

The Queer Optimism of a Remuant Pedagogy

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Every fundamental trait which underlies everything that happens, which expresses itself in everything that happens, ought to lead an individual who felt it as his fundamental trait to welcome triumphantly every moment of general existence. The point would be precisely to experience this fundamental trait in oneself as good, as valuable, with pleasure. (Nietzsche 2003: 118)

One of many contemporary pessimisms is a pessimism about pleasure as well as optimism itself. The argument goes that pleasure is fleeting and only leads us to desire more at its end and is therefore ultimately a negative force. Happiness and wellbeing are more acceptable because they help us be sociable, productive, and reduce or eliminate depression. A number of academics, politicians and school leaders have lately been engaged in clumsily adapting Buddhist teachings to Western contexts under the rhetoric of “wellbeing” and “mindfulness.” Anthony Seldon's recent book *Beyond Happiness* decries pleasure as a “purely self-centred, egotistical and narcissistic state” (Seldon 2015: 16). For him

Happiness is a deeper and more rewarding condition. We are no longer isolated individuals but in a relationship with others, and with our deeper selves. It is not dependent upon consumption or personal acquisition. We act directly in order to

achieve pleasure but we experience happiness as a by product of living wisely. If we want to be happy, we thus have to live well, and we need to act morally. (Seldon 2015: 16)

Following this prescriptively moral definition he goes even further and argues that “Joy is deeper still, and is experienced when the profoundest part of us is in complete harmony with the rest of creation. To achieve this state we may need to negate ourselves, our egos, and become one with the whole” (Seldon 2015: 16). This quasi-religious and philosophically questionable ‘one-ness’ then becomes the product which is on sale to the individual in place of more obviously ‘pleasurable’ products. But as William Davies writes as part of his critique of what he calls the ‘happiness industry’, “Positive psychology, which repeats the mantra that happiness is a personal “choice”, is as a result largely unable to provide the exit from consumerism and egocentricity that its gurus sense many people are seeking” (Davies 2015, 17). Seldon's “selling” of joy thus turns it into another consumer item that is desired by the very consciousness it is seeking to vacate. This form of false enlightenment is based on many unnamed predicates, such as the harmony of existence, the self-presence of a subject, the unquestioned agency of a subject, and the capacity for an agential self-present subject to void itself and become aligned with the supposed harmony of existence. The conception or experience of existence as remuant (Bojesen 2015) - which is to say, fickle, changeable and restless – rejects the necessity of all these predicates, especially those of the self-present agential subject and the possibility of a harmonious relationship between the individual and what Seldon calls “creation.” It also rejects that existence is a “whole” and instead contests that existence is experienced only as incidences of occurrences, some of which endure long enough to be considered visitant (such as the idea of the subject or the planet called Earth). Seldon’s approach towards the possibility of harmony effaces the entire realm of identity

politics in favour of the individual will (which then - unconvincingly - effaces itself), seemingly unmitigated by contextual factors. This is an implicit affront to Queer Theory, which has long engaged in disrupting harmonious narratives of social relations, wherein that which does not fit the norm of the whole is considered unnatural and aberrant, to be rejected, converted or destroyed. Taking Queer Theory further, remnant philosophy removes the very foundation on which it is possible to make such judgments. In remnant philosophy, it is harmony and wholeness that is an (intellectual) aberration. The closest precursor to the use of the term queer optimism in this paper is that of Michael D. Snediker's *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*. Snediker is most interested in queer optimism as a form of 'meta-optimism', which 'doesn't aspire toward happiness, but instead finds happiness *interesting*' (Snediker 2009: 3). This paper attempts not only to find optimism interesting but also to localise a queer version of it within a practical form of pedagogy. As such, this paper's optimism is queer because, while extremely pessimistic about educational systems and structures, it is optimistic about the pleasure achievable in individual learning and teaching experiences. It argues that the optimism is in fact an essential component of a pedagogy which attempts to respond to and teach the lessons of existence. Thus, a remnant pedagogy is underpinned by the conviction that it is possible to affirm existential experience in a pleasurable way: *this* is its limited but significant queer optimism.

