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Scholarship and the Emperor's New Clothes

A CRITICAL REFLECTION

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James is currently a PHD student at a small university in Northern Ontario Canada, with an interest in popular education, critical pedagogy, and Marx, Freire, Hegel, and others associated with the fields of critical theory and popular education. This paper is representative of the struggles James faces with the academy, and the value he places upon the idea of praxis and the human element (humanization, Gattungswesen) that should be informing theory and scholarship. His current research addresses community education and the popular education lens that should be informing it.

Abstract:

The ways we do research and theorize are inseparable from the ways we do other things in our lives; for some, this means approaching research with a clear commitment to the complex personhoods confronting us, and in the listening, reflection, reparation, and intersubjectivity that this entails. This should mean approaching research and theorizing from an epistemology of “the king’s got no clothes on!” I am going to make use of the bare and vain king in Hans Christian Anderson’s famous tale, the metaphor of a kingly suit, the exposure that a declarative “Hey!” entails, and the impact it has on research and theorizing.

Key Words: Research, Theory, Scholarship, Academics, People, Epistemology, Hey!

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The *Emperor's New Clothes*, by Hans Christian Anderson – in broad strokes, as explained by Eve Tuck (2009, p.47-48): The story is about a kingdom consumed by status, a kingdom visited by a pair of loomers. Playing upon the king's vanity these loomers were commissioned to create a suit made of such a fine fabric that it could only be seen by those whom were worthy of seeing it. Demanding utmost secrecy to conduct their work, the loomers enjoyed the king's hospitality for several weeks. Periodically, the officers of the King's court visited the loomers; and although these officers saw nothing on the loom or on the worktables, they were afraid to reveal their unworthiness by admitting it. Such as it was they always returned to the king with reports of the cloths' magnificence. When the day of celebration for the king's new garment arrived, the loomers dressed the king. The king too was not spared feelings of unworthiness, for as he looked in the mirror at his own unclothed body, just before he was about to lead the procession in front of his entire kingdom, he thought: "No one must know that I, the king, am unworthy of seeing what everyone else is seeing." His conceit carried him into the awaiting throng. Everyone was uproarious, throwing confetti and cheering the genius of the design, for they too dared not admit that they saw nothing. During a moment of silence (when the king did a few leg lunges to demonstrate the flexibility and the movement of the fabric) a young voice in the throng yelled: "Hey! The king has no clothes on!" Truth revealed it self, and the king, completely naked, was left to deal with the consequences; and the crafty loomers, pockets filled with gold, made their way out of town (they were also spared the sight of the 'kingly' lunges).

About the story Tuck (2009, p.48) explains:

Throughout my life this story has become more meaningful, as I navigate the academy, as my country moved to war under threats of weapons of mass destruction, as I consider what I research and don't, what I say and keep silent [about].

Tuck (2009, p.47) writes that research necessitates making explicit theories of change that may have otherwise gone unseen or unexamined. It is in this light that she appreciates "the child who yelled: Hey! The king's got no clothes on! [and] also the loomers as the heroes of the story: the sly loomers [who] exposed the vanity of the town, [and the town's] obsession with the appearance of intelligence" (Tuck, 2009, p.47).

The ways we do research and theorizing, according to Tuck (2009, p.48), are inseparable from the ways we do other things in our lives; for some, this means approaching research with a clear commitment to the complex personhoods confronting us, and in the listening, reflection, reparation, and intersubjectivity that this entails. This means approaching research and theorizing from an epistemology of “the king’s got no clothes on!”

I too am going to make use of the bare and vain king, the metaphor of a kingly suit (I will try and not bring up the lunge again – because of the imagery that accompanies it), the exposure that a declarative “Hey!” entails, and the impact it has on research and theorizing. We need to be sure to remember the people involved in our research and theorizing; we need to share in Tuck’s epistemology of “the king’s got no clothes on!” in order to make apparent the risk of naturalizing the perspective that theory and research is an inherently sophisticated, moral, and nuanced perspective on the existing world.

