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### **Applied Benjamin: Educational Thought, Research and Pedagogy**

Our interest in this chapter is how Walter Benjamin might be of use in efforts to shift the imaginary of educational thought, research and pedagogy in the contemporary moment, what might be called “applied Benjamin” (Menninghaus, 1999, p. 200). Within poststructural work in education, Benjamin will be situated as a precursor to the post where he has much to say about a variety of topics: historical truth, interpretation as reading, translation as mourning, the crisis of representation, shifting the imaginary of the human sciences, and pedagogy.

After a brief introduction to Benjamin, the chapter will survey the ways he has been and might still and yet be put to use in educational thought. We will then unpack the central themes of such application in terms of how his work can be used to articulate a different sort of relationship between philosophy and educational research and pedagogy.

#### **Introduction: Benjamin as precursor to postmodernism**

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was born into a Jewish, upper-middle-class family in Berlin, which at the time was a major economic and cultural hub of Europe, and the young Benjamin watched the city develop into a modern metropolis. Berlin, and later Paris, would become the landscapes of much of Benjamin’s work, especially those that addressed the cityscape and urbanism. Such spatial considerations are present throughout Benjamin’s work, whether in his discussions of the *flâneur*, capitalist modernization of the cityscape; or the spatially grounded memoirs, diaries and other autobiographical essays. In his adult life he would become a peripatetic, struggling, literary and social critic of the early twentieth century. Never having substantial or stable income, he managed to sojourn rather extensively around Europe, but by 1940, he had been exiled from his native country, his brother killed in a Nazi concentration camp, the Gestapo had confiscated his Paris apartment which included his library and many manuscripts. After he and a group of refugees had failed to cross the Franco-Spanish border—from which point it was arranged that he would then go to Lisbon and board a ship for America—he supposedly committed suicide. During his life he had relationships with Gershom Scholem, Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht and other intellectuals of his time, and he would be partly subsumed by the Frankfurt School through his associations with Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Before his death he had written vast quantities of aesthetic, literary, social, historical and philosophical theory, much of it unpublished in his lifetime. Though only a few pieces of his oeuvre address education explicitly, pedagogical concerns are implicit in much of Benjamin’s work, particularly his theorization of historical materialism, or what Buck-Morss calls a “materialist pedagogy” (Buck-Morss, 1999). While there are no doubt some modernist qualities in Benjamin, his work has been heralded as being prescient of postmodernism,

and in the last few decades Benjamin has experienced a expanding popularity. His criticism has been translated into various languages and appears in numerous academic fields including literature, history, cultural studies, communications, and in education.

Given the magnitude of his writings, there are numerous considerations relevant to educators, some of which will be addressed below. Depending on when he was writing, Benjamin's themes include considerations of language, production and translation; interpretation, allegory and storytelling; image, representations and the "aura"; memory, remembrance and narrative; urban modernization and commodification; historical knowledge (truth) and discontinuity; praxis and progress (historical); and "dialectical images." Many of his ideas situate him as a precursor to the postmodern where, depending on who one is reading, postmodernism refers to a historical moment, a theoretical framework, an epistemology, a sensibility and/or a certain set of concerns. As a pioneer figure in cultural studies, Benjamin was prescient<sup>1</sup> in many ways, four of which have particular resonances for education.

Perhaps primary is his critical embrace of the emergence and development of new technologies, particularly what might be termed "a new kind of engagement and a new democracy of the popular" (Peim, in press, p. 11). Rather than fearing the changes wrought by new developments in his time of film, radio, photographic techniques and other means of mechanical reproduction as applied to a range of cultural products from art to advertisements, he was most interested in what such shifts meant for new forms of consumption and their effect on human perception, self-conception and social relations. One cultural critic has even deemed him "father of the internet" (Desideri, 2005, p. 109) for his theorizing of both the possibility of expanded human potential and the vulnerability to manipulation posed by technological shifts. In his analysis, popular pleasures are taken seriously and the political, cultural and psychological are brought together to understand the role of shifting culture in the construction of political subjectivity. Like James Gee's recent work on video games (2005), Benjamin held that there was no opposition between entertainment and the education of apperception, between intoxication and education. What Benjamin termed "the hard schooling of . . . new form" (1978, p. 62 NOT), his kind of analysis that focuses on the possibilities as well as limits of technology, culture and practice seems particularly fruitful for rethinking learning and curriculum as well as the very idea of the political.

