



*Critical Truth-Telling: Educational Inquiry,
Bemusement, and Democratic Change
Or
What Happens when a College President, an Entertainer,
and Rhetorician Discuss Social Change over Dinner*

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Abstract

In this article I engage with the notion of “critical” scholarship as it manifests in our contemporarily absurd times. I ask how our current context in higher education perhaps requires a differently productive sense of critique than traditionally practiced in the academy. Through foregrounding a Foucauldian sense of critique as a “voluntary insubordination” to normalized ways of being, knowing, and coming to know, I seek to reanimate critical work as moral practice—politically engaged ways of being other than we currently are (or are coerced into being). I ground my analysis through an examination of two connected events on my university campus—historical circumstances that challenge common approaches to sense-making. I end with a call for critical educational inquiry as a type of philosophical parrhesia, or truth-telling, that requires scholars to risk their own subject-formations through the political work of disrupting the logical status quo.

Keywords: *Critical, truth-telling, parrhesia, methodology, schizoid, critique, Foucault, Deleuze*

This article is about a series of seemingly disparate events entangled within one university campus: a machete apparently lodged in a fraternity house door, an African-American entertainer defending racial progress in a civil war era mansion, and a smartphone app designed to promote safety through its use as a social panic button. This article is also about rhetorical techniques utilized to persuade truth, the failure of contemporary critique for social justice, and the folding of social history into an origami-like figure of progress. In short, this article is about sense-making amidst absurdity.

In what follows I address a series of entangled issues and questions: What does it mean to engage in critique? How does such critique intersect with practices of knowing and being? How do our contemporary times require a different sense of critique than times of old—those that do not rely on processes of differentiation, representation, or true/false distinctions for meaning? Lastly, how might our treatment of history extend from a diffractive reading of being or becoming—in short, living—such that critique takes on newly transformative potential? I ground my

approach in an analysis of two connected happenings on my university campus—historical circumstances that certainly challenge notions of reality as linearly progressive or easily announced even as they draw upon a reconstituted collective public memory for their logical articulation.

In the first occurrence, a series of campus emails respond to rumors of future violence on campus, going so far as to recommend a phone application to communicate one’s potential feeling of unease. Administrative actors claim factual clarity through explaining what did not happen—as though the absence of some past happening would put to rest concerns about what might happen in the future. Here, official communication seeks to impact a collective group on the affective level, yet the absence of a full narrative leaves the reader bemused, lacking the necessary grounding to respond in any active way.

The second instance bewilders through a narrated conflation of historical events with contemporary campus issues regarding diversity and perceived institutional progress towards a more equitable university environment. Somewhat ironically, when the university president seeks to demonstrate a continuing commitment to diversity she does so by recalling a visit with Bill Cosby who, while wearing a “property of Alabama football” t-shirt marvels at how far the university has come on issues of social justice. When read in light of recent accusations charging Cosby with rape, the president’s attempted cohesive narrative of progress fails to hold, offering instead a bewildering sequence of events.

This ongoing entanglement of contemporary events with seemingly disparate and untethered social logic often leads to a type of individually-enacted and collectively-felt bemused paralysis—where social happenings seem to push against traditional forms of knowing/coming to know in such absurd ways that we, perhaps, must begin to laugh; we laugh because it is absurd. We laugh, I suppose, because such absurdity has become so commonplace that the critical furrowed brow is no longer as useful for inciting change. We are bemused, as Deleuze (1990) would have it, just as Alice remains bemused by the shifting laws and claims on commonsense that are her experienced wonderland. Given our contemporary context we might productively eschew empty proclamations for “critical” scholarship (assertions that are all the rage these days) in favor of what Deleuze termed a *philosophy of the absurd*. In this way our disoriented, bemused state is an active one, making possible ways of knowing, coming to know, and being that had previously remained unrealized or short-circuited by normative claims on reality. Perhaps there is promise in a stance of critical bemusement, an activist potential in dwelling within the absurd.

A Critique Of Critical Approaches to Knowing or An Invitation to Our Viewers

Before entering into an extended discussion of absurd circumstances I think it important to pause and consider the implications of critical scholarship, particularly as it relates to how inquiry practices might productively engage with contemporary contexts. Thus, this section seeks to foreground a critical engagement with the examples that follow, emphasizing a particular means of encountering select social realities towards productive ends. Yet, what does it mean to be critical, to engage in critique? This question concerns me because it seems that *critical* scholarship is all the rage these days in higher education: everyone wants to *be* critical. The danger of such a normative proclamation is that the term *critical* loses its definitional quality—its ubiquity within ac-

ademic discourse results in the term meaning simultaneously everything and nothing. Disappointingly, and as others have noted,¹ within the academy the critical locale has become a safe space from which to operate, an all-too-comfortable place in which to situate one's identity and label one's scholarship as meaningful. Far from being a place of some risk (either to the subject position of the critic or to the norm that is the object of critique) the critical association has come to denote a degree of positive cache within the academy. Critical is the hipster's beard, cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon on sale at a trendy bar in Midtown.² How did this happen? How might we, in turn, reclaim the term for specific practices for social change? If *critical* is more than an empty term, more than a rhetorical placeholder or verbal tick, then it must imply or convey particular characteristics.

