TEACHING IGNORANCE: ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING PSYCHOANALYTIC SENSIBILITIES IN EDUCATION

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Lacan once remarked that there was "something quite ironic about Christ's injunction to love thy neighbor as thyself because, actually, people hate themselves."[1] We might say, in observing the way people treat each other, perhaps they have always loved their neighbors as they've loved themselves: that is, "with a great deal of cruelty and disregard."[2] In his thorough engagement with Freud, Lacan theorizes that we are, at the core, ambivalent animals: wherever we love we hate, wherever we hate we love. Ambivalence does not, in the Freudian story (retold by Lacan, retold here by Adam Philips), mean mixed feelings, it means conflicting or contradictory feelings. Love and hate—too narrow concepts and so not quite accurate articulations—are the rudimentary sources, the most primary affects with which we try to make sense of our realities. They are mutually constituting in that you can't have one without the other.[3] Psychoanalytic inquiry encourages us to grapple with our often unrecognized yet structurally organizing ambivalences about anything and everything that matters to us, even as we carry on as if we are entirely rational, as if we are masters of our own house, so to speak. In other words, psychoanalytic insight informs us that we are often ignorant to our own affective (dis)investments.

Can Lacan's observation about our loving and hating our neighbors the way we love and hate ourselves help us to make sense of ongoing, almost incomprehensible suffering, the rise of hate crime, cruelty, and alt-right nationalist movements here and around the globe? In reflecting on the theme of this year's conference "Education and the Suffering of Others in an Era of Spectatorship," I've begun to wonder whether new technologies, social media, and social justice oriented classes have over stimulated students with so much suffering that for too many of them it has become expected and accepted as a somewhat boring obligation on par with being stuck in traffic or standing in line at the grocery store. While for some, bearing witness to the suffering of others is a call to action, for others it is paralyzing, anxiety inducing, maddening and depressing. Others still may be relatively aware but choose not to care as they find themselves completely consumed by trying to make ends meet, overwhelmed in trying to meet the demands of their own unaffordable and increasingly instrumentalized education in this cult of efficiency, where folks are

[1] As quoted in Adam Phillips, "Against Self-Criticism," *London Review of Books* 37, no. 5 (March 2015) https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n05/adam-phillips/against-self-criticism.
[2] Phillips, "Against Self-Criticism."
[3] Phillips.

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measured in terms of productivity rather than dignity. Worse yet, bound by doctrine or ideology, there are those that find the cruelty and suffering of Others justifiable, necessary, and even, (dare I say it?) quite pleasurable. What can we reasonably hope from education in such a political climate?

In this paper, I suggest that ignorant attachment can help to account for all that has led to and follows from Trumpism. I advocate for teaching about varieties of ignorance with a psychoanalytic sensibility as one strategy with which to engage the emotional investments that sustain apathy and the ignorant refusal to care in this new era of suffering and spectatorship. Ignorance, here conceived, is complex, far from consisting only in some passive *lack* of knowledge. It is understood multidimensionally, as *activity*, rarely innocent, always inevitable, and entirely ineradicable; it is a powerful agent in the maintenance of oppression, but it is also an important resource on which we can draw to promote curiosity and less defensive encounters with difficult knowledge and different Others. In diagnosing different forms of ignorance, we can distinguish between the varieties that are culturally produced and disseminated for profit from those forms which might serve as impetus for investigation. In short, ignorance, I argue, is best understood as a defense against difficult knowledge that circulates in structures and the subjectivities that constitute them. By incorporating psychoanalytic sensibilities to ignorance studies, we can invite examination of our own (structural and subjective) unacknowledged attachments and defensive refusals to know, in love, work, and play—and in our complicity in the suffering of Others (as well as our own).

In reflecting on the potential role of education and the teaching of ignorance to transform spectatorship of suffering to active engagement in the fight for dignity and civil rights, I was reminded[4] of how early in his career, W. E. B. Dubois was unwavering in his dedication to educating people about the actual realities of the so called Negro problem. Aiming to rectify the gross injustice, barbaric treatment, and widespread misunderstanding of Black folk, he sought to correct the absence and distortion of knowledge of Black life in history, sociology, philosophy, and the national narrative. He reasoned that accurate knowledge and representation of race would be the most important tool to be used in the fight against anti-Black racism. If we could do away with ignorance about Black folks in both Black and white communities (and consciousnesses), he reasoned, we would clear a path for equality once and for all. The world was thinking wrong about race because it did not know. The ultimate evil was

widespread ignorance, and "the cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation,"[5] or so he had once believed.

