

◆ Chapter 7

Social Pedagogy in the Information Age: Creating Reflexive Inclusivity to Combat Social Media-Fueled Narcissism and Solipsism

Bradley J. Nelson and Vivek Venkatesh

Let's cut to the chase: recent and ongoing attempts to “disappear” critical race theory, basically, the history of race relations in the United States, through political misinformation campaigns, legislative action, disinformation news commentary, and social media blitzes demonstrate that the crisis of othering is at its nadir.¹ It is not enough to respond to the resultant polarization with virtue signaling—at worst—and activism—at best—that more often than not fail to preach outside of one's own choir. This is not to suggest that one must cease to protest hegemonic, institutionalized, and systemic forms of inequality and injustice. We say this as a first step in making the case for a pedagogical approach that reframes, rejigs, and trains proponents of social justice paradigms to remain supple and agile so that they might cease othering those with whom they disagree. For not only should one not turn a deaf ear to those whose opinions are different from our own, but importantly, one must seek to understand the rationale for such divergences in opinion. We must learn to sustainably progress beyond reductive binary debates, so often steeped in identity politics and personal agendas, by critically framing social justice issues that persist in spite of those who espouse their lofty ideals. We advocate for a social pedagogy to imbibe and supplant the hierarchical notions of knowledge production, exchange, and transfer—both within and without socio-political institutionalized structures, especially in the digitized and connected social media landscape.

First, though, let's lay some groundwork for our arguments. Our passion is directed against the propagation of hate, specifically as an instantiation and even reification of the concept of the “other.” Hate speech, that is, the purposeful use of gestures, text, images, or multimedia to disparage and malign an individual or group based on identifiable characteristics, including—but

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not limited to—gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, has been present on the internet since its earliest days of public use.² The internet is uniquely suited for broadcasting hate speech because users can magnify hateful utterances in so-called “echo chambers” with large numbers of people who have like-minded ideological inclinations, purposefully excluding any and all forms of dissent. Hate groups’ online presence is diverse, from clearly marginal zones of radically violent language to sites with a more moderate rhetoric that, at first glance, can appear mainstream in design and tone, especially when sublimated and disguised as “free speech.” We propose that, to render some of the rationales behind why people hate more transparent, we must adopt instructional frameworks grounded in social pedagogy, with a focus on building critical thinking and information literacy skills at every level of society. In an age of increasing and ubiquitous consumption of online media, the para-academic and public discipline of social pedagogy refers to the organic development and study of the reflexive and inclusive adoption of digital technologies, such as mobile and social media, across formal, non-formal, and public learning contexts. Instructional design principles grounded in social pedagogy provide an opportunity to create online spaces in a radically democratic³ fashion that promote critical and agonistic debates about matters of social, economic, cultural, and political import, especially one as polarizing as hate speech. In addition, the ability of digital media to mobilize social consciousness around topics such as hate speech across cultural scenes such as music, visual arts, films, literature, and spoken word performances provides a unique opportunity for social pedagogy to impact and influence public sensibilities. Social pedagogy is capable of drawing multiple stakeholders, including politicians, police, lawmakers, and religious leaders, into debates about how to ensure criticality in discussions as polarizing as hateful conduct in our present-day post-truth society.

The goal of our essay is both to explain the underlying principles of social pedagogy as they relate to understanding and sensitizing the public to the deleterious effects of hate speech and to describe a series of guided discussions and hands-on training activities in a number of our own pedagogical initiatives. These include: Project SOMEONE,⁴ an international consortium of community, policy, and research partners building community resilience to counter discrimination; publicly-curated and improvised multimedia spectacles called “Landscape of Hate”⁵ and “Landscape of Hope”;⁶ Montréal-based Concordia University’s Interdisciplinary Summer Institute “Learning to Hate: Pluralism in an Era of Echo Chambers”;⁷ and the “Cervantes Public Project,” an online and social media-centered initiative designed to combat disinformation regarding Miguel de Cervantes, his works, and early modern Spain, as well as to apply Cervantine irony and mediatic self-reflexivity to current debates and cultural analysis.⁸

All of these projects have positioned themselves to provide leadership in the area of social pedagogy by developing strategies to counter and prevent online hate speech and the disinformation that fuels and sustains it. These projects put into practice social pedagogy and model methods for creating opportunities for academic partners, cultural scene collaborators, and students to engage with the broader community, including artists, educational policy makers, public safety stakeholders, and community leaders.