Equally fruitful is Benjamin's theory of history as more about ruins and fragments than progress, triumph, monuments and mastery. The "perfectability" thesis so characteristic of modernism, the sense of accumulating knowledge toward greater human freedom has run up against stuck places and standstills that interrupt tidy linearity in such areas as urban schooling reform.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin's shifting imaginary of thinking in response to

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<sup>1</sup> For Benjamin as a prescient figure in relation to post-structuralism, see Eagleton, 1981, Jay, 1994, McRobbie, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Just ask Bill Gates who has spent 100 million dollars for small-school plans toward the reform of urban secondary schooling and still finds "[e]ducation is this mysterious thing" that he is trying to "grok" (Levy, 2006). An April 30, 2007 editorial in the Columbus

changed historical circumstances endorses a hybrid of the theological, philosophical and political against the “triumphalist philosophizing” of Hegel (Hodge, 2005, p. 21) or the cultural pessimism of much of the Frankfurt School. Lather (2007) calls this “getting lost” versus “getting smart;” St. Pierre and Pillow (2003) call this “working the ruins.” Such contemporary uses of Benjamin focus much on the “loss of aura” as a good thing, on the loss of ideals as making space for something else to happen, something stuck to get unstuck, as we give up on mastery and move toward an engagement with what the playwright Tony Kushner, who has made much of Benjamin, terms “non-stupid optimism” (quoted in de Vries, 1992).

A third area of Benjamin’s work that has particular resonance for educators is his insight into the complexities of communication in an information-saturated society, what might be termed a “profane illumination” of the intrusion of representation into everyday life. Such insight includes the development of a materialist philosophical frame that insisted on the constructed or mediated nature of experience and the importance of the image. This has come to be known as “the crisis of representation” and Benjamin was early to see how the romance of experience was a limit situation. Deeply aware of the politics of culture, he developed a critique of authenticity that focuses on the violence of empathy and the non-innocence of a focus on caring and voice, constructs at the center of much rethinking of teacher education. Perhaps teacher education can be rethought as more about the art of translation, translation as an “existential experience” between “generations of knowledge contained in texts, events and experiences” (Dobson, 2002). Here foundational approaches, graspable referents and searches for origins are much troubled. Meanings shift, contexts change, reception/consumption patterns refuse to be fixed, objects talk back and refuse their containment. This is to teach in such a way as to not deny the flow of time and history while still respecting the text, including its untranslatable elements and the emotions such as anxiety and resentment that have to be worked through in the social relations of teaching if engagement is to flourish. Such a view of teaching might help both teachers and students negotiate competing knowledges, helping both become aware of the necessity of selection, exclusion, and interpretation versus either objectivism or subjectivism. To live in the ambivalence of uncertain and competing knowledges, to understand multiple meanings of our experiences as something other than “anything goes:” this would be an expansion and enrichment of knowledge as situated, partial and perspectival where we might finally get over the loss of objectivity.

A fourth aspect of Benjamin’s work is his modeling of engaged intellectual work. As a nomadic historical figure, he as well was wandering in his theoretical mix of “Marxist messianism” where needed incompatibilities are brought together to see “against the grain.” McRobbie (1994) calls this “a model for the practice of being a cultural intellectual” (p. 99). On the edge of intellectual life, everything he wrote was “shot through with difficulty and urgency” (Ibid.) and well outside the usual constraints and practices of the academy that refused him. His ability to read out the emergent, multiple

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Dispatch says Gates is “unhappy” with the results of such efforts and, hence, moving to a more political advocacy model via a 60 million dollar campaign, The Strong American Schools project, to raise public awareness of the need for educational reform.

and unstable meanings of culture in its objects and patterns of consumption and reception was not for the sake of the new but for social change and transformation.

What are the implications of such thinking for the field of education?

