

# Unlearning Aesthetics Pedagogy and the Perceptual Ecology of Class Struggle

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Article abstract

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## *Unlearning Aesthetics Pedagogy and the Perceptual Ecology of Class Struggle*

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### Abstract

*Materialist approaches to aesthetics historicize our sensuous capacities, orientations, and objects by attending to their ongoing production. This article begins by articulating capital not as an “economic” system but as a broader perceptual ecology that produces particular correspondences between subjects and the world. In response to the clear limits of ideology critique we argue that not only is capitalist ideology reproduced educationally but that pedagogical challenges to capital need to generate experiences with alternative collective perceptual realities that exist in the present. In our current conjuncture, such experiences are political insofar as they help rejuvenate the belief in the possibility and reality of revolutionary transformation. We offer the pedagogy of unlearning as one potential educational philosophy and practice that interrupts our inauguration into capital’s sensuous regime. Moreover, we read Marx’s Capital as a text that is guided by an aesthetic pedagogy to help us understand capital as a totality in shifting and partial ways and that, more importantly, produces a gap in the reader between our presumed sensuous certainty and other possible perceptual configurations.*



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## Introduction

While neither Marx nor Engels never wrote any “theory” of art or aesthetics, in *The German Ideology* they sketch a brief but powerful formulation of a materialist approach to aesthetics (which names the perception of the world through our senses). “The sensuous world,” they write, “is, not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society; and, indeed, in the sense that it is an historical product, the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations... modifying its social system according to the changed needs” (Marx & Engels, 1932/1970, p. 62). In this section of the manuscript, which went unpublished until 1932, they’re engaging Ludwig Feuerbach’s argument that liberation is achieved by directly sensing the world as it is. Marx and Engels critique the possibility of “sensuous certainty” because even the most basic object of our senses results from “social development, industry, and commercial intercourse” (p. 62). Giving the cherry tree as an example of a “simple” and “common” sensuous object, they observe it was “only a few centuries ago transplanted by *commerce* into our zone, and therefore only *by* this action of a definite society in a definite age it has become ‘sensuous certainty’” (p. 62). The shape and structure of our sensations and that which we sense are determined by the different modes of production operative in the past and present of any social formation.

Not only are perceptions shaped by ideologies, but ideologies operate sensually. An ideology is effective to the extent that it’s unquestioned and assumed to be natural and timeless rather than the result of struggles over the production of life. There’s nothing more ideological than when something is presented as non-ideological. Through a reading of Marx’s *Capital* below, we show that capital’s collective sensorium is produced and reproduced materially through both large-scale structures and everyday experiences. Insofar as capitalist ideology works directly on our sensations, ideology critique and political persuasion alone are insufficient for revolutionary pedagogy. As a result, we follow Tyson E. Lewis’ (2013) contention that educational “politics does not begin with changing a student’s beliefs or raising critical consciousnesses” (p. 346). Instead, the politics of education arise from creating space and time for “the sensation of freedom,” which means “politics in education has its fleshy roots in the pre-reflective, pre-cognitive erotics of perceptual foreplay wherein the potentiality for sensing differently—sensing otherwise than the disciplinary apparatus of learning dictates—is not sacrificed but rather nurtured” (p. 347).

In addition to demonstrating the aesthetic educational operations of capital, our primary goal in this article is to propose pedagogical concepts and practices that can stimulate the possibility of sensing the world beyond capital. The pedagogical dynamics we articulate here are deduced from the educational apparatus of capitalism and developed to generate the kind of pedagogical experience Simon Boxley identifies in the mass strike. For Boxley (2022), these large-scale interruptions are pedagogical in that they transform the public organization of society and force political responses but, more importantly, because they are “in essence, an erotic imbrication in the tide of collectivism as a ‘natural force’, the parallel at the level of class-consciousness of the ontopoetic absorption that Marx envisaged in his communion with divine nature, the parallel at the level of class-consciousness” facilitated by “an erotic surrender of the self to the collective, in angry love” (p. 63). These are sensorial disruptions through which we collectively experience another way of perceiving the world.

