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**What did you learn in school today? Cultural Studies as Pedagogy**[[1]](#endnote-1)

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In this essay, I suggest that cultural studies is, at its heart, a pedagogical project. It is a critical practice embodying a commitment to complexity, contingency, contextuality, addressed to the politics of discourse and culture, but always performed as an ongoing conversation challenging the certainties that too often guarantee our claims to knowledge. The essay offers some thoughts on how such a conversation might define both classroom education and public political debate—the latter through a consideration of the protests against Confederate monuments—in the context of the contemporary crises of education and knowledge.

I have devoted my adult life to teaching, more particularly, to teaching cultural studies. As much as my passion for cultural studies involves a faith that better ideas, better knowledge and better stories matter, that they are invaluable to any political project for social change, it also involves a deeply felt recognition that cultural studies is, at its heart, a pedagogical project.

I have always known that teaching is central to cultural studies, not only in the narrow sense of the institutional practices of the classroom, but in the broad sense of pedagogy as using the resources of thinking to change the ways people (including ourselves) understand and act in the world. The heart and soul of cultural studies has always been defined by the ways pedagogies enable us to articulate thinking and socio-political change—in classrooms, the arts, popular cultures, and mass media,[[2]](#endnote-2) in all sorts of conversations--intimate, institutional and public, and in whatever media are available and promising to us. If the very possibilities of cultural studies have always to be understood conjuncturally, then the conjunctural demands for pedagogy, and moreover, for particular practices of pedagogy, have to be answered, even if always within the limits of the conjuncture. These questions of pedagogy –and education-- have to be embraced as an inescapable part of the effort to construct cultural studies in the present moment, but again, the very question of pedagogy—and my own response to it--has to be understood conjuncturally.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS)—my own introduction to cultural studies— was built on a foundation of teaching –in a variety of forms and practices. As have often been remarked, each of the three major founding figures of British cultural studies—Williams, Hoggart and Hall—began their careers in extra-mural and adult education (although Hall also taught at a secondary modern school). Hall’s first book, *The Popular Arts*, co-authored with Paddy Whannel[[4]](#endnote-4)—was written primarily for school teachers. Williams wrote extensively about how his experiences in adult education pushed him into questions of popular culture and communication on the one hand, and into the broader questions of what was to become cultural studies on the other. Hoggart and Hall have similarly acknowledged the profound impact of their pedagogical roots and routes.

CCCS was devoted to teaching. I remember Stuart Hall often talking about the Centre’s responsibly to teachers, especially to colleges (as opposed to universities) and to what were then called polytechnics, and some of the material they produced and seminars they organized were directed to teachers in such institutions. Many of those studying/working at the Centre were themselves teachers at such institutions. The Centre maintained the interest and commitment to education throughout its history, and published a number of books directly addressing it: *Learning to Labor* (1977), *Unpopular Education* (1981), and *Education Limited* (1991).

But it went much deeper than that. I think for Stuart Hall, being a political intellectual was intimately and inextricably linked to being a teacher in the broadest sense possible. This link between scholarship and teaching, thinking and pedagogy, is one of the things that makes cultural studies uniquely powerful and appealing. It was the passion generated by the belief that both could be effectively made to matter if and only if they were inseparable, that made an extraordinary impression on me (and that inaugurated my own passion for teaching, however often I think I fail) and on the audiences of early cultural studies events (in the U.S.).[[5]](#endnote-5) And, I have to admit, it was just this unique relation that I had the great fortune to experience in a number of amazing teachers—Jarold Ramsey, Loren Baritz, and Hayden White (none of whom quite knew that I would later understand them as reaching for cultural studies) in my undergraduate years, and Stuart Hall and James W. Carey as my graduate mentors.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The everyday life of the Centre was in fact, deeply and intimately involved with teaching as it tried to create new practices for graduate education—new kinds of seminars, new kinds of collective experiences, new forms of institutional practices. The Centre was also involved in some undergraduate teaching early on, where it similarly reached for new possibilities. All these experiments sought to enable, even to invent, new relations between “teachers” and “students,” new forms of authority, new syntheses of rigor and passion, new ways of distributing and acknowledging expertise while still respecting the broad political commitments (because there were a lot of very real and very passionate disagreements as well) that often bound people together. These experiments were usually compromises—among those present in the Centre, and dependent on what the Centre could get away with behind the back of the administration as it were-- that satisfied no one completely, but the more important question was: did they move the work of the Centre forward? Later they tried to extend this experimental attitude to pedagogy into a taught M.A. program and even a more formal undergraduate program. These extensions brought greater administrative scrutiny, limiting what they could do even more, but they never gave up the effort, even long after Hall left, even after the Centre had become a department (and gone through numerous transformations), until it was finally—arbitrarily? politically?--closed in 2002.

I want in my comments here to talk about cultural studies as a pedagogical project and pedagogy as the practice of a particular sort of conversation, one that is always multiple, complex, fluid, and ongoing but also, one that seeks not consensus but a dissensual “unity-in-difference,” one that seeks a better understanding of what’s going on and better stories of how we get out of this place, elucidating the possibilities of forging forms of strategic cooperation aiming to move toward something more humane. But let me be very clear here that I am trying to rearticulate the very concept of conversation into the present conjuncture, and the present political crises. By conversation, I do not mean to assume a process of rational, deliberative, or persuasive relations (although I do not exclude them as tactical efforts) but a more tortuous process of engagement by which we attempt to move people and to move with them, into new forms of community, new forms of political movements. It is a conversation simultaneously intellectual and political (although these are never equivalent or simply corresponding), discursive and embodied, a conversation into which we enter and attempt to contribute something that will move it, however slightly, along, and a conversation that will (hopefully) continue beyond us in ways we could not have predicted.

Such a pedagogy need not appear exclusively under the sign of cultural studies, as if it belonged to cultural studies. I think such pedagogies are actively championed by some formations within feminist, anti-racist, antipatriarchal and anti-heterosexist, post- and de-colonialist, environmentalist, etc. thinking, but such political commitments do not guarantee the kind of pedagogy I am here articulating as and to cultural studies. After elaborating such a pedagogy, I will address its possibilities in the college classroom and the public arena. I will conclude with some thoughts on the state of pedagogy in the current conjuncture.

**Cultural Studies as Pedagogy**

This is not the place for me to elaborate, once again, my argument that the specificity of cultural studies begins with commitments to complexity, contingency and contextuality.[[7]](#endnote-7) I want instead to talk about how such commitments might change the ways we think about pedagogy. And I want to begin by displacing the relation of cultural studies and politics in order to more carefully articulate them. First, although the desire for cultural studies is driven by political concerns in the first instance, and the “success” of cultural studies is partly measured by its ability to open up new possibilities for struggling against the dominant tides of history and power and imagining possible futures, cultural studies has no guaranteed politics attached to it. It is too easy and too common to assume that the politics of cultural studies is guaranteed to follow certain “progressive” values and visions. But if cultural studies is both an intellectual and an educative/pedagogical project, if it in fact recognizes that these are inseparable insofar as they are pedagogical, if it is built on a particular understanding of the nature of political struggle and possibility, such assumed guarantees are unwarranted—and conservative articulations of cultural studies are more than simply possible. That is because the pedagogy of cultural studies is defined by its intellectual project and commitments, albeit always deeply colored by its particular political choices. That being said, my own take-up of cultural studies is shaped by my own oppositional politics and by my own progressive commitments in the present conjuncture.

Second, to the extent that cultural studies is always articulated by and to politics, its politics is always conjunctural and pragmatic; it is not interested in attaching itself to some absolutist vision of the “correct” and “pure” politics. It has become all too easy and all too common to think that teaching cultural studies means educating students to a proper political experience/interpretation/judgment of the world, so that, in the end, teaching cultural studies comes to mean teaching social justice and the critique of capitalism. A cultural studies’ pedagogy will talk about how such structures and practices of inequality, injustice, etc., characterize our realities, but that is only the beginning. Cultural studies is committed to being part of political and social change, but only through the mediation of the production of the best knowledge possible, of creating better maps that might open up alternative strategies leading to better futures, and better stories that might speak to people in ways that win them, however slowly and however compromised, to different political positions. That is to say, part of the uniqueness of cultural studies is that it does not presume to have a pre-constituted constituency; rather, it recognizes that politics works precisely by assembling new political constituencies. The differentiation between maps and stories is a tactical and unstable one. Maps tell stores, and stories provide maps. Maps provide the backstories as it were, vital information if we are to understand where we are and how we got here as the foundation for the strategic stories we imagine and tell. But this means, at the very least, finding a way out of the distinction between knowing and sharing/showing, between research and education, for as I will argue, they are both always imbricated within the same pedagogical conversations.