Introductory Remarks

As we ponder the answer to the query “what *is* social pedagogy?,” we are tempted to reflect—in a rather staidly sequential fashion—on the remnants of our thoughts on what social pedagogy *was* and what social pedagogy *could be*. It would also belie the strange and somewhat unnatural affectations we—as theorists and practitioners—have developed as we have transformed our professional and personal agendas to acutely focus on a stubborn and visceral need to destroy the *id*, to suppress the ego, and speculate on a future that lies just beyond the morbid consumption of our collective minds as they feed on the encrustations of, literally, billions of social media-fueled vanity projects. In his recent book *Dividuals*, Julio Baena writes:

[w]hen the reflection offers itself in the form of the revindication of oppressed collectivities such as Latinxs or African Americans, for whom [collective] identity is the antidote to the damage that individuality has done to them, a new reality distorts that reflection; that is when individuality assumes command of the process of identity in the form of the social media with its virtual regroupings of people in terms of ‘likes’ and the algorithmic engine . . . [i]ndividuality takes over any and all the weapons that identity offered to the collective.⁹

Baena unveils how social media platforms obstruct the formation of collective political identities by focusing on seeding, cultivating, and harvesting the attention of the individual. From this it follows that social pedagogy is nothing if it cannot be conceived as a necro-reflexive and harrowing journey of dissolution of the ego—necro-reflexive because one is forced to gaze at a deadened wretchedness in society mirrored in hierarchies of vulnerabilities, including one’s own, and harrowing because we have accustomed ourselves

to seeking pitifully numbed reactions that seemingly resonate in increasingly hollow ways within the paradigmatic silos we've spent so much time assembling around ourselves.

When one of our flagship initiative—Project SOMEONE (Social Media Education Every Day)—was created in 2014, one of its missions was to build online and offline spaces for pluralistic dialogue. It is becoming clearer, in 2023, that such an objective was not misplaced in that the form of pluralism we champion seeks to affirm the silos within which paradigms tend to function and successfully replicate their theoretical saturations; at the same time, to create the porous foundations for sharp and even shocking exchanges of counter-ideas, we must take the time to resonate against, chip away at, and breach the steely walls created by the heroes and heroines of these insular, canonized paradigms. Consider one of the latest initiatives undertaken by Project SOMEONE, which seeks to create dialogic overtures between Canadian urban communities marginalized by social and racial profiling perpetrated upon them by public safety stakeholders. Social service and community stakeholder organizations are unwilling—with reason—to meet at the proverbial roundtable with the police before a firm acquiescence and acknowledgement of the problem at hand is made by the authorities who inflict such demonstrable oppression. While a solution is not necessarily at hand, Project SOMEONE seeks to magnify these oppressed voices through research, storytelling, and public engagement and, by helping these communities re-appropriate their cultural tropes, to create the exclusive physical and virtual spaces that amplify the participatory action research needed to open up the possibility of dialogue.

Another useful example is the September 2022 celebration of Muslim Awareness Week held at Concordia University in Montreal. Although the ostensible reason for the event was the celebration of Muslim cultures in Montreal and Quebec, the motivating impulse behind the selection and presentations of the speakers was Quebec's Bill 21 (2019) respecting the laicity of the state, which prohibits the wearing of religious symbols by certain public employees in positions of authority and grandfathers those who were in office when the bill was introduced. Although enforcement of the law has been inconsistent and largely lacking, it is worth noting that the first person to be prosecuted was Fatemeh Anvari, a Muslim elementary school teacher who was removed from the classroom, whose very public arrest exposed the institutional and cultural racism and sexism at the law's core. Curiously, according to a study by Miriam Taylor of the Association for Canadian Studies, although Quebecers are generally supportive of the law, surveys have shown them to be reluctant to advocate for enforcing the law; moreover, a majority would be inclined to drop their support for the law altogether if Quebec courts deem it to be discriminatory.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the study also reveals that, in the three