### **Bringing Benjamin to Educational Thought**

While Benjamin has made an appearance here and there in educational writing, it is often to merely use the figure of the flaneur (e.g., Hammer and McLaren, xxx) or the angel of history (xxx). Deborah Britzman (2003) borrows from Benjamin's cultural criticism, particularly regarding photographic techniques, to analyze the narratives of student teachers in *Practice Makes Practice*. More substantive engagement is rare. A few examples include Nick Peim (2001 and in press) who probes the work of art essay for its educational implications, and Stephen Dobson who has a book on the "urban pedagogy" of Benjamin. This book is designed as an introductory text that includes "a critical dictionary of fragments" and applications of Benjamin's thought to varied socio-educational issues toward "a pedagogy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (p. 4). Erica Burman (19xx) has written about Benjamin's radio programs for children. Angela McRobbie (1994) writes of the place of Benjamin in cultural studies, his displacement of Althusser who displaced Marx, with his ability to read new cultural spaces created by mass culture and new technologies. Focusing particularly on the Arcades Project, McRobbie traces the rise and fall and rise again of interest in Benjamin outside of Germany where interest remains steady. Yasuo Imai (2003) compares the thinking of John Dewey and Walter Benjamin in the context of an anti-dualistic concept of experience and media in relation to aesthetics and social philosophy. Arguing that Benjamin illuminates Dewey's blind spots, Imai unpacks Benjamin's interest in the "ordering of the relationship between generations" (p. 117). Kevin Davison (2006) and Maggie MacLure (2006) will be dealt with later in their work on how Benjamin can be used in the realm of qualitative research.

What might a close look at Benjamin's rethinking of history and historiography open up in such areas as truth, narrative and reading?

Even in some of his earliest pieces (see 2000a), Benjamin was an ardent critic of historical progress, and one of the more identifiable claims of Benjamin's theory of historical materialism is that history has been the tale of the victor suppressing the alternative histories of the vanquished. Much of his critique was levied at a universal notion of history that views human progress as an inevitable course of human development, especially one that followed a linear continuum of history. However, it is important to note that Benjamin is attacking a certain notion of historicism and universal history, particularly the attempt to reveal the past "as it really was" (Ranke) or a history that holds a dogmatic attachment to accuracy. As a counter to the popular forms of the historicism of time he offers historical materialism, which is most explicitly described in his later works (2002a; 2003a; 2003b; 1999a). He (2003b) targets his criticism at three aspects of historicism and the first of these is a universal idea of history which he compares to "a kind of Esperanto" (p. 404), a notion of an internationally constructed language that reduced linguistic principles to basic universals. But such a language still

possessed Eurocentric roots and syntax, and, much like notions of a universal history, it universalized and privileged particulars as though they were the transcendent experiences of all of humanity. The second position he is criticizing is the tendency to present history as an epic narrative, what he refers to in another essay as “the whore called ‘Once upon a time’ in historicism’s bordello” (2003a, p. 396). This is not the “Epic Theater” of Brecht, but refers to historians’ tendencies to employ the narrative form to history, to create linear causalities and “historical continuity,” and to otherwise present history as epic adventures of the famous and celebrated. The “third bastion of historicism is the strongest and the most difficult to overrun, which presents itself as ‘empathy with the victor’” (2003b, p. 406). This empathy for the victors—the winners of history—occurs in various forms, not the least of which is their being the writers and producers of historical texts. In response the historical materialist cannot address this lineage—indeed, culture itself—without a certain attitude of “horror,” recognizing the “barbarism” of such texts and events (2002b, p. 267; see also 2003b, pp. 406-407; 2003a, pp. 391-392).

However, for Benjamin, remembering and retelling the tales of those victims is not only to save them from being forgotten, but he also attempts to safeguard against how such alternative histories, if recognized at all, can too easily become the tools of the oppressor. As such, alternative histories can become considered merely unfortunate events in a progressively unfolding history, whether progressing toward a more perfect democratic humanism, the proletariat revolution, or even the messianic redemption he sometimes described. None of which, in his view, seemed inevitable, and perhaps later in his life, they may have all seemed utterly unlikely. This messianic redemption is a subject of much debate among Benjamin scholars, particularly whether or not it was a successful or conscious attempt to combine theology with Marxism (see Buck-Morss 1989/1999, pp. 242-248; Tiedemann, 1984 and 1999). Regardless, allegorically the messianic reference of an apocalypse or “Judgment Day” is not an apocalypse as it is often used today, as the end of the world (though it *is* a day of destruction), but in this case, apocalypse refers mostly to revelation—as in revealing—or a day of reckoning, answerability, or in the language of education, accountability. Benjamin describes this in the image of the famous Angel of History inspired by a painting by Paul Klee called *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin describes the angel of history who has been caught up in the storm of progress, helpless against the continual catastrophe that is history. “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. . . [but the] storm drives him irresistibly into the future” (2003a, p. 392). This messianic allegory has a few implications. One of which is a claim the past has on the present, which is not only a call for historical understanding and remembrance, but this claim, if recognized possesses a “destructive character,” and if wielded properly, is capable of “exploding” the historical continuity. Such “critical momentum,” was indeed one of knowledge, the “destructive” knowledge that would “blast” or “explode” the continuum of history. If such potential is left untapped (as it almost always is) this is the moment of “catastrophe” which is “to have missed the opportunity” (1999a, p. 474) for “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed [suppressed] past” (2003a, p. 396; see also translators note no. 27 page 400). As such, the remembrance of the events and stories of the oppressed can be seen as a form of testimony, or witnessing, in a way that ruptures the continuity to the point that the historical object *cannot* fit or be “reinserted” into traditional conceptions of universal

history and progress, or potentially leaves only ruins. As such, “historical materialism sees the work of the past as still uncompleted” (2002a, p. 267).