I have been told that I should struggle and feel uncomfortable with meaningful research, challenged as I should be by differing academic lens/analysis, different theoretical foundations, and/or different methodologies and different contexts. I think this is very good advice; that is, provided I am struggling and feeling uncomfortable for the right reasons. These reasons, I believe, need to stem from perspective. I believe as researchers we need to assure that we remain the “young voice in the throng,” to whom the truth is apparent, and by whom truth is always exposed. This was a “Hey!” moment for me. Allow me to explain...

Consider if you will what a fine suit the academy and scholarship creates. Eli Thorkelson (2008, p.188) refers to it as an internalized cosmological category that organizes the daily lives of academics. Just in terms of our class, consider Peter McLaren’s (2009, p.63) description of emancipation as an attempt to reconcile and transcend the opposition between the technical and the practical. And on critical pedagogy, Antonio Darder, Marta P. Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres (2009, p.02) write: “[It] loosely evolved out

of a yearning to give some shape and coherence to the theoretical landscape of a radical principle.” Now ask yourself: What is missing from these descriptions?

Participatory Action Research (PAR), described by Michal Krumer-Nevo (2009, p.279) as a “democratic, participatory and action orientated research approach” takes on the connotation of “data generation” in the description provided by Sally Holland, Emma Renold, Nicola J. Ross and Alexandra Hillman (2010, p.360). And in a paper preparing education doctoral students for the various voices and perspectives they will encounter as researchers, Aaron Pallas (2001, p.06) writes of the “proliferation of epistemologies,” and poses the question of what counts as knowledge, what is proper evidential support of a claim, and what qualifies as evidence? His concern is with what members of the research community hold to be true about phenomena and subject matter.

Admittedly, the above represents the very important practice of finding mechanisms for fostering free and open conversation and collaboration among different parties interested in one’s research and theories (Lagemann, 1997, p.06). My worry, however, of looming such a fine academic fabric, one that can only be seen by those whom are worthy of seeing it, is the potential for reducing to objects the subjects we are speaking for, due – like the people in the story – to an obsession with appearing intelligent (so to speak); to quote the king: “no one must know that I... am unworthy of seeing what everyone else is seeing” (Tuck, 2009, p.48). Methods and procedures do not necessarily transmit values, nor nurture our capacity to see. The risk is that many subjects disappear into the discourses that supposedly threaten no one. It is the unwitting banishment of the anxieties and complexities of morality, embraced by those appreciating the genius of the design – and PhD students, like myself, are especially susceptible (Hedges, 2009, p.91). The truth is, “judged from the standpoint of making a contribution to human welfare, academic inquiry... [can be] damagingly irrational” (Maxwell, 2010, p.19).

And a voice in the throng yelled: “Hey! The king has no clothes on!” But in this instance, it was a colleague of mine’s online and personal communication that exposed the bare essence of it all:

I'm finding that as a "scholar", I am becoming full of myself and therefore full of \$#!T. I am conscious that when I get caught up in this academic "talk" I have to switch gears just to have an authentic conversation. I feel that components of this critical theory are deepening my engagement with my own decolonization but at the same time, I feel that I must strive to be conscious of being further colonized being a PhD student and what that entails. I see this in terms of living the paradox at the crossroads of unity and difference where the institutions that were created first to colonize the consciousness are a source of decolonization but at the same time I must struggle to remember who I am and why I am here so that I do not lose myself within its confinement. Maybe I'm going crazy, but as the Mad Hatter says, "All the best people are".

