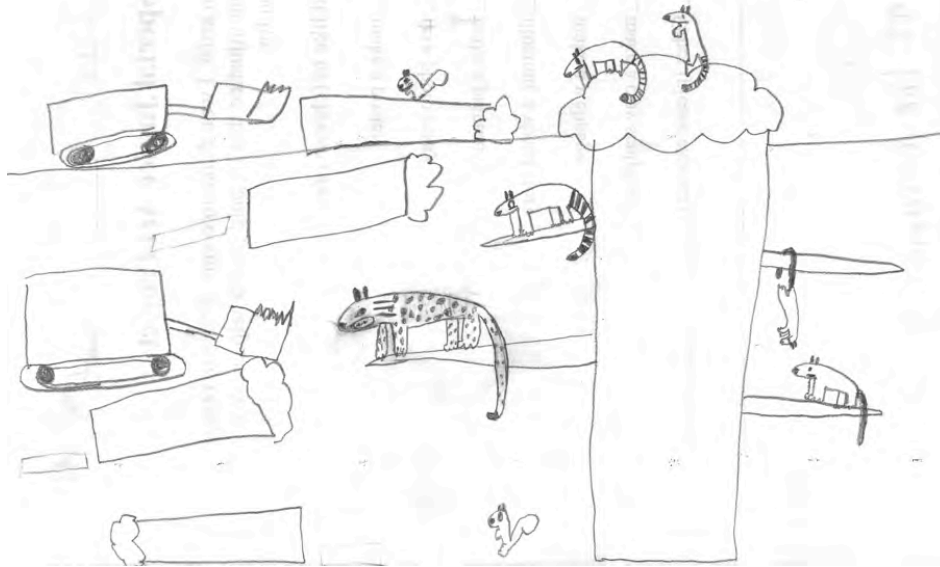


Figure 6.



Figure 7.



### The Reconstitution of Visual Culture

The fascinating thing about being a teacher among students who draw upon the resources of the first pedagogical site in a visual culture is the limited need for my input in their understandings. Yes, I do have an important role once those resources are ready to be processed and made valuable to the community in the contexts of the second pedagogical site. However, as is evident in Ian's thinking, children are *not* blank slates; they are packed with self-sustaining ideas, rooted in the fertile visuality of their own idiosyncratic personal and cultural experiences. At the time of this political cartooning project, the nation was steeped in the media imagery of the 2004 U.S. presidential elections and in the U.S. invasion of Iraq. A youngster named Akiko pictorializes her social justice concern for the civilians in Iraq in the following series of iterations.

We had discussed as a class the representation of certain aspects of our opinions in representative symbols. Akiko came back to me with an image of a predator assaulting its terrified prey (Figure 8). I responded with the suggestion that her cartoon would need to carry more information to convey the meaning of her representations with any precision. I asked her look again at some of the sample historical and contemporary political cartoons we had seen and to come back to me with an updated sketch—a refined iteration made possible by the investigatory dynamics of the second pedagogical site.

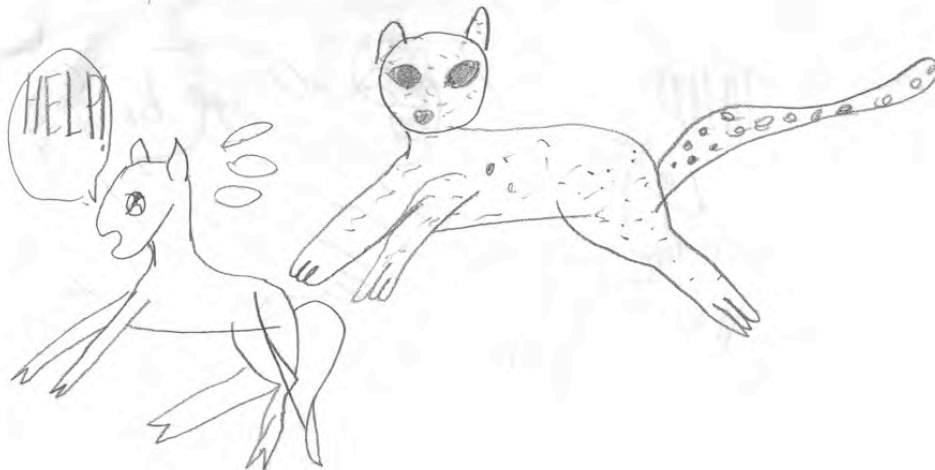


Figure 8.