years since the law's adoption, Muslim women, alongside other racial minorities in Quebec, have experienced a dramatic increase in acts of overt and subdued racism and a significant loss of well-being and feelings of belonging. In response to this situation, the three speakers at Muslim Awareness Week offered a pan-historical presentation and discussion that revealed the wide variety of Muslim sartorial practices and cultures, ranging from medieval Iberia (Professor Adnan Husain) to the contemporary Kingdom of Qaboos (cultural attaché Kathleen Ridolfo). Bradley Nelson's talk on the representation of Muslim characters and dress in the seventeenth-century novel *Don Quixote* characterized Cervantes's ironic juxtaposition of non-Muslim characters disguised in Muslim dress with Morisco characters' use of non-Muslim outfits as a way to expose the devastating effects of institutional racism on the humanity and well-being of minority cultures in early modern Spain. Cervantes's irony, pathos, and humor can be productively used to help identify analogous racist structures and fears at the heart of contemporary expressions of racism, like Quebec's Bill 21.

Presumptions

Our speculations stride alongside a darkly dystopic¹¹ landscape within which we wish to implement a presciently empowering conception of social pedagogy. To our way of thinking, dark dystopia reflects the non-canonical and artistically minded conjectures—both past and present—of the sordid outputs of liberal democratic processes and of the rapidly devolving humanism that coincides with the technological advancements in our society. The dystopic biomechanical aesthetic of Swiss artist Hans Ruedi Giger clearly projects a technologically ravaged futuristic version of the earth, wherein overpopulation, thanatotic desires, and over-industrialization point to a bodily and stately decay of humanity.¹² Giger's institutionalized versions of hyperreality¹³—that is to say, the liminal space wherein the human conscience makes no distinction between reality and its virtual representations—are keenly mirrored in literary works of early modern Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes. The paradigmatic example of a work that critically examines the artificial barriers erected between individuals—and social castes—through virtual realities is, of course, the aforementioned *Don Quixote*. Through Cervantine irony, readers of the novel are instructed in the ways that the theatrical matrices engineered by the Spanish nobility erect and enforce racial and ethnic divisions that reify their own power by diverting the individual's potentially critical reading of an oppressive culture of spectacle toward a neurotic obsession with their own racial purity.¹⁴ Reflexive readings of social and cultural artifices are at the heart

of the Cervantes Public Project, which uses Twitter, Instagram, engagement with online publications, as well as podcasts¹⁵ to critique the gross misuse of Cervantine tropes and to instruct readers and listeners on how to implement Cervantine irony in the reading of reality, which Castillo and Egginton have called *reality literacy*.¹⁶ Examples include cogent analyses of recent cartoons depicting Donald Trump as a heroic Don Quixote pursuing his “impossible dream”¹⁷ and Eric Drooker’s recent cover for the *New Yorker*, in which Picasso’s melancholic knight sits alone on Rocinante facing an apocalyptic landscape in the Cervantes Public Project.¹⁸ According to Castillo and Childers, these widely distributed epic and apocalyptic images of Don Quixote elide the mediatic self-reflexivity that saturates Cervantes’s original, thereby occluding the critically pedagogical potential of Cervantes’s *oeuvre*. In Castillo’s words, “as we travel deeper into the reality-on-demand digital age that has produced the most effective and far-reaching disinformation-spreading machines in history, from Fox News to Facebook/Meta to Twitter, let’s not underestimate the power of irony to expose counterfeits and combat demagoguery.”¹⁹

Elsewhere, Polish film director Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *Decalogue* (1988) and its realist depiction of Poland’s hesitant and poignant exit from communist rule provides an impressively reflexive framework to guide our thinking with respect to social pedagogy. The prescience with which Kieślowski hurries the viewer to confront the accelerationist²⁰ regimes that hasten the arrival of technological advances to the ultimate detriment of humanist ideals (c.f., *Decalogue* Volume One) is mirrored in the ritualism and morbidly magnetic pull of our own identity devolutions in the hyper-consumerized realm of social media and its “influencer” subculture. Kieślowski ponders the important question of why we would yearn for a humane savior to emerge from such technocracies when the endgame is, in fact, the destruction of humanist ways of thinking. Such liminality is not dissimilar from the horrifying gaze that penetrates viewers when terrorist organizations like Daesh release propaganda films depicting the murder of alleged traitors,²¹ or when a right-wing extremist livestreams their mass killings of Muslim worshippers, as was the case in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019. Media artifacts of such extremist undertakings invert the postmodern leanings of centering and favoring the individual consumption experience to instead emphasize an intensely magnified focus on one reality, namely that of the political, religious, and cultural elite. These videos serve a unique need that instantiates a horrific reification of the Western cinematic tropes of senseless violence, usurpation of political power, and revenge by forcing viewers to accept the real consumption of death while simultaneously effacing its symbolism.

