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## Acts of Interpretation: Pedagogies of Inquiry

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## Acts of Interpretation: Pedagogies of Inquiry

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[T]he world is not given, it is not simply ‘there.’ We constitute it by acts of interpretation.

—Jonathan Z. Smith, 1988

In Nadine Gordimer’s 1970 novel *A Guest of Honour*, the central white figure, diplomat James Bray, is asked by a newly installed Black president to shift from the diplomatic sphere to organize educational structures for a newly minted Black national constituency. Intelligent, sensitive, and empathetic, Bray considers his own sophisticated background in the context of this semi-literate Southern African country and thinks: “What was needed was perhaps someone with a knowledge of the basic techniques of learning. Someone who could cut through the old assumptions that relied so heavily on a particular cultural background, and concentrate on the learning process itself” (109). Although not himself an educator, he addresses his assignment with a deep respect for the mass of needy people around him—for their keen observational skills, capacity to survive in their unpredictable surround, untapped abilities, and genius at reading innuendo.

Bray's attitudes and expectations are not so different from those of Paulo Freire. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues forcefully against the European educational model that has shaped education in the new world for more than a century, a system that results in what he calls "the banking concept." This concept rests on a social structure that presumes student ignorance versus faculty knowledge; it presupposes a shared and self-validating or self-undermining cultural grounding in class, and it rests on "the assumption of a dichotomy between man and the world" (62). Freire argues that a pedagogy embodying so deep a hierarchical divide both expresses and enforces a power structure that militates against critical thinking. He advocates as a counteraction "the posing of the problems of [men] in their relations with the world." "Problem-posing education, responding to the essence of consciousness—INTENTIONALITY—rejects communiqués and embodies communication. . . . Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transfers of information" (66–67). Problem-posing methodology, Freire says, shifts the student-teacher relationship, which in turn shifts the entire learning/teaching enterprise: "The students—no longer docile listeners—are more critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (68). For him "the form of action [men] adopt is to a large extent a function of how they see themselves in the world" (71).

When I began working on City as Text™ (CAT) as an integrative strategy that would realign the classroom in order to build a problem-setting ambience for the kind of change Freire envisioned, the thinking of Parker J. Palmer was reaffirming. The dominant ethos of the academy in the 1970s and 1980s, and in some ways still, posited a dichotomy between the campus and world that is antithetical to the problem-posing approach of Freire. Palmer urged students instead "to intersect their autobiographies with the life stories of the world" in his persuasive article "Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing" (22). Mapping and ways of knowing were a starting point.

City as Text, designed from its inception as a vehicle of integrative learning, offered the chance to provide a seminar cum field

laboratory in which students brought into discussion readings from social sciences, science, and literature (all focused on a theme chosen for its richness in the specific locale of a Semester) even as they grew familiar with that site in extended field explorations; students integrated the expertise of others into their own direct investigation undertaken almost weekly. Writing up their field notes for use as additional texts in seminar catalyzed rounds of questions about what was observed, by whom, and how. Inevitably the issue of “lens” came up. For example, when three or four students wrote about the same event or location, the puzzle of their seeing differing dramas unfold through multiple lenses moved to the center of discussion.

Student’s lived experiences, reiterated and written up as texts for weekly classroom discussion, became additional information allowing entry into a new reality. Progression from reported text to innuendo, metaphor, nuance, and voice moved every session to questions of context and interpretation. The increasing emphasis on voice and perspective was powerful to professors in NCHC Honors Semesters and, as all of us veterans now know, transformative as well. Class discussion became almost immediately a “conversation among interpretations,” in Jonathan Z. Smith’s formulation (11). Just as quickly, discussion turned to the need for evidence: Whose eyes, what context, what words or tones? What made you think so?

An emphasis on evidence arising from explorations and from the discussions that ensued distinguishes CAT methodology as one among several sources of information and analysis in field-based seminars. The more a CAT seminar is embedded in a site-specific cluster of courses that represent varying domains of inquiry, the more effective is this approach to field-based pedagogy. Organic design enables integrative insights and nourishes skills of mapping, observing, interpreting, and reflecting to shape independent investigation and intellectual and emotional growth. (See Braid, “Field-Based Education.”) The more various the disciplinary cluster, the more powerful the integrative dynamic of CAT.