Here we can link educational politics and aesthetics, as education necessarily entails reinforcing and/or challenging dominant regimes of perception, ways of seeing, feeling, smelling,

hearing, and tasting. Just think of how much of our elementary school experience is explicitly about enforcing a particular regime of the senses: “Don’t lick *that!*” “Sit down and *listen to me!*” “Stop looking *out the window* and bring your eyes to the board!” It’s the same with teachers in that we can *see* certain students as intelligent or stupid, good or bad investments, as members of racial, gender, and other social groups—or not. Education unavoidably teaches of the fit or misfit between ourselves, others, and the world, or what we can and can’t—or should or shouldn’t—see, hear, feel, touch, and taste.

A critical analysis of capitalism and the struggle for socialism, then, must attend to the aesthetic dimensions of both. Capitalism isn’t merely an economic system but is a broader perceptual apparatus, and just as capital is historically produced through struggle, so too are regimes of perception. The capitalist mode of production determines our sensorial order, we argue, through a repetitive educational regime of learning. Our hope lies in the fact that capital’s perceptual ecology is—and must be—continually reinforced through educational processes and institutions. The sensuous world is pedagogically produced and might be pedagogically resisted because this world is “the total living sensuous *activity* of the individuals composing it” (Marx & Engels, 1932/1970, p. 64). Entering the class struggle through the aesthetic is crucial for, despite the endless proliferation of ever-more refined critiques, capitalism continues to thrive as the system that is, if not just, at least the best we can do. To be sure, this isn’t to say that explication and critical inquiry aren’t important, but that they represent one component of the class struggle.

### **The Aesthetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of the Conjuncture**

There’s no binary between theory and practice in marxism; it’s not as if marxism is something you “apply” or “use” to analyze a situation. Because marxist theory arises as a generalized reflection on the class struggle in a concrete moment in time and place, marxist praxis emerges from and responds to the conjuncture. While we don’t claim to know the totality of our current conjuncture, we do assert that one of its central features in the U.S. is the struggle over the necessity and possibility of revolutionary transformation.

At the global level, the desirability and reality of revolution has been discredited since the momentous overthrow of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc socialist states 30 years ago, a trend especially pronounced in the United States. As Jodi Dean (2017) frames it, today we believe that “there are revolutions, but they are not for us, not the revolutions we were hoping for, not proletarian revolutions” (p. 134). As Curry Malott (2017) has persuasively shown, critical pedagogy’s origins are precisely found in the rejection of the actuality of revolution. We need to rejuvenate and spread our belief in the *actuality of revolution* as a fundamental tenet of organizing.

Because there’s nothing to guarantee where or when the revolutionary rupture will take place, revolutions are always unpredictable. There’s nothing to guarantee that revolutionary forces can—and will—seize the opportunity, that reactionary forces won’t seize the moment of insurrection, or that existing forces won’t quickly reabsorb the opening back into the capitalist mode of production. The revolutionary party neither knows if or when the revolutionary moment will come, nor can it make the revolution. Yet the party does operate on the assumption of, in Georg Lukács’ (1924/2009) distillation, “*the fact—the actuality—of the revolution*” (p. 26). The actuality of revolution represents “the core of Lenin’s thought and his decisive link with Marx, for historical materialism as the conceptual expression of the proletarian’s struggle for liberation could only be conceived and formulated theoretically when revolution was already on the historical agenda as a

practical reality” (p. 11). The actuality of revolution is a perspective dictating our actions today, guiding our every move.

Political pedagogy needs to cultivate aesthetic encounters with alternative worlds and enunciate the educational resources involved in helping the movement sense alternatives to the current order. In this article, we map the perceptual ecology of capital, or how capital shapes our sensuous capacities and tendencies, by presenting our study of *Capital* as a text whose methodology and pedagogy corresponds—and responds—to that of capital. Contending that capital’s perceptual ecology is reproduced educationally via the pedagogy of learning, we propose a pedagogy of unlearning that introduces and maintains the space and time for encountering other potentials in the now.

We begin by relaying how capital isn’t merely an “economic” system but a perceptual network that produces particular correspondences between subjects and the world to show the limits to explanation and critique and the necessity of attending to aesthetics. We then turn to the relationship between aesthetics, pedagogy, and politics. Arguing that education is political because, as a matter of course, it inaugurates us into particular perceptual regimes, we propose that learning and unlearning offer two contrasting educational logics, with the former reinforcing capital’s perceptual ecology and the latter challenging it and helping us sense the actuality of revolution. Finally, we bring the threads of the article together by interpreting Marx’s *Capital*—particularly the sections on primitive accumulation and commodity fetishism—as guided by an aesthetic pedagogy that’s determined by both the object of inquiry and the political objective of the text.

