

PHANTOMS AT THE HELM: NOSTALGIC AND UTOPIAN MODES OF THOUGHT IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Educational institutions have held a central role in utopian projects as the vehicle for implementing utopian principles and fashioning the utopian subject. As vehicles for utopian narratives or projects, educational institutions are simultaneously shaped by utopian modes of thought. Modes of thought are not neutral tools that are used as needed, but rather, they are active in how we understand ourselves, others, and the world. This paper draws out the implications and risks of nostalgic and utopian modes of thought to suggest that their mobilization is problematic in education as it directs education's sight to a distant, illusory past and to an imagined future. The impact of this is an inadequate account for the lived realities of the present. By drawing on feminist epistemology and the work of Jacques Rancière, the paper proposes that a radical attending to the "now," coupled with a politics of location, offers a way for educational theory and practice to engage its relationship to past, future, and present.

Keywords: utopia, feminist epistemology, feminist epistemology

Phantoms at the Helm: Nostalgic and Utopian Modes of Thought in Education

Educational institutions have held a central role in utopian projects as the vehicle for implementing utopian principles and fashioning the utopian subject (Davis, 2003). As vehicles for utopian narratives or projects, educational institutions are simultaneously shaped by utopian *modes of thought*. Modes of thought are not neutral tools that are used as needed, but rather, they are active in how we understand ourselves, others, and the world. They shape what is identified as important for our attention, including *who* is identified as important. Modes of thought are therefore implicated in questions of justice and equity. In considering utopian narratives, this raises a significant question: who is imagined to be a part of these ideal futures? Whose voices shape the ideals that educational institutions imagine for themselves, the communities they serve, and the worlds they share in? Perhaps most significantly, whose voices are left out of these imagined futures? Accordingly, my focus in this paper is not on the centrality of educational institutions in utopian narratives, but on the ways in which utopian modes of thought are taken up in educational theory and practice. Despite the focus on newness and futurity in utopian narratives, my discussion requires holding space for both past and future—for both origins and telos. As such, my exploration here is not only about utopian modes of thought, but also nostalgic thought.

Northrop Frye (1965) offers one way to account for both past and future through his identification of two social concepts that he calls “myths.” The first myth is the myth of the social contract that accounts for the origins of society. The other is the myth of utopia that identifies the ideal aims of a society. By considering the ways in which these myths are active in educational theory and practice, my aim is to draw out the implications and risks of nostalgic and utopian modes of thought. I aim to raise questions about the neutrality of these ways of thinking, particularly about the estrangement from the present that they introduce. I will suggest that the mobilization of nostalgic and utopian thought is problematic in education as it directs education’s sight to a distant, illusory past and to an imagined future. Consequently, nostalgic and utopian modes of thought inadequately account for the lived realities of the present. I conclude by presenting an alternative way to imagine the future of educational practices. I draw on the work of Jacques Rancière (1991) to propose that a radical attending to the “now,” coupled with a politics of location informed by feminist epistemologists, offers a way for educational theory and practice to engage its relationship to past, future, *and* present.

Origin Myths and Nostalgia

Origin myths serve as points of orientation for the history, philosophy, and practice of a given discipline. Origin myths provide a sense of the common and of something shared. Shared origins, however, are not only related to the past, they are necessary for the future. As T.S Eliot (1939) argued, common historical sources and shared origins make the future possible as they provide a common orientation. In other words, shared origins offer a sense of where one has come from, where one is, and therefore, where one is going. Furthermore, origin narratives function as a reference point for identifying and explaining what might have gone “awry” since

departing from that origin. They offer an (imagined) beginning that is often conceived as a “pure” starting point to explain present challenges.

Western education’s origin myth lies in ancient Greek civilization and its forms of education. References to these “beginnings” in Western educational theory are extensive and they serve as both a point of orientation for the discipline, as well as a reference for diagnosing current educational flaws. For example, Thomas Huxley (1888) in his reproach of Humanist reforms in education remarked that “the Humanists have brought this reproach upon themselves, not because they are too full of the spirit of the ancient Greek, *but because they lack it*” (emphasis added, p. 22). Similarly, Matthew Arnold (1882) argued that Plato’s view of education and studies is “fitted for all sorts and conditions of men, *whatever* their pursuits may be” (emphasis added, p. 7). Arnold goes on to define a kind of ‘fall from grace’ in education that is instigated by delineating from Greek ideals.

