

This article was downloaded by: [derek ford]

On: 30 March 2014, At: 11:24

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Educational Philosophy and Theory

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rept20>

A Critical Pedagogy of Ineffability: Identity, education and the secret life of whatever

Derek R. Ford^a

^a Cultural Foundations of Education, Syracuse University,
Published online: 20 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: Derek R. Ford (2014) A Critical Pedagogy of Ineffability: Identity, education and the secret life of whatever, Educational Philosophy and Theory, 46:4, 380-392, DOI:

[10.1080/00131857.2013.779218](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2013.779218)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2013.779218>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

A Critical Pedagogy of Ineffability: Identity, education and the secret life of whatever

DEREK R. FORD

Cultural Foundations of Education, Syracuse University

Abstract

In this article I bring Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'whatever singularity' into critical pedagogy. I take as my starting point the role of identity within critical pedagogy. I call upon Butler to sketch the debates around the mobilization of identity for political purposes and, conceding the contingent necessity of identity, then suggest that whatever singularity can be helpful in moving critical pedagogy from an emancipatory to a liberatory project (a distinction I take from Marx). To articulate whatever singularity I situate the concept within the work in which it appears, and then take a detour into Agamben's general philosophical project. I propose that, for critical pedagogy to take whatever singularity seriously, it must uphold a respect for the ineffability of being, which entails in part the suspension of dialogue. To help flesh out what I mean by this proposal, I turn to a fragment of Lyotard's philosophy and his critique of democracy. I conclude by addressing a pressing ontological critique of Agamben, which leads me to argue for a materialist appropriation of the figure of whatever singularity, one that is held in tension with ontological concerns of identity.

Keywords: Giorgio Agamben, critical pedagogy, Jean-Francois Lyotard, dialogue, subjectivity, community

Introduction

Critical pedagogy, as a response to systematic oppression and inequality, seems to be almost inescapably tethered to identity politics. After all, oppression and exploitation occur along the lines of identity, and identities have to be mobilized in order to expose how certain groups are oppressed. One problem with pedagogies that call on identity, however, is that they often inadvertently serve to cement and reaffirm identity categories, a violent process of exclusion and marginalization, one which renders certain bodies intelligible at the expense of others. I argue that it is here, in this moment,

between the necessity of educating around identity and the violence thereof, where Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'whatever singularity' can offer important insights, challenges and hope for critical pedagogy.

The point of entry for this article is the 'problem' of identity within critical pedagogy. As such, I begin by briefly sketching the role of identity in critical pedagogy literature. Then, with the help of Judith Butler (1993/2011), I articulate two interrelated problems with the mobilization of identity terms and categories. Conceding the contingent necessity of identity politics, I then suggest that the figure of whatever singularity may be helpful in moving critical pedagogy from an emancipatory to a liberatory project.

Next, I move to an exploration of whatever singularity.¹ To flesh out the concept I situate it within the work in which it appears and within Agamben's overall *oeuvre*. I argue that, for critical pedagogy to resist the violence of identity by engaging whatever singularity, it must posit and uphold a respect for ineffability, which entails the suspension of dialogue. In order to make such a proposal more robust, I turn to a fragment of the philosophy of Jean-Francois Lyotard (1993/1997) and his critique of democracy. Finally, I address one of Catherine Mills' (2008) critiques of Agamben's ontology. I argue that Agamben's interpretation of Tiananmen Square validates this critique. I conclude by arguing for a materialist appropriation of the figure of whatever singularity, one that is held in tension with ontological concerns of identity.

Critical Pedagogy and Identity

Critical pedagogy has been the subject of considerable debate over the past several decades. Partly as a consequence of these debates there has been a proliferation of what are branded as critical pedagogies. Indeed, it is regularly noted that critical pedagogy has become difficult to define, it is difficult to 'speak of ... the various and conflicting pedagogies that propagate themselves under the banner of "Critical Pedagogy"' (Gur-Ze'ev, 2005, p. 7). This perhaps productive multiplicity is the reason why some, like Jennifer Gore (1993), write about pedagogies in the plural and not in the singular form. In this article, I concentrate primarily on more traditional incarnations of critical pedagogy, such as those put forward by Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux and Stanley Aronowitz.