In such efforts to tell better stories, i.e., to join into and contribute to the conversation in ways that enable us to keep thinking (and strategizing), one must take account of the nature of ongoing struggles—the forms, strategies and effectiveness of all sides engaged in contemporary struggles for power. One has to move beyond what is see-able and say-able to discover the complexities that too often go unnoticed and unremarked, the practices by which they are inaugurated and maintained, the contradictions that make their apparent taken-for-grantedness always contingent, and the ways that people are recruited into supporting them, often unknowingly (without assuming they are dopes, duped or even worse, morally reprehensible).[[8]](#endnote-8) But understanding contemporary complexities always demands knowing the history—both intellectual and political—that has both grounded and often been erased in the current conjuncture.

Cultural studies attempts to reconstruct the obvious, the taken-for-granted, not merely to change the ways we judge them, or even just to bring them into consciousness, but to problematize them, to problematize the larger contexts and temporalities that hold them in place and make them seem reasonable, unavoidable, or just the way the world is. It seeks not merely to make the invisible visible, to give voice to the unsaid and silenced, but to create the conditions for understanding why and how the world continues to be made in such (inhumane) ways. And for that, it offers a pedagogy that enables people to think about their lives and the contexts that make those lives possible. Therefore, it has to be concerned with what our intellectual and political practices communicate to those whom we are attempting to reach and move.

Finally, cultural studies refuses the illusion that it is political activism or even politics by other means. Again, I am not denying that cultural studies is political; on the contrary, it seeks to provide better “intel” for activisms—although these are never so neatly separate, being always in conversation and contestation--and therefore perhaps, enable more effective tactics and strategies. I believe the political engagement and mission of cultural studies was prefigured in Stuart Hall’s understanding of the (British) New Left, which was actually formulated originally by young emigres in the U.K.[[9]](#endnote-9) The New Left called for: (1) a new analysis of the political, economic and social relations and dynamics of “our times,” which would (2) take culture seriously. Such work would provide the ground on which to (3) reinvent a new conception of socialism (and an expanded understanding of politics), what we would think of today in terms of economic and social justice, embracing freedom, equality and difference together. This vision of political possibilities can only be realized if we (4) inaugurate a popular politics that connects with people’s lives, that starts engaging with people where they are, and that makes questions of everyday life and agency central. It would not only embrace democracy, but heterogeneity, seeing the political struggle not as a battle between two warring camps but as a struggle to create unities-in-difference, new forms of social, cultural and political assemblages. Finally, all of this depends upon (5) embracing another way of thinking, one that rejects any and all binary choices between oversimplified options (e.g., the old and the new, the left and the right, party politics and movement politics, the good guys and the bad guys) in favor of seeking a third, more complex position defined neither by a simple compromise nor a dialectical synthesis. In political terms, Hall often described this as a strategy of “one foot in, one foot out,” that is, as a partial connection, a tempered commitment. If I may oversimplify for a moment, I would suggest that the first two are the decisive purview of cultural studies, the next two are the point at which cultural studies reaches out to political struggle, and the final one is what provides the condition of possibility for all four and points us to the pedagogy attached to or imagined within this broader project.

There are three aspects as it were to this pedagogy.[[10]](#endnote-10) First, it is a pedagogy of the conversation, not an ideal conversation but a real conversation built upon the ever-present possibility of being wrong and the reality that conversations will change everyone involved. It is not merely the liberal conversation of pluralism (teaching the debates) or the postmodern conversation of sheer multiplicities.[[11]](#endnote-11) It is a conversation embodying the democratic principle that all voices have a right to be heard, but qualifying that principle insofar as it recognizes that not all voices are equal or have equal authority, and that such judgments have to be made contextually by balancing the claims of various experiences and forms of expertise. Further, obviously, not all voices can win the day as it were, and no voice is guaranteed assent or leadership by virtue of its social position or moral virtue. The point of the conversation is not victory but moving the conversation forward, intellectually and strategically. The point of the conversation is to find a livable and useful order in the chaos, to find an organization of the multiplicities that is both possible and better (according to some epistemic and political values, which are themselves to be decided within the conversation). Cultural studies believes that conversations can move people, hopefully toward better—albeit always contextual—truths and possibilities. It is always a matter of finding the best available truths of the situation. Of course, failure is always an option—especially these days—but it becomes almost a foregone conclusion if we enter the conversation with the certainty of our own truths and values.[[12]](#endnote-12) Certainty is what ends the very possibility of conversation. Certainty arises from simply affirming what we already know, from whatever it is that seems obvious to us, from whatever it is that we are willing (even required) to take for granted—whether epistemically, politically or even morally. Certainty makes it almost impossible, offering no incentives—reinforced in the contemporary political and intellectual cultures—to admit that one might be wrong and to change one’s position.

Second, cultural studies’ pedagogy rejects any absolutism, the result of the articulation of certainty and simplicity. Cultural studies recognizes the necessary and specific complexity of determinations, contradictions and agencies that define any context, as well as the possibilities of seeking collective strategies for making the future. The conversation that cultural studies calls for is never limited to cultural studies, or to any single, pre-approved set of voices. It is a conversation defined by a logic of yes…but, where the “ellipsis/but” is not operating in the register of critique or the accusation of evil or complicity or necessary failure. It is not an act of exclusion or refusal. Instead, it is an affirmation, an invitation: yes …and … give me more. It is always about the complexities, the contradictions, the contingencies, the multiplicities, the relations among the many agents and agencies, among the many operations of power, the constructions of unities and differences, the competing possibilities of both order and change.

Third, one always needs to figure out where to enter the conversation, but even more important is how one enters, for there is I believe a distinctive voice of cultural studies. It is a voice predicated on uncertainty, humility, generosity and if possible, even a bit of humor (yes, even in the face of despair and monstrosity). But most importantly, it is a voice that recognizes that the task of such a conversation—its greatest contribution--is to enable us to go on thinking, not to settle for some new Absolute, some new Truth. It is a voice that embraces its own necessary incompleteness. Such a conversation is not dialogic,[[13]](#endnote-13) a call and response, since its temporality is always uneven, nonlinear and fractured. And it must always recognize the real inequalities, some reasonable and many unreasonable, of knowledge, experience and feeling. Moreover, in conversation, while every contribution has to be received as a gift, not every contribution will be a useful or even appropriate response to what has preceded it. It is a conversation among people who are simultaneously equals and non-equals, where the necessary negotiation of identifying what matters where (e.g., claims of expertise) always constitutes it as reflexive and self-reflective. It is also not a call for a return to reason or civility, because it cannot forget the criticisms of the ways both of these have been imbued with and articulated to particular structures of power. It is a conversation imbued with passion, but a passion always tempered by the call to know better.

Stuart Hall “put it this way...you have to be sure enough about a position in order to teach a class, but you have to be open-ended enough to know that you are going to change your mind by the time you teach it next week. As a strategy that means holding enough ground to be able to think a position out but always putting it in a way which has a horizon toward open-ended theorization.”[[14]](#endnote-14) John Trudell, a poet and leader of the American Indian Movement, expresses it somewhat differently, talking about the difference between believing and thinking. “You can’t do both. Either we’re going to believe or we’re going to think, and the difference is …when … we’re thinking, energy is flowing, it’s going where it goes, it’s flowing. When we believe, we’ve taken that flowing energy and put it into the box that is limited by the definitions of the belief. So here’s energy that should be going and finding its way into the universe so that we can create solutions, being put into the box of belief, and then every solution we attempt to come up with is limited by the box of belief.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

The conversation of cultural studies always attempts to convert believing into thinking. Cultural studies offers a voice, a voice courageous enough to speak against the tide, not only of the forces of inhumanity but also against those forces seeking—but often failing--to challenge them and redirect the tides of history. But this means, among other things, that we must know these histories, understanding what is old and what is new, understanding where there are both intellectual and political insights, and where we face failures and dead-ends. It seeks a voice passionate enough to defend itself against the taken for granted certainties of both sides, but humble enough to accept that it may be wrong—and always incomplete--and that, at the very least, it will need to change as it responds to the vicissitudes of the conversation itself and of the changing world in which it lives and which it seeks to reconfigure. This is cultural studies’ pedagogical voice—whether engaged in public debate about political strategy or trying to reach students in a classroom. It poses at least two problems: how to get people to think otherwise (other than those embodied in the academy and the media); and how do you provide the “content” that will enable people to enter into the conversation in productive ways.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Cultural studies in the classroom**

I hope it is clear that I think that research and teaching are inseparable in cultural studies, and so the question of teaching cultural studies in the academy is crucial. Before proceeding, I have to at least acknowledge that there are people—usually not in cultural studies—who criticize its move from “the new left” into the academy. They usually grab hold of Stuart Hall’s statement, latching on to the word “retreat”:[[17]](#endnote-17)

We thus came from a tradition entirely marginal to the centers of English academic life, and our engagement in the question of cultural change . . . we first reckoned within the dirty outside world. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was the locus to which we retreated when that conversation in the open world could no longer be continued; it was politics by other means … But then, one always has to make pragmatic adjustments to where real work, important work, can be done.