To begin to answer such questions it is perhaps helpful to pause and follow the path set by Foucault (1997) who, in a short lecture entitled "What Is Critique," revisited the notion of critical work specifically as it relates to the production of normative thought. For Foucault, critical work involves a double practice—one of simultaneously demarcating the boundaries of normative thought *and*, through noting where such boundaries fail, making possible new (and literally unimaginable—or unthinkable) ways of being, knowing, and coming to know. This doubled position of critique situates thought in both the present (noting the limits of the now) and as in excess to the contemporary moment (pointing towards an as-yet unrealized future). As such, critical work brings the future into the present and this temporal collapse proves a disruptive force. Thus, I take from Foucault that the critical scholar has two interwoven tasks: 1) to understand the means by which otherwise commonsensical rationales develop, producing a host of legitimated practices; 2) to imagine or enable new practices that extend from newly possible forms of knowing.

As I have noted previously (Kuntz 2015), critical work is that which necessarily *intervenes* in normalizing discourses such that the logic that informs what we already know—what we assume to be—can no longer hold. Common sense fails when set against the critical frame. As such, the critical space is decidedly uncomfortable—a disquiet space for that which receives the critique (and can no longer continue its normative ways unabated) and s/he who formulates the critique (and because relationally bound to the object of critique is likewise changed by the critical act). Critique thus takes on a pedagogical function: guiding one towards emerging ontological and epistemological formations. In this way, critique intervenes in the normative governing structures of the contemporary moment; critique as radical intervention.

Thus it is that critique cannot replicate and can only alter that with which it engages (if some practice were to reinscribe or reinvoké normative ways of being and knowing it simply would not be critical, despite the best of intentions); such attempted critiques are not, as a consequence, critiques at all. Important to the project at hand, Foucault (1997) situates critique in relation to: (1) an unknown future; (2) truth; and (3) coercive practices of governing. Critical work remains oriented towards events that, in some way, intersect these three elements—when a future is prescribed based on some assumed truth and the populace is subjected to normalizing discourses of what was and what must come to be. In this way critique intervenes to disrupt normative logics and practices towards a future that is yet-to-be-known. This is critique as an opening force, an uncomfortable allegiance with an unknown future recognized now in the present; an excess to the known that, through its very utterance, is disobedient to normalized practices of living. In this vein, Foucault offers a general definition of critique as, "the art of not being governed quite so much" or with such costs (p. 45). Critique displays a "voluntary insubordination" (p. 45) to normalized ways of

1. e.g. Simons et al. 2005.

2. As a further aside, the term *critical* is also often utilized as a rhetorical device to which there is no answer—who would ever claim an identity position as *not critical*, or promote a stance of *acriticality*?

being, knowing, and coming to know. Because from a Foucauldian framework normative meaning is produced “through the effects of coercion” (p. 53), to disrupt such production is a rebellious act—refusing to be governed by the rules of the day. Indeed, it is my concern that the overuse of the term *critical* has rendered the act of critique relatively meaningless (or lacking a rebellious function). In this sense, what passes for critical work in the academy might well be situated as normatively coercive, lulling the intrepid activist into comfortable acts of rhetorical engagement.³

Following Foucault, Butler (2001) situates critique as questioning the “limits of our most sure ways of knowing” (para. 10). This is critique as exposing (and disrupting) the limits of the epistemological field. Butler’s rendition of critique highlights critical practices as inherently tied to virtue—critical practices extend from a virtuous emplacement within the world. In this way, the critical act takes on moral dimensions: a determination to intervene in normative production because it is the *right* thing to do. As such, critique is a morally-engaged practice that cannot occur from a disinterested stance; the critic is necessarily invested in disrupting coercive acts of governing. Critical practice stems from virtue, from a moral determination to not submit to or be coerced by normative logic.⁴ Critique extends from a refusal to be fully governed or determined by the status quo. As such, being critical means both registering space for insubordination (to act and be differently than one claimed by the norm) and being insubordinate; a resistive ontological and epistemological practice.

For both Foucault and Butler, being governed according to normative domains comes with particular costs (to freedom, to democracy, to subjectivity) and thus critical practices are moral practices—politically engaged ways of being other than we currently are (or are coerced into being). Critical work refuses to accept the costs of acting and being as we always have been, of accepting the costs of existing as governed subjects. Yet this is, of course, no easy task: how to make visible the limits of the very logics and assumptions under which one operates? How does one identify the edges of the knowing environments of which one is a part?⁵

In order to enact critique and make visible the epistemological and ontological limits that circumscribe the norm one must begin with what Foucault (1984) deemed *problematization*—bringing forth an *object of thought* as an historical problem without resolution. In this sense, the object of thought is uncertain—it can never fully be accounted for (otherwise it would not be a problem) nor familiar (else it would continue unrecognized). Yet, it is precisely the uncertainty of such problems that draw forth a social anxiety that, in turn, feeds a desire to account or otherwise manage the difficulty of non-closure.

As a contemporary example, consider the social anxieties that extend from the implicit ordering mechanisms of globalized neoliberalism, particularly as they manifest in education. Principles of globalization enforce a macro-oriented perspective on social practices and policies that often eradicate state or national boundaries in favor of large-scale conversions of people (and their outputs) into measurable forms of data.⁶ Neoliberal values privilege select formations of data, making possible a host of comparisons that virtually ignore local contexts in favor of macro-level comparisons. Thus it is that the United States (U.S.) is often statistically-related to other countries

3. In discussions of truth-telling, Foucault (2011; 2001) differentiates between rhetorical and philosophical approaches to truth. The former approach emphasizes persuasion over truth, while the latter is a risky association of truth with belief. More on this in a bit.