It does seem, though, that the canonically powerful and terrifyingly evocative measures of justice meted out—especially against one’s own kind in

Cervantes's and Kieślowski's tales and in the propaganda produced by terrorist organizations like Daesh—occupy too little place in our efforts to make sense of the collective narcissism that pervades the empty spaces surrounding our society's intellectual silos. It is in these spaces where we need to ensure that social pedagogy makes its mark and creates a ripple effect—for nothing other than human selflessness, characterized by a wave of dissent, can expose the tired and solipsistic logics of the intelligentsia from within. Despite these metaphorically dire and purposefully extreme presumptions of the state of social affairs, we make no apologies for our characterizations of the introverted states of individual and collective minds that must, nevertheless, catalyze a crucial turn in the forms of public mediation to crack open the aforementioned silos.

Thus, the crux of this essay, as with the pedagogical projects we have undertaken over the last few years, is simultaneously theoretical and practical, historical and contemporary, reflective and active. As we have moved forward with innovative projects of engagement that alternately challenge and reward students, audiences, and partners, it has become necessary both as intellectuals and practitioners to ground our work in recognizable authorities and pedagogical paradigms, in part, to better understand our own work, but also to make that work comprehensible and repeatable for ourselves and others. Monikers such as “Landscape of Hate,” “Landscape of Hope,” or “Learning to Hate” require theoretical, pedagogical, and historical contexts or frameworks if we want to share their methodologies so that others can understand them, experiment with them in other productive spaces, and engage as many stakeholders as possible in comprehending and thereby combatting hate and its various roles in creating, expanding, and mobilizing extremist ideologies of division and oppression. We will stress the concept of *partners* throughout our essay, because one of the principal theories and techniques of our work is to challenge the teacher-student, benefactor-recipient, knowledgeable-unknowledgeable dichotomies and hierarchies upon which much modern educational theory is based and is practiced.

Oppression as Catharsis

Paolo Freire begins his powerful *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with the observation that the biggest obstacle to progressive change in society is the “fear of freedom,” stating that those who act out of such a fear often present themselves as “defenders of freedom. But they confuse freedom with the maintenance of the status quo; so that if *conscientização* threatens to place that status quo in question, it thereby seems to constitute a threat to freedom

itself.”²² *Concientização* signifies the humanistic understanding of the historical, economic, political, and psychological conditions and mechanisms that inform and maintain a violent hold over (neo)colonial and neoliberal social and economic relations. Freire’s pedagogical program is designed to bring subjects through a problem-based educational practice that humanizes and empowers partners in the pedagogical praxis of reimagining themselves as free co-creators of the world around them as opposed to freedom-fearing thralls of the compensatory ideologies in which they are trapped. Project SOMEONE and our network of partners in North America, Europe, and the Middle East rely exclusively on the shared and collaborative experiences that enable us to co-create, adapt, and build contextualized strategies to magnify community resilience narratives with, for example, refugee communities in Lebanon, racially and socially marginalized populations in Canada, and social service professionals who work with orphaned refugee youth in Southern Europe. While each context is distinct, the underlying humanist mechanisms that allow us to respect the exclusive features of each community and iteratively work to sustainably empower from within are a testament to our Freirean leanings.

Our focus on the artistic and ideological landscapes that arise from and respond to extreme metal music²³ and its generation of spectacles of hate²⁴ foment a dialectical model that moves between destructive *necrophilia* and its opposite, *biophilia*.²⁵ Recent work on Cervantes has likewise emphasized his critical consideration of ethnocentric and religious structures and expressions of othering and hate speech through the juxtaposition of scenes of expulsion or threats of death with the collective narrativization of the harrowing experiences of individuals.²⁶

Seeing Is Not Believing But It Might Be Perceiving

In Cervantes’s theatrical interlude *El retablo de las maravillas*,²⁷ a ragtag theatrical troupe arrives to a rural Castilian town whose inhabitants await the arrival of the king’s army, whom they are expected to billet. The impresario Chanfalla explains to the town council that his troupe will put on the most marvelous spectacle the peasants have ever seen, provided the spectators satisfy the conditions for seeing the amazing spectacle and, of course, pay him. In short, one must be of pure Christian blood and the legitimate son (or daughter) of one’s legally married parents in order to see the show. Having literally set the stage, Cervantes proceeds to expose the existential terror that the individual townspeople experience, and the subsequent mental contortions to which they subject themselves professing to see what is literally not there.