But Hall’s statement not only acknowledges the pedagogical impulse always inscribed in cultural studies, it also recognizes the contingent and strategic location of cultural studies. It starts with an awareness of the contingency and multiplicity of potential sites for the inextricable link of pedagogy and knowledge production, but also of the changing availability and limits of such sites. The consequence is that there is always a need for pragmatic and contextual judgments about how to use different sites, for particular projects. While this is not the place for a map of the contemporary epistemic-pedagogical landscape—one would certainly have to include the continuing work of the trade union movement and NGOs, such as those dedicated to matters of law and justice, economic justice, environmental rights, etc.—I do not mean to ignore the complicated relation between pedagogy and schooling. [[18]](#endnote-18)

I have been teaching classes in cultural studies for a long, long time. Sometimes they have been more advanced, more focused classes, but mostly they have been “introductory.” Sometimes they have been undergraduate classes, but mostly they have been graduate classes. And mostly, to be honest, I have never felt like I really succeeded, although I hope that at least some of my students would disagree. In fact, I have always found teaching cultural studies to be a somewhat impossible task. I am sure that this is partly my own failure, because some of my students have developed classes that seem more promising than my own efforts. So, what does it mean to teach a class in cultural studies? What we are trying to do when we teach cultural studies?

Unfortunately, the most common answers largely miss the point, even if they are often inscribed into “textbooks.” Some assume we are teaching students how to read and respond to the current state of power, in particular, to an already defined set of structures and relations of economic and social injustice and inequality. Teaching cultural studies becomes a matter of getting students to see the world in “politically correct” ways; we teach anti-racism, feminism, heterosexism, the critique of capitalism, etc. usually within a set of predefined analyses and concepts. Others assume we are teaching students how to read power off of texts, as if meanings were permanently inscribed, often guaranteed by the politics of their origin, assuming an equivalence between discourse, meaning and power. Just as commonly, cultural studies is reduced to a matter of theory—so we teach some canonical mixture of political and cultural theory, choosing from among the apparent chaos of modern and postmodern schools and authors, constructing some sort of canon from various traditions of critical thought (Frankfurt School, post-structuralism, postmodernism, etc.) or identifying cultural studies with whatever theories they conceive to be the new cutting edge, or simply offering up a list of key concepts (among the latest, biopower, ontology, rhizome), which like Maslow’s famous hammer, will always lead you to find what the tool (concept) tells you to look for. I have to say that many of the theories included in such constructions of a canonical field have, in my opinion, little to do with cultural studies except as interlocutors or positions against which cultural studies has constituted itself, at least in my own contexts of thinking. On the other hand, and more generously, theories and concepts may provide tools and resources useful to cultural studies in particular contexts. Finally, some people make cultural studies into a new (sub-) discipline or set of (sub-) disciplines, defined by some range of objects that have been ignored by, or are outside the normal range of vision of existing disciplines (e.g., forms of popular culture, or new technologies, or regimes of power); the result is often that cultural studies becomes a survey of social and cultural activities (that students will find interesting?).

I hope it is obvious that these approaches actually avoid coming to terms with cultural studies. Cultural studies transforms the very organization of knowledge by insisting that its “object” is the messy, multidimensional, context. For cultural studies, the questions that demand to be answered, and the political struggles that need to be addressed, can only be known in the confrontation with the concrete, empirical, and discursive materialities of the context, always mediated by theoretical concepts that are viewed as tools that may or may not prove useful, but that are always likely to have to be adjusted to serve the needs of specific contexts.

So, what is to be done? Cultural studies—I do not claim it is alone--is about how to be a political intellectual rather than the proper politics of theories or theories of politics; it is an intellectual practice/attitude, a way of thinking, and a way of organizing a conversation so as to go on thinking. Teaching cultural studies means making this visible, hearable, maybe even desirable. However much I might agree with the particular ethics or politics on offer, I have trouble with the notion of a teacher as the model of an ethical or political subject who stands as a measure against which students have to judge themselves (usually as failures). As Tony Bennett and others have pointed out,[[19]](#endnote-19) such pedagogies have a long and problematic history, operating by turning ethics or politics into normative systems of judgment. For cultural studies, the teacher is but one intellectual, part of a community, who struggles to find better questions, better tools, better analyses (maps) and better stories, who embodies the tension between—and the possibilities of articulating—rigor, passion, pragmatism and humility—at the intersection of analysis and politics, in order to go on thinking. At the same time, I have no problem thinking of the teacher as an occasional and circumscribed expert, or as someone positioned to call out others’ assumptions and certainties,

The easy part is to get students to understand that culture matters and, in the contemporary world, that popular culture and everyday life matter. The harder part, especially given the current, problematic status of knowledge and the levels of cynicism, is to get them to appreciate that ideas and knowledge actually matter as well. But the hardest part is to get them to know, deep in their bones, that the only way to understand how they matter is to be willing to question and to risk whatever they take for granted, starting with every certainty (no matter how obvious it seems to them), any faith in certainty, the very search for certainty.

Most students have been taught for their entire lives that there is always and only one right answer—often framed within a binary choice, which is to be found by clearing a way through all the messiness, reducing the overwhelming complexity to find the single, simple truth, interpretation, explanation. Such ways of thinking assume that, whatever the question, in the final analysis, it is all about some one thing and even that every question leads to the same thing (e.g., economics, class, patriarchy, racism). They have to be moved (we all do) to give up the assumption that they can know the answers in advance—whether they are guaranteed by theoretical commitments, political investments, or by apparently legitimated empirical generalizations. All of these, to use Hall’s phrases, let you off the hook, let you sleep comfortably at night, thinking that the world is neatly wrapped up and explained. At the same time, abandoning “truth” to relativism (it’s all a matter of perspectives), cynicism (it’s all a matter of politics) or the celebration of multiplicity for its own sake (it’s all about modernist ontologies) is equally problematic.

Actually, the really, *really* hard part is to realize just how pervasive such ways of thinking are, how commonsensical they appear to be, even in the academy—among both faculty and students. How do you explain to students who have not yet really lived inside the over-disciplined and over-specialized academy what it means to be interdisciplinary?[[20]](#endnote-20) How do you explain to students who have been educated for their entire lives to think in precisely the ways cultural studies criticizes, who have internalized academic habits and norms, why cultural studies thinks it is necessary to disrupt the everyday and structural conditions of labor in the academy? How do you tell students that they have to learn how to ask questions, and how to recognize what an answer looks like? How do you tell students who are seeking academic jobs that cultural studies is trying to teach them how to be an intellectual rather than a professional academic? How can we teach students if we do not take the contingency of the classroom seriously, if we do not engage with the students’ own structures of beliefs, involvements and investments?

They have to learn new ways of figuring out what questions to ask, how to construct the context or problem space within which one is working, which conceptual and empirical tools might help to answer those questions in that context, and how to arrive at a better story, opening up new possibilities of reconfiguring the present for another future. To do this, they have to learn to think complexity, contingency and contextuality, to think of a specific social reality as the result of multiple forces and struggles configuring the chaos into an organized structure of relations of power (i.e., there may be conspiracies, but there are always lots of them, as well as other forces and chance, all working on the same reality). Students have to be gently convinced (we all do) to give up any and all appeals to homogeneity, unity, purity, wholeness, or rather, they have to understand that such realities are always contingent constructions, the results of articulating relations and organizing multiplicities, which yet always retain their heterogeneity, their hybridity, their syncretism. Hence, any reality is always the space of contestations and possibilities, of many contradictions, struggles, agencies and openings. Second, they have to learn to speak provisionally, with humility, accepting the uncertainty and incompleteness that is the very condition of knowledge. And third, they have to learn to recognize that interesting work, effective politics, are not only collective and collaborative endeavors, but always risky and difficult.

All this brings me back to the question of how—how do you teach students to think outside the habits of both common sense and the academy? How do you teach cultural studies? Over the years, I have tried many ways: traversing political and theoretical literatures, constructing canons, creating genealogies, rehearsing different questions and problematics, staging arguments, etc. Increasingly, I have learned to teach cultural studies from my students. Somehow this seems appropriate. I have come, in recent years, to approach the task simultaneously in two ways.