### **The Perceptual Ecology of Capital**

Jennifer Ponce de León and Gabriel Rockhill (2020) articulate the “compositional model of ideology” to describe “the intricate ways in which ‘social agents’ are gradually composed—and potentially recomposed—out of palimpsestic processes of material socialization” (p. 106). Our subjectivity, consciousness, and sensuousness are products of both the overall complex determinations of history and everyday encounters that either reinscribe, alter, or challenge our ways of making sense of the world. Ideology in this model is viewed as “a social process of habitual sense-making that norms perception, thought, and practice—among other things—by accustoming social agents to a shared sensorium” (p. 101).

At one point in their argument, they turn to Marx’s writing on commodity fetishism from the first volume of *Capital* to demonstrate how this social process operates. Commodity fetishism names the reality under capitalism where “the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour, because the relation of the producers... is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour” (Marx, 1867/1967, p. 77). Commodity fetishism explains why when I purchase groceries I think and feel like an individual exchanging one object (money) for other objects when I’m actually a social subject in a complex interaction with the international working class and the totality of capital. When we buy strawberries, for example, we’re engaging in “a complicated affair involving dozens or hundreds or thousands of people, complex politics concerning tariffs and taxation (and maybe even the enforcement of these policies), contradictory border polices and innumerable decisions by banks, fertilizer companies, labor contractors, and much, much more” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 125).

Ponce de León and Rockhill underline how Marx frames commodity fetishism aesthetically. As Marx writes (1867/1967), commodities are “social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses,” just like how “the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself” (p. 78). The difference is that as values, commodities have “absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom” (p.77). For workers, commodities appear “as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things” (p. 78). Commodity fetishism isn’t “false consciousness” because the sensual forms capital takes on don’t operate according to the true or the false; they are objectively *real*. Under commodity fetishism, commodities seem like “what they really are.”

Capital is a perceptual regime producing sensual capacities, relations, and objects. The immateriality of value is historically produced and specific to the capitalist mode of production because it’s generated the moment in which commodities become bearers of value, which lets us equate different use-values with each other. Even before the section on commodity fetishism, Marx is clear that “the value of commodities is the very opposite of the coarse materiality of their substance, not an atom of matter enters into its composition” (p. 54). Value is also posited as a sensual relationship that we hear only by listening to the language commodities, for “the value of commodities... is told us by the linen itself, so soon as it comes into communication with another commodity” (p. 58). Value is only *represented* when commodities stand in relationship to each other, for it is only then that they take on the form of “a mirror of value” (p. 64).

Capitalist ideology isn’t imposed on us by the ruling class; on the contrary, it produces the forms through which capitalists themselves sense and understand the world. Take the general rate of profit from the third volume of *Capital*. Profit is different from surplus-value in that the former is the ratio of surplus over constant and variable capital while the latter is the ratio of surplus over variable capital. The capitalist doesn’t distinguish between constant and variable capital and, “since in the rate of profit the surplus-value is calculated in relation to the total capital and the latter is taken as its standard of measurement, the surplus-value itself appears to originate from the total capital... Disguised as profit, surplus-value actually denies its origin, loses its character, and becomes unrecognisable” (Marx, 1894/1977, p. 167). For this reason, capitalist economists can’t identify the differences between land, labor, and the social relation that is value.

In the second volume of *Capital*, we see how bourgeois political economists and other capitalist apologists fall over themselves trying to explain the origins of profit. When Marx breaks down the circulation of capital into three different phases, he highlights the peculiarity of the circuit of money-capital. In this circuit, the production process appears as an *interruption* or “as a necessary evil for the sake of money-making,” which is why “all nations with a capitalist mode of production are therefore seized periodically by a feverish attempt to make money without the intervention of the process of production” (Marx, 1885/1967, p. 56). It’s similar with the wage in volume one. As a representation of value, we sense the wage as payment for the entirety of our working time. “The wage-form,” Marx (1867/1967) writes, “extinguishes every trace of the division of the working-day into necessary labour and surplus-labour, into paid and unpaid labour. All labour appears as paid labour.” Value, which is imperceptible under capitalism, produces “this phenomenal form, which makes the actual relation invisible” (p. 505).