Critical pedagogy, as a theory and practice, takes seriously the historical, political, economic and social contexts of education. Critical pedagogy embraces the notion of education as a profoundly political practice, and is 'in one way or another committed to the imperative of transforming the larger social order in the interest of justice, equality, democracy, and human freedom' (Biesta, 1998, p. 499). Critical pedagogy is first and foremost, then, an attempt to discover, address, and combat or alleviate systemic oppression and inequality. Originating as it does in historical materialism, neo-Marxism and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, critical pedagogy emphasizes the central role that schooling and education play in the reproduction of unequal and unjust social relations. Peter McLaren (1989), for example, when outlining the major concepts utilized in critical pedagogy, lists ideology, hegemony, cultural capital and discourse. In other words, within the literature there is a primary focus on

the way in which oppressive power relations are reproduced through knowledge, discourse and culture. The idea is that the critical pedagogue, through a dialogical exchange with students, can help make visible the operation of power and oppression, and then work towards transforming those relations, institutions and cultural forms through which such operations take place. This type of ‘demystification’ (Giroux, McLaren) or ‘decoding’ (Freire) plays a central role in critical pedagogy.

By definition, oppression is not an individual relation but a social relation, which is to say that people are oppressed not as individuals, but as belonging to (or failing in some way to belong to) social groups. As Marilyn Frye (1983, p. 8) put it, ‘If an individual is oppressed, it is in virtue of being a member of a group or category of people that is systematically reduced, molded, immobilized’. Oppression thus occurs along lines of identity. Theories and movements that have sought to combat oppression, such as the Marxism and Critical Theory that inform critical pedagogy, interrogate and reveal systems of oppression that are reproduced in large part because of the invisibility of their operations.

Critical pedagogy thus seems to be almost irretrievably tethered to identity politics. As Henry Giroux (2011, p. 6) writes, ‘critical pedagogy foregrounds a struggle over identities, modes of agency, and those maps of meaning that enable students to define who they are and how they relate to others’. In another example, when talking about difference versus deficiency, Joe Kincheloe (2008) emphasizes that critical pedagogy has to understand the ways in which cognitive differences are connected to ‘cultural issues such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, religious beliefs, and other factors’. He argues that ‘Without such an understanding, cultural and cognitive *difference* are confused with academic *deficiency*’ (Kincheloe, p. 22). Similarly, McLaren (1989) stresses the relationship between curriculum, student experience, and identity. The critical pedagogue, he argues, has to know ‘the cultural and social forms through which students learn to define themselves’ (McLaren, p. 226).

The notion of ‘border pedagogy’ that has been developed by Giroux and Stanley Aronowitz operates comparably:

Border pedagogy offers the opportunity for students to engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages. This means educating students to read these codes critically, to learn the limits of such codes, including the ones they use to construct their own narratives and histories. (Giroux & Aronowitz, 1991, pp. 118–119)

Giroux and Aronowitz are attempting to appropriate what they call the postmodern insight of multiple and shifting identities and social positions into critical pedagogy. But note that here, too, identity categories are mobilized in order to expose social processes of subordination and domination in hopes of transforming those social processes. Pedagogy here is supposed to be a force which can work against the marginalization or for the freedom of subordinate or oppressed identity groups.

Part of critical pedagogy’s attempt to reveal and address systemic oppression and inequality within the classroom has led to an emphasis on voice, particularly the voice of traditionally marginalized and excluded students. Critical pedagogues, the thinking goes, should always be ‘searching for new voices that may have been excluded by the

dominant culture or by critical pedagogy itself' (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 22). The oppression of subjugated identities is supposed to be expressed through the voice of subjugated students so that it can be exposed and struggled against.²

Two 'Problems' of Identity

Before proceeding, I want to state in no uncertain terms that identity is not always and only a 'problem'. To assert or imply otherwise is to do tremendous violence to revolutionary and social movements, like national liberation struggles, that have and continue to mobilize identity. And in educational theory and practice, I find critical pedagogy's utilization and mobilization of identity to be in many ways desirable and necessary—but it does not follow from this that identity is unproblematic, or that identity is *enough* for liberation.

There are two intimately connected problems with critical pedagogy's insistence upon identity that I would like to account for here. Both of these problems can be introduced by a succinct quotation from Judith Butler. Referring to the identity signifiers 'queer' and 'women', Butler writes that such terms and categories

institute provisional identities and, inevitably, a provisional set of exclusions. The descriptivist ideal creates the expectation that a full and final enumeration of features is possible ... When those contents [of an identity category] turn out to be illimitable ... identity politics founders on factionalized disputes over self-definition or on the demand to provide ever more personalized and specified testimonies of self-disclosure that never fully satisfy the ideal under which they labor. (Butler, 1993/2011, p. 168)

The first problem that we see here results from the fact that identity categories are always necessarily based on exclusion and marginalization, which has the effect of rendering certain bodies and lives intelligible at the expense of others. Belonging to or possessing an identity is necessarily predicated on living *w*, having *x*, thinking *y*, believing *z*, and so on, which means that those who either 'lack' or are perceived of as 'lacking' such predicates are excluded and marginalized. This is the 'double movement' in identity politics that results in something of paradox, for the process whereby identity is utilized to expose how certain groups of subjects are oppressed works simultaneously to exclude and marginalize other groups, bodies and subjects—discursively and structurally.