First, I have learned from some recent graduate students (Adam Rottinghaus, Andrew Davis and Megan Wood) who have serially and collectively designed an exemplary and effective undergraduate class, to emphasize, from the very beginning, that the practice of cultural studies is conjunctural analysis.[[21]](#endnote-21) Conjunctural analysis might be figured as the construction of a context by mapping the lines of determinations and structures of relations that intersect at a particular point of entry (and hence, the conjuncture can be mapped by following these lines out from that starting point). The very practice of conjunctural analysis is the organizing principle that defines the structure of the class and the particular tools--theoretical concepts and research techniques--the students will need to carry out closely monitored collective and collaborative research projects. They learn cultural studies in the conduct of cultural studies itself. My own observation and experience suggests that this works better in undergraduate classes than graduate seminars. Without being too cynical, graduate students are often too involved in self-professionalization (aided by their departments no doubt), too dedicated to defining their own individualizing (if not star-making) niche, and too unwilling to take the risk of giving that all up and really stepping outside their comfort zone. On the other hand, undergraduates for the most part have no disciplinary comfort zones to be transgressed.

Second, whether or not there is a canon of cultural studies, and to what extent such a canon can be or has to be “diversified,” there are certainly particular authors who have had powerful and dispersed influences within and sometimes across different contexts. The question is not so much whom to read but how to read them: to figure out how they are an expression and response to their own context, and how they have been and can be taken up in different contexts. This is in line with Thomas Kuhn’s notion of paradigm exemplars, which tell the scientist how to do normal science within a specific paradigm. The problem is that there is no “normal” cultural studies, or at least, what constitutes “normal” cultural studies is less a matter of theoretical revolutions than of conjunctural specificities. It is impossible to say what cultural studies would or should look like in any particular context; this is the paradox of contextuality. But it is not impossible that particular exemplars of cultural studies can be understood and even appropriated into other contexts (because, as Kuhn himself later admitted, paradigms are not completely incommensurable). Hence, the second strategy is to learn to read cultural studies contextually, to understand any genealogy as embodying the project of cultural studies itself.

If I were able to start over, I would try to develop a classroom pedagogy of cultural studies that articulates these two efforts: doing a cultural studies of cultural studies’ exemplars alongside the very attempt to do cultural studies. It is, I hope, a challenge that others are taking up and will take up as both the need for cultural studies and the risks and difficulties of professing and practicing cultural studies continue to grow.

**Cultural studies as public pedagogy**

As I have said, cultural studies is a pedagogical project in any context, but these days, it seems vital that we bring it into the public arena. However, rather than attempting to offer a template for such engagements, I want to take my own advice and offer instead a particular example of public pedagogy—the particularities of which may well be forgotten by the time anyone reads this.[[22]](#endnote-22) There has been much controversy and struggle recently, in the U.S., over the presence of Confederate symbols and monuments in the South. One of the most visible has been on my own campus—Silent Sam. Silent Sam (the name appeared in the 1960s) is a commissioned, bronze statue of a confederate soldier erected in 1913 through the efforts of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, with private funds. It stood at “the front door” of the campus of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill until August 2018, when protestors pulled it down after a year of protests. This act of “removing” Silent Sam was, to some extent, predetermined by the lack of foresight and courage demonstrated by the university administration, who seemed more concerned with a reactionary Board of Governors and wealthy alumni/donors. This was not the first demonstration against Silent Sam; there was an intermittent history of such protests since the 1960s. In 2009, a graduate student re-discovered a speech made by Julian Carr at the dedication ceremony, a particularly ugly speech that defended and advocated white supremacy and described—even celebrated--his own recent, brutal treatment of a black woman not far from where the statue stood.

Protestors—most of whom were students, many students of color—asserted that this speech defined the meaning of Silent Sam, that it had always been and continued to be a paean to slavery and white supremacy, on a campus that had never truly come to terms with its own history in relation to the Confederacy, slavery, segregation and racism. They argued that Silent Sam was a key site defining the history and landscape of a university that still refused to face up to the problems and challenges of racism. Their passion and willingness to act was inspiring, and many of their arguments about the still-hidden history of the university and its current policies were compelling. At the same time, much of their rhetoric was framed in a language that transformed the feminist maxim—the personal is political—into a much more problematic belief that the political is personal. It was a language of victimage and suffering, measured in terms of feelings of comfort and safety. So one commonly heard descriptions of the feelings of sadness, discomfort, danger and anger that people of color felt as they walked by Silent Sam. It is important that we do problematize these claims, and not assume that the meanings and resonances of these terms can or should be taken for granted, without denying their personal realities; they are no doubt expressions of highly complex but unarticulated experiences and commitments.

Many professors, graduate students, alumni, and staff supported the demand to remove the statue and continued to support the protestors after they had torn the statue down; some joined the protests at various moments. Some demanded that the protestors not be punished in any way. Many professors have spoken of and used the protests as a pedagogical opening, particularly in relation to the history of slavery and Jim Crow, and their continuing legacies in contemporary racisms and the recent “mainstreaming” of white supremacy. They asked: how are these differences, these inequalities, these acts of violence and suffering, but also the struggles against racism, inscribed in our histories and on our landscapes, on campus and more generally.

My own relation to the protests was, I admit, more ambivalent. On the one hand, especially given the increasing visibility and voice of white nationalists and white supremacists in the current context, and the all too common retreats into cynicism, such courageous acts of resistance bring a moment of optimism into an increasingly desperate political situation. And such small victories are often necessary. On the other hand, they have to be understood in the context of larger—conjunctural and strategic—struggles. I thought the pedagogy of the struggle was quite limited and the questions that were raised were all too predictable (even if still important!). I was concerned that we had not learned the important lessons from recent past struggles.[[23]](#endnote-23) I wondered if the faculty had not abdicated its responsibility to initiate (or bring the discussion of the protests into) another conversation, which is perhaps just as salient in the present context.[[24]](#endnote-24) That conversation would start by locating the current resurgence of racisms and the rise of white nationalism and supremacism in the struggles over political culture that have defined the U.S. (at least) since the 1960s. Understanding these struggles would require us to consider the ongoing and significant victories of right-wing politics as at least in part the result of long-term strategic conversations, alliances and actions. But it would also require us to reconsider the successes and the failures of liberals, progressives, leftists—both in terms of party politics and social movements, and to ask why such heterogeneous forces have largely been unable to mount an effective opposition to or to stop the increasingly conservative and even reactionary directions of U.S society. It would do just what cultural studies tries to do: to offer better stories about what’s going on, so that one might find better ways of actually affecting the tides of change. It would raise some very different—and difficult—questions about the struggle itself, its assumptions and tactics, in the present conjuncture, not in order to criticize what has been done (there is little point to that) but to open up the possibilities for thinking in the future. In the present climate, I feel it necessary to say: I offer these questions (and I do not claim to know the answers, or that cultural studies has answers already formed, even if it sometimes sounds as if I think I do) to enter into or, perhaps, to initiate a conversation.

1. What are the strengths and limits of symbolic politics in this context? What can it win, and what might be its unintended consequences? How is it articulated to other struggles against racism and the larger reactionary and conservative rights? How is it even articulated to the deeply inscribed racisms of the university, which continues to think of diversity as a marketing strategy, which continues to pay its service workers significantly less than a living wage…?

2. Are meanings so singularly and transparently inscribed upon texts (monuments) and landscapes, once and for all time? Have there not always been multiple, contested meanings of Silent Sam for different audiences? Even at the dedication ceremony in 1913, there were other speeches that seem to have challenged Carr’s white supremacism. What does it mean to claim the power to close the struggle over meaning, to demand that one’s experience—often offered in the name of an assumed collectivity--is fully determining? The struggles over contested meanings demand something other than declarations of certainty and self-righteousness.

3. Ought we raise questions about going beyond the deconstruction (in this case, quite literally) of specific histories in order to construct multiple—counter--histories, to rewrite the landscape as it were as a more complicated field of struggle. Rather than “settling” for the absence of Silent Sam, how might we endeavor to commemorate the overwhelming presence of black histories?[[25]](#endnote-25)

4. Does the fact that politics has become increasingly affective—that it works on and through structures of feelings, mattering maps, etc.-- justify the claim that the primary stakes of politics are affective?[[26]](#endnote-26) What’s the relationship between affect as a landscape of struggle and strategy, a set of political demands, and the certainty that determines truth and politics in the last instance? What are the implications of a politics based in personal experience or feelings of suffering, discomfort and danger? Progressive intellectuals and activists, especially feminists, have argued before about the dangers of a politics of victimage and comparative suffering. Aren’t appeals to feelings, like any other form of certainty (because they are not challengeable), more likely to close the conversation prematurely? Might we not, following Fanon for example, use our multiple histories of suffering and our common capacities to both feel and abhor suffering, to forge new assemblages, new unities-in-difference?