It might seem as if exposing and explaining the reality of the law of value that produces the phenomenal forms mentioned is adequate for marxist pedagogy. As Marx (1867/1967) makes clear, however, although value is “a secret... its discovery, while removing all appearance of mere

accidentality from the determination of the magnitude of the values of products, yet in no way alters the mode in which that determination takes place” (p. 80). Explanation and critique are necessary for revitalizing the actuality of revolution but are on their own insufficient if they aren’t understood both as part of and in relation to our capital’s broader perceptual ecology as it is reproduced through everyday experiences. We see this most clearly expressed in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx (1939/1973) clarifies that our labor is social in that it produces use-values for others, but “the social character of production is *posited* only *post festum* with the elevation of products to exchange values and the exchange of these exchange values” (p. 172). Not only “the social character of activity” (labor), but also “the social form of the product” (or the commodity) take on an external form *and* content because “personal independence [is] founded on *objective*... dependence” (p. 157-158). Our relations with each other *are* mediated through the exchange of commodities; hence, they *appear* as such! In response, to cultivate another aesthetic, to experience and see another world in the present, education has to challenge the dominant sensorial regime of capital. It’s not enough for us to *know* the reality of surplus-value that hides under the form of profit; we have to encounter an alternative social formation, to sense a world beyond value.

### **Pedagogy and Aesthetic Orders**

The class struggle is, as Ponce de León (2021) argues in *Another Aesthetics is Possible*, a battle over “the socially forged sensory composition of a world” (p. 4). This fight is for an “other aesthetics,” which names the production of a liberatory social order. However, capital and the struggle against it are aesthetic not only because they concern our senses of what makes or could make sense, but because aesthetics entails “the production of experienced lifeworlds via material practices” that take place “within a complex social totality that is overdetermined by the social relations of production” (p. 5). The aesthetic element of the class struggle is, crucially, not limited to “art.” When we confuse aesthetics with art, we obscure “the social force aesthetics exercises through other social practices,” ignoring other aesthetic experiences and the production of art as uniquely aesthetic (p. 5).

In *Radical History and the Politics of Art*, Rockhill (2014) establishes that dominant studies on art and politics assume that both are clearly distinct, universal, and permanent entities that relate to each other when they meet at a specific and timeless intersection. Unable to account for processes of social production, distribution, and consumption, art and politics are posed as transcendental metaphysical entities rather than “concepts in struggle that vary according to the social setting and historical conjuncture” (p. 179). The “autonomy of art” theses is the most striking proof of his theory, as “the very idea that art could be autonomous from society is an oxymoron: it is itself a social category” (p. 47). During the Cold War, the CIA used the autonomy of art thesis to fight against communism. Because communist societies understood everything as political, the argument was that the detachment of art from political agendas proves the “freedom” of capitalist societies. This is the ultimate irony: “an art movement that was largely perceived to be apolitical became ‘a prime political weapon’” (p. 216).

Rockhill’s intervention is political as it participates in the struggle over defining art and politics, for *describing* intrudes into the struggle over both. Rockhill’s project is pedagogical insofar as it involves “mapping out—and participating in—the dynamic interaction between multidimensional social practices” (p. 50). The politicized art is not about the artifact but the conditions of its production, distribution, and consumption. This educational process is different from what Ponce de León and Rockhill (2020) conceptualize at the end of their essay on ideology where they

endorse “collective education” as an education that proceeds by *demonstrating* alternative aesthetic worlds. This educational project is not about description or critique because, as they say, “it is one thing to tell people that another world is possible; it is quite another to show them that another possible world is actual” (p. 110). Education’s political capacity emanates from producing encounters of sensual experiences beyond those of capital. We take up their call by articulating pedagogical logics operative in reproducing capital’s perceptual ecology and proposing other logics and practices that might advance the cause of working and oppressed people in the class struggle.