The cumulative effect of repetition is a powerful promoter of students’ sense of being in the moment and of connecting to an unfolding drama. Exploring and reporting back produce an

exhilaration that spurs motivation to redo it all autonomously and in self-selected destinations. Even the miniaturized versions of a preliminary CAT experience at NCHC conferences evoke an evident exhilaration and a desire to go out again independently, as our CAT colleagues always report at conference debriefings.

The emergence of interpretation as a key element in discovery—of place, of process, of self—is central to an understanding of how all of this CAT apparatus works. Students presenting their written summary respond to questions; queries about significant detail; considerations of that detail as support for the speaker's conclusions about meaning; and prolonged discussions of evidence to support those conclusions. As the discussions recur, students become increasingly aware that interpretation of events must be based on convincing evidence, and since the experience being reported is unique to the student presenting it, there is pressure to pinpoint precisely which aspects of the scene in question could provide that evidence. The unravelling of a scene so viscerally present in the mind of the reporter requires answers to questions about lens, context, tone, and preconception that undergird the overall question: "What makes you think so?" In turn, the sequence described here triggers some insight that surprises students even while they are leading a discussion about their own processes.

A need for specificity, for citing a range of detail including emotional content, rests on the metamorphosis of data points into patterns that shape meaning and interpretation. Witnessing their own thought processes, students who are far more accustomed to what they think of as "objective" reporting (often of other people's data points) react in powerful ways. The power of surprise may reside in their harvesting of what their own senses have revealed to them, which they now hear in their own voice. When their exploration of place incorporates material gleaned from scholarly readings as well as from their own insights, this laboratory exercise becomes an exemplary and adaptable instrument of integrative learning.

Examples of the process described here can be drawn from each of the more than thirty NCHC Semesters and more than forty Faculty Institutes sponsored by NCHC that have been designed and

facilitated by the Honors Semesters/Place as Text Committee. (In acknowledgment of the range of territory explored, from cities to farms to national parks to jungles, the name has morphed from City as Text to Place as Text.) Two kinds of assignments in all of them consistently reveal the power of perspective in the interpretive process: 1) an initial “Private Use of Public Space” exploration, timed to serve as an introduction to place; and 2) events/happenings/interactions written up by each of several observers who witness the same scene together, in which impromptu interviews of strangers, eavesdropping, and careful observation play an important part.

The subdivisions of these assignments include some version of Setting (Where, when, who is being watched, and who is with you?) Description of event (Who? What? Where? When?); Interpretation (What do you think is happening?); Analysis (What makes you think so? Is this included in any of the above?); Reflection (What did it feel like to witness this? Why?). Often there is an afterword: were you to see a scene like this again, would you behave or react differently? Why? Why not? This addition has been particularly revelatory in international study explorations.

One example of the Private Use of Public Space occurred when a small team of CAT participants explored NYC’s Grand Central Terminal, where they listened to a guitarist playing for contributions. Most of the team reported on the entertainment value of the scene, responding with the voice of the entertained. One student, however, was struck by the way that a woman “intruded”: she lectured the musician about how to save his soul and not waste time playing the guitar. This student was also bothered by the chatter that made it hard to hear the guitarist. To this student, the event was about interrupting his performance with demeaning comments and rude behavior. The woman interrupted the artist to engage in a competitive and paradoxically private exchange. Group discussion was lively and included considering issues of whether the performance is private use in the first place. The student who objected to the interruptions, however, took a strong position that spectators who chose to stand in the circle close to the player violated his space if they spoke loudly. They had no right to be so insensitive

to a performer. What the entire seminar moved into was a serious discussion of perspective, of what it means to take a stand on a committed attitude or to take a position and then use that lens to read events that evolve from that position and attitude. "Eyewitness Testimony," in short, became a concern of these pilgrims to New York City, especially since they felt called upon to witness so much during their explorations and because they thought of themselves as "objective" and therefore as "innocent bystanders."

From there to framing their own discussion of insider/outsider status in all human interactions, or just what being a participant-observer feels like, was a short step. Moving through the varied versions of the same incident as the team members each presented the experience was both traumatic and deeply revealing. They all had begun by feeling like innocent bystanders, objective reporters on a simple scene, witnessing events with no viewpoint, and ended by having to explain multiple interpretations of a now not so simple or singular scene.

