

Ambiguity, Disorientation, and Fabulation: Toward a Radical Pedagogy of Plasticity

“Imagining things being otherwise may be the first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed.” -- Maxine Greene, Releasing the Imagination

This paper brings into conversation speculative/materialist feminism, cognitive neuroscience, and critical pedagogy to consider the ways in which the materiality of our brains, under new formulations of the "learning" encounter, may not only accommodate but flourish from experiences of ambiguity, disorientation, and imaginative speculation. It begins with the now established understanding of the brain's inherent plasticity -- that is, its ability to form and reform networks, connections, and potentials -- and connects that to Maxine Greene's conceptualization of the role of imagination in transformative pedagogy. Along the way we visit Donna Haraway's formulation of speculative fabulation, Simone de Beauvoir's vision of radical freedom derived from an acceptance of fundamental ambiguity, and Sara Ahmed's push toward spaces and moments of generative disorientation. Through this exploration, I hope to uncover new ways of thinking about the teaching of writing and, more broadly, the role of education and encounters of learning in our late-capitalist, neo-liberal world.

Ideas of neuroplasticity, henceforth simply *plasticity*, have been in development in neuroscience and cognitive psychology since the late 1960s. As technological advancements enable researchers to see the workings of the brain as it functions (through fMRI, for example), the notion that our brains are "plastic" -- that is, adaptable, changeable, malleable -- has been more or less accepted as scientific fact, verifiable by the data. As neuroscientists seek to understand how plasticity materially functions in the brain, philosophers theorize what this new understanding might say about ontology, epistemology, and ethics. In her book *What Should*

We Do with Our Brain? Catherine Malabou connects Marx's understanding of history and historicity to what this new realization of the materiality of our brains means for human action. She quotes Marx: "Humans make their own history, but they do not know they make it" (Marx qtd in Malabou 1) and connects that to the self-generating nature of the plastic brain: "Humans make their own brain, but they do not know they are doing so" (8). She continues:

"We know for certain that the ability to learn, to acquire new skills and new memories, is maintained throughout life. And this is true *in a different ways from one individual to the next*. The capacity of each to receive and create [their] own form does not depend on any pre-established form; the original model or standard is, in a way, progressively erased." (6)

In this way, our brains, and the neuro-material archive therein, represent the historicity of our lives as individuals with unique sets of experiences. It is because the brain is not ready-made, but rather begins with a model that is then shaped and reshaped by our individual experiences that we must actively question what to do with it. This questioning forms the exigence for what Malabou calls a *neural ideology*, which is not just "a matter of uncovering...a certain freedom from the brain but rather...to free this freedom, to disengage it from a certain number of ideological presuppositions that implicitly govern the neuroscientific field, and, by mirror effect, the entire field of politics" (11). It is through this ideology that we might begin to see what "neural liberation" could look like, not just for ourselves but for the ways in which we interact with, shape, and create the world. Spaces of learning seem like the ideal places to theorize this neural liberation and construct pedagogical approaches that enable the brain (and so the body, the person, the community, the society, the culture) to flourish through new potentialities, new modes of being in and of the world.

Maxine Greene was an educational philosopher, social activist, and teacher. She worked with existential and critical approaches to pedagogy, focusing on how education as an institution and learning spaces as micro-institutional moments might more radically impact the lives of the oppressed, marginalized, and forgotten. She saw the potential of the imagination, particularly through an engagement with the arts, as being one of the means toward this critical pedagogy. In her book *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* Greene seeks to highlight “the ways in which we and our students might come to use imagination in search for openings without which our lives narrow and our pathways become cul-de-sacs” (17). For her, imagination as a practice and a pedagogy enables people to see new worlds, potentials, possibilities -- and that this is the first step toward meaningful social change. She argues that when people do not have

“the imagination to adjust what they gradually find out about the intersubjective world as they move further and further from the views of their original home, they are bound to reinterpret those experiences, perhaps to see the course of their lives as carrying out the possible (among numerous possibilities) rather than the necessary” (21).