5. Did the discourse of the protestors adequately capture the complexity of race and racisms in the U.S.? While I do believe that many if not most people raised in the U.S. have racist thoughts and even habits, I think that many if not most of them perform their racism non-consciously and without consenting to it. At the very least, there are many different ways people enact and consent to the many different forms of racism. Not all people who may still accept, even unwittingly, the effects of racism, are white supremacists. It does matter how one thinks about difference[[27]](#endnote-27) and racism—whether one recognizes its complexity and conjunctural specificities. And it is not merely a matter of intersectionality but of the multiplicity and syncretism of any identity/identification.[[28]](#endnote-28) The work of building an innovative and effective movement against racism has to reject the simple binary that says people are either committed anti-racists (in already defined terms) or at least complicit in racism, or simply racists. It is in the middle, where people are ambivalent, uncertain, not self-conscious, or apathetic, that the real challenges lie.[[29]](#endnote-29)

6. If politics involves constructing constituencies and popular consent, trying to win fragmented and contradictorily invested subjects to the possibility of new positions and of different organizations of the space of possibilities, then how do we create and continue conversations toward democracy and justice? Is asserting that everyone who does not automatically agree with you, who might even oppose or resist you at the beginning, is the enemy, likely to be an effective strategy? Is configuring the political field as a simple binary division between camps, us and them, victim and privileged, a useful way of organizing the struggle? Or are such strategies (e.g., despite denials, they often fall into black suffering, white privilege) too simple, too certain, destined to close the conversations? Certainly “privilege” is never as simple as it sometimes seems. (It is worth recalling that the white supremacists marching in Charlottesville were shouting anti-semitic slogans!)[[30]](#endnote-30)

7. While politics might be grounded in moralities and feelings, how they are articulated in any conjuncture is a strategic question. One might suggest that, in recent memory, the civil rights movement, for very conjunctural and tactical reasons, strongly equated politics and morality, but one can also ask whether such an equivalence is the best strategy in the present context. Is the answer somehow obvious, or already sewn up? We must ask: is the equation of politics and morality, the reduction of politics to a moral struggle between good and evil, a viable strategy? What is the best—contextual—articulation of morality and politics today? What are the differences and relations among moral witness, pedagogy and strategic politics?

8. What is the meaning, goal and practice of civil disobedience in the contemporary context of struggle? Can such forms of resistance demand that actions have no risks (such as arrest) or consequences beyond those intended?

9. What other histories and geographies—of fear, threats, silencing, protests, etc. might be brought into the current conversation?

10. Finally, in summary, and perhaps most importantly, at least from my own perspective on cultural studies, what sort of understanding of the importance of culture and of how cultures can be changed—are being enacted here?[[31]](#endnote-31)

It is reasonable to ask why such pedagogical conversations are not taking place, or at least, whey they are not particularly and publicly visible, and why it sometimes feels that they are impossible, or that they have largely been silenced. It’s all too easy to blame the current reactionary turn and the longer-term conservative shift on some singular conspiracy, or on some fraction of capital or on the stupidity or racism of anyone who does not share our position, or on technology (while with the other face, hoping the technology will unleash some liberatory and cooperative General Intellect).[[32]](#endnote-32) It’s a lot easier than considering the changing contours and conditions of intellectual production, and the changing cultural economies of the academy as, perhaps, still the most site of intellectual and pedagogical labor.[[33]](#endnote-33) It’s a lot easier than coming to terms with the conjuncture, its complexity and contradictions. And it is certainly a lot easier than having to look at the ways our own tactics and strategies, our own discourses and conversations, are part of the context, part of the calculation as it were, which is not to say that they are to blame for or even complicit with the dominant configurations of power.

I know too many intellectuals and teachers who have succumb to the weariness that results from feeling that we have had these arguments and struggles many times before, and yet, they seem to have been forgotten and their results erased. Perhaps some (myself included?) are afraid of being attacked for what are seen as “politically incorrect” or even complicitous positions, as expressing some form of the privilege of the dominant, or as dinosaurs representing some old mealy-mouthed liberalism. I know that many people who both support, e.g., anti-racist struggles, and have questions about contemporary tactics increasingly feel the pressures of what my friend Ted Striphas calls a “public compulsion to perform ‘being-in-line’” as a condition of inclusion in a political community.

Perhaps some of us hear echoes of the memories of our own college struggles in the 1960s, and we are afraid that we sound too much like the professors in the 1960s who opposed the many new social movements. But such concerns have to be faced and addressed in the context of the changing conjuncture and the changing fields of political struggle. Those liberal professors in the 1960s operated in an affective landscape of optimism, which they shared in some ways with the social movements but while they thought things we getting better and would inevitably continue to do so, the movements thought—not so much. Today, we speak from within a much more overpowering landscape of pessimism. Those liberal professors did not understand the crucial role of social movements, nor did they have to face the overwhelming failure of the political establishment and the cynicism that has resulted (partly the product of the very forces that benefit from cynical disinvestment); they did not understand the absolute centrality of culture in contemporary politics, nor the possibilities of a popular politics. Things have meanings and effects only in context, and as contexts change (and also, in part, do not change), so do the possibilities of tactics, strategies and even conversations. That is the difference, for me, that cultural studies makes. Cultural studies is not liberalism by another name, but it does say that these are risks we must take.

**Teaching in the conjuncture**

In concluding, I want to consider some broader questions about pedagogy, education and teaching in the present conjuncture. But any discussion has to begin by acknowledging that as culture has become a primary battleground of political struggle, even the condition of possibility for further political struggle, the very possibility and status of knowledge has been called into question and with it, the legitimacy of the academy. But the legitimacy crisis of the academy is not only the result of partisan struggles (and our own intellectual arguments and failures[[34]](#endnote-34)), but also of the dissolution of that which separates us from journalists and documentarians on the one hand, and activists on the other. At least part of the academy seems increasingly to be competing with these other groups, while often saying pretty much the same things.[[35]](#endnote-35) We no longer seem able to answer the question: what is it that we as academics can or should do? Cultural studies might suggest that this is, in part, a matter of the temporality of the academy—both in terms of its work and its focus. I have elsewhere distinguished between three political-historical temporalities: the situation, the conjuncture and the epoch.[[36]](#endnote-36) The situation is the time of the “now,” the immediate moment and it is often experienced with the greatest sense of urgency. And it is, I believe, the realm of the journalist and the documentarian and often, of certain kinds of activisms (deposing Trump, winning elections, saving immigrant families, etc.). These are obviously important struggles and require particular kinds of knowledge and stories. The epoch stands at the other extreme—the relations of power that have been established, however fluidly, over centuries. It often defines the concern—or at least the moral foundation—of many activists who seek to overthrow capitalism, overturn patriarchy, put an end to racism, reconstitute the environmental ways of living of modernity, etc. Epochal struggles also require particular—different—kinds of knowledge and stories. As I have suggested already, cultural studies is concerned with the conjuncture—with the changing relations of power constituted, usually over decades, by the articulations of many different forces and contradictions. Unlike the situation, which is impossibly overdetermined, and the epoch, which demands abstracting particular forces from the complexity of determinations, the conjuncture is constituted precisely as an intellectual and political site where we can grasp and transform the complexity into manageable stories and effective strategies.[[37]](#endnote-37) But as a result, the work of cultural studies takes time: it cannot operate at the speed of popular media (and hence, it must be wary of adapting itself to these new technologies), nor can it take the time required to produce the sweeping panorama of social history. It knows that it must take the time to negotiate the complexity but that it must also limit that time, so as to offer its carefully considered maps and stories, aiming to both suggest possible interventions and to continue the conversation and transform the conjuncture.

So, with the aim of continuing the conversation, let me admit that teaching has always been something of a mystery to me, despite over six decades as a student and close to five trying to be a teacher. I love teaching, although sometimes I hate it. Sometimes I know I have succeeded, sometimes I know I have failed, but most of the time, I really just don’t know. In fact, I am not sure I know what I mean by success and failure, or how to judge or measure it. Do we buy into current metrics that reduce quality to outcomes, but absolve ourselves of possible guilt by simply changing the outcome we desire? Instead of making students into consumer goods or potential employees, we define our desired outcomes in political terms, making the classroom into a tool of political recruitment.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Yet I know that, like everything else we do, a teacher is certainly not in control of the outcomes (at least not those that matter beyond the immediacy of students’ “performances”); we can never guarantee what our students take away from our classes or interactions --in part because we don’t know where they are starting from or where they are going. (I remember early on in my career reading somewhere in Roland Barthes that the one thing a professor should never do was to look at his or her students’ notes). I often find that my own understanding of success changes from class to class, from year to year, and from decade to decade. But is “success” even the most relevant question to be asking?

