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Book Review: Petar Jandrić (2017) *Learning in the Age of Digital Reason*. **Rotterdam: Sense.**

> There is a quote attributed to Hunter S. Thompson: "when the going gets weird, the weird turn pro" (Thompson, 1985). So the question becomes: How do you produce weird people for the weird times we are living in? That strikes me as one of the really interesting challenges for education at the moment. (McKenzie Wark, in dialogue with Jandrić, 2017, pp. 123-4)

Learning in the Age of Digital Reason is much more than its title suggests. The quote above, plucked from Jandrić's compelling dialogue with McKenzie Wark, captures the book's driving question. In my view, *Learning in the Age of Digital Reason* is best described as a contemporary handbook of critical pedagogy, collectively authored through a painstaking yet playful process of open-ended dialogue. As such, Jandrić and his interlocutors' commitment to achieving a measure of congruence between the book's form and content, makes it worthy of comparison with Horton and Freire's classic *We make the Road by Walking* (1990). If your first reaction to this comparison is incredulity, then let me explain.

It isn't a comparison I anticipated making as I began to engage with the text. Firstly, beyond the fact that the book was brought into being through dialogue, this text is the product of not one but sixteen conversations, with Jandrić playing the central node in the social network. Secondly, digital learning, not critical pedagogy, is the conceptual node around which a cacophony of (academic, artist, activist) voices is brought together. As I read on, I grew increasingly daunted by the prospect of reviewing this carnivalesque book, bursting at the seams as it is with critical reflections on education in contemporary life, as well as speculations on educational futures. To name but a few: coloniality; climate denial in the Anthropocene; knowledge enclosures/commons; the 'datafication' of everyday life, the surveillance state and welfare conditionality; the changing nature of the public sphere and critical literacy; the materiality of 'the digital'; de-schooling and post-work; the relationship between art, pedagogy and activism; critical post-humanism and social movement learning. As to how it all came to be, Jandrić likens the process to throwing a "wild, spontaneous party" (xiii) and is upfront in acknowledging the limitations of this approach. In his words: "I am acutely aware of this book's unfortunate bias towards male interlocutors, towards those employed in institutions of higher education, and towards those who live in the Global North […] This book reflects my personal history and the historical moment we live in. Letting things go inevitably results with insecurity and non-predictability" (ibid.).

This assemblage of voices and ideas requires a reading strategy, perhaps a strength and a shortcoming depending on one's perspective. For me, the hardcopy book form currently represents a refuge from the psychic effects of the '24/7' attention economy in my own digitally saturated life (Crary, 2013). Therefore, my initial attempts to review the text were stymied by a longing for a focused narrative and sustained argument. However, I only realised I'd been approaching the book the wrong way during the final chapter (a conversation with Christine Sinclair and Hamish Ross, both pioneers of Edinburgh University's MSc in Digital Education), where Jandrić states that "the book's structure was not determined by facts or calculations – by and large, it is shaped by feelings and chemistry between its interlocutors. This fact defines the book; it should also define its interpretation (p.p. 358-9)." The realisation that this book ought to be read 'rhizomatically' was quite

liberating, in the sense that I might write riff on any number of the book's themes depending on my intuition and mood.

The above notwithstanding, I do think that the title of the book mis-frames its central concern: to ask difficult questions about the role and shape of critical pedagogy in our current 'age' (more on this shortly), as experienced from the contributors' different standpoints. This epistemological commitment to praxis, and a determination to model it in the book's form is what, for me, warrants the comparison to Freire and Horton. This is captured in the conversation with Giroux, who reminds us that "critical pedagogy ought to adjust to the circumstances in which it finds itself" (p. 152).

The book's form and content represent, above all, an attempt to find lines of flight out of what Cox and Nilson (2014) call "frozen activist knowledge" to denote a tendency on the Left to deify critical theorists and reify their ideas, when in fact they emerged from and spoke back to particular historical conjunctures. As Wark (p. 114) argues, one major educational challenge we face is creating the new vocabularies needed to name and understand the complex geopolitical relations between ecological crisis, the 'second nature' of the built environment and the cartography of digitised information networks. For me, this refusal to treat 'the digital' as an immaterial fetish object—instead recognising its entanglement in regimes of environmental despoliation, exploitation and expropriation—is one of the book's strongest features (Emejulu and McGregor, 2016).

Thus, if I have one abiding criticism of the text, it is the notion that 'digital reason' captures, however precariously, some kind of epochal distinction. On this particular point, the conversation with Siân Bayne is an essential read, as it is the chapter which most explicitly tackles the question of what makes reason itself digital. Drawing on 'critical posthumanism', Bayne and Jandrić draw out the ways in which it is ontologically untenable to draw sharp distinctions between algorithmic and human agency in educational contexts. And as they recognise, treating 'the digital' as a fetish object only serves to reinforce these binary schemes, which do not offer helpful roadmaps for political intervention. Yet the notion that our age can be defined by 'digital reason' is more of a founding assumption than something adequately justified from the outset. That being said, the tension between the particular and the universal is a recurring theme in this book, so perhaps it is fairer to say that a work so heterogeneous always was always going to be challenging to frame. To me, this matters precisely because this book deserves to have a readership extending far beyond the 'ed tech' crowd.

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