Just as it’s a mistake to posit art and politics as discrete, transhistorical, universal, and essential attributes of certain objects or actions, so too is it an error to equate politics and pedagogy in these ways. Capitalism and imperialism are able to incorporate all kinds of subversive and radical teachers and disciplines into their accumulating and innovating structures, which is why we need to define the educational aspects of our conjuncture. We can approach this by noting how teaching has been reduced to the mere facilitation of learning, which, among other barriers, eliminates the need for *teaching* (and teaching *others* how to teach). Teaching is thereby redefined as “the creation of learning environments and as facilitating, supporting, or scaffolding student learning” (Biesta, 2014, p. 45). Learning is guided by the incessant demand for the constant improvement and accumulation of knowledges, skills, habits, etc. We’re all positioned as lifelong learners who must endlessly retool and reskill ourselves to adapt to the ever-shifting demands of the world market. We don’t become lifelong learners by choice; to survive we must remain competitive in the hyper-malleable global market.

When we’re told where and where not to look, what and what not to touch, and so on, we’re *learning* to accommodate ourselves to the perceptual ecology of capital. As Lewis (2018) puts it, “learning is the development of ever-more discriminating perceptual apprehension of what is possible in a world,” a kind of “modification of the body schema that allows fine-grained adjustments” (p. 128). The aesthetics of learning (under capitalism) are oriented toward the ever more precise merging of our sensorial experience – including what is perceptually and politically possible – and our bodies, orientations, and worldviews. Learning harmonizes our sensual capacities and orientations to capital’s aesthetic order. We learn to sense knowledge as a commodity—as an external and distinct object with a use-value and exchange-value we can acquire or transmit—instead of as a social relation between diverse segments of subjects in the global working class distributed across time and space unevenly. We learn what to see as we learn what’s invisible, what to listen for as we learn what’s inaudible, what can touch us as we learn what can’t. We learn *common sense*, acquiring the wisdom to judge not only what and how to see, but what is and isn’t worthy of vision, how to prioritize good sights and bad sights—what *should* and *shouldn’t* enter the sensuous field according to the general law of capitalist accumulation.

We need a pedagogical understanding of teaching and education that opens up a different perceptual ecology of education. We suggest teaching as the facilitation of unlearning to cultivate another aesthetic education to challenge the sensorial regime of capital. To counter the equation of teaching to learning, Biesta (2014) characterizes teaching as “something that comes radically from the outside, as something that transcends the self of the learner, transcends the one who is being taught” (p. 46). Teaching here is an imposition by the pedagogue into the very lives of students. Education is *defined* by the act of teaching because “the point of teaching, and of education more broadly, is never that students ‘just’ learn, but always that they learn *something*, that they learn it for particular *reasons*, and that they learn it *from someone*” (Biesta, 2017, pp. 27-28). Teaching



intervenes in the world through the arrangement of educational material, the generation of an educational relationship of trust, and the cultivation of an educational space of the encounter. Today, perhaps teaching, or *political* teaching, requires producing something different altogether, an alternative aesthetic and political relation with the world. Rather than “make sense” of something, the teacher’s task might be to prompt another kind of sense-making.

Teaching derives its educational force from the teacher’s intention to engage singular and collective students in certain content and derives its political force from the teacher’s aim to relate *specific* student(s) to *politically* curated content at *distinctive* moments in the educational process. Teaching as the facilitation of *unlearning* opens fissures from within the world as it is, inaugurating a break in learning. Through what Lewis (2018) calls “moments of breakdown,” the teacher helps produce disclose “a perceptual space wherein things can shine forth” (p. 130). Unlearning “enables a gap to emerge through which things can appear (no matter how briefly or indirectly)” and that, accordingly, “dis-orient us, and thus opens up a new access point” (p. 132). By producing the conditions for an unforeseen encounter, unlearning can break open an experience of being “in-between” the world as it is and as it could be. Unlearning puts us off our course, setting us adrift, suspending the perceptual ecology of capital and making room for the development of an alternative sensorium.

In a recent work, Gert Biesta (2022) posits that the basic signal of teaching is pointing, conceiving conceives “the basic gesture of teaching as that of *redirecting someone else’s gaze*” (p. 77). The teacher points in two senses simultaneously: they point *at* a student to direct their attention to some *thing*. As he writes, “pointing has a double orientation, in that it is always directed *at something* – Look *there!* – and at the same time oriented *to someone* – “*You, look there!*” (p. 78). In essence, what is the syllabus but an example of such a gesture, insofar as the syllabus points the students to particular content. The teacher’s aim is not for the student to *internalize* what’s in their gaze into their own understanding and being because education is about *the world* rather than the student. If the student merely incorporates the pointed-to into their understanding they merely *grasp* it (Ford 2022). The goal of the teacher is rather to change the student’s sense of self by making the world or the pointed-to *interrupt* the student’s being.