There are so many questions one can ask about teaching, especially in the current conjuncture. Struggles over education have taken on a whole new importance and passion—and have become part of the popular political agenda—since the Cold War and the rise of the New Right, which is not to say that education has not been a political touchstone in a highly divided, partisan nation before. New conservatives like William Buckley and Allen Bloom understood not only that education was ideological but perhaps even more importantly, that culture mattered. (“Politics is downstream from culture,” as Breitbart noted.)[[39]](#endnote-39) While the left tends to think politics precedes culture and therefore understands culture almost entirely in ideological terms, the right is actually more attuned to the need for more conjunctural understandings of culture, enabling them to foreground the politics of affect (feeling) as perhaps the key linchpin in the struggle to redefine and reorganize the political field (and the relations of common sense and political positions). And they have made it one of the major sites of partisan struggle at every level, from institutional finances, to curriculum, to teaching practices.

Partly as a result of the politicization of education, but only partly, teaching has become ever more precarious in a variety of ways. It is increasing devalued and disrespected in the public (and governmental) arena, and I am not sure about how it is viewed in the academy. While teaching is, in one sense, the public face of the academy, it still remains the less valued for many within the academy. When I began teaching, an administrator in my department warned me that students “just got in the way” of an otherwise enjoyable job, and further warned me not to put too much time into my teaching because strong course evaluations might speak against my tenure case. I doubt that anyone would say that today, at least not in public. But do we actually take teaching as seriously as our research today? We continue to act in ways that prioritize research as both the true locus of passion in the profession, and as the criterion of judgment for success. I have never heard a young scholar suggest that he or she had to devote their full attention to teaching in order to gain tenure. But the solution is neither to privilege teaching over research, nor to pretend that we can achieve some real balance between them. As long as we think we can separate our research and teaching (even if we are teaching our research), I do not think such valuations will change. But there is an important difference between seeing the articulations of our teaching and research, and defining our teaching by our research, rather than by the need to introduce students to broad bodies of knowledge and multiple ways of thinking.

Whether one grasps this relation depends upon how we understand the point of education? Are we training students to be good workers, good citizens or good people? Everyone claims to be teaching students to think, but they define thinking in very different ways (and adding “critical” does little to clarify the differences): thinking as an ability to adapt to the changing demands of an evolving economic sector; thinking as the embodiment of certain processes of rational decision-making; thinking as the inculcation of particular habits of moral and political judgment. If the first reduces education to matters of economic survival and corporate power, the second assumes that social life is a process of rational decision-making, while the third position makes education a project of constructing “proper” subjects (where each particular moral-political project defines its own propriety, its own sense of adequacy or, in some cases, inadequacy). In this third, increasingly visible vision of teaching, teaching is too easily measured by our own sense of political self-satisfaction, by the appreciation of those (resisting and insurgent) groups whose politics we support, and by how much we have strengthened or transformed the pedagogical subjects.

I suppose it is already clear that I have problems with the over-politicization or better, the too quick and easy politicization of pedagogy, with the idea that we are supposed to make our students better moral/political subjects. I am not sure that teaching—or politics—should be reduced to a matter of subjectivity or that the role of teaching is defined by moral and political concerns. More importantly, I have trouble with an all too easy articulation of knowledge and politics; knowledge is no more transparent, and its politics no more guaranteed, than any other discourse. We do not know what we know without the extraordinary labors embodied in conversations. From the other side, I wonder whether many academics, especially those working in public institutions, are capable of justifying their actual research or teaching programs, or at least of explaining why the public should be paying for them to teach students, e.g., how to overthrow capitalism. This is not a call for the legitimation of the humanities or of critical thinking, or of the cultivation of capacities; nor is it a call for abandoning the effort to enable students to see the world differently, to question their own—and others’—certainties. It is a question about the ways we understand and represent our own pedagogies and the potential contributions of higher education.[[40]](#endnote-40)

In recent years, many serious debates about pedagogy have been displaced onto the question of different practices of teaching, and the “atmosphere” of the classroom. One can distinguish many styles of teaching, and the many forms of authority to which they can be articulated: on the one hand, lectures, discussions, skills training (often claiming to instill in them the capacity to learn, making them into permanent students as it were), and “active-learning;” and on the other hand, various forms of elitism (from expertise to absolute hierarchy), representation (speaking for those who cannot or are not allowed to speak), dialogic (empowering others to speak), and egalitarian. Too often, these forms of classroom practice and authority are presented as exclusive choices, rather than recognizing that one might have to adopt different practices in different contexts, for different questions. At the same time, the relations between these two dimensions of pedagogical practice are often assumed in advance, e.g., assuming that active learning is in some sense egalitarian, making students into co-producers.

It would be easy to look back at the early efforts of the CCCS as experiments in active learning, but that would be too simple, too decontextualized, ignoring the often necessary assertion of expertise and authority, as well as the simple fact that such practices were necessary in the context of trying to invent something which, to a large extent, did not yet exist. Often, the requirements of such a transformative vision of education are presented as if they depend upon a particular understanding of the classroom environment as “comfortable” and “safe,” defined largely by the protection of the subjugated, the victims. This has led, recently, to the absurd demand that students not be required to do anything (e.g., public speaking) that makes them uncomfortable. But I do not mean to argue about complicated issues by reduction ad absurdum. We have to engage the competing claims, but not by pitting one certainty against another but by asking questions and challenging certainties.

No where is the need for the kinds of unruly and unfinished conversation constitutive of cultural studies more necessary than around the question of “free speech” and the silencing of some voices on college campuses. Such silencing can take many forms—and they are not all equal or equivalent: simple refusal of the right of access to spaces; disruptive actions that make speech impossible, violent protests that make the occasion of speech unsafe; forms of intimidation that undermine some peoples’ ability to voice their position, etc. We need to question both the bases and the political effects of various demands and actions. Are there inconsistencies in the ways people appeal to free speech and anti-discrimination (only partly justified by the first amendment and anti-discrimination laws), and do these matter? Should we take serious claims of the university as a unique site for the expression of ideas seriously despite its failures? How do we take into account the history of voices that have been silenced in the past, and the possibilities of which voices might be silenced in the future? Who has the right—and what is the basis of such a claim—to decide which voices are to be allowed and which denied? Do assertions of moral certainties (often couched in the forms of political judgments) and personal feelings provide compelling and adequate grounds for decisions to silence particular voices (and might such appeals work for different moral and political positions)? In what ways has and does the academy already silence many voices—especially voices of precariously positioned minorities? Do we understand how and where such silencing is experienced? Should we separate—temporarily, so that we can more effectively re-articulate them—concerns about the different kinds of venues (public lectures versus classrooms for example), the voices of those invited to campus and those of members of the university community, the distribution of various resources, etc.? What are the complex relations among the freedom, the willingness, and the ability to speak? And what are the conditions of possibility, in various contexts, of speech, including the construction of specific affective landscapes and interpersonal expectations? How much do we need to consider the effects of our actions outside the university, where the apparent denial of the right to speak to various conservative and reactionary speakers has become primary evidence for the accusation of “political correctness,” a very tactical appeal aimed at constructing intellectual elites and progressives as extremists unworthy of popular political support? Are we, however unintentionally, providing succor to the increasingly extremist right by giving them exactly what they want, a powerful point of articulation for their chain of equivalences that define “the enemy”? Do we have the luxury—or would it be a better political tactic—to deny them an audience and the publicity that they seek? Again, whatever my opinions on these matters may be, my argument is that we need to have intelligent conversations around these concerns, however passionate and uncomfortable such conversations may be. However, at this point, I want to recall that Stuart Hall once said, “ . . . I do think you have to create an atmosphere which allows people to say unpopular things. I don’t think it is at all valuable to have an atmosphere in the classroom which is so clearly, unmistakably anti-racist that the natural and ‘commonsense’ racism which is part of the ideological air that we all breathe is not allowed to come out and express itself. . . That experience has to surface in the classroom even if it is pretty horrendous to hear—better to hear it than not to hear it.”[[41]](#endnote-41) To repeat myself, cultural studies as pedagogy is all about discomforting not only students, but ourselves and our colleagues as well. Progressive pedagogies have too often been quite happy to discomfort the “other side,” without attending to their own assumptions and certainties.