The play climaxes with one of the men of the town dancing all by himself while imagining he is dancing with King Herod's daughter Herodias.

The play makes clear that the principal motivation for the townspeople's mass psychosis is fear, revealed in the numerous asides by the Gobernador, who panics when he realizes that he cannot actually see what the mediatic con man is narrating on the stage. To preserve his social honor, which is grounded in a narcissistic attachment to racial myths of superiority, he echoes the vociferous declarations of his neighbors rather than believing what is—or, actually, is *not*—in front of his eyes. It is an exaggerated and yet completely believable transposition of what happens in *Don Quixote* when the errant knight compels those around him to acquiesce to his absurd narcissistic projections to keep the peace or avoid uncomfortable confrontations. What ultimately happens, however, is that the entire landscape becomes a theatrical *mise en abyme* populated with “fake news” and “big lies.”²⁸ Returning to the *Retablo*, when the official agent for the king's army arrives at the climax of the nonexistent play and asks “what the hell is going on here,” the townspeople accuse him of being blind and thus “one of them!”²⁹ [*De ex illis est*], and the play ends in total chaos. The attempt to point out the obvious—that there is nothing to see—serves to strengthen the townspeople's insistence on their imagined (racist) identity through the identification and collective hate directed against an *Other*. The reader, meanwhile, sees all of this from a distanced point of view, one that is designed to penetrate and question their own adherence to the ethno-racial myths of exceptionalism and exclusion on which Spanish national identity was established. Cervantes's method can be called socially pedagogical in the sense that the irrational fears and ontological violence at the heart of a racist ideology are allowed to freely express themselves in all their absurdness and violence without an explicit judgment being rendered by the author, moral or otherwise. One feels empathy for the terror of the Gobernador, laughs at the cognitive contortions of the villagers, and, finally, feels revulsion at the violent othering of the military officer, who, after all, is the maximum representative of the imperial government. This is precisely the kind of analysis and education envisioned by the Cervantes Public Project.

In analogous fashion, the rise of Black Metal in Scandinavia in the early 1990s can be tracked to the increasing hegemony of the European Union and the reining in of European national interests and concerns by an emergent multi-national political, economic, and military order. The lyrics and visual motifs of many Black Metal songs reflect the modern attempt to create a European hegemony through the historical imposition of an imperialistic Christianity over “native” pagan religions in the Middle Ages, which helps explain the fervent anti-Christian posture of Black Metal. The latter uses mythologies analogous to the Spanish trope of blood purity, but as an act of resistance to

what is perceived as a threatening international order. Thus, the Scandinavian phenomenon is both homologous and antithetical to the historical moment in which Cervantes is writing his powerfully ironic works, when honor and “blood purity” were tools of official propaganda used to entice tax-paying peasants in Spain to identify with the monarchical-seignorial elements of the Spanish court while being denied the material privileges enjoyed by the aristocracy. Honor plays and Scandinavian Black Metal function, in the end, as imaginary identification mechanisms that exploit the desire to belong while simultaneously triggering the fear of, and fear of *becoming*, the *Other*. These imaginary identifications and the fear at their heart are a primary target of Freire, who assembles an educational methodology for contesting such ideologies and constructing more dialogical and life-affirming beliefs and practices, what we are calling *social pedagogy*.