It is not so much the identification of a history or origin that is problematic, but rather, the concern lies with the nostalgia that comes to accompany such identifications.¹ Susan Sontag (1976) argues that nostalgia for a past is a “facet of the modernist sensibility” that has become “increasingly suspect” (p. 45). The suspicion arises from these pasts being so heterogeneous that they become historically “unlocatable” (ibid.). Consequently, accurate historical knowledge becomes an illusion. A singular, shared origin point becomes a phantasm. For Sontag, this illusory quality is precisely what makes nostalgic pasts so appealing as it makes them inaccessible; these ‘pasts’ become “stimulants to the imagination precisely because they are *not* accessible” (original emphasis, ibid.). Nostalgic pasts are therefore “both models and mysteries” that oversimplify the complexities of past, present, and future. These oversimplified pasts are “imaginative exploitation[s]” that risk “plunder[ing] and parod[ying]” the past (ibid.).

Kieran Egan (2007) echoes these sentiments in his exploration of myth and history. He argues that myth is engaging and seductive but does not allow us to address change very effectively. This inability is because myth serves to establish a feeling of security amidst change, rather than inviting action to adapt to those changes (ibid.). This security is accomplished, in part, by the fact that myths “displace what should be the stubborn particulars from which our historical understanding is built” (Egan, 2007, p. 62). The risks here are significant. To model educational programs based on an inaccessible, oversimplified, and exploitative origin myth that rests on a nostalgic mode of thought results in an educational system that will fail to meet the lived realities of its current participants.

Exposing the Seductive Utopian Narrative

Utopian narratives and myths of origin are intricately linked. Utopian narratives can be marked by nostalgic longings; however, they must adopt a myth of origin to put into relief what is wrong in the present. A utopian narrative must identify something that has been lost, forgotten,

¹ There is an argument to be made about the concept of history and how it is operationalized as static, objective, and singular. I am conscientious of this and consider it problematic; however, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address these perspectives.

or violated that it will accordingly restore or correct. The practice of education is particularly fertile ground for utopian projects given that it engages a mostly captive audience of children, who are at the early stages of their life. In other words, the underlying logic is that a new beginning starts most readily with “new” subjects. For example, Arendt (1968) writes that it seems “natural” to “start a new world with those who are by birth and nature new” (p. 173). Furthermore, the project of education is continuous and is therefore, in principle, committed to innovation, development, dialogue, and contestation. Accordingly, there is much to imagine anew and a commitment to imagining better, *for better*. Lastly, given that educational institutions are primarily public and social institutions, there is not only much to imagine anew, but also *many* who are invested in imagining it anew.

Utopian narratives and ideals have been lauded as important for educational practice. Starkey (2012) argues that utopian visions in education are important for overcoming cynicism, indecision, and despair in educational discourse, raising hope, supporting imagination, and for reconceptualizing schools at both macro and micro levels (e.g., curriculum). Though Starkey warns educators against the possibility of utopian thought being used for indoctrination and coercion, he nevertheless maintains that utopian thought can serve social justice ends when it is coupled with sociological analysis. Along these lines, Wallerstein (1998) argues that utopian narratives can be realistic tools for making decisions toward *alternative*, rather than perfect futures. Though this shift from perfect to alternative futures suggests a more flexible process for imagining and creating the future, including more capacity for ensuring that these futures are guided by a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, the question I posed in the introduction remains: whose voices are included and excluded in shaping these alternative futures? In other words, the question of the present and its lived realities are still poorly accounted for as an “alternative future” still suggests that the current state must be transcended. The question remains as to whose lives, perspectives and voices are left behind and overlooked in the act of utopian transcendence. Accordingly, whether the distinction is between perfect or alternative futures, utopian and nostalgic thinking are seductive; they entice with an answer, a vision of “somewhere better” to aim, perfect or not.