[4] Todd Dean, "The Psyche and The World Outside," Lecture given at the St Louis Psychoanalytic Institute (4/12/18).

[5] Eli Zaretsky, *Political Freud: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 48, as cited in Dean, "The Psyche and the World Outside."

Early in 1899, during his tenure at Atlanta University as he was diligently working on a 10 year program to create a body of knowledge that would properly depict the problems faced by Black folks—poverty, crime, family, education, and so on, his faith in constructing knowledge as a solution to the color line was forever shaken. He had learned that Sam Hose, a poor Black man in central Georgia, had been accused of murdering his landlord's wife. Worried about the fate of the accused, DuBois had written out a careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts and started down to the Atlanta Constitution Newspaper office. But he did not get there. On the way, he was greeted with this news: Hose had been cruelly, brutally, and viciously lynched, and his knuckles were on exhibition at the local grocery store, labeled and displayed alongside the pigs and the pork. In horror and disbelief, he turned back to the university, and turned aside from his work.[6] DuBois, Zaretsky explains, now understood that the violence and cruelty of lynching came from a place that was impervious to reason: "In the fight against race prejudice we were not facing simply the rational, conscious determination of white folk to oppress us; we were facing age-long complexes stuck now largely to unconscious habit and irrational urge."[7] Criticizing his earlier views that the race problem could be solved through knowledge acquisition and education, DuBois concluded, writes Zaretsky, that he had not been "sufficiently Freudian to understand how little human action is based on reason."[8]

Importantly, we learn here that DuBois began to shift his focus from race to racists and, we might say, draw on psychoanalytic theory to render the invisible forces driving racism a little more visible, an important move that would inspire a vast array of interdisciplinary scholarship that continued the work to show how violence and oppression dehumanize all members of the equation, victim and victimizer alike. Unpacking the perils of privilege, and the invisible forces beyond profit that drive it, continues to be an important strategy for engaging resistance across privileged-oppressed divides. Zaretsky shows how a wide range of twentieth-century radicals, activists, and intellectuals have used psychoanalytic ideas to probe consumer capitalism, racial violence, anti-Semitism, and patriarchy. I find his work compelling as I try to understand why and how we are literally on the verge of extinction and actively ignoring it; investments in contradictory forms of knowing and not knowing, defenses such as denial, disavowal, idealization, and splitting enable people to act violently, destructively, dangerously toward others and themselves without conscious awareness of guilt, without noticing harm done, or without conscious experience of contradiction. But also noted with psychoanalytic sensibility is that these defenses do not come without a cost. We remain blissfully ignorant at our peril.

The kinds of unreason and ignorance that drive lynch mobs (whether then or now) and so much of the violence and suffering we see at home and

[6] Zaretsky, *Political Freud*.
[7] Zaretsky.
[8] Zaretsky.

around the globe are no match, it seems to me, for knowledge that might be constructed in order to set the record straight. Rather than focus on curing unreason with rationality, or ignorance with knowledge, we need to make unreason, irrationality, and ignorance itself the object of study. Contrary to much popular belief, knowing better does not mean doing better. But just maybe, (just maybe?) shining light on forms of unknowing, mis-knowing and varieties of ignorance can help us to better grapple with and work through them.

Putting aside psychoanalytic insight into the forms of ignorance that drive violence, cruelty, and suffering for a moment, I turn now to briefly sketch the work of those who have more recently paved a way for the teaching of ignorance. I provide a brief overview of literature and conceptual tools as a strategy to inspire psychoanalytic sensibilities in the service of disciplinary diligence in the pursuit of knowledge, as well as for educating in service of the struggle for social and global sustainability and solidarity. I first look at those who find ignorance essential to never-ending investigation, then I turn to work of scholars who show how ignorance has been cultivated and disseminated as a weapon of domination and social control but also wielded as a form of active resistance against oppression. I then outline how these approaches to understanding ignorance can be better grappled with through the development of psychoanalytic sensibilities.