4. Perhaps this is what David Harvey (1991) alluded to when he wrote of the “moral obligation” of the professoriate to counter neoliberal norms and values.

5. I take up moral dimensions of truth-telling and attempt to address these questions in relation to inquiry practices in my book, *The Responsible Methodologist* (Kuntz, 2015).

6. For an excellent discussion of neoliberal policy on tertiary education, see Ben Kisby’s (2014) work.

based on these manufactured points of comparison.⁷ And, as a consequence, there is no small amount of anxiety that extends from politicians and the public alike when the United States is not at the top of these rankings. We are told that the U.S. is “falling behind” other countries in high school math achievement, for example, or middle school literacy levels.⁸ Such information is inevitably linked to parallel anxieties that the U.S. will fall behind other nations (notably China and Germany) in economic production and will hold less power (and corresponding position of privilege) within the world order. When conflated, these anxieties (of failing to keep up with the frenzied pace of globalized neoliberalism, of falling behind other nations according to select economic indicators) provide the energy and rationale for a large-scale testing industry that, in turn, offers the data through which educational policies such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top are born. As a consequence, individual educational practices (such as learning and test-taking), large-scale national policies (such as Race to the Top), and ongoing social anxieties (such as our position as a leader in the world order) are not so much layered as entangled, a dense skein of practices, processes, and affects from which extend a series of truths and realities seemingly without end.

Part of the process of *problematization* entails disengaging from the object under scrutiny. As such, the problematizing act is a resistive act of freedom—the critic is no longer so caught up in the object that s/he cannot recognize its boundaries. Through allowing thought to act upon some process or practice of knowing/being one recognizes the critical act as *in excess* of that which it engages. Thus, problematization begins with the acknowledgement that ways of knowing and being are never fully accounted for, never previously determined. Critical work in excess of, and no longer accountable to, the normalizing objects under scrutiny.

Part of the issue with how critique has been shortchanged in the past extends from the habitual ways in which we have come to reenact “a settled domain of ontology” (Butler 2001, para. 16) through inquiry practices that simply point to contradiction or falsities without making space for an unknown future that exists in excess of normative ontologies. Yet, what happens when the revelation of contradiction fails the critical scholar? What is to be done when our contemporary moment is saturated with contradiction and continues on unabated? What is the critical scholar to do in such absurd times? In short, given our contemporary context, what does it mean to be critical in the here-and-now? Indeed, ours is an oddly absurd time—one where affective states of unease, anxiety, and paranoia seem to predominate—and, as a consequence, the nature of critical work must likewise change.

Social Schizophrenia: The Problem of Social Truths or **Setting the Table for our Guests**

Despite neoliberal claims on the intrinsic values of rationality and consistency,⁹ it is often also noted that we live in profoundly contradictory times. National discourses submit that peace

7. Ben Baez (2014) offers a detailed examination of the database as a governing technology employed in what he terms our “society of the statistic” resulting in the “data-basing of our lives.”

8. See my work with Ryan Gildersleeve and Penny Pasque, Kuntz, Gildersleeve, & Pasque (2011) as we examine how President Obama’s community college initiative extends from anxieties of falling behind in the globalized neoliberal era.

9. Though a thorough treatment of the neoliberal moment is beyond the scope of this article, elsewhere I detail select formations of neoliberalism in relation to processes of globalization (Kuntz 2015).

can only be achieved through armed securitization both at home¹⁰ and abroad,¹¹ that the best way to achieve financial stability is to take on debt, and the best type of productivity is measurable productivity. More than what has been termed in the past as Orwellian *doublethink*, there exist today a simultaneity of “truths” that, together, manufacture a collectively-felt affective state of disorientation and apathetic distancing from avenues towards social change. This is to say that our contemporary problem is not simply an inability to distinguish truth from falsity but rather the incessant overproduction of multiple truths that remain side-by-side without productive consequence; such truths simply remain. As a consequence, the singular act of pointing out that one truth potentially contradicts another serves no critical or disruptive function on its own. Contradiction is no longer the place from which social justice may grow.¹² Instead, there must exist a moral position articulated through acts of truth-telling: statements that these things cannot be.¹³

Amidst this over-production of truth I am struck by the amount of social energy, time, and anxiety that goes in to managing (or rationalizing away) their commonsensical alignment. These daily practices maintain normative function and, as such, might usefully be the objects of our inquiry and critical intervention. With this conceptual shift to the mechanisms by which various truths are maintained and procedurized, there is increasing concern for how such work instills collective affective states (of disorientation, paralysis, or even bemusement). Our contemporary moment entails allowing such truths to remain side-by-side, distinct and without full resolution. Because of this, our unique time of non-resolution makes possible the formation of a whole host of deeply felt social anxieties, that, in turn, play a key role in maintaining governing structures, processes, and practices. In short, affective states of being develop within a complementary over-production of truths and an inability (and/or collective disinterestedness) to differentiate truth from falsity.