At first, utopias seem to offer endless possibilities—they are seductive and promising in this regard. Utopias, however, are *not* fluctuating and open concepts, but rather operate as final, static ideals. This is because, as Frye (1965) argues, “most utopias have built-in safeguards against radical alteration of the structure” (p. 329). If educators want to forefront dialogue and innovation as they imagine new possibilities and new futures, utopic thinking is not the means for achieving this. Returning to the etymology of “utopia” highlights why utopian modes of thought are not useful tools for educators. As Frye (1965) writes,

Utopia, in fact and in etymology, is not a place; and when the society it seeks to transcend is everywhere, it can only fit into what is left, in invisible non-spatial point in the center of space. The question “Where is utopia?” is the same as the question “Where is nowhere?” and the only answer to that question is “here.” (p. 347)

In other words, utopian thinking remains divorced from the realities of lived experience as it is premised on the idea that it is precisely these realities that must be transcended for utopia to be imagined and mobilized. Utopian thinking therefore struggles to be a realistic tool as it has no mechanism to account for current lived realities and experiences.

Utopian thinking in education is epitomized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's character of Emile. Emile is the figure of "nowhere," in this case the "no one"; Emile is the phantom that utopian thinking instils into educational practice. Emile is fictional, his education imaginary, his achievements illusory. Yet, Emile haunts educational practice and has a profound effect on conceptions of living, breathing students. Emile "haunts" teacher education programs, undergraduate curricula, doctoral seminars, lists of foundational texts for the discipline, and the imaginations of novice and seasoned educators alike. Emile is the phantom child and student that educators have fixed their visions upon across the history of Western educational theory, practice, and training. It is concerning that a phantasmal child is at the helm of utopian educational projects; it speaks to my central concern in this discussion of utopian modes of thought overlooking present realities.

Despite utopian narratives beginning in a diagnosis of the present, they serve to estrange one from the present by projecting and prescribing how it *must* be, or *could* be, with little account of the here and now. This projection serves as a distraction from the way things are and soothes fear and worry about the present by assuring that things do not need to be this way. Consequently, the utopian "life"—in this case, the utopian student, teacher, educational program, and so on—is imaginable only in an abstract or observational manner (Nichols, 2008). As Joshua Nichols (2008) argues about utopian cities, "We cannot imagine ourselves as citizens of these fictive cities precisely because the author does not invite us in *as we are*" (emphasis added, p. 461). Similarly, utopian thought in education struggles to invite participants in *as we are*. Along these lines, Karl Mannheim (1936) writes, "A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs" (p. 192). An immediate response to this could be agreement: of course, we want a utopian state of mind precisely because it is different from the state of reality that is lacking! However, Mannheim's (1936) definition highlights that utopian thought is marked by incongruity with the present; it thereby risks estrangement from the present by setting itself in opposition to the present. In other words, utopian modes of thought establish a mutually exclusive relationship between present and future where the future is defined by being "not-present." This relationship means that the present can only exist in estrangement as the negative counterpart to the future—the devalued component that serves to establish the value of the future.

This estrangement is fueled by the fact that utopias are by definition *selective*; as Nichols (2008) writes, "the most interesting question concerning utopia is not the possible future that it presents to us but the present conditions that it omits" (p. 462). Rather than addressing and speaking to present wrongs, utopias merely omit them. Furthermore, this selectivity is a kind of confirmation bias where information and ideas are selected that favour and confirm particular beliefs and hypotheses. These selections are by nature political and are not independent from

judgements, beliefs, and attitudes of the present, but rather are *constituted* by them. As Arendt (1968) argues, “A crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgements, that is, with prejudices. Such an attitude not only sharpens the crisis but makes us forfeit the experience of reality and the opportunity for reflection it provides” (p. 171). Utopias are therefore not free playgrounds that challenge or move beyond the problems or constraints of the present; their “thinking anew” is not new at all but merely distracts us from the present by pointing to a fictive past and a phantasmatic future. To use Arendt’s words, the present is “forfeited” as a result of utopian modes of thought that name the present as lacking and wrongful.