As an extended exemplar, Lather (2000) has used Benjamin to understand the Rigoberta Menchu controversy where “testimonio” was much troubled in terms of issues of the “truth” of native history and its resistance value.<sup>3</sup> As can be learned from that example, there are many slippages between “a people” and their assumed representative, the non-unitary speaking subject, the relationship between knower and known, and an assumed audience. Such slippages make room for Benjamin’s insight into how “truth seems to stand in the way of truth, or more exactly, truth and its transmission get in each other’s way” (Hartman, 1999, p. 347). Here complications and ambivalences become the very ground upon which we might learn to read against ourselves, to read for difference rather than the same. What kind of historical truth are we talking about here? How might the undecidability of reading Menchu precisely be the lesson?

As Lather notes, it is too easy to see such efforts as a recovery of lives lost or a knowing renunciation as we come to terms with language. Benjamin troubles either response, knowing as he did that history comes onto the scene as writing, a scene of the ruins of things/objects that become history when we write about them. His interest was in how that which escapes knowledge, the authority of the object, can be gestured toward by looking at the detour of performance. Benjamin referred to this as the “mortification” of the object (1977, p. 182) by a criticism that “saves” the object only at the price of its being taken apart via “the dissecting activity of knowledge” (Hanssen, 1998, p. 71). Benjamin’s interest was, rather, in a transformation of historical content into philosophical truth content that shows in the original a mobility, an instability that opens it to variant translations and interpretations. There is no naked and manifest real. Torn between becoming and vanishing, restoration and incompleteness, the factual is consumed by language that is “no tool to catch hold of its referent” (Jacobs, 1999, p. 11). But something remains: interested in rescuing the world of things from our efforts to know it, Benjamin’s turn is to pay attention to the way stories are told, to the presentation of the object that is a performative registration of how history courses through us in the scene of writing. This is Benjamin’s lesson about the truths to be found in history.

Benjamin can be used to demonstrate how to present something as the real thing is not the same as to produce it. “What one thinks one sees, as though through a glass clearly” (Jacobs, 1999, p. 33) is always already distorted: by language; informant desire to persuade, protect and preserve; translation; psychic stress and torment; anthropological framing and mediation; our own reading practices. What somehow must be said, in the Menchu case, for example, about indigenous rights and values, survival strategies, revolutionary hope and change from the pose of autobiography brings memory to bear in the space of a life. Benjamin theorizes “the mysterious work of remembrance” (1978, p.

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<sup>3</sup> I Rigoberta Menchu is an ethnographic life story compiled by Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray and produced in Paris in twelve days of what Menchu calls “recording my testimony” (Menchu, 1998, p. 113).

16) as less a repository for what has happened than a production of it: language, writing, space, a spectacle of replication in an excess of intention. Remembrance is not about taking hold but a medium of experience, a theatre for gathering information. Here Benjamin's lesson is to celebrate the gathering itself and even the failure to find (Jacobs, 1999, p. 11).

In short, for Benjamin, truth is what it does via presentation, performance, production. We gesture toward restoration but in our doing perform the discrepancy between language and experience and how elusive our knowledge of it might be. His lesson is to see truth as that which escapes knowledge and is graspable only through the detour of its performance. This includes the performance of a reading that produces an interpretation via translation, a readerly engagement Benjamin hopes will be not comfortable but, rather, "violently moved" (Jacobs, 1999, p. 3) by the very foreignness of the truth effect of what is read. Benjamin's portrayal of history as a betrayal of "what is in history deprived of words" (Felman, 1999, p. 211) becomes the curriculum. Here the text becomes a kind of test for readers in terms of issues of interpretation where no matter how much we think we are reading voice, we are reading a text. Acts of transcription have taken place. Editorial decisions have been made. The text is never free of the contamination of language. Given this, what is knowledge and how has it been commodified, canonized, even auraticized, to twist Benjamin's (1968) term for the "authority of the object," both its (lost) authenticity in an era of mass reproduction and our investment of it with an ability to return the gaze, to unsettle us with otherness?