If listening to street music is so complicated, imagine a small CAT team attending a nighttime street fair in a poor and unstable neighborhood in the 1980s when New York was teeming with hostilities. Or picture this scene: American students and faculty are in Guatemala City on the first day of City as Text, visiting a museum and witnessing a small family group of ethnically clothed women and children sitting in a circle having lunch on the grounds; they try to take a photograph of the group and realize that the mothers were turning their backs on them in an attempt to protect their children from the gaze of strangers. A young man with camera in hand wrote in his Afterword that he would never use his camera on people again after having felt "shut out" by using it to capture people.

The act of interpreting is the act of constituting the world. Speaking of writers who observe but who also live in a contested time, South African Nadine Gordimer states: "One thing is clear: ours is a period when few can claim the absolute value of a writer without reference to a context of responsibilities" (*Essential Gesture* 288). The responsibilities of which Gordimer speaks extend to

citizens, witnesses, and participants in society, and it is what our students pick up and live with once they have finished their studies and have their lived experiences to count on when they travel through new spaces.

When the student reacted to the scene in Grand Central as though she were in a formal concert hall, not at a street performance, she constructed a metaphor that clarified elements of the scene for her, but the clarification itself conferred complicity on her, making her feel uncomfortable with both her colleagues and the guitarist. A moment in a public station—described, interpreted, and analyzed—carries with it a blindingly complex image that captures a profound ambiguity in social interactions. Witnessing it while being part of it confers a distressing realization of what insider/outsider really means, and the attempt to see patterns in the fast-shifting drama begins to amplify an emerging significance in the scene. As students extend their explorations into neighborhoods, schoolyards, and parks, and as they return to these places multiple times to develop a sense of how people actually live in this location, they invent symbolic language to reflect what they see more clearly, what they begin to see as more complex and elusive.

This use of language manifests itself during semester-long courses because the students write three extended essays, one at the end of each section of the course: 1) Introduction, 2) First Module, and 3) Second Module. For these assignments students are given a prompt to review explorations with differing concerns. In the first they look for patterns to analyze, like architectural facilities that they think say something about the history of this place. In the second, they examine aspects of social structure that might reveal relatively hidden dimensions of life, like signs of wealth or poverty, community or estrangement: clues to the pace of life in this site and pressures that might shape life here. In both instances they can pull evidence for their discussion out of their own exploratory accounts and their readings. The third essay is different; it is an invitation to reread all their written work, especially their responses during the CAT course; review the prior Turning Point Essays very carefully; and answer one of these questions: 1) Do you understand or see the

theme of this semester more clearly or differently now than when you arrived here? OR 2) Do you understand or see your own way of thinking more clearly or differently than when you arrived here? In either choice, students need to describe the event(s) to which they attribute this shift and why.

The analysis students undertake in these three essays, particularly the final one, reveals the power of their own words to students; they see what results from articulating how and why they developed the lenses at work in the critical or turning point moments that might account for an emerging sense of responsibility. The analysis is an invitation to examine critically the building of a personal vocabulary, to think about where it came from, and to pinpoint what preconceptions, events, or reactions gave it shape. They tend to see exposed both their language and their effort to express the ambiguity in social interaction, to witness in themselves the weight of complicity arising from their growing empathy for people in places that have become their “lab space.” Almost always, they record a moment of surprise once they note some “change” or insight taking shape on the pages of their essay, one that is pivotal to their acute feeling of discovery.

Their discovery of a self-in-process might be simply the identification of a distaste. For example, a student from Omaha wrote that he realized he “hated the subway in New York” and then several years later showed up at the door of my New York office, saying, “I’m here because I miss the subway.” NCHC has always offered its Honors Semesters as adventures of discovery, but increasingly what has emerged is a cohort of alumni who demonstrate that the Semesters are also an immersion in feeling connected to the world, a chance to grow the conviction that wherever they stand, they occupy a spot in which they have become, perhaps in spite of themselves, actors in other people’s dramas while making them their own. Above all, they show us that they have learned to trust their insights and to articulate their interpretations of the world; they have learned that without acts of interpretation, they remain outsiders in their own lives.

The students have left behind a trail of their efforts to keep in touch with their cohort with, for instance, private links to internet accounts to facilitate cohort communication, and they have staged reunions, at the site of their Semester, such as Prague and New York City, if possible. As a result, we know how many have undertaken significant activities to enhance social justice: Peace Corps; public sector careers; advocacy paths in chosen professions. We also see, even in the four- to six-day Faculty Institutes that we have hosted, that the surprises revealed in the Turning Point essays simmer over time and percolate into the realization of what Parker J. Palmer meant when he wrote: “The WAY we know has powerful implications for the WAY we live. I argue that any epistemology tends to become an ethic, and that every way of knowing tends to become a way of living” (25).