Returning to the matter of various pedagogical practices, I believe that one cannot separate these options, that they always interpenetrate each other, that teaching is always a hybridized endeavor. One cannot escape elitism and uneven power, even in contexts of active learning and social justice classrooms. The notion that one can eliminate them is an illusion which, if ever realized, would render the role of the professor irrelevant or reduce it to that of a facilitator.[[42]](#endnote-42) And from the other side, one cannot escape the activity of the student even in the most hierarchical and authoritarian contexts. In the final analysis, we have to remember that one does not produce knowledge ex nihilo and the conversation of knowledge does not begin anew in every classroom. One does not magically become a producer of knowledge; there are real conditions of possibility that include not only learning how to produce knowledge within a particular paradigm, but also what tools are available and how to use them appropriately (contextually), and what claims to knowledge already define the discursive spaces one is operating in. Again, I would point to the efforts of my students’ (mentioned above) to teach cultural studies not by simply having students do it, as it were, not by making them co-producers, but by carefully and closely guiding their activity, by both providing them with the tools and knowledge they need in order to proceed, and carefully directing and even constantly surveilling their efforts. That is to say, teaching cultural studies by teaching the practice of cultural studies, by getting the students to engage with and in cultural studies—as a conversation marked by collaboration and humility on the one hand, and authority, rigor, judgment, and expertise on the other, as a conversation that does not assume it knows the questions or the answers in advance.

Teaching is a conversation, but not a democracy; research is a conversation, but not a democracy. In fact, for cultural studies, they are part of the same conversation, an ongoing pedagogy seeking better maps and better stories. In conclusion I can only repeat what I have said about the conversation that is cultural studies’ pedagogy. it is a conversation that started before we or our students entered into it, and will continue (hopefully) long after we leave the classroom and the academy. It is a conversation that seeks not truth but rather, to go on thinking, in a context that recognize the real inequalities, some reasonable and many unreasonable, of knowledge, experience and feeling. It is a conversation constantly negotiating the terms and practices of equality and inequality, where one can never predict in advance what difference (including expertise) will matter where. It is a conversation imbued with passion and tempered by humility.

Many people (myself included) are deeply frightened by the increasing power of a reactionary right with its re-articulations of nationalism and hatreds; many are disturbed by the recognition that these developments are the unanticipated consequences of strategic political thought and struggles--led by shifting alliances among re-imagined conservatisms and fluid assemblages of corporate/capitalist interests-- to reshape modernity and the forms and futures of the nation-state. But there is another dimension that should trouble us: the failures of the liberal and progressive forces to effectively stem these tides of change. Do we not need to accept the limits of our own thinking and strategies? And in the current conjunctural struggles, for me, the most troubling expression of this troubling situation is the fact that those who should be bound by common bonds of political desire are increasingly unable to establish the conditions for convivial forms of agonistic conversation and cooperation beyond the urgency—often lived as panic—of the most immediate and personal threats.

It is hard, maybe even impossible. For at the very least, we have to begin by learning, within the possibilities and constraints of the current conjuncture, how to constitute such a conversation (just to remind you, a conversation that is an engagement, always complex, multiple, fluid and ongoing, not predefined or limited by principles of rationality or ideological struggle). Like any conjunctural effort, it will require us to question where we begin, the very questions we ask. The sort of conversation I have in mind cannot be conceptualized in terms of the problem of “audiences” (so that we distinguish teaching and research as addressing different audiences) but as part of an ongoing process of constructing commonalities alongside difference, forging new figures and possibilities of unities-in-difference. But while pedagogy is always political, it is not politics in the last instance. I am suggesting that such conversations provide the conditions of possibility for finding more effective political struggles. While the answers emerge from the conversation, the conversation can never guarantee its own outcome at the beginning or by a formalist appeal to the process itself. The point of such conversations is not just to produce better stories, or even to simply produce new “communities” and alliances, but to organize to create new kinds of organizations and movements and long-term infrastructures, which are necessary to transform the culture and with that, the field of political possibilities. For that reason, the conversation cannot be endless; one must, however temporarily, take the pedagogical conversation into the realities of political decisions—strategies and tactics. It is always a risky effort and it does take time. I believe it is worth the effort, no matter how much or how often we fail, or how desperate we may feel. Paradoxically, we cannot afford to refuse to take the time we need. We do not have the time to abandon the effort;

1. I am deeply grateful to many of my students who have lovingly forced me to think about my own pedagogy. Most recently, I have to acknowledge how much I have learned from Andrew Davis and Megan Wood, whose commitment and intellectual rigor have pushed me further. I want to thank Paul Gilroy for generously sharing his forthcoming essay on Stuart Hall and for many conversations, Heather Menefee for bringing John Trudell’s piece to my attention. I also want to thank Ted Striphas, Jaafar Aksikas and John Pickles for invaluable criticisms. Finally, I owe a debt I can never repay to Henry Giroux, whose political passion and insight has always made me think about the pedagogy of politics and the politics of pedagogy. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. After leaving CCCS, I joined an itinerant, anarchist theater commune touring Europe. After returning to the U.S., I taught what were described as “troubled” kids at the Bank Street College in New York by helping them use (primitive) video equipment to gain new perspectives on their lives and environs. Without realizing it at the time, these experiences helped me come to terms with cultural studies and its pedagogies. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For my own efforts to analyze the contemporary conjuncture, see Under the Cover of Chaos: Trump and the Battle for the American Right (Pluto, 2018) and We All Want to Change the World: The Paradox of the U.S. Left (<https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/free-book/we_all_want_to_change_the_world.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Paddy Whannel was the Education Officer of the British Film Institute from 1957 till 1971. His role in the history of film studies and cultural studies, and his passion for education, has yet to be fully told. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I am thinking particularly of Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (University of Illinois, 1983) and Cultural Studies Now and in the Future (University of Illinois, 1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. To this list, I would add Richard Taylor , Loren Baritz, and Paul Ricoeur, who nurtured my love of critical analysis and theory with true generosity and open-mindedness, but also the grade school and high school teachers, whose names I have unforgivably forgotten, who taught me to love reading and arguing. Each of my many wonderful teachers had their own expertise, styles, passions, and pedagogies. I could feel their pleasure, their passion, their intensity, and their intelligence in every class and every interaction I had with them. I have learned from some of the very best. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For discussions of cultural studies, see Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies 1983 (Duke University Press, 2016) and Familiar Stranger (Duke University Press, 2017). Also my own Cultural Studies in the Future Tense (Duke University Press, 2010); “Pessimism of the will, Optimism of the intellect.” Cultural Studies 32-6 (2018); and “Cultural Studies in search of a method, or looking for conjunctural analysis.” New Formations, forthcoming. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I find it helpful to remember Foucault’s observations that revolutions are defined and accomplished not by the vanguard leading it but by those watching it from the sidelines as it were, trying to decide their own place and response. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Stuart Hall, “Life and Times of the First New Left.” New Left Review II, no. 61 (January–February 2010), 177–96. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This image of cultural studies as pedagogy puts it in conversation with other projects that articulate the intellectual, political and pedagogical through notions of complexity, contingency, and contextuality. I am, however, not claiming that such sympathetic interlocutors are all simply versions of or equivalent to cultural studies. One powerful and influential example is Wendy Brown’s States of Injury (Princeton University Press, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. I do not intend to re-assert the accusations made against “the left” of illiberalism, brainwashing and the denial of freedom of speech. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Stories can always fail; they may fail because the pieces do not come together, or because they end with either a bang or a whimper. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. I am thinking here of the Buberian tradition, rather than the Bakhtinian; the latter is closer to what I have in mind. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Cited in David Scott, Stuart Hall’s Voice. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. John Trudell, “I’m crazy?” U.S. Social Forum 6-24-2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctUecTdPEO0> [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The intellectual left has too often failed to provide the intellectual, cultural and political histories that form the necessary backstory and that might serve as resources for contemporary analyses and strategizing. This is a problem of popular media/journalism as well as of the “content” of institutional education. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Stuart Hall. “The emergence of cultural studies and the crisis of the humanities.” October 53 (Summer 1990), 11-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I am indebted to many critical pedagogy scholars, including Ivan Illich, Paolo Freire, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Patti Lather, Mike Apple, Roger Simon, and Cameron McCarthy. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See, for example, Tony Bennett, Outside Literature. London: Routledge, 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See my “Seeking interdisciplinarity: The promise and premise of Cultural Studies.” In Cultural Studies 50 Years On: History, Practice and Politi*cs* edited by Kieran Connell and Matthew Hilton. Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 123-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See the contributions of Davis and Wood in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. I think that similar questions and conversations need to be raised, for example, ab=round the Me-too movement. There have been numerous interesting attempts to start such a conversation by JoAnn Wypijewski, Margaret Atwood, and many others. I have no doubt that such conversation are continuing—although they are also too often simply ignored or the authors castigated--but they seem too hidden to affect the actual course of events. These questions might interrogate the place of law and legal protections (including the ways colleges handle complaints of sexual assault), demands of punishment, the possibilities of personal change, forgiveness and redemption, the relation of suffering (and rage) to politics and the utility of shame and humiliation, the embrace of Twitter politics, and most importantly for me, the question of how one changes what is clearly a sexist and heteronormative culture. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. A few years ago, students, staff and faculty protested against the name of an academic building (Saunders Hall) after a man who had been a leader of the KKK. The protestors had wanted to rename it after Zora Neale Thurston who, in her later life, has been a member of the faculty of the North Carolina College for Negroes (now North Carolina Central University) in Durham. The result was that the name was changed—to Carolina Hall, as innocuous a name as one can imagine, and a small education presentation was mounted in the entrance hall. And the Board of Governors of the university declared a ten-year moratorium on renaming y campus buildings. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. I know, through my own conversations, participations and researches, that some versions of the sorts of conversation I am calling for in the paper do take place. I also know that I am overgeneralizing to some extent in the following comments and that there are important exceptions to my criticisms. Nevertheless, my sense is that these conversations often take place locally, around the tactical choices for a particular struggle or event, or among particular dimensions and communities of resistance (e.g., Black Lives Matter), or even just among friends. Often, they assume that real conversations can take place through social media. In some locations, such as the Social Forums, they are taking place in larger communities and contexts. But such conversations do not generally include the full range of voices (including intellectuals/experts, and those with longer histories of experience of opposition). I do not think they do enough to invite and embrace disagreements. I do not often see a willingness to risk the possibility that their certainties may not be right or at least, may not define the best strategic options. I do not see them questioning the relations between analyses and strategies, and between strategies and tactics.