This forfeiture is identifiable in educational practices today. Educational programs such as the *Education for All* (EFA) movement, which was supported and championed globally by UNESCO from 2002-2015, are built on the premise that a particular (singular) kind of education is necessary for people worldwide, an education in which “recognized and measurable learning outcomes are *achieved by all*” (emphasis added, UNESCO, 2015, n. p.). EFA relies on ideas of origin, destination, and universality that maintain that participants in educational programs are interchangeable and inessential to imagining futures. The issue with this is evident when analysed from a social justice lens. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva argue in *Ecofeminism* (2014), that the “catching-up development path” that guides global development strategies, including educational strategies, is a myth. The myth of “catching-up” assumes that the “good life” can be attained by following the same path of industrialization and technological process that was undertaken by the Western “developed” world (p. 56). Educational projects like the EFA have figured centrally into this catch-up logic as they offer a way to “reach this peak”—a peak that has notably been reached mostly by white men (p. 56). In other words, this peak, or utopian vision of where education should be working toward, is shaped and determined by patriarchal, white supremacist ideals, values, and beliefs. It forfeits the present and in doing so, forfeits the complex and diverse lives that inhabit it moment to moment. Educational futures guided by nostalgic and utopian modes of thought therefore do not invite us in *as we are*, but rather, invite only particular (white/male/able-bodied/heterosexual/etc.) subjects in, while claiming that the future is available to be imagined and inhabited by all equally. Utopian modes of thought offer futures that are only available to some, not all.

Nostalgic and utopian thinking are sustained by a belief in the myth of progress. This myth is based on the assumption that Western society is continually moving towards social, economic, and political improvement (Leonard, 2002). Its logic holds that progress is inevitable and therefore utopian narratives are equated with improvement by the mere fact that they strive for betterment. The assessment of progress is not based on an evaluation of the proposed reforms in relationship to the issue they are supposed to be addressing, but rather, on a belief in the myth of progress. This logic maintains that even if a proposal for educational reform is poor in some respects, it will still be “doing something” and this must be better than “doing nothing.” Such a claim is only sustainable if there is an unquestioned assumption that Western society is always already moving towards improvement.

In Stéphane Mosès' (2009) work on Walter Benjamin, he argues that the belief in historical Progress (with a capital P) is quasi-religious. It involves three postulates: "Progress is *that of humanity itself* (and not only of its capacities and its knowledge); progress is *infinite* (corresponding to an endless perfectibility of humanity); it is *irresistible* (automatically following a linear or spiral trajectory)" (original emphasis, p. 115). As Langdon Winner (1979) argues, this assumption leads to little or no need to examine the purpose or goals as it is, by definition, progressive. The belief in the benevolence and inevitability of progress serves to perpetuate and deepen the estrangement that is at the center of nostalgic and utopian thinking; it abdicates responsibility for the 'here' and the 'now' by deferring it to the 'there' and 'then.' It abdicates responsibility for the present by promising that the inevitability of progress will right things. As Sara Ahmed (2010) writes, "the belief that things 'will only get better' at some point that is always just 'over the horizon' can be a way of avoiding the impact of suffering in the world that exists before us" (p. 178). Educators cannot afford to overlook the suffering, injustice, and inequity that exists before and is reflected, maintained, and perpetuated by educational institutions.

Nostalgia, Utopianism, Time and Subjectivity

Nostalgic and utopian modes of thought institute a problematic relationship to time—past, present, and future. I would like to draw out the consequences of this form of relationship to time by bringing in a consideration of subjectivity. I draw primarily on the work of Elizabeth Grosz, (1995) who argues that the spatio-temporal location of subjects as embodied beings is necessary for a subject to be a subject in the world, and Donna Haraway (1991), who argues that a lack of such a location is a "gaze from nowhere," or in other words, the "god-trick." In this section, I consider how an account of time is necessary for subjectivity and thereby suggest that education's relationship to time impacts the subjects it is attempting to shape by undermining the ability of students and teachers to take up subject positions. This is because nostalgia and utopianism introduce a view from "nowhere" that denies a particular perspective on the world and as such, denies a place from which to act, think, and speak.