Advocates for Teaching Ignorance as Impetus for Investigation

Back in the 1980s, University of Arizona surgery professor Dr. Marlys H. Witte first proposed teaching a class entitled "Introduction to Medical and Other Ignorance." As reported by New York Times op-ed contributor, Jamie Holmes, Dr. Witte's proposal was not well received; she was greeted with derision and urged to, at the very least, alter the name of the course; she vehemently refused, adamant that far too often teachers focus only on what we know and fail to emphasize how much about a given topic is unknown. Advocating the importance of engaging students in recognizing the limits of knowledge as well as the importance of problem posing and questioning, she was unrelenting in her cause and finally found support from the American Medical Association to develop the course "students would fondly remember as Ignorance 101."[9] Witte went on to found the Summer Institute on Medical Ignorance at the University of Arizona and has created a curriculum and a vast amount of resources for introducing students to ignorance studies, including ignorance maps, guidelines for developing questioning skills, and packets for engaging students in new ways of thinking about ignorance and new forms of

[9] Jamie Holmes, "The Case for Teaching Ignorance," *The New York Times* (August 24, 2015), https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/24/opinion/the-case-for-teaching-ignorance.html.

inquiry.[10] I have adapted some of these and found them extremely helpful in encouraging students to begin to map out different forms of ignorance, with an eye toward developing analysis of power relations and different forms of complicity and culpability that might attach to them (though this last aspect was not part of Witte's project explicitly).

Classes like hers remain relatively few and far between, but in recent years a wide array of international and interdisciplinary scholars have made the convincing case that far from being deviant, ignorance is indeed the norm. Investigating ignorance and uncertainty can foster crucial critical thinking and questioning skills, as well as uncover latent curiosity that so much early education seems to squander and deem irrelevant. A constant emphasis on clarity, predictability, and measurement, ignorance advocates argue, works to convey a warped and unwarranted faith in objective knowledge. A decade or two after "Ignorance 101," Columbia University neuroscientist Stuart J. Firestein also began teaching a course on ignorance, noting how many of his students seemed to take as given our knowledge of the brain. Firestein shows how scientific inquiry must always be treated as unfinished, a process that will unfold in ways we can never predict, and, importantly, in his work, the drive for certainty is pathologized. It would seem that teaching students that ignorance can be overcome with knowledge is a dangerous business. For Firestein, answers ought not be taken to solve problems but should provoke new questions. Ignorance is not to be eliminated but cultivated as impetus for investigation.[11]

Michael Smithson, another educator of ignorance, explains:

> The larger the island of knowledge grows, the longer the shoreline — where knowledge meets ignorance — extends. The more we know, the more we can ask. Questions don't give way to answers so much as the two proliferate together. Answers breed questions. Curiosity isn't merely a static disposition but rather a passion of the mind that we must ceaselessly and carefully nurture. Mapping the coast of the island of knowledge, to continue the metaphor, requires a grasp of the psychology of ambiguity. The ever-expanding shoreline, where questions are born of answers, is terrain characterized by vague and conflicting information. The resulting state of uncertainty can intensify our emotions: not

[10] See MH Witte et al., "A Curriculum on Medical Ignorance," *Medical Education* 23, no. 1 (January 1989): 24–9, and https://ignorance.medicine.arizona.edu/programs/curriculum-medical-ignorance

[11] See Stuart Firestein, *Ignorance: How it Drives Science* (Oxford University Press, 2012) and https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_firestein_the_pursuit_of_ignorance?language=en.

> only exhilaration and surprise, but also confusion and frustration.[12]

What we learn from the advocates for teaching ignorance is that we need to unlearn desire for certainty and cultivate a disposition of curiosity—aspects of the human condition stymied by mainstream K–12 education, enamored as it has become with the cult of efficiency and accountability, measurement, and productivity. One helpful way to (re)discover our capacities to tolerate ambiguity might be to heed the calls of STEM professors cited earlier and also to step into the literary imagination and linger in what poet John Keats calls "Negative Capability," the "capacity for remaining in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact, logic, and reason."[13] Andrew Bennett describes literary practice as demonstrative of this kind of "knowing ignorance," as "literature embraces, explores, and celebrates the condition by which we are all beset, in that it confronts us with the human condition of not knowing."[14] While this inaugural work on advocating for the teaching of ignorance is extremely insightful and has paved a way for destigmatizing and further complicating common sense conceptions of ignorance as merely passive lack of knowledge, it doesn't directly engage questions of power or the role of actively constructed ignorance in worrisome logics of profit, oppression, and dehumanization, threatening the extinction of us all.