One provocative illustration of the integrative push inherent in City as Text/Place as Text methodology is the following Turning Point Essay from the 2008 Metropolis: BERLIN Institute, in which we can see that the methodology is a means to overcome intellectual habits of separating ourselves, of disengaging the self from world, in order to figure out what our observations might actually mean. The Berlin Institute, a collaboration between NCHC and the International Institute of Education, was set in the heart of the city. Faculty participants had read historical articles and literature of the pre-WWII era and spent several days interrogating monuments that Berliners had created to represent their troublesome history. Faculty also explored neighborhoods ranging from high-end to immigrant areas, great cultural institutions, open markets, and centers of political power. Participants represented the globe, half from the United States and half from elsewhere, and included several local educators as well. Both lodging and meeting rooms were in the former Eastern sector, but explorations of both sides of the former Wall were among the focused assignments already completed before Jesse Peters wrote about his Berlin experience. Like most of the Seminar participants, Peters was a newcomer to Berlin. This is his response to Assignment #3, the Turning Point essay:

“BERLINER?”

I can't say what I want to say. Perhaps I don't even know what that is. I have moved deliberately through the streets of Berlin for four days, and I am tired. The city has felt deliberate to me, as if every action and decision has a purpose and there is no rest here, nothing that is decadently meaningless. But still, there has been laughter around me, and pride, moments that let me know that not everything is completely planned and metered out. I have been to the flea market, the Turkish Market, Kolwitzplatz, Alexanderplatz, Potsdamerplatz, the memorial to the murdered Jews of the Holocaust, Brandenburg Gate, the topography of terror exhibit, the Neue Nationalgalerie, and many points in between. And yet, if someone asked me to describe Berlin, it would be a difficult task.

I have seen many faces of the city and many packages of the “Berlin ‘experience.’” None of them have defined the city for me, and I am sure I have packaged it myself a hundred times over. Perhaps that is the most valuable result of this experience; it forces us to look beyond ourselves and to become aware of who we are in the context of where we are, to start to define ourselves as we consciously engage with others. Identity is not stagnant, nor should one want it to be. It depends upon how we imagine, articulate, and evaluate ourselves. The City as Text experience can help us do that.

For me, Berlin has been a particularly fertile ground for these experiments. It seems one of the most complex cities in the world, one that is steeped in intricate history and has been labeled by drastic events occurring over a relatively short period of time. As an outsider, it has been difficult, and even felt a bit impossible, to accurately grasp and describe Berlin. I know that the struggle for meaning and the terrible task of putting that meaning into language are a valuable endeavor, one that we hope our students learn to

accept as part of what it means to be human. At the same time, it is an activity that demands a lot of self-reflection, and we all know that the mirror is rarely kind.

I will say that I have enjoyed the experience. It has been especially beneficial to draw upon the kindness and openness of the German participants. I hope I speak for many of us when I thank you for your generosity. I for one learned much from you. And as I sit here tonight, thinking over the days I have spent with you all in this magnificent city, I find myself at a loss for words and still grasping for answers. If pressed, I would probably say that maybe “fatherland” does describe Germany best. Sometimes it feels that it is like a land that has known no mother, has felt no gentle hand stroke its hair, to hold it and help it through those most terrible darkneses.

That is the best I can do right now and that is certainly neither a fair nor complete description. So having nothing else, I give you this poem and hope that you see something in it that means something to you.

“Sprechen Sie”

The text of Berlin opens quickly,  
 as if there are no secrets,  
 no walls between  
 what I want to know and  
 what there is to know.  
 German words, German sounds  
 fill me up, but I can only manage  
 a quiet “bitte,”  
 not nearly enough.

I ride the Spree, claiming it  
 with camera and beer  
 taking something away from the isolate  
 Black clarinet player, his tune bouncing  
 off the bright Bundestag

with its deep blue seats  
and silent silver eagle—

“For the People who Live in Germany,”  
they tell me, with the glass  
newly washed and the sun reflected down,  
chambered for the people.  
Will the garden cover the words?

On the roof, the city shifts,  
cranes swing, buildings fall  
only to be built again, glass and steel  
rise from Alexanderplatz, Potsdamerplatz, Freidrichstrasse,  
the streets narrow and people walk  
fast in chic sunglasses, drinking  
Starbucks coffee.