Traditional reading practices assume an immediacy of events recounted as real, spoken faithfully, an authentic narrative told by a reliable witness who summons truth in order to set straight the historical record. Cast in a mimetic frame, assuming a seamless text instead of a highly mediated genre, such a reading occludes "that narrative accounts cannot help but falsify life itself" (Freeman, 1998, p. 27),

Benjamin's lesson here is to insist on ruins.<sup>4</sup> If Foucault is right that "nothing is innocent," what can now happen? How do we keep telling stories, knowing what Benjamin (1968) knew in "The Storyteller," that truth can no longer be narrated because "no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation," that any translation contaminates the text with meaning (p. 89)? How do we translate "without ignoring that translation shows the original to be dead, that it in fact kills the original?" (Moeiras, 1996, p. 223)

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin posits the ruin as the historically charged structure and detail of an object that allows the cultural critic "to make historical content. . . into a philosophical truth" (1977, p. 182). In the wake of the demise of transcendent meaning, working with the fragments, which is all we ever have, we can read the ruin "either as a subversion of the unifying grasp of systematic philosophy or as a remnant waiting to be redeemed" (Hanssen, 1998, p. 83) For a reading of Benjamin and ruins in the context of contemporary theory, particularly the exhaustions of ideology critique, see Dirks, 1998.

In his engagement with Benjamin, Derrida (1985) speaks of the problematic of translation as a passage into philosophy given its focus on the (im)possibilities of direct, unmediated access to a transparent reality. To so speak of translation is to move well beyond interlingual or transmission issues into a set of questions regarding representation, adequacy, truth, language, reality, knowledge and the privileging of voice and speech over writing. What, for example, is “adequate” representation if a pre-given real “reflected” by a transparent, unequivocal translation is precisely what is at issue? As Niranjana (1992) notes, tracing the critique of representation, truth and presence from Benjamin’s early focus on translation to his later interest in historiography, “the problematics of translation and the writing of history are inextricably bound together” (p. 42). Hence the translator/historian/ethnographer face the same issues of desire for transparent knowledge that provides immediacy of access to “the other” via the classical concept of the mimetic relationship between “reality” and “knowledge.”

Chow (1993) reads Benjamin as warranting “the essential untranslatability from the subaltern discourse to imperialist discourse” that must be recognized if alternatives are to be conceivable (p 35). Far too quickly, she argues, western intellectuals turn themselves into witnesses where they become visible, “neutralizing the untranslatability of the native’s experience and the history of that untranslatability” (pp. 37-38). Drawing on Benjamin to note the violence of modernist collecting, Chow writes that “whenever the oppressed, the native, the subaltern, and so forth are used to represent the point of ‘authenticity’ for our critical discourse, they become at the same time the place of myth-making and an escape from the impure nature of political realities” (p. 44).

Such readings of the impossibility of translation in Benjamin speak of it as an interpellating, containing, appropriating move, based in colonial efforts to better control, “the drive to study, to codify, and to ‘know’” (Niranjana, 1992, p. 35). From such a position, this is the scandal of translation: “tell us what you are really like. Dance for us once more and sing your songs” (Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe, quoted in Ingram, 1999, p. 82). This is commodification, turning to otherness to redeem oneself in the production of “a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self” (Spivak, 1986, p. 272). Zora Neale Hurston responds: “‘The theory behind our tactics: The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right. I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song’” (quoted in Sommer, 1994, p. 531).

This use of Benjamin is often accompanied by Lyotard’s *differend*, “the inaccessibility of, or untranslatability from, one mode of discourse in a dispute to another’ (Spivak, 1988, p. 300). It occludes, however, that the very translation of Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” is contested for whether it is saying that translation is possible or impossible (Niranjana, 1992). Niranjana argues that, for Benjamin, the task is to use the critique of representation as a strategy for a practice of translation that reveals the original’s instability and the difference made by translatability. This is about how to grasp and possess, “know” and understand both that which has already happened and our impotence in “knowing” it through mimetic recuperation.



According to Benjamin, the mimetic faculty has not died but been transformed and a certain loss must be taken account of from the beginning (Jacobs, 1999, p. 96). The “faithful reproduction” and “fidelity to the word” that characterize traditional concepts of translation “seem to be no longer serviceable to a theory that looks for other things in a translation than reproduction of meaning” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 78). For Benjamin, the “task of the translator” is to convey the “something that cannot be communicated. . . to release in his own language. . . the element that does not lend itself to translation. . .” (pp. 75-80).