Hate and Hope in the Public Sphere

In our educational projects, we consider the “oppressed” to be individuals who have internalized an extreme view or position with regards to racial, ethnic, or sexual identity and otherness to the point where dialogue has become all but impossible. This is certainly the case in the situations described above, and it equally applies to extremist ideologies such as white supremacy, the far-right, religious fundamentalism, as well as far-left positions that engage in violence to achieve their political ends. Project SOMEONE tackles these issues head-on in its conception of public pedagogy projects such as Landscape of Hate and Landscape of Hope. The former is an improvised multimedia project with the objective of promoting and favoring the public voice in framing pluralistic dialogues about how we negotiate various forms of hate in our society. Events under this banner typically consist of a combination of panel discussions, debates, art expositions, and multimedia spectacles. These spectacles include a combination of original compositions of electronic music, audio samples, social media feeds, soundscapes, and video projections. The lyrical materials are derived from data collected from the Internet, research interviews, and other public sources that purposefully source hateful rhetoric, and narratives of resilience against these forms of discrimination. Each unique performance draws from scene-based soundscapes, filmic languages, and social media polarizations, thereby provoking, titillating, and scattering catalysts for pluralistic thought and expositions. The Learning to Hate Summer Institute, which we first held in June of 2018, anchored itself around a Freirean philosophy of sharing expertise, purposefully refusing to create hierarchies of knowledge dissemination. Furthermore, the collection of digital media by participants

from multiple disciplines, including public policy, arts, humanities, criminology, and sociology, and their ensuing reflections with the facilitators of the Institute were subsequently performed by the Landscape of Hate collective. Such an undertaking typifies the social pedagogical dissolutions of ego that have come to characterize our interactions with our participants.

The second initiative is Landscape of Hope, and while it is inspired by its older sibling Landscape of Hate, it differs significantly in that it explores the boundaries of inclusivity for marginalized communities by creating exclusive artistic spaces for them to project their unique narratives. Landscape of Hope is an arts-based multimedia remixing project that empowers youth with critical digital literacy skills to create alternative media narratives that build resilience against extremism by countering racism, prejudice, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination. We bring together multiple stakeholders, from public policy and safety, social services, social media, mental health, and educational sectors, and enable them to collaborate directly with marginalized youth to create sustainable and impactful primary prevention to combat extremism. First, we create frameworks for workshops to counter different forms of discrimination amongst these youth. Outcomes from these workshops include increased sensibilities toward information literacy, pro-social behaviors, and moral engagement through the novel use of mobile and digital media as is already conducted under the Landscape of Hate banner. Second, these workshops feed into a series of youth-led, multimedia-based performance and installation pieces, which feature media and musical narratives to showcase community resilience that combats racism, discrimination, and other acts of prejudice.

Reflection and Uncomfortable Confrontation as Necessary Conditions of Social Pedagogy

Instead of offering a solution to the oppressed state and unconscious internalization of the oppressor in the object of his pedagogical program, Freire advocates for a dialogical process of becoming that seeks to understand and analyze the historical, social, and economic conditions that produce asymmetrical power relations. Turning the gaze of the oppressed back onto their personal experiences as a problem to be disarticulated and understood, and not from the traditional power dynamic of teacher-student but from a participatory structure, invites the active engagement of the oppressed. We have seen how Cervantes triggers deep acts of reflection on how power and individual desire interact in *El retablo de las maravillas*, where the reader/spectator considers each fearful spectator's engagement with the literally empty public spectacle.

For Freire, such processes of *conscientização* occur in two stages: “In the first stage this confrontation occurs through the change in the way the oppressed perceive the world of oppression; in the second stage, through the expulsion of myths created and developed in the old order, which like specters haunt the new structure emerging from the revolutionary transfer.”³⁰ This change in perception is where reality ceases to be a *given*, both in the sense of a solid, irrefutable Cartesian fact, and in the sense that this given is the “gift” of the oppressor. Instead, it becomes a problem to be understood and eventually contested, questioned, or overcome through a collective effort that begins with the individual. The second stage is equally important, because this expulsion of myths and the very structure of myth in the fashioning of economic, social, and political realities is just as important for an interrogation of neoliberal mythology as it is in “extremist” ideologies.