The Mad Hatter indeed. It was this declaration that pushed me to consider the human subject that lies under the fanciful fabric; who we are and what we research are beings every bit as flawed and visceral as the kingly lunges (I know, I promised not to bring up the lunges again), and never so 'fine' as the research and theory we don as academics. Perhaps the angst I am feeling explains my turn to popular education. My colleague also reminded me that we shouldn't take ourselves as seriously as many do... to paraphrase the colorful Oscar Wilde: While an education is an admirable thing, we are well to remember, at least from time to time, that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught. Yes, this is a paradox – as identified by my colleague's "Hey!" – but the plus side of the paradox is that it stems from our ability to see the absurdity of life, we feel emotions, and we are capable of recognizing them. And like Tuck, I appreciate the "Hey!" moment, but for me it is because it was revealing of not only the bare king but also the sly loomers and the fabric they ply. To paraphrase the above, as academics we need to be wary of becoming full of s#!t, we need to watch that we don't lose the ability of authentic conversation, and we need to remember why we are here. We need to avoid getting too caught up in the jargon and the fine fabric of the academy; for research methodology and theory, in the end, is about people.

In my search for sources to help me express my "Hey!" moment, I came upon Darren Lund and Maryam Nabavi (2008, p.27-28), who offer the very simplest of advice: we can best navigate the academy by looking deep within ourselves to find where the roots of our interests came from, and to realize that our experiences as people, however

insignificant they might have felt at the time, have been instrumental in shaping who we are as well as our research and the theories we adhere to. This un-erudition adds a personal and a self-reflective perspective to Tuck's (2009, p.48) insight of approaching research with a clear commitment to the complex personhoods confronting us, and in the listening, reflection, reparation, and intersubjectivity that it entails. It is a declarative "Hey! The king's got no clothes on!" from a voice in the throng, as a call to consider what research we do and don't do, and what we say and keep silent about. "Voice" is pivotal in research concerned with narratives, perspectives and subjectivities, and we need to assure that it is authentic and that it doesn't hide more than it reveals (Krumer-Nevo, 2009, p.279).

How does the declarative "Hey!" apply to theory? – We need to commit to the personhood that informs the ideas. In the case of Freire for instance, it means doing our damndest to understand what it really means to win back the right to say our own word (Freire, 1993, p.33), and not to just talk of it in the abstract because it is what everyone else is doing. Like the child in the throng, we need to see the person underneath the magnificent cloth, as unsightly and unsettling as that may be. And we need to be sure we do not lessen the theory by reducing it to the trivial. It is to genuinely appreciate the significance of statements like:

If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. (Freire, 1993, p.88)

I can imagine my colleague saying: "We need to keep it real!"

After my colleague's comments pushed me to consider the human subject that lies under the fanciful fabric, in the words of Tuck (2009, p.47): to explore what otherwise goes unseen, I hit the streets to do just that. I met a homeless man. He just wanted to tell someone his story, and let someone know that he is one of the unseen. He is an example of what I have been writing about. We cannot forget whom it is we are speaking for when doing academic research and reading theory. It is all too easy when cheering the

genius of the design to forget the people that are behind the fanciful terms; that is, it is all too easy to become full of \$#!T. Theorizing from an epistemology of “the king’s got no clothes on!” (Tuck, 2009, p.48) should not be embarrassing but rather an acknowledgement. As those doing the speaking, we need to be aware of more than the fabric.

I want to conclude with a passage from Henry Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945, p.167-168) – it seems fitting:

How to become conscious? It’s very dangerous, you know. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you will have two automobiles and own your own home with a pipe organ in it. It means that you will suffer still more – that’s the first thing to realize. But you won’t be dead, you won’t be indifferent, you won’t be insensitive, you won’t be alarmed and panicky, you won’t be jittery, you won’t throw rotten eggs because you don’t understand. You will want to understand everything, even the disagreeable things. You will want to accept more and more – even what seems hostile, evil, threatening.... And if I know what I’m talking about, you will listen more and talk less.

Good advice for the academic, or those aspiring to be such... be conscious – and don’t be indifferent, don’t be insensitive, accept that you will not always understand, and mostly listen more and talk less. It is reminiscent of the advice I once received that we should struggle and we should feel uncomfortable as researchers and as academics.

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