The popular reception of ideas such as Seldon's (and other purveyors of mindfulness, and happiness) reveals a form of social pedagogy operating between those who are seeking better ways to live and those who are offering them (as products). In contrast, the pedagogy this essay outlines is not about conveying how best to maintain a consistent state of happiness, nor is it about promoting a resignation to our conditions beyond either egoistic desire or altruism. It is a queer, optimistic, remnant pedagogy. It is queer because it does not

accept that individuals can be the “same” or in harmony with each other or the world and that this in itself is a cause for optimism rather than resignation. It is remuant because it rejects both an existential “wholeness” but also the very idea that something that is fleeting - such as pleasure – is of little or negative value. The argument presented is twofold: that there are certain existential conditions that affect life, even if they are not recognised *and* that these conditions do not preclude certain provisional positivistic pedagogies. These pedagogies are, however, precarious. Not in the sense that Judith Butler (Butler 2004: xviii) gives in her articulation of “precarious life” through her reading of the face in Levinas, as presenting that which is “human” and “injurable” but rather *precarious pedagogies as provisional practice*. Which is to say pedagogical practice within which risk and fate are always visitant. This provisional practice of precarious pedagogy is not simply open-minded experimentation or the search for *an* alternative pedagogy. Yes, it is always provisional but this provisionality is also located in pedagogy that does not recognise its provisionality. My argument is that *any* practice of *any* kind is provisional because it is conditioned by the remuant. That is to say, it is, as with all existence, changeable, restless and fickle. As such, a pedagogy that explicitly recognizes these conditions and behaves as if they were the case might offer a means of learning from and about existence that value-based and end-oriented pedagogies do not.

This does not mean that more socially and economically constrained pedagogical methods might not spill over into this existentially broader territory partly because, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in her essay on the ‘Pedagogy of Buddhism’, “learning might proceed in the absence of spontaneous recognition” (Sedgwick 2003: 169). This aspect of Sedgwick’s pedagogy of Buddhism (which has little or no correlation with Seldon’s mindfulness) has many lessons and consequences for the thinking of a queer pedagogy for a remuant existence and for what could then be called a remuant pedagogy or the pedagogy of

the remnant. Precarious pedagogy could then be able to reduce the often implied educational privilege of “spontaneous recognition.” This would mean imbuing provisional and precarious pedagogy with a certain *lack* of focus. However, this lack of focus would exist precisely to *enhance its clarity*. Such a practice would emphasise the passive aspects of experience, existence and learning, at the same time de-prioritising attention, intention and other ways of conceiving of “active learning.” There is an irony between the pedagogical practice here proposed and the historical examples of experiential or “progressive education” which are explicitly engaged with active and self-directed learning. The pedagogy I propose would absolutely not be child-centred. In fact, it would have no centre whatsoever. Of course, this emphasis on the passive aspect of learning does not attempt to hark back to classical (although often still utilised) modes of education where the student is a passive receptacle for the facts conveyed by the teacher. In the pedagogy I propose here, the teacher would also be conditioned by a certain passivity.

One of the things that is most appealing about the approach to pedagogy taken by Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling* is her unrepentant optimism and disposition of affirmation rather than negation or scepticism. It is important that the affects of “interest-excitement” and “enjoyment-joy” are privileged by Sedgwick (Sedgwick 2003: 21). Even though it is not as if they are the only affects of critical or pedagogical interest, there is also no reason not to give them particular attention. They are also somewhat concomitant with a certain form of Nietzschean affirmation that is inextricable from remnant existence. Sedgwick describes her project as an exploration of “promising tools and techniques for nondualistic thought and pedagogy” (Sedgwick 2003: 1). She writes of *Touching Feeling* that “The ideal I’m envisioning here is a mind receptive to thoughts, able to nurture and connect them, and susceptible to happiness at their entertainment” (Sedgwick 2003: 1). In her essay from this