In Akiko's second iteration, the predator becomes George W. Bush, and the prey is defined as the innocent people of Iraq (Figure 9). In Akiko's final cartoon, Bush evolves into the U.S. war machine, complete with a military helmet and a U.S. flag emerging

from its back (Figure 10). The prey becomes the entire nation of Iraq as it cries out, "Help! I'm getting attacked! Why do I have to die!? I didn't do anything!" Akiko titled her cartoon, "They Were No Longer Rescuing Iraq," a reference to one of the early justifications for the invasion, the rescue of the Iraqi civilians from Saddam Hussein's tyranny. The longer the U.S. occupied Iraq, the more civilians died unnecessarily, the more Akiko was left only with a sense of a social injustice being carried out.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

There are some who would argue that Akiko's opinion is naïve and ill-informed; after all, she was only in the 4th grade at the time. And yet, her opinion is shared by many who are far more educated, experienced, and who have long considered themselves to be adults. The larger point of Akiko's political cartoon is that she *has* an opinion, as well as the agency to reinterpret other opinions. Akiko's youth does not lessen the gravity of her opinion; in fact, Akiko's critical thought gives her, as it would any other contentious-minded 4th grader, the cultural capital to trade in discourses of social justice and transformation. Constituting sites for such transactions is the shared responsibility of both teachers *and* students.

### Inconclusive Texts

The pictorialized understandings of Ian and Akiko present us with “visual cultural texts” (Wilson, 2005, p. 19). Wilson (2005) elaborates on such texts as follows:

Any text that members of learning communities deem sufficiently important to either interpret or create is given status [within the space of a transactional pedagogy]. The differing interpretations and creations provide occasions for *discussion, debate, negotiation, and modification*; they are opportunities for the transactional multi-directional exchange of images, knowledge, assumptions, values, and meaning. In these transactional pedagogical contexts, I envision situations in which individuals, artworks, and visual cultural artifacts representing differing interests and conflicts of interest are honored equivalently so that they may present their own points of view, and interpret and criticize other points of view. (p. 19, emphasis in original)

To summarize an understanding of Wilson's (2005) three pedagogical sites, the first pedagogical site elicits contention by drawing upon the experience of informal learning even in formal learning contexts. The second pedagogical site elicits contention by creating portals for drawing raw and ideating thought material in the minds of the learner into rapprochement with schooling mechanisms for cultivating intellectual and cultural conformity. The third pedagogical site elicits contention by creating the space for indocile minds to co-construct curriculum and derive learning content that is deemed relevant to that student's particular frame of thinking in spite of conventional educational practices in an era when teachers and educational administrators are held almost solely accountable for the learning or lack thereof in schools. Together, these three pedagogical sites interact in the context of public education, constituting a transactional pedagogy that contends with the traditional conception of children dependent for the most part upon adult educational industry for their intellectual and cultural development. A transactional pedagogical framework requires that we understand that every agent in the classroom plays an independent role in one another's thinking and growth.

When Annie, Ian, and Akiko work to pictorialize their understandings, they develop a practice that works to figure themselves out in the midst of a surfeit of competing visuality. As a professional educator, I am only one of the teachers in the classroom. Annie, Ian, and Akiko are doing at least as much work as I am—it's just that their work is different. Their transactions are intended to be inconclusive; they fill in the blanks on their own identities as they enter a collaborative space with all those, young and old, who seek to generate questions, defy expectations, and contend with the many conventions in schooling practices. Annie, Ian, and Akiko introduce and reiterate new and mutinous visuality into their art classrooms, a visuality that is not dictated and coerced by their teachers, and which contests for significance within a visual culture. In conclusion, I propose that the regulatory power of schooling is most elegantly resisted by the individual ownership of ideas within the first pedagogical site and the transacting of those ideas within the third and publicly situated pedagogical site; the classroom, resting as a threshold between both of these pedagogical sites, may be considered a staging area where students refit personal intellectual property for use in the constitution of their social agency.

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