Medina's book, which began as her doctoral dissertation, is a personal and intellectual journey in which she explains how her Critical Aesthetic Pedagogy came to be. Critical Aesthetic Pedagogy (CAP) stemmed out of her personal experiences as an artist, a student, and an educator. Grounded in the works of critical theorists such as Freire, Giroux, bell hooks, Kincheloe, Ladson-Billings, McLaren, and Shapiro as well as the writings of Maxine Greene and the aesthetic education philosophy of the Lincoln Center Institute where she worked for several years, Medina builds the theoretical work for her pedagogy. She shows us CAP in action by presenting two case studies and giving us examples of the awareness and empowerment gained by students in her classes as a result of her pedagogy. In the last chapter she discusses the implications and challenges of CAP.

In chapter one, Medina takes us through her life experiences and the issues of identity she has faced as well as the connections and allegiances about which she feels most strongly. She defines herself as a Dominican Yorker, Latina Salsera, and a teacher. While she was teaching in college, she found that she shared many characteristics with her students: they were immigrants (or the children of immigrants), people of color, had English as a Second Language, were mostly women, and were nontraditional students. But, she also discovered there was something that made her different from her students: her capacity to see lived experience from a different perspective. Her students had a sense of despair and little hope for things to change for the better for them and their children. Medina believes this difference between her and her students comes from her involvement with the arts; she has always loved dancing. She commits then to define a new kind of pedagogy—a pedagogy where students’ experiences and interests are at the center, thus creating and promoting respect for them as human beings; and secondly, to find the means to link these experiences to the arts as a way of empowering students to create and promote self and social change.

Chapter two takes up her intellectual journey and the foundations of her Critical Aesthetic Pedagogy. She considers four critical elements to it. 1) The value of experiential knowledge, which is rooted in the premises of critical pedagogy. Within her pedagogy it is imperative students feel they are in a safe, accepting environment where their personal experiences are valued. When students can incorporate their experiences into what they are learning, this new knowledge becomes relevant and contributes to the process of students becoming critical thinkers. 2) Medina acknowledges that by providing students the opportunity to share their experiences and be critical about their learning process and the content of what they are learning, students are then able to challenge existing forms of schooling. Students will interpret the new knowledge through
their own lenses, i.e. coming from their own language and cultural background, their social class and gender.

However, in order for this personal interpretation to take place, students 3) need to explore their own identities and allegiances or connections to the different aspects of their identities. Students need to learn what exerts an influence on them and how their thoughts might be shaped by different ideologies. It is important students become aware of their biases and find their own voices. When students have a critical awareness of their own identities, they are ready to start a social transformation. 4) To explore students’ identities, Medina uses the aesthetic experience; this is the added new element to the critical pedagogy premises she has been working on. She contends that the soma (body) carries memories and brings subjective perspectives of our feelings and views. In her CAP she reinforces the importance of the “body authority” which bridges feelings of disempowerment and a hopeful imagination that is the source of self and social change. She bases her CAP on two defining concepts: “a) Imagination illuminates the path toward possibilities,” and “b) Compassion gives us the desire to embark on the path toward change.”

Medina shows us in Chapter 3 how CAP can be put into action. She describes two different case studies she conducted at two different institutions. For these two case studies, she carefully chose art pieces that would allow students to have shared experiences and enable them to recognize forms of oppression. She also carefully selected a set of readings to accompany the art piece for each group and that would help create in students an awareness of social justice and a sense of empowerment to promote this change.

One study was at Queen’s College with two different groups of undergraduates who came from under privileged backgrounds. For this case study, she based the artistic experience on the documentary drama Twilight: Los Angeles by Anna Deavere. She developed a line of inquiry, i.e. the connection between the artwork, the assigned readings, and the course content. She prepared six specific activities related to drama. For this particular piece, students explored issues of race, gender, social class, privilege and discrimination, and ability. Students had to write a narrative at the end of the semester reflecting on the readings and content of the course under the lens of their own personal experiences during the activities related to the play. She found several recurring themes in their narratives that clearly showed students had critical awareness of how the drama connected to the readings and the course; she found they had deepened their sense of compassion, and had developed a sense of empowerment to challenge social inequalities.

The second case study took place at Borough of Manhattan Community College with a population very different from the first case study. These were graduate students, most of them white and middle class. For this case study, she integrated a set of self-portraits by Frida Khalo. The focus was to explore issues of identity and allegiances and how, if these are not analyzed, they will contribute to maintaining the systems that lead to oppression and discrimination. As with the previous case study, she developed a line of inquiry, chose a set of readings related to the topic of identity, and developed a series of activities to do in the classroom with her students. Again, with this group there were some recurring themes in which students show they have acquired critical awareness in several aspects such as how a teacher’s identity affects what goes on in the classroom. It was also clear students understood the relationship among the readings, the course content, and the aesthetic activities; the importance of using art as a pedagogical tool; and the need to create positive changes in our lives. She also found that the students had critical
awareness about the importance of knowing one’s identity and having a sense of empowerment—empowerment that would enable them to change their students’ lives.

The fourth and last chapter addresses the applications, implications, and complications of her method. CAP puts the student at the center of the learning process and creates awareness of one’s identity, biases, and worldview. It validates students’ experiences and allows them to make connections between what they are learning in the classroom and their lives. It brings into consideration multiple perspectives and exposes students to works of art. However, Medina is also aware of some of her method’s “complications,” as she puts it. Teachers have to be trained to use this method. It is time-consuming to search for an appropriate work of art, prepare a line of inquiry, and find relevant readings that connect to the course content and the work of art. She also acknowledges that not all students will be open to this pedagogy and understand the benefits it may bring. She is aware it is not always easy to find appropriate works of art/drama to expose students for. Lastly, she mentions that it can be costly.

I, personally, enjoyed reading the book. It is written in a style and language friendly to all readers. I liked going with her on her life journey of discovery of self; and found there were several places in which I identified with her feelings. Medina is an artist herself and has built a strong set of connections with artists and people deeply involved in different forms of art who helped her with the development of the material she used for the two case studies discussed in the book. She also lives in New York, which, somehow, makes it easier to be close to different forms of art. It may not be as easy for teachers who are not artists themselves, who do not have the connections, who do not feel that strong connection between art and the soma, or who do not have as many resources of this sort at hand to develop meaningful lessons or units in which Critical Aesthetic Pedagogy can be seen at its best.

I love art in all its forms. Although I do not feel that strong connection between art and the sense of empowering, I see the connection between art and identity. The reading of this book has opened a new door for me, but it has not prepared me to implement this pedagogy in my classroom yet. I would love to attend a workshop where I could learn more about CAP and would even love to go on a project with someone to put it into practice in one of my classes.