Through the over-production of social truths the true-false binary that we often hold dear dissolves; truth is instead entangled with absurdity. In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze (1990) shifts from discussions of *the truth* to the *condition of truth* and this latter phrase is “not opposed to the false, but to the absurd...that which may be neither true nor false” (p. 15). For Deleuze, absurdity extends from relations without signification. Yet such relations are not absent sense, nor nonsense, they are absurd, seemingly impossible. As Deleuze points out, the notion of contradiction can only occur when dealing within the realm of the known, or the normatively possible: “for the principle of contradiction is applied to the possible and to the real, but not to the impossible” (p. 35). Thus, the scholar who finds critical satisfaction in pointing to contradiction is forever bound by the normatively possible, pre-determined claims on the real or selective truths. Consequently, such a scholar can never be critical. Instead, opening up the impossible refuses the normative power of contradiction, offering instead the potential that is absurdity. The absurd, in this case, is

10. See the recent armed police retaliation to protests in Baltimore, for example, or Ferguson.

11. See our continuous acts of warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, operating under the rationale that such “occupations” make both the local region and, by extension, our own country more safe and secure. The logic in this instance seems to be that if we are violent and aggressive over *there*, then we will not be visited by violence and aggression *here* in the United States.

12. In many ways, the failure of contradiction to make way for progressive change aligns with contemporary theorizations that refuse moves towards synthesis (a move to bring together that is a hallmark of dialectical thinking) and, instead, privilege difference or defractive ways of knowing (a move that begins from the point of difference and makes no attempt to resolve contradictions to the point of synthesis).

13. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me in his/her review of this article.

made visible through its excessive status—excessive truths over-produced to the point of absurdity. Thus, it is not truth as distinguished from falsity that might serve our critical work, it is truth-telling in the face of absurdity.

Drawing from Deleuze's philosophy of the absurd, Ian Buchanan (2014) examines the contemporary schizo-society wherein we "know" multiple truths and yet have no sufficient means to act in direct relation to them. We thus remain frozen by an inability to discriminate among an ever-intensifying availability of truth-claims. Truths simply remain "out there," beyond the direct reach of the individual who simply must abide their (multiple) existence. The schizoid thus exists as a modern-day subjectivity that recognizes more truths than one can possibly act upon, a disorientation to the point of non-action. As a result, exposing what is *not-true* (what is false) or contradictory is no longer a means for challenging or disrupting the neoliberal system in any revolutionary way (as the critical theorists of old, perhaps had it). It is not the production of falsehoods that is the contemporary problem—it is the incessant production of multiple truths that lead to our schizophrenic state. Perhaps this is why "critical" scholarship has lost its disruptive edge and become a safe harbor within the academy: calling attention to falsehoods fails the schizo-society. This unique circumstance manifests in multiple ways. When seen from a productive distance, frantic attempts to distinguish truth from falsity border upon the absurd.

As an example, early in the fall semester of 2014 a series of confusing stories swirled around my university campus, accelerated by the ubiquity of social media and the entangled overlap of local and global—where present day fears lead to a series of anxious practices and technological innovations all aimed to address issues of safety and security. The result was a social context wherein efforts to differentiate "facts" from "fictions" did little to assuage anxieties and fears of the unknown—indeed, they perhaps heightened them. The events began, it seems, with a series of anonymous YouTube® comments that told of future violence on campus. These comments fueled further rumors of violent acts that were said to have recently occurred on various campus locations. Anxious students reported what they "knew" to one another; concerned parents contacted the university—often to report new information as much as to confirm what their son or daughter had told them was said to have happened and what anonymous comments said would happen. Facts blurred with fictions, past events merged into presumed inevitabilities. In response, the university sought to break the cycle of rumor-fueling-rumor through detailing what was "known" to have happened and what did not happen.

What follows are three emails that were sent via my campus faculty listserv over the course of four days. The first appeared in my inbox on Monday, September 22nd, 2014 and came from the campus police (UAPD) alert account—it consisted of a series of bullet points:

Please see the update below on the events of the last 18 hours regarding safety issues on and off campus.

- *UAPD has issued search warrants to social media sites regarding the YouTube comments. Officers continue to process and follow-up with new information and tips that have been provided.*
- *Based on the information that has been evaluated to this point, classes will continue as scheduled and UA will maintain normal operations. Faculty members are encouraged to work with students who present specific or unique concerns.*
- *The student in the advisory sent earlier this afternoon about the off-campus incident admitted to investigators that the incident she described did not occur. The investigation into this case has been closed.*

- *The fire alarm in Presidential Village was due to a sensor that was activated by a non-fire event.*
 - *There was no machete with a note on the door of a fraternity.*
 - *No shots were fired at Presidential Village.*
 - *The FBI is not on campus, and did not conduct a raid in Paty Hall.*
 - *No one dressed as the Joker was in Tutwiler or on sorority row.*
 - *There was not a man on sorority row with a box tied to him in a threatening manner.*
 - *No one was shot and no one has been arrested.*
 - *No students were choked on the Quad or anywhere else.*
- Students who have concerns about their safety are encouraged to go to myBama and to sign up for Rave Guardian, an app that will immediately alert UAPD if a student becomes concerned about his/her safety.*

The second email came a day later, Tuesday, from our senate president:

Dear Faculty Member,

Yesterday was a very difficult one for many students and their families. We saw the boom-erang of social media rumors compounding rumors. I believe the administration was responding with immediacy to each of these claims. This was unlike anything seen in memory at the university. I met three young students walking into Gorgas early yesterday morning. They were afraid to go to class. Many are confused and anxious by what has happened. And their parents are anxious. As a faculty member you are the most direct link [to] our students at The University of Alabama. Please take the temperature of your classes over the next couple days. If it is appropriate this may be a teachable moment and a time for discussion. I would ask you to be particularly sensitive to the student experience at this moment. In Faculty Senate we are working so that all students are treated equally and with respect. I know you do so in every class, but please wrap your arms around all our students today. Thank you.