We want to substitute “gaze” for “glance” for, as Lewis (2012) notes, “the gaze is directed at *something* and is “a visual practice of mastery and control” insofar as there is a clearly definable *object* of the subject’s gaze (p. 64). The gaze is integral to the colonial framework, which holds that the colonized only exists to the extent that they’re subjected to the gaze of the colonizing power. This is the framework under which it’s logical for the colonizer to “discover” a land inhabited by people for centuries. After “discovery,” colonialism demands the constant visibility and transparency of the colonized. Any retreat from visibility into opacity is an affront to the colonial power (Ford, 2021; Pappachen & Ford, 2022). The glance, on the on the other hand, is always “an *ignorant* form of seeing and perceiving” (Lewis, 2012, p. 65). The gaze requires the student to examine something while the glance requires the student to be “receptive to the agency of the other” (pp. 64-5). The glance is necessary insofar as teaching brings us into a new aesthetic relationship with each other that exceeds our individual ability to make sense (hence, its ignorance).

Whereas the teacher guided by learning objectives directs the students *gaze* toward something in an effort to better integrate it into the student’s understanding of the world, the teacher as the orchestrator of unlearning encourages the open wonder of the glance. As a facilitator of learning, the teacher ensures that the student has the correct orientation to the educational object so that the student is better integrated into the perceptual ecology of capital. The educative gesture of

pointing calls the student's attention to something outside of themselves that can affect them, disorder them, and produce a misfit between the educational subject and object. The politics of education concern the sensual organization of our world, or *what* we make sense of it, *how* we make sense of things, and what we *don't* make sense of.

Ponce de León's (2021) writing about "Mexican Laundry," a poem by Ricardo A. Bracho that intervenes in struggles over gentrification in L.A. provides one example of this interruptive pedagogy of unlearning. The poem is on a plaque commemorating a downtown bar. Yet while gentrification is dominantly framed as a slightly transformation in which the neighborhood is made more visually "appealing," the poem doesn't articulate that which gentrification is erasing. There are no textual depictions of what existed before the influx of capital into the neighborhood and the poem thus "suggests a refusal to represent" what is displaced "in a way that would be easily assimilated to ideological uses of the visual" (p. 23). Rather than describe a visual representation, the poem uses "the phrase 'close eyes,'" which is "a refusal of the written text itself," a refusal that's "followed by an appeal to 'breath[e] beneath/... and smell" (p. 123). The sense of sight opens up other aesthetic engagements such that we can *sense* the past in the present, the alternative that exists in the world as it is.

The linearity of learning is interrupted as we unlearn our dominant conception of temporality and encounter the variegated times that co-exist at any given moment. By engaging with text's refusal to articulate content for us to learn, the poem "treats the senses as a social phenomenon and decenters the individual subject in the act of constructing memory, so that the act of memory comes to appear as a latent potential embedded in places and their sensorial landscapes" (p. 23). The subject confronting the plaque is, in this conjuncture, desubjectified as their expectation of encountering a plaque's text from which they could *learn* is blocked. The poem prevents the accumulation of knowledge and the learning of a particular message through prompting unexpected perceptions.

Bracho's poem says "*You! Look here!*" directing our attention to something that we can't identify or incorporate into our self-accumulation. Whatever politics are inherent in education involve *what* and *how* the teacher organizes the educational relationship between students and content, or how and what the teacher indicates the educational subjects should see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. Doing so, we hold, intervenes into the struggle over aesthetics and politics as the teacher makes curricular content into a political and aesthetic object. The poem, if engaged by the teacher as a political object that can open a space for unlearning, creates a misfit between educational subject and object, encouraging a collective exploration in an alternative perceptual ecology, which demonstrates the possibility of revolution—of producing a radically different society through revolutionary struggle.