The estrangement that utopian and nostalgic thinking introduce is an estrangement from particularity. These particularities include not only the dynamic and complex individuals that are impacted by these modes of thought, but the socio-historical particularities of the now. To overlook these particularities is arguably what Donna Haraway (1991) calls the "gaze from nowhere." Haraway (1991) argues that the "gaze from nowhere," a view that is untarnished by concrete particularities, is the pretension of the "god-trick" that has been articulated throughout the history of Western epistemology. As such, it aims to offer the "purest" form of objectivity. However, in "seeing from nowhere" the god-trick abdicates responsibility for the "sights" it engenders and legitimizes. Haraway names this the "god-trick" as only a god could claim such transcendence. Arguably, if educational practice is separated from the particularities of individuals and of current socio-historical realities, we are left with a "disembodied" perspective

that, metaphorically, has “nowhere” to speak from. If one does not have a body, one can claim to “see from everywhere” (Haraway, 1991).²

The consequences of the “god-trick” are not abstract and they become most salient when the trick is considered alongside subjectivity. Elizabeth Grosz (1995) argues for the centrality of embodiment to subjectivity. This embodiment is important because it represents particularity—it is a view from “somewhere.” It both literally and figuratively grounds sight—and consequently, knowledge—to a body that is located in a particular time and place. This grounding is necessary for a subject to take up a subject position and to have a perspective on the world that then offers a place from which a subject is able to think, act, and speak from. Without a perspective on the world, without a particular subject position to inhabit, there is no place from which to exercise agency and authoring. The “gaze from nowhere” is upheld by the way that utopian and nostalgic thinking conceptualize time as “there” and “then.” Consequently, these modes of thought preclude viable subject positions because they prevent an account of “now” time, including its particularities and inhabitants. The relationship that educational practice holds to time is therefore a pressing question given its inextricable tie to questions of subjectivity, agency, and action.

Exorcising Phantoms—Attending to the Now and a Politics of Location

Given the ways that nostalgic and utopian modes of thought haunt the discipline of education and the risks they bring, the question remains as to how alternative, innovative, and new possibilities can be imagined and mobilized so as to avoid these risks. I would like to suggest two possibilities for beginning to answer this question. First, I suggest that attending to “now” builds connection to the moments and experiences of the present and in doing so, attends to the possibilities of every moment. I use Jacques Rancière’s (1991) work in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and the story of Joseph Jacotot as an example of attending to the “now” in teaching. Second, I propose a “politics of location” that counteracts the erasure of particularity by identifying a gaze from “somewhere.” I maintain that hope³ (I use this word with caution) for a better way does not exist in the remembrance of ghosts from the past, nor in the positing of phantoms at the helm.

Jacques Rancière’s (1991) story of Joseph Jacotot offers an alternative model to nostalgic and utopic narratives in that it radically attends to the present. Jacotot, an exiled French schoolteacher, was tasked with teaching the French language to Flemish students who knew no

² It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss *why* educational practice may be invested in “seeing from everywhere.” My brief comments here, however, would suggest that this investment is linked to traditional Western education’s history of fidelity to patriarchal ideals of objectivity and rationality. Feminist epistemologists have extensively critiqued such ideals in guiding Western philosophy and thought. See the work of Susan Bordo (1987), Lorraine Code (1991, 2006), Harding and Hintikka (1983), and Genevieve Lloyd (1993).

³ I am aware of the literature and discourse around the relationship between hope, hopelessness, and utopianism and wish to signal its importance here. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to trace out “hope” in the practice of education. It is important to recognize that the concept of hope is central to utopianism and futurism and that a significant body of work is dedicated to exploring and criticizing this relationship. See the work of Sara Ahmed (2010), Ernst Bloch (1986), and Lee Edelman (2004).