What would it mean to think of translation as a knowing disruption, dissemination rather than containment? This entails what Barnstone (1993) calls “a duty to betray” (p. 259) in that faithful reproduction is false and the task is to be loyal to the spirit of the original, not the letter. Translation becomes neither mirror nor mimetic copy but, rather, another creation that addresses that which is untranslatable in the original. Remembering, interpreting and becoming, translation is not about likeness so much as “a transformation and a renewal of something living” that “catches fire” and changes both the original and the language of the translator (Benjamin, 1968, p. 72). Within/against assumptions of “letting the voices speak,” translators/historians/ethnographers forge a reciprocal relationship with the original, aware of translation as “violent and forced, and foreign” (Derrida, quoted in Niranjana, 1992, p. 160), supplement rather than mimesis, both inadequate and necessary.

As Britzman (2000) notes in her work on the diary of Anne Frank, “if the story cannot end,” it is due to how efforts to represent bring something more to the story in order to use such texts as “possessing the capacity to comment upon something difficult in our own contemporary efforts” to know (p. 6). The key is to use the “breakdown of meaning and the illusiveness of signification” (p. 5) to foster our capacity to notice the vantage of the other and the obligation of our own implication. If one uses this to look at the claim of a text on us, the very translatability of its specific significances has much to do with “living on” under the assaults of history. In the case of Menchu, for example, in terms of issues of voice and authenticity, as a subaltern that unsettles us with otherness, her voice registers what in history is deprived of words. Given the difficulties of speaking out of difference, misrecognizing such voice as transparent fails to see that meaning is elsewhere, beyond translation. All that betrays Menchu in her telling becomes part of the learning we might have from suffering and injustice. But, as Britzman (2000) notes, it is representation that lets the story continue if we can meet the demands that such “difficult knowledge” makes on us.

Benjamin’s portrayal of history as a betrayal of the vanquished, his view of truth as graspable only through performance and production, his insistence on the discrepancy between language and experience: such views provide rich ground for theorizing a post-foundational methodology that educational inquiry might use to contest the instrumentalism so evident in “evidence based” practices.

### **Bringing Benjamin to Educational Research**

Our particular interest in this section is how Benjamin as “difficult knowledge” (Pitt and Britzman, 2003) might help us in rethinking educational research. The nature of research, its subjects, objects and modes of knowing and doing, including representing, open up vast questions of the relationship of empirical work and philosophy. This relationship has been askew since August Comte, after Saint Simone, shaped the transition from philosophy to social science by limiting research to matters that could be directly tested. Associating inquiry with quantitative analysis of “objective” conditions and “essential” natures, Comtean positivism separated the social sciences from philosophy in aligning with the “natural” sciences.

To the contrary, Benjamin sees a plethora of necessary distortions of inquiry: language, informant desire to persuade, protect, and preserve; translation; psychic stress and torment; disciplinary framing and mediation; our own reading practices; the mystery of remembrance. Maggie MacLure (2006) has titled her exploration of such Benjaminian “uncertain thoughts” for qualitative research in education “the bone in the throat” of a “baroque method.” Such a “productively irritating” post-foundational method resists clarity, mastery and a single point of view and endorses uncertainty, movement and tension in the analysis and representation of data. Kevin Davison (2006) probes the uses of Benjamin’s dialectical imagery for the analysis of qualitative data through processes of fragmentation and purposeful manipulation toward representation of complexities. Hoping to effect a “transition from one mode of thought to another” (p. 136), Davison articulated this methodological strategy out of a study of practices of gender and bodies that used an online questionnaire and assembled data and reflections in a poem form. This allowed him to embrace the contradictions in the data and also resist a one-best interpretation in what he refers to as a “systematically tentative” direction that is an asset in gesturing toward the complexities of the postmodern world (p. 145).

Lather (2007) asks how such a complicated and complicating view of knowledge might be put to work toward an evocation of “ethnography-philosophy” that explores how a post-epistemological scientificity can be used to contest the displacement of philosophy by social theory in terms of the legitimacy of an engaged social science. How might refusing to concede science to scientism approach the larger project of rethinking the relation between empiricism and philosophy that posits an engagement with not knowing as an ethical and political move? This is a negotiation that structures the empirically graspable as not not philosophy by functioning as a careful displacement of a philosophy of presence. The goal of such a project is a double(d) science that works the necessary tensions that structure contemporary social science as fertile ground for the production of new practices.