### **Unlearning Capital in *Capital***

We can turn to Marx's own method of representing capital as an intentional pedagogy that aesthetically and pedagogically corresponds to and counteracts that of capital. This is most evident in the first volume of *Capital*, the only one Marx published (and republished) in his lifetime. In the preface for the first edition, Marx (1867/1967) states "it is the ultimate aim of this work, to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society," a social formation in which the capitalist mode of production is dominant (p. 20). All social formations are combinations of different modes of production and in any given social formation, time, space, and labor are uneven. "In all forms

of society,” as he puts it in the *Grundrisse*, “there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others... Capital is the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society” (Marx 1939/1973, pp. 106-107). Delineating between social formations and modes of production clarifies that various modes of production, temporalities, and spatial relations coexist in any given society (although one will always be dominant or striving for dominance) and produce different social relations, antagonisms, and landscapes.

England serves “as the *chief* illustration” in *Capital* because it was where “the natural laws of capitalist production” were most dominant over other modes of production and, thus, more observable (Marx 1867/1967, p. 19). At the same time, England still suffered from “a whole series of inherited evils... arising from the passive survival of antiquated modes of production” together with “modern evils” (p. 20). Even the “natural laws” of capitalism are, he constantly reminds us, adjusted in their actual operation (after all, capitalism is an inherently dynamic and contradictory system). The last part explains that capital’s development in England resulted from its location within the global balance of forces and attributes it to, among other things, “conquest, enslavement, robbery murder” (p. 668), national and international debts, the enclosure of the commons and the violent disciplining of peasants into wage laborers, “the discovery of gold and silver,” “the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, “the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins” (p. 703), and “slavery pure and simple” in the United States (p. 711).

The most general interpretation of primitive accumulation as a universal and finished “origin” story of capitalism, repeated almost endlessly, evidences a lack of attention to the text (e.g., Robinson, 1983/2000; Juárez and Pierce, 2017). Most obviously, Marx’s (1867/1967) introduction to this account of primitive accumulation signals that “in different countries, assumes different aspects, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different periods” (pp. 669-670). More significantly, however, Marx’s method is, as Beverley Best (2010) writes, not only “inconsistent with a chronological representation” but is “internally inconsistent” in that “throughout Marx’s analysis, he posits certain categories as ‘initial’ categories from which other categories are derived” (p. 111). To take just one example, Marx defines abstract labor in some moments as the *generator* of capitalist relations while elsewhere he defines it as the *result* of the exchange process. Rather than a defect or error, this inconsistency is the aesthetic form through which we can not only sense and know capital but, more importantly, unlearn the entire system that makes it make sense.

It is because articulating the logic of capital and arming our class requires transforming our cognition and sensation that accounts for Marx’s hesitation over publishing the French translation as a series of separate articles in progressive newspapers over a few years. In his 1872 letter to the publisher, Maurice Lachâtre, he expresses both approval and worry. “I applaud your idea of publishing the translation of *Capital* as a serial,” he says, as this structure will make it “more accessible to the working class, a consideration which to me outweighs everything else” (p. 30). At the same time, because it would appear piecemeal over time, he “feared” readers “may be disheartened” by the inability to link “the immediate questions that have *aroused* their passions” with the book’s “general principles,” an inability resulting from the specific form of publication (and, hence, distribution, exchange, and consumption) (p. 30). It was with this edition that the section on the fetishism of commodities we have, and with which we began this article, was properly formulated.

Marx, that is, was clearly thinking about how the pedagogy of *Capital's* presentation can best render its content sensible. Because capital is defined by the expansive motion of value, Marx's representation of capital's logic also takes the form of a process. Moreover, *Capital* is defined by contradictions, as is Marx's study of it. He can never articulate the totality, and every vantage point divides the visible from the invisible. The object of analysis provides the aesthetic organization of the text. It's interesting that Marx eventually decided to conclude the opening chapter of *Capital* by moving from more analytical argumentation to literary analysis or allusion. This aesthetic shift might be the most effective way for us to sense the social reality of value, to sense the perceptual ecology of capital, and to move us to action. As we reflect on reality, the substance of capitalist commodity production has "already acquired the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life" (p. 80). We can only get value as a social relation corresponding to capital through historicizing capital, so Marx visits other modes of production.