If we listen to individual experiences of Canadian former extremists such as Brad Galloway, Mubin Shaikh, and Maxime Fiset, the expulsion of myths and the ideological anchors they provide is at the crux of overcoming the individual’s fear of freedom, a freedom that is required to create new realities based not on fear but on hope and on the formation of communities that eschew mythological foundations in favor of a dialogical engagement with the material conditions in which they are situated. In their lucid interviews, which were filmed for Project SOMEONE’s massive open online course (MOOC) “From Hate to Hope,” Galloway, Shaikh, and Fiset describe the realizations they had on how the process of othering was emotionally exhilarating and powerful during their descent into violent extremism. Yet, this same othering was repugnant to them as they were exiting their respective movements when weighed against the largely humanist framework of compassion that they felt from those that they othered.³¹ Such cognitive dissonance is also apparent in the “conversion” experience of Megan Phelps-Roper, the former firebrand for the Westboro Baptist Church’s assault on homosexuality, who describes how agonizing and terrifying it was to realize how the veil of religious doctrine, which once seemed so solid and unassailable, could fall completely away once subjected to questions concerning its strategic exploitation of a limited scope of biblical passages supported by an apocalyptic interpretation of current events.³²

Neo-Communitarity as Social Pedagogy

The pedagogical events and social media engagements at the heart of our outreach projects endeavor to empower the partners we seek to engage in a participatory dialogue and the production of artistic representations of the power

dynamics and aesthetic practices at the heart of extremist ideologies based on hate. And this is the essence of social pedagogy as it relates to our public engagement initiatives in the twenty-first century. First off, social pedagogy is communal. In an era of near post-web 2.0—what with the impending arrival of the speedy, much-heralded 5G communication technology—the act of creating, becoming a member of, sharing common interests with, and building communities will become even more ubiquitous than was afforded by the Internet in the past. However, to remain effective, socially pedagogic practice must upend the norms of community formation and foment non-hierarchical and organic bonding of its members, both in online and offline settings. The communality of social pedagogy does not insist on adopting shared values, beliefs, customs, or rituals, as much as it allows for legitimate peripheral participation so that a multitude of perspectives and standpoints are brought to bear on any issue at stake. The paradoxical legitimization of the points of view of those who wish to remain on the boundaries of the community seeks to dissolve the individuality associated with said ideas—for a social pedagogy is powerful only when the ideas debated remain faceless but never nameless. This means that, as social pedagogues, we are responsible for welcoming opposing views, with attention being paid to equipping our learners with the critical thinking and cognitive tools necessary for the dissection of ideas and not the character assassination of those who propose those ideas. Within such a pedagogy, one insists on critique, both of a reflective and an ideological nature. And one insists on recapturing the aching loneliness of the passage of time as a key characteristic of reflective practice.³³ For it is not too far-fetched to ask that one ponder and re-ponder the complexities of the ideas presented, their blind spots as well as their fantasies, instead of reacting within an echo chamber and taking fake solace in the reverberations of those who possibly know as little of the other points of view as you might.

Pluralism as Social Pedagogy

Far too many accelerationists have warned of the technological destruction of society through the throttling-up and unconscious feeding of capitalistic structures.³⁴ Yet too few of us engaged in innovative social pedagogies speculate on the broader question that accelerationism poses, which is a variant of the following: “what happens when we have exhausted selling our identities in our valiant but failing efforts to propel our vanity projects?” As we write this essay at the beginning of 2023, the vanity political projects of the extremist right in the United States have completely paralyzed the United States government by fomenting the failure to elect a Speaker of the House

of Representatives, a historically mundane and routine act that has become a risible media circus.³⁵ These deep attachments—emotional, social, political, cognitive, or otherwise—to our respective causes are one of the issues that social pedagogy must rail against. For herein lies the essence of social pedagogy: the oft-ignored and much suppressed notion of pluralism,³⁶ most necessarily of the agonistic variety.³⁷ We must take a step back and listen not just to the other's views, but we must undertake the cognitive efforts to clarify the experiences, intentions, and rationale for these views. The agonism—which is an emotionally charged description of the reactions that accompany being faced with different points of view that seeps into such a pluralistic dialogue—must speak louder than the indignation that characterizes the knee-jerk reactions so often observed in an era of social media.