Ultimately, and quoting Dewey, she determines: “Without such realization ‘there is only recurrence, complete uniformity; the resulting experience is routine and mechanical.’ consciousness always has an imaginative phase, and imagination, more than any other capacity, breaks through the ‘inertia of habit’ (Dewey 1934, 272 qtd. in Greene 21).

The “autopilot” of our brains is routinized, mechanical, habitual -- aligning with an anti-liberatory neural ideology. Neural default is to find the most efficient and effective path for routine activities, and to solidify those paths through perfected repetition. It is only through seeking out new experiences, new ways of thinking, new relationships, that we might enact neural liberation through engaging with our brain’s predilection for plasticity. It is not enough, as

Malabou would point out, to question what our brains do, but to actively engage with the question *What should we do with our brains?* Both Malabou and Greene would support, it seems, brain engagement that reflects neural ideology, that supports neural liberation. For Greene, imagination presents one potential answer, for,

“when habit swathes everything, one day follows another identical day and predictability swallows any hint of an opening possibility...Once we can see our givens as contingencies, then we may have an opportunity to posit alternative ways of living and valuing and to make choices” (23).

For Greene, Malabou’s call for neural liberation comes from creating moments, specifically in learning spaces, that help students to “see givens as contingencies” so that we might then imagine new and different futurities.

The next section of this paper examines what Haraway, Beauvoir, and Ahmed -- when combined with Greene and Malabou -- offer in the way of pedagogical possibilities for neural liberation. It begins with a consideration of the imaginative space that Simone de Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity might open and enable. It then looks at cultivating moments of disorientation, as Ahmed espouses, in light of this newly understood ambiguity. Finally, it calls on Haraways’ notion of speculative fabulation as a generative reorienting move, an orientation to new potentials rather than established and solid ground. All of these framings and moves seek to enact a neural liberation, leaving behind the predictability, control, and unilateral assessment of neoliberal classrooms for an open, imaginative, multidirectional flourishing of self with and through others.

While Simone de Beauvoir is most well known for her feminist tome, *The Second Sex*, it is her less cited work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) that finds itself called into conversation here. The broad argument in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* holds that ambiguity is a fundamental,

inescapable, an irresolvable condition of human existence. Beauvoir argues, “We must not conceal but assume our fundamental ambiguity” (Beauvoir “Introduction to an Ethics of Ambiguity” 291). According to Beauvoir, there are three primary ambiguities that form our experience of ourselves as both subject and object in and for the world. First, is that of transcendence and immanence. I am both the center of the world in which I live and the projects I undertake (transcendence) and but a thing in the lives of others (immanence) who also see themselves as the center of the world in which they live and the projects they undertake (transcendence). Our existences are always floating between these realizations of the self and its positionality in relation to others in the world. Second is temporal ambiguity. We are aware of past, present, future but in a moment in which the past is no longer, the future isn’t yet, and the present is nothing (Weiss in Simons Philosophical Writings” 284). From the present moment, I see a future in which I exist, a past that once existed and implies development toward both present and future, but the actual movement of time unfolds in a series of moments that “die one by one” (Beauvoir “An Existentialist Looks”). There is no mechanism by which we might hold time steady; thus, we exist in continual temporal ambiguity. Finally, we see the aggregate of our lived experiences as belonging to ourselves alone, but also as unfolding as experience shared with others; we are both historically unique and part of the general collective of our milieu.

Beauvoir’s formulation of ambiguity brings the notion of relativity into new light. Relativity attempts to hold things still so that they might be compared. When things can be held still, compared, they can also be reduced to essentials that mask the nuances of their existence; those things held still continue to be interpreted as essential qualities made relative in the presence of each other. Beauvoir argues that recognizing ambiguity is the starting point of an ethical life, and ambiguity rejects classification, categorization, and comparisons to essentials.

The only essential feature is the ambiguity of our condition and the idea that my freedom is linked to the freedom of all others: “To will oneself free is to will others free” (Beauvoir *Ethics* 78). This means seeing beyond the socio-cultural traditions that justify oppression, including the projects that appear to work toward liberatory ends through oppressive means. To be able to imagine, or make space, for this conceptualization of ambiguity, the self must be able to see itself as a multiplicity among pluripotent multiplicities. To begin to see the world in this way might enact plasticity, as the brain tries to work out how to account for and interpret these potentialities. To echo Beauvoir’s mantra of freedom: To will neural liberation is to will conceptual liberation, in which by seeing ourselves as ambiguous multiplicity we might begin to see the world with that same radical complexity and potential.