The third email appeared on Thursday, again from the campus police alert account:

Despite rumors currently circulating on social media, no arrests have been made in the initial social media post investigation. The individual whose photo appears on the Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office website is not connected to UAPD's investigation. Earlier this evening, in an unrelated matter, UAPD talked to an individual who was seen wearing a Halloween mask. After interviewing this person, officers determined that the individual had no ill intent.

So here again, differentiating between fact and fiction—locating the inconsistencies and non-realities of select circumstances—becomes, to a great degree, a bemusing practice; and at this point it seems all we might do is laugh. These examples, of course, might be read according to how efficient particular hysteria could be. Though I do not want to unnecessarily make light of the social anxiety that these emails reveal—or was it provoke?—I do want to point to their collective

absurdity.¹⁴ The first email signals a rather abrupt shift from updates on search warrants and fire alarms to discussions of a machete, the FBI, the Joker, and suicide bombers before pointing to an app—*Rave Guardian*—that allows one to communicate one’s safety concerns with the push of a button (indeed, after reading this email with its alarming bullet list I nearly downloaded the app and employed its function from my office chair—the email made me that anxious). The second email points to the social stress of such rumors—students afraid to go to class—even as it distances such events from any collective history: “This was unlike anything seen in memory at the university.” (Keep in mind, this is the University of Alabama—there have certainly been some rather threatening events on our fair campus over the decades). Lastly, the third email re-emphasizes the potential dangers of the unknown—and the absurd notion that a student in a Halloween mask requires a police bulletin.

Together, these emails might point to a strategy of “massive transparency”—revealing all the falsities that, I think anyway, *increase* a collectively endured affect of anxiety even as they fail to intervene in social circumstance in any real way. Reveal some events as false and newly “true” events take their place. Though incidents involving a machete, the FBI, and the Joker might never have happened, *Rave Guardian* exists as a technology to employ should I encounter, perhaps, a student in a Halloween mask or, to push it further, any student in distress (or distressing). This app exists as a protection against what has yet to happen, what might be imagined to happen in the future.¹⁵ Note here the ease with which the momentum of social anxiety might serve as a governing check, one that perhaps coerces one into a stance of securitization, of protecting oneself against an unknown (though seemingly probable) threat. Such elements make up the principles of what Foucault (2010) termed *governmentality*.

Our contemporary neoliberal moment asks us to hold multiple truths and corresponding anxieties in productive tension. Further, we are meant to encounter such anxiety without raising the alarm of abnormal function, of an inability to remain (economically) productive in the face of such circumstances. We can be anxious, just not overly so—download the *Rave Guardian* app but do not overuse it. In short, we are meant to endure the schizo-society of multiple truths but remain unphased by the inevitable contradictions that develop from such contexts. Importantly, we have come to desire these contradictory formations—developing satisfaction from nearly reconciling

14. Upon reading an early draft of this article a colleague asked that I include a full description of the events that precipitated these emails to help the reader understand the broader circumstance behind these emails (this concern was echoed by an anonymous reviewer). While I am sympathetic to the desire for a somewhat “complete” narrative, I think it important to note that all three emails assume that the reader understands their context or can otherwise offer the essential origins that precipitated their construction. Oblivious faculty member that I am, these emails left me mystified. I could not ground them in any contextual reality. As such, they existed for me as what Deleuze (1990) might term *partial objects*, lacking any totalizable unity, or *paradoxical objects* as they signal that there is meaning yet never stand in for the meaning itself. Further, in this case there exist no complete or full narrative. There are only attempts to clarify a non-narrative, or the assertion of what did not happen. The point, I believe, is that these attempts to simultaneously claim some truth (this did happen) and deny others (this never happened) result in circumstances of rather profound absurdity. Such absurd circumstances interest me at this point in time.

15. As a small digression, technologies such as the *Rave Guardian* app exist as a “protective” mechanism against an ill-defined or otherwise ambiguous future threat. This technology is thus different than, for example, the fire extinguisher under my kitchen sink. Though there may be other uses, the fire extinguisher exists as a protectant against a fire in my kitchen—a rather specifically-inclined technology. *Rave Guardian* exists simply as a means to communicate feeling unsafe, however the user defines that scenario. Thus, *Rave Guardian* exemplifies a technology meant to act in relation to one’s affective state, offering to alert others to one’s lack of security.

them, from nearly (though certainly never fully) making them coexist without much visible friction. Given such circumstance, how are we to engage in a renewed sense of critical work and to what end?