Such a social pedagogy is therefore inclusive, and at the same time, its inclusivity is characterized by a surprising exclusivity. That is to say, while our efforts at inclusion seek to provide the spaces for marginalized communities to safely parse their life experiences and their identities via lenses of patriarchy, oppression, and discrimination, who is to argue with the assertion that these communities need to protect the privacy of their humanism from the vapid activism that shines with a shallow coat of narcissistic glory? Let us recall Baena's stinging indictment of how social media co-opt the mechanisms and vocabularies of marginalized collective identities in the name of an elusive and isolating individual authenticity. Magnifying the marginalized other's voice from a position of privilege serves this latter communicator of the narrative, especially when the political capital derived from the inanity of sharing, liking, and commenting through social media is firmly couched in the revenue streams of social media firms. Instead, inclusivity in social pedagogy requires the preservation of the voice—as told and seen by the storyteller—and careful attentiveness to the needs of the communities that are represented from within rather than without. For example, Project SOMEONE's recent work in Lebanon was conceived and led by the stakeholders themselves: social service workers, refugee camp managers, teachers, journalists, and activists. And through dialogic approaches to the construction of interventions that in turn addressed objectives of sustainable empowerment and critical digital literacy, we were able to craft unique social pedagogical frameworks designed to persist and adapt themselves to the realities of the local populations.

Coda

While it is facile to note that enabling the physical, mental, social, and institutional frameworks that catalyze pluralism are a necessary first step in

creating social pedagogy, these processes have generally aligned themselves with the positivistic outputs that mischaracterize pluralism—namely, the servile intentions that easily represent a communal flavor of “perspective-taking” and needless exercises in consensus building. If not for dissent and debate as necessary conditions of Laclau and Mouffe’s exhortation of the values of agonistic pluralism,³⁸ our social pedagogy would not be able to withstand the resounding echoes from within the silos wherein we are so used to residing. Consider how cognitively difficult it can be to take on another person’s perspective, whether as an exercise in shaping the ephemeral concepts of empathy, compassion, and even humanism, or in attempting to rationalize a point of view that may not resemble your own. Developing the tools to create, evoke, and maintain an emotional state that digs deeper into the negation of the unified self and the promulgation of the other, as well as a consistent questioning and deconstruction of one’s own ideals accompanied by an unflinching commitment to argue a point to its logical conclusive turn, are key features of a social pedagogical approach that renders its humanism as essential as its political commitments. Rather than focusing exclusively on the combative and solipsistic voices and forces we face in our daily struggle to claim a privileged place from which to contest and correct what we see as the corrosive violence around us, we advocate for a recognition and Cervantine ironization of our own positions and voices as thinkers and educators and the institutions that surround and protect us.

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3. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985).

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17. See the cartoon in Reed, “Right-wing cartoonist draws Trump and Don Quixote—but draws mockery for missing book’s point,” *Salon*, July 9, 2021, https://www.salon.com/2021/07/09/right-wing-cartoonist-draws-trump-as-don-quijote--but-draws-mockery-for-missing-books-point_partner/.
18. David Castillo, “Talking Quixotic Trumpism with Cervantes and his Homies Stephen Colbert and Sacha Baron Cohen,” *Cervantes Public Project*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.cervantespublicproject.com/blog/quixotictrumpism>; William Childers. “Beyond Quixotic Climate-Change Melancholy; Or, Sancho Knows Bullshit when He Smells It,” *Cervantes Public Project*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.cervantespublicproject.com/blog/drooker-childers>
19. Castillo, “Talking Quixotic Trumpism.”
20. Jason J. Wallin and Vivek Venkatesh, “No Satisfaction, No Fun, No Future: Black Metal and the Occult,” in *Dark Glamor: Accelerationism and the Occult*, ed. T. Matts, E. Keller, and B. Noys (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, forthcoming), 176. As Wallin and Venkatesh have described, “accelerationist thinking . . . propos[es] that the present order of life ‘given’ through neo-liberalism and the edicts of the state both delimit and monopolize our imagination of futures that no longer resemble the image of how life ought to go. Aspects of the accelerationist movement suggest that sociopolitical transformation is necessarily enjoined to the mobilization of resources and attitudes capable of altering the present conditions of oppression and banality as they mar the emergence of alternative or co-present realisms.”
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28. Castillo and Egginton, *What Would Cervantes Do?*
29. Cervantes, *El retablo de las maravillas*, 235.
30. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 55.
31. See <https://vimeo.com/330831955/aab27a59e7>, <https://vimeo.com/330829418/6e2ef5428f>, and <https://vimeo.com/330843207/fac6fa9f14> for full interviews with Maxime Fiset, Mubin Shaikh and Brad Galloway, respectively.
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