French. Jacotot himself did not know Flemish. It does not take a trained educator to recognize the challenge of the situation Jacotot faced as the instructor. Jacotot decided to task the students with working through a French and a Flemish language version of the *Télémaque*, a 24-volume novel written by Fénelon in 1699. Jacotot's idea was that by comparing translations, the students would learn French. His method was successful; the children learned French, but what is particularly noteworthy is the "lack" of knowledge on behalf of the instructor. There was no shared or common past, incident, or experience that Jacotot could use to build a lesson upon (a "past") and there was no plan to guide Jacotot's actions (a "future"). Rather, "without thinking about it, he had made them discover this thing that he discovered with them" (Rancière, 1991, p. 9). Jacotot had "only given them the order to pass through a forest whose openings and clearings he himself had not discovered" (ibid.). To put it in the context of my aims here, there was no utopian future that the instructor knew ahead of time, no reward far off in the distance that the instructor could seduce students (or perhaps even themselves) with. Kristin Ross (1991) in the introduction to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* argues that:

Whether school is seen as the reproduction of equality (Bourdieu) or as the potential instrument for the reduction of inequality (Savary), the effect is the same: that of erecting and maintaining the distance separating a future reconciliation from a present inequality... a distance discursively invented and reinvented so that it may never be abolished (p. xix)

Jacotot's story is an example of what it looks like to collapse the distance, or to refuse *enacting*⁴ the distance between past, present, and future. For Jacotot, this refusal was partly a result of the language barrier forcing him to attend to the present in a radical way. Rancière's re-telling of Jacotot's educational undertakings provides a concrete example of practicing a "now-time" educational project. This is not to suggest that Jacotot's approach is *the* correct way, but it allows us to imagine more concretely what a radical attending to the present *could* look like.

In her analysis of Jacotot, Ross (1991) poignantly asks, "What would it mean to make equality a *presupposition* rather than a goal, a *practice* rather than a reward situated firmly in some distant future so as to all the better explain its present infeasibility?" (p. xix) Though Rancière's (1991) concern in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is primarily with the conception of equality in education, we can ask this question in relation to nearly any educational ideal: What would it mean to make an ideal a practice, rooted in the present, and not in some distant future? What would it look like to "read" the present differently—as unfolding present presence that does not exist as the negative counterpart to the past or to the future?

Walter Benjamin, in his philosophy of history, struggles precisely with such questions of historical temporality. The hope that Benjamin identifies—what he names as "messianic hope"—is particularly relevant in trying to address the risks of nostalgic and utopian modes of thought. This hope must "not be conceived as aiming for a utopia destined to be realized at the *end* of

⁴ The idea of "enacting" time is an interesting concept. In some sense, nostalgic and utopian thinking is a kind of enactment, or performance of time, that represents a particular way to practice a relationship to the past, present, and future. Arguably, we are constantly in negotiation with concepts of time and these negotiations impact the way in which we situate and understand others and ourselves.

time, but as an extreme vigilance, a capacity to detect what at each moment shows the ‘revolutionary energy’ of the new” (emphasis added, Mosès, 2009, p. 109). Here then lies the third term, the other possibility in the wearisome back and forth between pasts and futures: extreme vigilance to what is possible *in every moment*, in the “now-time” that is “governed by the demands of the present situation” and in which the unpredictable, the revolutionary, “happens (or it can happen) at any moment, precisely as each moment of time-grasped as absolutely unique-brings a new state of the world into being” (Mosès, 2009, p. 108). Hannah Arendt (1968) echoes a similar alternative for education. Arendt locates this alternative in what she calls the essence of education: natality, or the “fact that human beings are *born* into the world” (original emphasis, p. 171). Natality implies an education where “we decide...not to expel [children] from our world and leave them to their own devices, *nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us*” (emphasis added, Arendt, 1968, p. 193). In this vigilant attending to the moment and to the possibility that something can happen at any moment, we are positioned to take both responsibility for and action in the present.

In suggesting that we attend to the “now,” it is important to distinguish that I am not suggesting giving up the possibility or desire for a “better” or “happier” future. What I am suggesting is that imagining these futures and reflecting on the past must come with an account of the present. The present must not exist as a place that we are trying to escape or move beyond, but rather it must be the starting place to understand the past and to imagine the future.