Parrhesia, Democracy, and Rhetoric
or
The Guests Enter & The Meal Is Served

In response to the contemporary limitations inherent in foregrounding contradiction or falsity in one's critical work, I next offer Foucault's articulation of *parrhesia* as a useful mechanism for intervening in normalizing discourse.¹⁶ Loosely translated as "truth-telling," *parrhesia* refutes rhetorical moves to dismiss truth through collapsing the disappointing distance between truth and belief—one cannot speak truths one does not believe. Indeed, Foucault (2011; 2001) emphasizes two different approaches to *parrhesiastic* practice among the Ancient Greeks that are distinguishable based on their respective orientation to truth and belief: 1) *political parrhesia* (the domain of the rhetorician); and 2) *philosophical parrhesia* (which aligns truth with belief and, as such, extends an ethical positioning within the world). Both *political* and *philosophical parrhesia* play a role in democracy: the former extends from a desire to persuade the populace towards some end, while the latter calls to question the very realities that give sense to everyday democratic practices, thereby asking citizens to act differently towards a possible future. Through *political parrhesia* the rhetorician seeks false democratic action: persuading others to some persuadable end. Conversely, through *philosophical parrhesia* one strives for radical democratic engagement through envisioning a potential means of being and knowing that is yet undetermined. In this way, *philosophical parrhesia* extends from the virtuous position within the world that Foucault and Butler earlier ascribed to critique. It is thus through *philosophical parrhesia* that we might locate critical inquiry practices for social justice.

Democracy requires an engaged populace, one that deliberates on discussions of what is true and what is false. Consequently, the inability to distinguish truth from falsity (or giving equal standing to multiple, contradictory truths, as is the case with the schizo-society) necessarily imperils democracy. Stagnated democracy—consisting of a citizenry paralyzed by the multiplicity of undifferentiated truths—loses any critical possibility: it repeats the same practices, beliefs, and values across time and space, regardless of context. This is the domain of the *political parrhesiast*: recycled truths given new life through coercive articulation. Thus, *political parrhesia* might be shown to cannibalize democracy by enforcing social stagnation and normalizing repetition. In such a scenario there is no room for political projects for deeply-rooted social change; only incremental alterations to what is already seen and known are allowed. In the field of education, *political parrhesia* gives rise to the educational technocrat, and might be deemed a *democracy of the past* (reforming what already was).¹⁷

16. My hope in this section is to give an overview of *parrhesia* as a useful orientation towards truth-telling and as an example of critical work for social change. As such, what follows is a bit of a gloss. For a fuller treatment of *parrhesia*, especially as it relates to social justice inquiry and materialism, see my previous work: Kuntz, 2015.

17. As an example, see how Bush's *No Child Left Behind* gave way to Obama's *Race to the Top*—both educational "reforms" make sense within the "truth" of accountability measures and principles of standardized assessments of content.

However, in the more liberatory sense of *philosophical parrhesia* truth-telling disrupts normative patterns of being and knowing. Here, telling-the-truth is to recognize the limits of the normalizing status quo and to imagine ways of being otherwise. This is truth-telling as intervention, as critique. As such, democratic activity stems from an engagement with an immediate, yet unfinished now. This is to provoke a *democracy of the immediate now*, risking truths that *require* change. Through *philosophical parrhesia* the *democracy of the immediate now* is productively disrupted towards a yet-to-be-realized future.

It is, however, strikingly easy to be persuaded by the skilled rhetorician who employs *political parrhesia*, to become enamored with a reformation of the *democracy of the past*. For the *political parrhesiast* there is no coincidence of truth with belief: it doesn't matter what you believe, it doesn't matter if you believe what you say, what matters is that you persuade your audience. If the audience is persuaded, you might be said to have spoken a truth.

What follows next is an example of political truth-telling that incorporates historical memory as a rhetorical skill to concretize select truths—of social progress, of the inevitability of productive change—that are far from interventions into the normative status quo. During the fall of 2013 the University of Alabama had a bit of trouble with its sorority system—it was shown to make pledge decisions based on race. Though the racial segregation of the university Greek system was not news (or was, rather, old news) it became of interest because of the blatant ways in which race was used to reject a well-regarded African-American pledge from a historically all-white sorority. I am not going to get in to the details of the actual instances of racist recruitment policies—readers can do that on their own—but I am interested in the rather bemusing response of our university president, a rhetorical response of truth-telling that looks increasingly absurd with the passage of time.

In recognition of the international attention brought to Tuscaloosa as a result of the systematic racial prejudice of the campus Greek system, President Bonner released a carefully choreographed series of online videos wherein she articulated the progressive action of the university to reframe the racist and segregated Greek system as we know it into a narrative of inevitable racial equality and community harmony. In particular, one video—released the morning of September 17th, 2013—stands out from the rest due to the absurdly rhetorical nature of its contents and the misalignment of assumed history and meaning-making; all very bemusing to say the least. In this particular video President Bonner linked what she termed the “carefully scripted scene” of Wallace’s 1963 Stand in the Schoolhouse Door, John F. Kennedy’s famous civil rights address to the nation that same night, and the university’s determination to integrate the sorority system some 50 years later—and she did it all in four minutes and 21 seconds. These are three decidedly scripted events—the stand, the speech, and now the video—and each remains entangled in public memory, cultural norms, and questions of truth.