book on “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” (subtitled, “you’re so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you”) she rejects a form of paranoid critical discourse which had and perhaps still has, taken hold of the arts and humanities. A form of discourse Nietzsche might call resentimental, or, in Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, reactive as opposed to passive nihilism: a discourse of unveiling how utterly terrible and claustrophobic the conditions of the world we are, usual specifying the condition of some form of total revolution or overhaul as the only solution. Ironically, critics who are too eager to posit an alternative to the current condition (however unachievable it might be) are less likely to provide intellectual sustenance to those existing in that condition. Remnant pedagogy attempts the opposite. While recognising the ills of our current condition it seeks spaces of optimism and affirmation. Its queer optimism is in its ability to see a more positive present by striking a compromise with the negatives that cannot (for the moment) be changed. While it is difficult to be optimistic about the future of our education systems, it is much less difficult to be optimistic about our daily teaching and learning practice. In fact, this daily optimism is, in Sedgwick's terms, reparative, not only of the present, but of the concept of pedagogy more generally. Sedgwick writes:

The monopolistic program of paranoid knowing systematically disallows any explicit recourse to reparative motives, no sooner to be articulated than subject to methodological uprooting. Reparative motives, once they become explicit, are inadmissible in paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure (“merely aesthetic”) and because they are frankly ameliorative (“merely reformist”). What makes pleasure and amelioration so “mere”? Only the exclusiveness of paranoia's faith in demystifying exposure: only its cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is

people's (that is, other people's) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn't have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions. (Sedgwick 2003: 144)

Paranoid and pessimistic pedagogy is definitely an option – and an option that is chosen by many. Seldon, for example, rejects pleasure as being narcissistic, self-centred and egotistical – with the weak ‘common sense’ assumption that all of these are negative characteristics – paranoid about the emphasis our culture places on it; pessimistic about its value. Not only is Seldon’s thinking pessimistic about pleasure, it is pessimistic about any form of self-assertion, retreating instead into an (albeit illogical) form of self-effacement. Seldon negates pleasure and negates individual life, preferring instead a relationship to the ‘whole’. The alternative to this negation of the self and its pleasures is an optimistic and affirmative pedagogy which in no way reduces an awareness of inequality and injustice but equally is not steered by its pessimism and paranoia. But where does this affirmation come from? And why should this reparative optimism take precedence over a paranoid pessimism?

In terms of remnant existence, affirmation can either be occursive – arising in a particular incidence, sometimes as if from nowhere, other times seemingly as choice – or it can be visitant, which is to say the existence of affirmation endures as part of the existential incidence defined by a singular individual: affirmation as a disposition of that individual. But this does not yet answer the question of “*why optimism?*” and it is certainly difficult to answer this question in terms of anything but a bland relativity. That is to say *why not optimism?* Optimism is not just the optimism of a “self” deciding to be positive about a certain situation or possible outcome, although this would not be precluded. Optimism, in the sense I am using it here is much more an affirmation of existence as existence, which is to

say, remuant, rather than whole or harmonious. Pessimism and the paranoid mode of thought that accompanies it sets the world at a remove and perceives it in terms of an untheorised or impossible *better world which is not possible or even posited*. Affirmation is not the Leibnizian affirmation of this world as the best of all possible worlds; it is the Nietzschean affirmation of existence as neither best nor worst but as – via Roland Barthes - neutral. This affirmation includes an affirmation of desire and will, not as primarily directive of how individuals experience and behave in existence but *as components of remuant existence*.

Existential affirmation is concomitant with optimism, pleasure and amelioration. To affirm is to say yes and to welcome existence rather than to negate and, at least intellectually, push it away. This is not to say that to accept and affirm suffering might then make it pleasurable or even acceptable – that said, we should take pleasure in fighting against suffering and inequality but perhaps only when we *actually* fight - but rather that incidences where pleasure and amelioration are possible are incidences that seem particularly predisposed to being affirmed. A pedagogy that is directed towards facilitating pleasure and amelioration rather than paranoia and pessimism would be more likely to be existentially affirmative. But why does this matter? And why should pedagogy be directed towards existential affirmation? I would argue it is because pedagogy is ultimately and can only ever be the teaching of existence and can never offer a *way out* of existence, even if it can change that which is. To change the world is also to affirm how it exists *as* remuant. Thus the trajectory of paranoid reading is at a certain level unpedagogical and unexistential because it perpetuates and engages only with implied utopic abstractions of the ‘good’, so as to be able to present the ‘bad’. The irony being that paranoid and pessimistic reading or pedagogy is actually far more utopian than reparative and optimistic reading or pedagogy. This is because paranoid critique usually works with the implication that a better world was or is possible,