Actively Constructed Ignorance in Logics of Oppression

In terms of illuminating the dynamic relation between ignorance, knowledge, and power in nurturing a social justice consciousness, there is much worthy of note. In *Epistemology of the Closet,* Eve Sedgewick begins to develop a taxonomy of ignorance and privileged unknowing, illuminating questions of labor, erotics, and economics in their production and distribution. She writes, " Insofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge—a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either true or false under some or other regime of truth—these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as particular regimes of truth."[15] She documents how such constructions have made a home in binary thinking and the denial of sex and gender diversity. She illuminates the denial of difference in common sense logics and highlights the erotophobic and homophobic enterprise of western knowledge production itself. From Sedgwick we learn that, like knowledge, ignorance is motivated. When we pause to note the ways in which sex education policy fails to provide students with medically

[12] Quoted in Holmes, "The Case for Teaching Ignorance."
[13] Andrew Bennet, "Literary Ignorance" in *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, eds. Matthais Gross and Linsey McGoey (Routledge, 2015), 39.
[14] Bennet, "Literary Ignorance," 38.
[15] Eve Segewick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990), 8.

accurate information or discussion of LGBTQ+ communities, pleasure, and ethical relationships, it is fairly easy to see how ignorance continues to be crafted and carefully maintained for population control and domination.

Following Sedgewick's lead in demonstrating active constructions of ignorance in logics of oppression, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, illustrates how different forms of carefully crafted ignorance constitute racial knowledge, such that "white ignorance"[16] and the "denial of relationality"[17] are consciously produced and vigorously sustained in preserving racism and white privilege. Authors in this volume argue that the varieties of ignorance that underpin white supremacy are not to be understood as lack in knowledge nor epistemological oversight. Racist structures require racial ignorance that is actively produced, carefully maintained and meticulously disseminated. But equally importantly, ignorance is not simply a tool of oppression wielded by the powerful. Alison Bailey shows how it can also be a strategy for survival, an important tool for people of color to wield against white privilege and white supremacy.[18] Sullivan and Tuana's collection carefully documents the role of power in the construction of what is known, what is not known, and why we don't know it or mis-know, providing a lens for analysis of the political values at work in knowledge practices and the production of ignorance.

Another foundational collection to new studies in ignorance is *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance.* Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger invite authors to grapple with the questions of how ignorance is produced, what keeps it alive, allows it to thrive, and enables its use as a political instrument. Agnotology, a term that denotes the study of cultural productions of ignorance, documents the history of manufactured ignorances, shining light on why it is we don't know what we don't know. Authors explore ignorance as "manufactured doubt" and uncertainty by detailing its cultivation by the tobacco industry and climate change deniers. Also theorized is how ignorance functions as "lost, suppressed and forbidden" knowledge with regard to what we know and don't know about the clitoris and different historical practices of women in controlling their own reproductive capacities. Ignorance as "classified knowledge" and "military secrecy" under the veil of national security along with many other of its manifestations are explored in this rich and provocative work.[19] In the *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies,* we find further examples of the activity of ignorance across disciplinary boundaries from

[16] Charles Mills, "White Ignorance" in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (State University of New York Press, 2007), 11–38.
[17] Sara Lucia Hoagland, "Denying Relationality: Epistemology and Ethics and Ignorance" in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance,* 95–118.
[18] Alison Bailey, "Strategic Ignorance" in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, 77–94.
[19] Robert N Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, eds., *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

philosophy to journalism and meet conceptions of ignorance as "undone science" and science undone, "selective information," "presumed and transferred knowledge" with cautionary tales on how teachers and journalists can easily become the "purveyors of ignorance" if we neglect examination of its operations across fields of difference.[20] These new studies in ignorance offer us promising direction in engaging students in dialogue about how ignorance is inherently complex, multidimensional and, most importantly, strategic, something which is often intentionally culturally produced and socially sanctioned for profit and/or political gain. Further, it has been and should be engaged as a strategy of resistance. Like knowledge, ignorance is produced and circulates in three distinct but overlapping dimensions: structural/institutional, social/group-based, and subjective/individual.

Within the context of education in general, and social justice education in particular, teaching about strategies of ignorance, learning to distinguish its different faces, is a fruitful approach with which to engage students in dialogue about power and knowledge, about taboo and controversial topics, and can help to prepare them to engage the increasingly complex barrage of mis- and disinformation in mainstream news, the oval office, and social media. I want to go a step further and suggest that teaching ignorance infused with a little Freudianism is one way that social justice educators can encourage students to better understand and actively respond to the suffering of others in this new era of spectatorship, hate, and catastrophe. Ignorance conceived with psychoanalytic sensibility might be best understood as a defense against difficult knowledge structurally and subjectively.