With an attending to the “now,” there comes an attending to the particularities that accompany it. Such an attending is precisely what feminist scholars have proposed as a “politics of location” that argues that the particularities of our individual selves and experiences *matter* (Borsa, 1990). In a politics of location,

Where we live, how we live, our relationship to the social systems and structures that surround us are deeply embedded parts of everything we do and remain integral both to our identity or sense of self and to our position or status within a larger cultural and representational field (Borsa, 1990, p. 36)

A politics of location resists Haraway’s “god-trick” as it can no longer claim to “see from everywhere.” This introduces the possibility of particular perspectives on the world from which subjects can see, speak, and act. Haraway’s argument for “situated knowledges” is precisely this. It is a demand for “politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (Haraway, 1988, p. 589). Situated knowledges, then, not only move educational theory and practice away from the estrangement that utopian and nostalgic thinking present, but also introduce the possibility of taking responsibility that utopian and nostalgic thinking evade. As Haraway (1988) argues, to locate vision and the “embodied nature” of vision means that we can “become answerable for what we learn how to see” (p. 583). Taking responsibility for our “vision”—for what we see, imagine, project into the past and future—is necessary as “vision is

always a question on the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices” (Haraway, 1988, p. 585).

The re-visioning of educational contexts through epistemologies of situated knowledges has been partially addressed in James Lang’s (2011) work. I would like to highlight two of the implications he raises of situated knowledges for education that I think are relevant when considering utopianism and nostalgia. First, the introduction of multiplicity and second, the implication of teachers and students in the production of knowledge.

Lang (2011) argues that to re-vision educational contexts through an epistemology of situated knowledge means a foundational shift toward multiplicity. Educators could no longer refer to “an essential educational context but to *multiple* educational contexts” (p. 92). This is because epistemologies of situated knowledges introduce an “inescapable multiplic[y]” as knowers are situated, or located, in ways that affect *what* we know and *how* we know (Lang, 2011). Similarly, we cannot locate a singular, universal or transcendent form of knowledge or way of knowing. To consider multiplicity alongside nostalgia and utopianism would similarly mean the inability to speak of a singular origin or past in education, as well as the inability to imagine a singular future for education. Educators would have to relinquish the idea that an origin point for education is identifiable in the first place. Educators would be invited to consider the possibility of numerous points, not of *origin or destination*, but of *orientation*. Furthermore, multiplicity projected forward would also mean a framework of orientation where there is no singular end point that educators are aiming towards. This multiplicity is necessary to counteract the estrangement of nostalgic and utopian thinking as it fractures the singular “then” and “there” and introduces the possibility of locating individual subjects in numerous, yet particular, spaces and places.

A consideration of multiplicity leads into the second implication of situated knowledges for educational theory and practice. Multiplicity implicates teachers and students in the production of knowledge as teachers and students are no longer interchangeable with one another; each is a unique individual that is active in the construction of knowledge (Lang, 2011). This implication counteracts the estrangement of nostalgic and utopian modes of thought by legitimizing the perspectives of students and teachers in the here and now. The implication of this for challenging utopian and nostalgic modes of thought is significant. It suggests that envisioning the future is no longer an activity reserved for elite educational theorists and administrators, politicians and ministers of education, nor is it directed at only singular or unified points of destination, but rather, the future is an activity rooted in the lived realities and embodied perspectives of the present, aimed at creating points of orientation to navigate current challenges and obstacles.

From Utopia to Eutopia

Nostalgia and utopianism in educational theory come at a cost. Both are mythic in structure and foster estrangement from the present. They draw our gaze to such faraway places

and times that we risk immobility and a failure to take responsibility for the present. At their very best, they occasion a false sense of movement toward phantoms that haunt the discipline.

This does not, however, suggest that imagining new ways of practicing education is a useless endeavour. Educators have a responsibility not only to imagine the educational project anew, but also to attend to the *ways* in which these re-imaginings are thought. The tools of thinking, the structures of thought, are not neutral or objective; they have consequences on the way we understand others, the world, and ourselves and to how we imagine and mobilize justice and equity. As an alternative to nostalgic and utopian modes of thought, this paper has suggested a practice of education that involves a different relationship to past, present, and future—one that is marked by a vigilant attending to the “now-time” and the possibilities in present moments. Such re-imaginings may indeed bring us to “eutopian” places—eu + topos—a well or happy place.

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