while reparative critique works with the world as it exists. It is of course useful to utilise abstractions to point to that which is bad in the world but often paranoid reading is too selective in its evidence. It is not an affirmative reading of existence but rather the imposition of a narrative on existence. Existence is quite clearly not entirely pleasurable or even repairable but many affirmable incidences of existence are within that which is often painted with a negative narrative. Affirmation does not mean that everything bad can be made pleasurable or repaired but rather that one should not forget to attend to the pleasure that can exist within or despite what is superficially or polemically presented as bad.

In order to effect change, Sedgwick offers what she calls “alternatives to that habitual subordination of affect to drive” (Sedgwick 2003: 18). We go from “why does she do this” to “why does this happen to her” – to which I would add, my provisional preference: “what is happening.” And beyond that, “what changes by attending to this happening.” These are as much statements as questions. Occursive statements and questions that themselves become involved in the incidence of what happens. Or to posit a new provisional preference: the occursive becomes involved in and as incidence. I have privileged the concept of incidence to happening because happening is a word that is usually tied to the concept of “event” and as such is not suitable for a remnant philosophy, which eschews the imposition of the event and instead emphasises incidences of existence that overlap occursively. Some of those occurrences may present themselves *as if they were an event* but they are never in fact outside of incidence(s). This means that there is no such thing as an event contained within itself. Anything that occurs is only ever an event (which is always a “main event” in contrast to what occurs around it) because of a subjective designation (this could of course be a “mass” subjective designation). Incidence removes this subjective dimension by recognising that

what is considered “the event” might simply be the most recognisable occursive aspect of an incidence.

In *Touching Feeling* Sedgwick draws on a concept akin to incidence by showing how what she calls the periperformative clusters around the explicit performative event and exists on its peripheries. Meaning also that it may be on the periphery of several explicit performatives (Sedgwick 2003: 78-79). Ultimately this logic probably still privileges the “explicit performative”, at least more than how the concept of incidence privileges the concept of the event: to be clear, incidence does not privilege the event at all. But Sedgwick is already aware of this issue, writing that:

The explicit performative, as Derrida demonstrates, offers itself in the form of transparent self-referentiality and pure self-presence, while its force actually depends on a tacit citation of past and future and an occluded reference to a space beyond itself. The periperformative, by contrast, is openly allreferential before it is anything else. And I don't think we should assume that we understand in advance, as it were by analogy or by simple reversal, what can then be the effects of the sting of self-reference only half-concealed in its tail. (Sedgwick 2003: 75)

The periperformative is therefore only ever thought in terms of explicit performances, which is problematic in terms of remnant thinking's lack of privilege given to one incidence or occurrence over another. However, in a sense, the periperformative allows for this deprioritisation of the explicit performative or what could be called “the main event” in a different way. The periperformative is involved in the incidence of occurrences, within which there might be an occurrence that asserts (as in the occurrence of an explicit performative) or casually creates the conditions for something being perceived *as if* it were a main event. The

aspects of incidence which do not occur as if they were the main event are the ones that Sedgwick is interested in, in terms of the periperformative.