Sara Ahmed’s understanding of disorientation provides spaces and means for beginning to exist within that ambiguity, which presents a continual uprooting of what was believed to be true, stable, and known. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed begins with the notion of orientation. “Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitants, as well as “who” or “what” we direct our energy toward” (3). Viewed from a cognitive lens, orientations are the well-worn pathways, the routinized ways of thinking and being that become more ingrained and more efficient with regular engagement. They are the things that, because of their regularity, the naturalness of these routines, we might not even see -- might not have explicit understandings of their ontological impacts. It is in moments of disorientation that we might suddenly see our orientations; in the moments of rupture we can recall the sense of order that was once transparent. Ahmed writes,

“Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or the the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and

it can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which we resides can support the actions that make life feel livable" (157).

Given what we understand of plasticity, these experiences of disorientation may be the moments in which our brains are forced to wake, to think actively, no longer able to follow the same well-trodden paths for regularly experienced (and therefore easily accepted) phenomena. These experiences of disorientation liberate, if momentarily, neural networks. Perhaps then, pedagogies that engage with neural liberation should call forth, create, uncover these potentials for disorientation. This notion of productive disorientation, critical confusion seems antithetical to the highly routinized, assessment focused modes of current education and learning encounters. By highlighting Beauvoirian ambiguity in our existences and then experiencing those ambiguities in moments of disorientation, learning encounters might begin to engage with Malabou's neural ideology and enact spaces for neural liberation. When we are sufficiently aware of our ambiguity, disoriented so that we might better see our orientations, then we find the kairos for Haraway's speculative fabulation.

Donna Haraway's notion of speculative fabulation might be one of the ways to open the imagination in the classroom, in critical ways that are tied both to Beauvoirian ambiguity and Ahmed's (dis)orientations. In Haraway's thinking, speculative fabulation is one of the many possibilities of the "SF" construction: "science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminist, science fact, so far" (2). This section is most interested in the space between speculative fabulation and science fact, since we are dealing with modes of imagination (speculative fabulation) as way of building material potentials in the brain (science fact). For Haraway, speculative fabulation is "closely tied to everyday storytelling practices of storytellers who aren't all writers, who aren't all professionals." Fabulation is a way of making, a collection of "wild fact, facts that don't hold still" that inhabit fables. For her, it is not the

“speculative narrative” as it has been “domesticated in literary theory but the *fabulacion*, the worlding, full of animals and full of critters who maybe don’t really exist...full of creatures of the imagination...impossible worlds.” In this sense, speculative fabulation is a “critical germ, seed, and point of eruption.” In this connection between Malabou, Greene, Beauvoir, Ahmed and now Haraway, we can see this “point of eruption” as the moment in which the ambiguity has been recognized, the disorientation ripe, and the moment for de-linked imaginative potential as wildly flourishing.

Giving learners the space to imagine, to fabulate, to combine fact and fantasy, to play with the various SF assemblages that Haraway imagines is to cultivate the space for neural liberation, a liberation that might carry forth from spaces of learning to spaces of existence (as if they were delineated), broadening what we might believe we have to say, what we believe *can be said, can be thought, can be felt, can be made* in the project of world-building. In the “information age” we don’t need education that teaches how to find what already exists; we need education that teaches how to imagine what might become.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press, 2006.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Philosophical Library, 1948/2015.
- . "Introduction to an Ethics of Ambiguity." *Simone De Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Margaret A. Simons. University of Illinois Press, 2004, pp. 289-298.
- . "An Existentialist Looks at Americans." *Simone De Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Margaret A. Simons. University of Illinois Press, 2004, pp. 307-315.
- Greene, Maxine. *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. Jossey-Bass, 1995.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- . "Speculative Fabulation." Video produced by *Fabbula Magazine*. May 24, 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFGXTQnJETg>
- Malabou, Catherine. *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* Fordham University Press, 2008.