In her video, Bonner raises the issue of segregation as a question of truth—she notes that the university was working to “determine what the barriers were—whether they were real or perceived” in order to produce a plan of action.¹⁸ As such, President Bonner offers a question of reality vs. perception, and that perception—or reality—is of the notion of *barriers*, as she later states, “we will remove any barriers that they [the pledge members] perceive.” Here perception is in the foreground—you perceive it and we shall remove it. There is thus a rhetorical collapse of truth with perception. If it is perceived it must be true (and thus removed).¹⁹ Rhetorically, we might surmise that if we change the perception—that pledges *perceive* barriers—then we change

18. All quotations are from a direct transcript of the video itself.

19. How very postmodern of her.

the reality that there *are* barriers; odd, that. But then it gets odder as the video extends to link a productive history of progressive change with a prescribed future of necessary (and inevitable) advancement. Given recent events—happenings that could not have been anticipated by President Bonner—the video becomes patently absurd and, it seems, one can only laugh uncomfortably at the strangeness of it all. The image below is a still-shot from the video.²⁰



After making a stand to change barriers—or was it perception?—the video shifts to a montage of scripted candid shots of Bonner with...Bill Cosby. Now, to be fair, this is Cosby before the public outcry against a litany of rape charges—this is the good natured, Jello-Pudding Pop, Kids Say the Darndest Things, gentle father Cosby. And, if you look closely, the (in)famous comedian is wearing a shirt that says “Property Of Alabama Football.” Such circumstance strikes one as laugh out loud funny even as it remains incredibly disturbing. Since the airing of the video, of course, Cosby has refused to answer allegations of rape on National Public Radio, continued his comedy tour, and been confronted by dozens of women who allege he drugged and raped them over an extended number of years. What are we to do with these multiple truths, all hanging side-by-side? What are we to do, but remain anxiously bemused by such absurdity? Just to review, we have a documented case of historical segregation in a Greek system at the University of Alabama. The president responds with a pledge to remove *perceived* barriers, invoking George Wallace, JFK, and Bill Cosby to do so. To make things wonderfully worse, Bonner concludes the video by quoting an exchange with Cosby that (scripted) night:

As he took his seat at the head of the table, [Cosby] commented:

“In 1955, when I crossed the color barrier and began my career in the entrainment industry, I could not have dreamed sitting at the head of the table in the President’s Mansion at the University of Alabama, with the first woman president.”

20. Judy Bonner with Bill Cosby. Digital image. *University of Alabama president: Our Greek system remains segregated, we will not tolerate discrimination [video]*. Accessed September 15, 2014. http://blog.al.com/tuscaloosa/2013/09/university_of_alabama_presiden.html.

I commented back to Mr. Cosby,

“During the last fifty years since two brave students walked through the schoolhouse door, The University of Alabama has made so much progress, but clearly, we still have so much further to go.”

Mr. Cosby looked at me and said,

“Please do not think about how far you have to go. Think about the steps that you are going to take in order to get there.”²¹

Such a delightfully non-scripted moment of connection, between the university president with the southern drawl and the African-American entertainer in the “property of” t-shirt. The online video has since been removed; I cannot imagine why.

What the entanglement of the video, representational histories, and forced celebration of social progression provoke in me is amazement at how easily absurdity aligns or rubs up against the most common of sense without undo friction or anxiety—it just is there, we watch the movies and move on. In many ways the practice of everyday living is one that meets such apparent discontinuity with a practiced shrug.

And what of the protests? Entangled in Wallace’s Stand, Kennedy’s speech, and Bonner’s video were a series of campus protests. As history folds unto itself protestors responded to revelations of the sorority incident by virtually re-inacting the 1963 stand itself—a march was organized to the administration building where the president met the marchers, shaking hands for a delightful photo-op. Thus, the sorority protest enfolds within the social memory of Wallace’s stand, the pictures overlay as nearly identical: the administrator (then Governor Wallace, now University President Bonner) stands at the doors to a building, surrounded by protestors (then protesting integration, now protesting segregation)—virtualized repetition at its finest. This, I suppose, is the cycle of past and present, perhaps even future, that Deleuze (1995) deemed “coexistent cycles of being.” As Deleuze notes, such coexistent cycles extend from representative systems—the machine renders a reality, a knowing, that can be known, understood according to its own sense-making. Thus there is an odd sense of history here—the contemporary racist event enveloped within the celebration of the historical post-event of the Stand. It’s a non-history history. It is thus not all that amazing that such repetition folds in on itself—repetition plays out and is called progress.

There are many ways to read this, but for the moment, let us foreground how public memory was invoked to shore-up an administrative response on my campus and, well, failed in rather spectacular ways. It might be said to have failed in the moment of calling back or recalling a shared public memory—that is, it just did not work in the ways perhaps intended (hence the video’s removal from the public domain)—but it certainly might now be said to have failed rather spectacularly given the distance of time (that is, when we fold an individually-felt collective memory—Wallace’s stand—on a recent happening—sorority segregation—and understand it through a few extended contemporary moments—Cosby at dinner with the president, Cosby refusing to discuss rape on NPR).

21. At the time of this writing, interested viewers can access the entire video through an attachment to this blog post: http://blog.al.com/tuscaloosa/2013/09/university_of_alabama_presiden.html.

This enfolding of public memory is often found on college campuses when some historical truth is called forth in the hopes of framing a more progressive contemporary time—one that learned from the events of the past in order to better operate and negotiate the vagaries of race, say, or class inequality. Sometimes this calling forth of public memory provides a useful ground upon which some community might come together—other times it disintegrates and we see not how far we have come, but how quickly we have redoubled back to where we were some odd years ago. This is akin to the politician who claims that he has made a “360 degree change” and is thus a newly made man. Public memory might thus be understood rhetorically, insofar as it attempts to preserve and reproduce particular understandings of the past to shape our understandings of the present and the future. As a result, public memory not only preserves shared understanding of the past, but also those conflicts about how exactly the past should be represented in the present—the coming together of the past in the present; an unfolding. So, in the Bonner example, we have public memory as a political tool, a means for engaging in *political parrhesia*.