The way that Sedgwick approaches texture and affect is extremely helpful in understanding the logic of occurrence in terms of pedagogy. She writes:

If texture and affect, touching and feeling seem to belong together, then, it is not because they share a particular delicacy of scale, such as would necessarily call for “close reading” or “thick description.” What they have in common is that at whatever scale they are attended to, both are irreducibly phenomenological. To describe them primarily in terms of structure is always a qualitative misrepresentation. Attending to psychology and materiality at the level of affect and texture is also to enter a conceptual realm that is not shaped by lack nor by commonsensical dualities of subject versus object or means versus ends. (Sedgwick 2003: 21)

Affects and textures are themselves occursive and the malleability that Sedgwick affords to the scale of these occurrences is useful for thinking the occursive more generally. Occurrences occur: inside, outside, across, through and between could for simplicity's sake be called subjects or objects. But even the very idea of the subject and object is occursive – as are ideas or affects that put them into question. This malleability of scale, when discussing texture and affect, touching and feeling, or the occursive and the remnant, in terms of pedagogy, is important because it opens the field of pedagogy indefinitely and thereby emphasises its constitutive provisionality. I would also argue - in the same way that Sedgwick does for affect and texture – that reading or teaching existence through the occursive and the remnant avoids a conceptual realm limited by binaries and teleologies.

Sedgwick's optimism includes an invitation for something like a reparative disposition to become visitant in teaching and reading practice. This would mean looking out for or being responsive to what could superficially be called positive as well as negative occurrences, or as Sedgwick puts it:

Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (Sedgwick 2003: 146)

This last concept might be the most beguiling of *Touching Feeling*. That reparative reading and pedagogy could help us to realise that the past could have happened differently from the way it actually did, for better or worse, allows us to understand that existence is remnant and it always has been. Showing that where we have ended up could not have been predicted, helps to show how our future is also not somehow predetermined. Ironically this allows for the potential of a more common form of optimism towards educational systems: because existence is remnant, they may get better after all. Our attention to the past, in terms of history and education is structured around the main events and narratives that grow out of or highlight those events. Major narratives trump minor narratives and historical incidences which do not easily fit into a narrative find themselves forgotten, ignored, or considered insignificant. The major events are then no longer – if they ever were – read as incidences of existence which include a host of paths not taken. This means that what we read and teach

becomes reduced to the easily transmissible: the performative rather than the periperformative. Of course, academic historians re-read the past partly to find more convincing interpretations or narratives, and sometimes these narratives contradict and even make redundant those which have previously been dominant. Generally speaking the task of educators is somewhat the same but threefold: they must present interpretations of the past and the “useful facts” or skills it holds, alongside a reading of the present with all its problems and opportunities and a protentive reading of the future. Alongside these relationships to the past, present a future, there is an existential relation to the actual experience of education. Teaching has social duties which it is expected to fulfil - but can it not also fulfil the existential obligation of affirmation? Can it not promote pleasure – including but not limited to the pleasure of education? Can it not seek to make education pleasurable? Affirmation is often pleasurable; pleasure is usually affirmative. In a remuant existence that is characterised by change, these more positive affects and dispositions remain remarkably constant. This paper closes with the hope that it might be possible to be as confident in the in the queer optimism of a remuant pedagogy as Susan Howe is affirmative of the power of poetry. Poetry, which is itself hardly exempt from the risk of educating its readers and its writers. Perhaps remuant pedagogy might hope to exhibit some attributes Howe ascribes to poetry in the concluding section of her *My Emily Dickinson*

Poetry is the greatest stimulation of life. Poetry leads past possession of self to transfiguration beyond gender. Poetry is redemption from pessimism. Poetry is affirmation in negation, ammunition in the yellow eye of a gun that an allegorical pilgrim will shoot straight into the quiet of Night's frame. (Howe 1985: 138)

If the same were true of teaching it could be said that teaching is the greatest stimulation of life; teaching leads past possession of self to transfiguration beyond gender; teaching is

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redemption from pessimism; teaching is affirmation in negation. If even the past can be repaired (without being whitewashed) by a pedagogy that seeks and operates with pleasure, interest and enjoyment as its affirmative markers, then an undeniably queer optimism arises for this remnant pedagogy. A remnant pedagogy: where a lack of focus can lead to an increase in clarity and where an affirmed provisionality both acknowledges and engages in the conditions of a remnant existence.

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