    Moreover, given the context of the continuing victory of the conservative/capitalist agenda, and the recent victories and voices of reactionary right formations, these conversations cannot remain only local or uni-dimensional (and I do not think intersectionality solves the latter problem) or limited to pre-defined political communities and struggles. There has to be a way to make the conversation national and even regional—and that requires us to move beyond our assumption that we already know what is going on in these larger contexts. While the right has, for sixty years, found ways to manage, organize, strategize and even at times control (the Tea party has destabilized its ability to do this) its own internal chaos, the oppositions continues to operate with what I might call an imagined anarchic unity. Again, I am not calling for homogeneity and consensus, but for better maps and stories, for strategic thinking and a cooperative politics that articulates the many struggles, that recognizes but is not ruled by heterogeneity, difference and dissensus: unities-in-difference.

    And perhaps most controversially, I think such conversations have to involve serious self-criticism. Given the ongoing successes of conservative/capitalist efforts to redirect and reshape the political culture of the nation, they have to be willing to ask why, despite the real battles that have been won, the progressive, oppositional forces seem to be losing the war or at the very least, seem to have to fight the same battles over and over. We need to recognize and celebrate what feminisms, anti-racism, anti-militarism, environmentalism, etc. have accomplished but we also need to be able to ask, critically but in solidarity, about the limits of the politics of the last fifty years or more. At the very least, can we not start by admitting that we have often failed to change the culture within which racisms, sexisms, consumerisms, militarism, xenophobias, exclusionary nationalisms, etc. continue to assert or re-assert themselves—in popular culture, politics and everyday life? [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. For example, circling the statue or perhaps the entire quadrangle on which it stood, with remembrances not only of slaves but of civil rights struggles, of musicians and artists, of scientists and intellectual, of leaders and politicians. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. For a discussion of affect, see my We Gott Get Out of this Place (Routledge, 1992), Cultural Studies in the Future Tense, and “Pessimism of the will, Optimism of the Intellect.” [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. I am thinking here of the absolutely crucial work on race and racisms by such thinkers as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. Both argue that race and racism have to be understood as always syncretic, fractured, multiple, processual and contextually specific. Additionally, Gilroy has argued persuasively that race as a political category (as opposed to a cultural discourse) is always and only constructed in the struggles of racism and raciologies. See the forthcoming collection of Hall’s essays on race, forthcoming on Duke University Press, and Paul Gilroy’s Against Race (Harvard University Press, 2002), a rather misleading title. For a popular version of these arguments, see Asad Haider’s Mistaken Identities (Verso, 2018). There is, additionally, in recent literatures, the question of what one might call the ontology of difference-- as negation, positivity, singularity, exception, positionality, ambivalence, displacement, etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. As often happens, I think there is a gap between how the concept is introduced (in this case, by authors like Kimberle Crenshaw) and how it is taken up by others in a variety of contexts. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. One way to think about the range and specificity of racisms is to start with the notion of whiteness as a “norm” in U.S. society. But as Foucault and others have taught us, norms can take many forms and operate in many ways, always contextually. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Many Jewish intellectuals, myself included, have received death threats recently. I would hope that my comments here are taken, not as coming from a simple position of privilege, but as a gift offered on the basis of research, thinking, conversations, and—yes, experience. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See, e.g., Ted Striphas, “Known-unknowns.” Cultural Studies 31 (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. While I agree with those who are increasingly pessimistic about whether the changes in the political and cultural economies of the university have virtually eliminated the possibility of doing the sort of work/teaching I am advocating, I think there are too many who seem to think that technology will transform both the micro-practices of research/writing and the constitution of intellectual communities. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See my “Tilting at Windmills: A Cynical Assemblage of the Crises of Knowledge.” Cultural Studies, 32-2 (March 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. As Megan Wood has pointed out to me, the internet has given rise to the almost immediate production of “crowd-sourced” syllabi that respond to the immediate demands of the situation, such as Trump’s election, or the white supremacist and anti-Semitic rally at Charlottesville VA in August 2017. The problem is that all too often, such “syllabi” respond to these immediate events by presenting you with everything you need to read to reaffirm what you already think you know, reinforcing the conditions of certainty. They almost always presume to know in advance the questions that need to be posed. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. See my “Cultural Studies in search of a method, or looking for conjunctural analysis.” New Formations, forthcoming. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Thus, when I say that the task of telling better stories about the conjuncture demands that we embrace the complexity, I do not mean to suggest that the work of conjunctural analysis is simply a matter of amassing more and more empirical detail; rather it is about finding structure in the complexity, order in the chaos. If we are committed, as I believe cultural studies is, to a popular politics that speaks to people where they are, then we will have to find ways of telling stories that people can both understand and care about. We need to find ways of telling simple stories that capture the complexity. Isn’t that just what the best story-tellers—the best historians—do? [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. The last time I taught my graduate seminar in cultural studies, in Spring 2017, I proposed using the class to at least think out what a conjunctural analysis, which begins with the moment of Trump’s selection, but seeks to open up to and construct the conjuncture, might look like. In addition to trying to introduce the students to the project of cultural studies, the students were divided into groups defined by their own (common) interests, to research some of the vectors that one might follow out of the election into the larger contexts. I keep asking myself if it was a success. Unfortunately, perhaps predictably, a majority of the students were unable to leave aside their own research questions and professional identities. On the other hand, for some of the groups—on race and class for example, the work actually led them to change the questions they posed, and as a result, they actually learned and taught things they/the class did not already know. Some of this work has been published and contributes to the conversation that I keep hoping will emerge. In addition, I should acknowledge that the class certainly helped me write my own book (Under the Cover of Chaos. London: Pluto, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Buckley famously refused to support Goldwater’s presidential campaign in part because he suggested that the right had not done the analytic and educative work it would create a new constituency enabling the country to be moved to the right in particular ways. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Recent attacks on critical academic research—such as recent scandals of “grievancy studies” have to be taken more seriously and answered. I would think an adequate response needs to address at least: (1) the changing history of such attacks, from the Sokal affair (an attack on forms of social constructionism) to “political correctness;”(2) an analysis of the deleterious effects of the current political economy of the academy, and its changing metrics of success, emphasizing that these are both imposed on the humanities and even the university, and also derived from more externally-funded scientific research; (3) the paradoxical absence of attacks on the bench sciences given their histories of much more serious scandals; and (4) a serious reflection on the state of critical humanities and social science research, and its response both to number (2) above and to the demands of the current moment, including a discussion of the ways it is shaped by ever narrowing forms of over-specialization in terms of object, theories and politics. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Cited in Paul Gilroy, “Race is the prism,’ his introduction to the forthcoming collection of Stuart Hall’s essays on race and racism, Duke University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. At the very least, should we think about sharing our salaries with the students? [↑](#endnote-ref-42)