Fostering Psychoanalytic Sensibilities: Thinking Through Ignorance as Defense

Because psychoanalysis is interested in understanding why one person or group comes to hate another and is inherently interested in creating contained opportunities for dialogue, it can help people to become more aware of the ways ignorance is self/group/structure-protective. As Anton Hart frames it, "psychoanalytically, it is axiomatic that both ignorance and its self-perpetuating variants such as prejudice and paranoia reside in all people. When we work to analyze transferences we are working toward the dismantling of such defensively held ignorance."[21] In this regard, transferences can be understood as prejudices acquired early in life, as ways of surviving the anxieties stemming from the problems of dependency and relatedness (Lacan's love/hate ambivalence). Accordingly, Hart elaborates, the goal when addressing prejudice is to "discover

[20] Matthais Gross and Lindsy McGoey, eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies* (Routledge, 2015).

[21] Anton Hart, "From Multicultural Competence to Radical Openness: A Psychoanalytic Engagement of Otherness" *The American Psychoanalyst* 51, no. 1 (2017): 12–27. http://www.apsa.org/apsaa-publications/vol51no1-TOC/html/vol51no1_09.xhtml.

blindnesses and defensive biases, how they may have been established and perpetuate themselves, not erase them or cover them with more desirable or socially acceptable thoughts and manners of speaking."[22] In other words, we might begin to investigate how structural (race or sex based) ignorance has fueled subjective investments of ignorance as mechanisms of defense against what we have learned to think of as threatening. The idea is not to erase or eradicate ignorance but investigate it and grapple with it more openly.

Psychoanalytic insight reminds us that normative measures fail to help us grapple with hatred and ignorance as elements of the human condition, stemming from the human fact of dependency; it reminds us that "the quest for new insight is always paralleled by the bliss of ignorance."[23] It reminds us that we ought to grapple with ambivalence and our defenses against it—in social structures and subjectivities. If we want to curb the cruelty involved in ignorant refusals to care about the suffering of Others, a turn to psychoanalysis can help encourage exploration of the pleasure and fears involved in the encounter with difficult knowledge, with difference. Perhaps thinking through Freud's work on mourning and melancholia could be instructive here. For in the context of the U.S. in particular, we need to grapple with the fact that while being a super power might feel good and offer a (false) sense of security on the one hand, we are currently more drug addicted, in debt, and suicidal than ever. Might we say that this stems from a refusal to mourn loss, to relinquish the power of whiteness? Might we say this is a death drive at work? Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism" could also be helpful here. Cruel optimism invites reflection on how our fantasies of the good life in fact inhibit our ability to attain it, so we must explore what it means to become undone by our fantasies and engage our imagination as we think about new forms of sustainable living and new forms of pleasure in ethical relationships and collective responsibility.[24] In short, the development of psychoanalytic sensibilities can help us unravel our unacknowledged affective (dis)investments in defensive ignorance in the encounter with that which is Other.

Conclusion

As a psychoanalyst in the classroom, Deborah Britzman offers keen insight into the utility of the development of psychoanalytic sensibilities in teaching and learning, particularly when we hope to inspire personal and social transformation in terms of social and global solidarity and sustainability. If we want to inspire active engagement with the quest to care about and engage with our own complicity in the suffering of others, what can we reasonably hope from education as vehicle for transformation? That education is a good idea, goes without saying, Britzman writes, but the thing with "things that go without saying

[22] Hart, "From Multicultural Competence," 12–27.

[23] Leo Rangell, "Defense and Resistance in Psychoanalysis and Life" *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 31S (1983): 147–174, 156.

[24] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

is that they are quickly forgotten. And this presents particular difficulties to presenting what needs to be said about the education we forget."[25] Forgetting, here, we might say is yet another strategy of ignorance we might learn to teach. Britzman sums up our current predicament nicely: Part of what has happened, she says, is this: "Students are urged to become clients with 'take away' knowledge; professors are urged to deliver the goods without too much affect; and this thumbs up and thumbs down education seems to justify the idealization of accountability, obedience based practice, quality assurance, professionalization and standardization."[26] The questions of love and hate, she continues, questions of "what learning feels like, why ideas make us nervous, what the contingencies of emotional life have to do with the ways in which thinking goes missing, and how one makes sense of discontentment in and desire for attaching to an education and others we know nothing about"[27] are ignored at our peril. Can we counter ignorant refusals to care with ignorance itself? The time has come to stop ignoring ignorance, to stop ignoring psychoanalytic sensibility, and to stop ignoring our need of and dependency on Others who suffer in our own demise. In teaching about varieties of ignorance conceived psychoanalytically, we might learn to listen to the human condition of education.

[25] Deborah Britzman, *A Psychoanalyst in the Classroom: On the Human Condition of Education* (Suny Press, 2015), vii.
[26] Britzman, *A Psychoanalyst in the Classroom*, vii.
[27] Britzman, viii.