Beginning with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, a favorite of the political economists, we "transport ourselves from Robinson's island bathed in light to the European middle ages shrouded in darkness" *en route* to patriarchal and communal labor and, finally, the communist mode of production (p. 81). "Let us now picture to ourselves," he implores, "a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour-power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour-power of the community" results in a "social product" collectively owned and distributed (pp. 82-83). Marx closes the chapter out by voicing a dialogue between commodities, which they say that "our natural intercourse as commodities proves" only value forms us, for "in the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange-values," before, finally, asking us to listen to the bourgeois political economists speak through commodities (p. 87). The aesthetic presentation of the argument coincides with the content because the commodity (under capitalism) is a "common, every-day thing" and "something transcendent," something standing "with its feet on the ground" as well as "on its head" (p. 76).

Marx's method of presentation relays an argument that can only come to fruition through aesthetic allusion. We can feel the contradictions between the fetishism and the socialization of commodities, between our common and our individual subjectivity. Marx's teaching intends to animate readers by establishing a gap between the sensuous world as it appeared before and after *Capital*. His pedagogy is, accordingly, neither closed nor self-referential, but just the opposite: contingent, open, and for the reason he "takes his own theory into account by politically *posing* and *exposing his own ideas*" (Althusser, 1993/2006, p. 47). The section on the fetishism of commodities, which glosses over the history of different modes of production, is one place Marx transitions from the certainty of calculation and arithmetic for the uncertainty of historical practice. This is a performance of unlearning that inaugurates a break in learning and interrupts the dominant sensorium by allowing "a gap to emerge through which things can appear (no matter how briefly or indirectly)" and that, accordingly, "dis-orient us, and thus opens up a new access point" (Lewis, 2018, p. 132). By producing the conditions for an unforeseen encounter, the aesthetic gap can break open an experience of being "in-between" the world as it is and as it could be. Unlearning puts us off our course, setting us adrift by suspending the dominant ideological ecology of capital and making room for the development of an alternative ecology, contributing to our sensation of the actuality of revolution.

## Conclusion

Learning is an aesthetic induction into the capitalist mode of production, as we learn to sacrifice again and again so we can learn and re-learn skills, knowledges, habits, worldviews, ways of thinking, orientations, dispositions, and even bodily comportments to remain competitive in the struggle for survival. We learn as fast as possible, racing through coursework structured by learning “goals” and “outcomes.” We learn about *what exists* to generate new insights about it to birth something *new* into existence, to *master* and *discover* something novel and, thus, saleable. Through capitalist education, we learn to sense knowledge as a commodity – as an external and distinct object with a use-value and exchange-value we can acquire or transmit – instead of as a social relation between diverse segments of subjects in the global working class distributed across time and space unevenly. We learn what to see as we learn what’s invisible, what to hear or listen for as we learn what’s inaudible, what can touch us as we learn what can’t. We learn *common sense*, acquiring the ability to judge not only what and how to see, but what is and isn’t worthy of vision, how to prioritize good sights and bad sights – what *should* and *shouldn’t* enter the field of the audible according to the general law of capitalist accumulation. We not only learn what we *shouldn’t* hear but *how* to not hear certain sounds.

When learning, we express *our* new understanding of an *object* while when unlearning, we experience an interruption in our ability to make sense of something. The difference turns on the distinction between *understanding* – in which we accommodate a different experience into our cognition or, more broadly, sense it within the confines of our aesthetic legibility – and *encountering* – in which we experience the limits of our capacity to know and understand through our *inability* to make sense, maybe exposing us to another aesthetics.

The aesthetics internal to the pedagogy of *unlearning*, an educational form we think we can mobilize in our struggles, opens fissures from *within* the world as it is, inaugurating a break in learning and interrupting the dominant sensorium as Marx does in the opening salvo of *Capital*. We sense we’re unlearning when that which seemed so familiar—like the origins of capital or the fetish of commodities—suddenly seems uncertain and strange, when an ideological framework or worldview that seemed so total, natural, and timeless suddenly appears as the result and condition of historical processes and, as such, something we can collectively transform. Political teachers, as Jason Wozniak (2022) has it, “grant students the possibilities of experiencing time and classroom social relations differently,” providing us with “a taste of free time, and an experience of being momentarily free” (p. 130). This is a taste of the presence of alternatives in the present, of the actuality of revolution.

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