I look for what I can.

I see a swan nesting  
beside the Boden museum,  
a boy playing accordion under a tree,  
Polizei guarding a synagogue,  
a blue-eyed Turkish girl smiling in the market,  
the U-bahn ticket police interrogating a Korean man,  
a man on the S-bahn singing “der leiben,”  
signs for Sony, Hyatt, Bentley,  
men who love architecture,  
starkly gray stones on the ground,  
the trees Jews hung from.

Is this what I am supposed to know, to feel, to read?

Berlin has not answered me.  
It does not march forward,  
or pulse with light and dark.  
The green man does not stay  
bright for long at the crosswalk.  
The bicycles will run you over.

Berlin writhes around  
 right in front of me, disturbingly  
 attractive, forbidden.  
 I walk the streets, wanting to hear  
 its rhythm, feel its breath.

I bend down low,  
 listening close,  
 hoping it might  
 speak to me.

What stands out from this reflection, written only five days after arrival at an unfamiliar place, is an emerging sense of being situated, contingent, and implicated, all at the same time. The writer has sought out repetitions, contradictions, and patterns that might bring together information from political and historical readings, artifacts that clearly speak—eloquently and loudly—of a disturbing political past, and attitudinal information derived from the voices of a discussion group so composite and diverse. A good ear has resulted in notes of dissonance and defense; a good eye has recorded evidence of defiance and distress in the stones of the city.

The importance of working in a cohort of explorers, whose intention it is to collect information from the sights, sounds, smells, and touches these explorations provide (Bundestag session vs. Turkish Street Market); the discomfort of reporting on all of this in a seminar with people who respond with diverse perspectives and the attempt to write about early impressions as they become confusing experiences: all are part of the interpretive process. Usually that process remains implicit and may remain tacit, but in the seminar structure of this pedagogy, people begin to articulate it, and in that effort they discover the “power of their own words” (Gordimer, *Essential Gesture* 293).

For students, engaging in these complex activities helps them overcome their dualistic thinking and over time buffers anxiety about seeing social activity as deeply ambiguous. They learn, in their repeated observations, often undertaken with partners and always with a focus on fully public activity, that to detect what Clifford Geertz calls “blurred genres” requires that they engage in what

he calls “thick description,” a term of art pivotal to his thinking and writing. (See “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” pp. 3–30, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*.)

The point for now is only that ethnography is thick description. . . . [A] multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [the ethnographer] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. (Geertz, *Interpretation* 9–10)

The process involves observation, description, interpretation, analysis, and reflection, and it culminates as practices in City as Text always do with the sharing of written records and engaging in full discussion of them. It is the interchange of comments that reveals multiplicity of analysis and that fosters further and deeper reflection.

This entire sequence commits students to ongoing acts of interpretation, which they engage in as they develop their ability to observe themselves observing and succeed in “intersecting their autobiographies with the life study of the world,” as Palmer urges us all to do (23). The full sequence, especially when practiced multiple times, leads students to experience themselves as connected to events around them, and a feeling of complicity and responsibility confirms that connection.

The ultimate accomplishment is to foster a habit of mind. Data, theories, and hypotheses from a variety of disciplines, such as history, political/economic theory, science, and aesthetic expression, collide. The world as revealed by synthesizing a composite of patterns perceived in lived experience and seen through the lens of those perceptions—what Jonathan Z. Smith calls “acts of interpretation” (8)—cuts across realms of inquiry and contested experience; it is anchored in self-awareness in context and enables commitments on which civic action and social engagement are based for alumni of “as text” adventures.

The field laboratory is the indispensable component of cross-disciplinary, problem-setting inquiry that connects students to themselves; it sharpens observational skills and creates a taste for interrogating impressions drawn from existential insights, for

discovering what being situated but contingent feels like. The lessons are provocative and lasting. The empathy emanating from these complexities, once analyzed and reflected on, enhances a sense of being-in-the-world and triggers, for many, action culminating in civic engagement.

The crucial step is to synthesize, to assemble disparate images and points of information into patterns whose meanings contain apparently contradictory or divergent information. City as Text inspires students and faculty who juggle their observational, lived experiences and—by acts of interpretation as Smith asserts—discover their world and their contested place in it. They are not onlookers. They discover themselves as participants, responsible for what they see, say, and do.

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