Benjamin’s focus on how performance becomes a detour that questions historical truth, interpretation, and translation foregrounds the undecidability of how to read across differences as not about the reality of reference but the need to reinvent language as part of political struggle. Perhaps in these times of the political economy of the sign, the (un)reliable narrator gives us what we need instead of what we think we want: not truth delivered to us in a familiar framework, but the truth of the play of frames and the

dynamics of presences, absences and traces as all we have in the unrepresentability of history. What might this mean methodologically?

Schematically, to read the archive as a writing whose meaning shifts over time, an archive forever reopened by writing in the present, the lessons of undecidability and language might be said to mean that we:

- Read against ourselves in presuming not understanding but incompetent readers reading for difference rather than sameness in order to be unsettled by otherness.
- Focus on what is “becoming” in the data: discontinuities, ruptures, the unexpected, the contingent, the stabilized configurations and the beginnings of the possible, how they carry both repetition and “the new” and what we make of the reach of the event in terms of possibilities rather than necessities, the cracks in history, what they meant in their time and what they mean today.
- Assume narrator as BOTH unreliable AND bearer of knowledge in a sort of disjunctive affirmation<sup>5</sup> of the price subjects pay to tell the truth about themselves.
- Attend to how stories are told, including how we stage what we represent in the scene of writing and what an analysis makes present via a delineation of weighty tendencies, dominations, the horizon of expectations and how categories construct inclusion/exclusion.
- Revalue how sources speak to us as readers/translators/researchers and the traces of meaning upon which interpretation works as a transformation and renewal of something living in the text. Here interpretation is a supplement rather than mimesis, both inadequate and necessary in its impossibilities.

In such a schemata, the task of data analysis becomes mediating traces through concepts that structure and are structured by the data. As translators/historians/ethnographers, our subjective implication in the question of categorization is assumed to be saturated with value judgments, positioning us not in transcendence but in situated knowing within an analytic practice where the forms of normativity that an analysis implies are seen as both enclosure and a living on.

It is the necessity of translation as impossibility that is Benjamin’s lesson here. The key is not to stop translating but to begin mourning<sup>6</sup> the kind of translation that is no longer

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<sup>5</sup> Disjunctive affirmation comes from Foucault’s (1998) review of Deleuze’s efforts to bring Freud and Marx together not in reconciliation but in “disjunctive affirmation.” This move is other to what Foucault calls “the tyranny of good will, the obligation to think ‘in common’ with others. . . .” and toward what he terms a “perverting” of common sense where philosophy itself is disoriented by uncontainable difference. Rather than searching for the common elements underlying difference, Deleuze was interested in the production of distress as a strategy to think difference differently.

<sup>6</sup> Britzman (2006) writes of “the fragile work of mourning” as “[t]his interminable work of making a relation to loss” (p. x). From Britzman’s Freudian vantage point, the “working through” of mourning is necessary in the face of loss if idealization is to be displaced by engagement.

possible given his lessons of language and indeterminacy, power and historicity in recognizing the heterogeneity of meaning and the contamination of translation. Translation is always producing rather than merely reflecting or imitating some “original.” Given the transformative nature of translation/interpretation/reading, our hope is practices that enlarge both our own language and that of the original through echoes that reverberate the original’s claim on us to engage with history in a way that puts the original in new motion, ripe to this present.

### **Bringing Benjamin to Pedagogy**

Up until his early 20s, Benjamin was actively a part of the Youth Movement. The Youth Movement was made up of a myriad of disparate pedagogies ranging from progressive modifications of method, to naturalistic explorations of the outdoors, to radically nationalistic or anti-Semitic models. Much of Benjamin’s earliest work from this period addresses the “spirit and solidarity of youth,” but for various reasons—including the coming of World War I, the Youth Movement’s growing nationalism, and his desire to pursue a doctorate in philosophy—he would eventually distance himself from the movement. Benjamin decided to pursue his doctorate at the University in Bern where he graduated *summa cum laude* in June of 1919. The second dissertation, the *habilitation*, required of German professors still had to be written and accepted by a university if Benjamin was to pursue a career in academia, but after spending a few years writing it, his *habilitation* was submitted to the University of Frankfurt where was rejected. While Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (play of mourning) would be published in 1928 to a widely favorable literary audience in France and Germany, in 1925, it did not suit the Germany academy and his request was denied. It is possible that had he entered the academy he would have produced even more explicitly pedagogical material, but much of his earlier work on school reform is unavailable or lost. Nonetheless, he did write some explicitly pedagogical texts later in his life, but these are mostly overtly Marxist, and rather brief (1999b; 1999c). Though as stated before, much of his work—especially his theory of historical materialism—had an implicit pedagogy, and calls for alternative histories of the oppressed are made by those associated with critical pedagogy.