Unlike *political parrhesia*, *philosophical parrhesia* points to a different type of disruption to normative political functioning within a democracy. Whereas *political parrhesia* perhaps leads to rhetorical interventions aimed at producing a social change that persuades select groups to think alike (and, further, follow-alike, hence the advent of facism), *philosophical parrhesia* makes available a type of civic disobedience that derives from the very linkage of belief and truth-telling. Through the coincidence of truth with belief, the philosophical truth-teller risks his/her positioning in relation to others, destabilizing one’s citizenship within a community. Thus it is that the truth-teller is in an unsettled position, one without predetermined ends.

Reclaiming Truth-Telling in Methodological Practice: Parrhesiastic Work or The Post-Meal Cigarette

Because I am not ready to foreclose on the notion of truth-telling, I find it useful to consider educational inquiry alongside Foucault’s notion of *philosophical parrhesia*. In this way, I seek next to situate critical approaches to inquiry as a type of *parrhesiastic* work. To be clear, I do not believe that there is any way to fully match *parrhesia* as enacted during the time of the Ancient Greeks with contemporary manifestations of educational inquiry; a one-to-one correspondence is not my aim. Instead, I want to consider *parrhesia* as an approach to living, being, and knowing the world differently—more productively—than we have traditionally and the implications that such a shift might have for those of us who take seriously the goals and aims of critical inquiry practice.

For Foucault, *philosophical parrhesia* extends from an orientation towards the world that is never complete; it always starts all over again. Thus *philosophical parrhesia* is an ontological positioning, one that extends from an ethical principal of insubordination to the coercive governing of the present. In this way, the *philosophical parrhesiast* seeks to transform the relations of which s/he is a part—the telling of truths makes possible an ongoing array of relational possibilities (some anticipated, perhaps, some not) and, as a consequence, is an intervention into the reproduction of standardized meaning. The *parrhesiast* never fully knows—never could fully know—the outcome of truth-telling and, as such, each *parrhesiastic* activity carries with it some degree of (productive) risk.

Whereas those who might inhabit the position of the *political parrhesiast* (or the rhetorician) often have little hesitancy when it comes to assertions of some truth (whether it be historically

“known,” individually felt, or both), contemporary academic theory often refuses to acknowledge the term *truth* for fear of essentializing or pre-determining the processes or concepts of which they speak. This seems strikingly apparent in educational scholarship that claims the critical mantle. “Critical” scholars seem all-too-easy with refusals of any truth and it is perhaps time to revisit this stance of non-truth in favor of truth-based assertions that extend from a determination to imagine ourselves as other than we are. Though I certainly understand the desire to resist foreclosing meaning to some fixed position, I remain concerned about the costs of such a move. And, I certainly am not ready to cede the role of truth-telling to the rhetoricians. Indeed, there exists the very real consequence that an ongoing determination to fixate on non-truths (the contradiction discovery tactics of “critical scholars”) actually enables a rhetorically-based production of multiple truths competing for visibility. We moved away from philosophical truth-telling to such a degree that we have achieved a type of inquiry-induced paralysis—we’ve no truths upon which to act (or a landscape of multiple, overdetermined truths, the multiplicity of which makes it impossible for us to act). Educational scholars intent on progressive social change cannot remove themselves from the consequences of such circumstances. We need to think, act, and live differently, according to new conceptions of responsibility and risk. Indeed, given our present day schizoid society, I find it all the more important that critical scholars risk practices of truth-telling and do so as a means of *philosophical parrhesia*.

The *philosophical parrhesiastic* orientation towards truth decidedly counters the tired hesitancy that has come to predominate the liberal world of inquiry work. Further, such truth-telling might usefully extend from a position of productive bemusement, laughing at the absurdity of truths given equal standing without much recourse even as we strive to intervene, critically, in their overproduction. In some ways, the schizo-society offers the critical scholar the opportunity to ask from the bemused position, as Foucault does, “How is it that meaning could be had out of nonsense” (1997, p. 53). What has coerced this meaning to ordered visibility in such absurd circumstances?

Perhaps what critical scholars must do is run the risk of becoming deformed subjects²²—this is the risk inherent to *philosophical parrhesia*: one risks the deformation of one’s identity. Butler (2001) terms this type of work “ethical labor” from an “ontologically insecure position”—critical practices that risk one’s own subject-formation and, as such, disrupt the politics of norms. Perhaps that is what our bemused status calls forth—we can no longer operate within structures of logical order—the rules have bent in absurd patterns. Like *Alice in Wonderland*, there is no rational means for tracing the patterns of logic that inform our contemporary moment. As such, we must develop a stance of bemused criticality—laughing at the absurdity of truth aligned with truth even as we locate the interstices where new formations might begin, where we might take a stance of belief that orients our work towards an unrealized, unimaginable, future. Critical faculty work, then, becomes moral work—the determination to intervene in neoliberal processes and practices because their incessant reproduction is unjust. And, one intervenes not because one has determined a progressive future but, instead, because one is determined to no longer be coerced by the seductions of neoliberal governing; the costs of such circumstances are simply not tolerable.

22. In some way, I align here with Ben Baez (2014) who alludes to the importance of *miscalculating ourselves* given the problematics of our contemporary “information age.”

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