In critical pedagogy, Benjaminian notions of alternative histories find expression in notions such as “border pedagogy,” “counter-texts,” “counter-memory,” and even “insurgent commemoration.” For Aronowitz and Giroux (1991), counter-memory is a democratic discursive analysis that critiques and disables particular subjectivities while empowering others, and understanding how “difference” is organized variously in assorted configurations of power within the public sphere. For a more specifically Benjaminian take on alternative histories, Simon (1992) gets the title for his book, *Teaching Against the Grain: Texts for a Pedagogy of Possibility*, from a phrase of Benjamin’s, who wrote the “task of historical materialism is to brush history against the grain” (Benjamin 2003a, p. 392; 2003b, p. 407). Simon (1992) describes his work as “not a recapitulation of Benjamin’s writings nor an attempt to interpret their significance and limitations” but to “read Benjamin as an educator” (p. 138). Additionally, his chapter (2000) in *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma* also references the work of Benjamin as influential and that book as a

whole addresses some of the issues that have been discussed here. Simon (2000) addresses one of the complexities of such an education in his chapter that attends to how and why we teach historical memories to those students who feel such events are “what has never been my fault or my deed,” a phrase he gets from Emmanuel Levinas. In doing so he draws on the Jewish notion of *zakhor* which he says can be translated as “both an imperative and an obligation: ‘remember’” (p. 10). Bearing witness to the past becomes a “space of intervention” in the present, as “To witness as an act of *zakhor* is to constitute this intervention as a realignment of memory and the present” (p. 11).

In *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma* (Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert 2000) the editors write an introduction in which they advocate a “*remembrance/pedagogy*” that engage people in “particular forms of historical consciousness” which they describe as an “indelibly social praxis, a very determinate set of commitments and actions held and enacted by members of collectivities” (p. 2). For Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert (2000), remembrance is a “*strategic practice*” that maintains “efforts to mobilize attachments and knowledge that serve specific social and political interests within particular spatiotemporal frameworks . . . aligned with the anticipation of a reconciled future” (p. 3-4). Furthermore, remembrance “endeavors to bring forth into presence specific people and events of the past in order to honor their names and to hold a place for their absent presence in one’s contemporary life” (p. 4). For them, this is not an invitation, but an “assignment.” Such production of knowledge involves also a “difficult return” that challenges students regarding “what it might mean to live, not *in* the past but *in relation with* the past, acknowledging the claim the past has on the present” (p. 4, emphasis in original). In considering “remembrance as critical learning” they address “how to enact telling stories of traumatic histories that encompass not only a repetition (a retelling) of the story of another but also the *story of the telling of the story*” (p. 7, emphasis in original). For them “remembering well” involves a humbling regarding the students’ attentiveness to the testimony, as being called as a witness, not to testify, but to *listen*. This also involves “a working through that takes into account the particularities of the space/time of one’s engagement, the particular investments one brings to remembrance, and the continuities and discontinuities one enacts in relation to it” (p. 7). Finally, they suggest that remembrance is “a means for an ethical learning that impels us into a confrontation and ‘reckoning’ not only with stories of the past but also with ‘ourselves’ as we ‘are’ (historically, existentially, ethically) in the present” (p. 8).

**John’s elaboration of pedagogical themes and implications in Benjamin, like some of the stuff on constellations**

## **Conclusion**

Reading Walter Benjamin reminds us that engaging with knowledge is an interminable process. Auras come and go, history happens, technology shifts, frameworks of sense-making rise and fall, sometimes with the “destructive character” (Benjamin, 1979) necessary to make room and clear away. In the midst of this, education attempts to pass on the “selective tradition” from the past in preparing its charges for the present and the

many futures that are possible. It has been the contention of this chapter that this man whose life was so nomadic and shaped by the burden of history of his time can speak to us here and now in a myriad of useful ways. As his work has opened up space for new directions in art, the study of popular culture, urban geography, philosophy, literary and historical analysis, might he do the same in education?

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