In a later exchange with Slavoj Žižek and Ernest Laclau, Butler gives a more explicitly concrete example of this first problem with identity. Writing about the mainstream gay and lesbian rights movement and the struggle for marriage equality, she argues that the fight to include monogamous gay and lesbian relationships into the institution of marriage is at the same time to 'work to remarginalize others and foreclose possibilities for sexual freedom that have been long-standing goals of the movement' (Butler, 2000, p. 160). Fighting to include some social arrangements within the institution of marriage, in other words, is at the same time fighting to exclude and inhibit other possible social arrangements. Further, such a strategy has the effect of grounding and immobilizing the 'gay' and 'lesbian' identity, severing its revolutionary potential. Even

in 'radical' deployments like critical pedagogy, then, identity can become a disciplinary regime. But again, this is not to imply that the struggle for gay and lesbian marriage is wholly reactionary.

The second problem with identity is the 'descriptivist ideal' that it occasions. The conditions of belonging to an identity group compel an articulation of the shared qualities (be they biological, social, political, etc.) of the group's members. But, as Butler notes, such an articulation is always already a failure. At the outset, there is a whole host of problems that arise in regard to each identity grouping: How are the common qualities of an identity group defined? Who or what members do the defining? How is each member's belonging verified? And apart from the questions that encircle each identity formation is the violence of the relationship between identity and the subject. One may indeed think *x*, but is that all that one thinks?

These two problems of identity, however, in no way magically negate the necessity of mobilizing identity. And it is here, I believe, between the necessity to catalyze identity and the necessary violence that ensues, where the figure of whatever singularity can help theorize a critical pedagogy that can move beyond the paradoxes of identity.

To better frame this theoretical intervention, it may be helpful to bring in a conceptual distinction that Marx makes in his essay 'On the Jewish question'. Here, Marx (1978) distinguishes between *political* emancipation and *social* emancipation. Political emancipation, Marx writes, 'is the final form of human emancipation *within* the framework of the prevailing social order' (1978, p. 35). Social emancipation, by contrast, is the abolition of that social order, such that the politically emancipated identity 'becomes *impossible*, because his consciousness no longer has an object' (p. 52). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) have written this as the distinction between *emancipation* and *liberation*, language that I find more helpful than Marx's. In the context of the present inquiry, we might state that emancipation is the entry of existing, formerly oppressed identities into the established ontological order, while liberation is the abolition of that ontological order. My purpose, then, in bringing whatever singularity into conversation with critical pedagogy, is to ask whether the former can move the latter from an emancipatory project to a liberatory project.

The 'Whatever' of Being

Agamben introduces the figure of whatever singularity in *The coming community*, one of his earliest works to be translated into English. Like many of Agamben's books, it is short in length and profound in substance. It is, I submit, impossible to investigate or explain one of Agamben's ideas in isolation; one can really only begin to understand them through a relation to his other work. Indeed, this is one of the difficulties of engaging with Agamben. His books are not written linearly or methodically, where an idea is introduced, developed and then 'applied'. In order, then, to begin to grasp what Agamben means by 'whatever singularity', we have to situate the idea within *The coming community* and in part of Agamben's *oeuvre*, which Catherine Mills (2008, p. 2) appropriately calls 'a densely interconnected conceptual web'.

Agamben originally published *The coming community* in 1990, in the middle of the dissolution and overthrow of the Soviet Union and the Eastern socialist bloc

countries. The book should be regarded, in part, as a response to these developments, and the grounds for this claim will soon become apparent. More immediately, however, the book was Agamben's contribution to a series of debates taking place, beginning in the 1980s, around the idea of community and the writings of Georges Bataille. The problematic of the debate concerned the criteria of belonging that are necessary for acceptance into a community.

A community, traditionally thought, is defined by the common experience or identity of its members. The inverse of this formulation means that a community is defined not only by who or what it *includes*, but by who or what it *excludes*. This necessary flipside entails a tendency towards terror and totalitarianism. The most obvious example of such totalitarianism, one which becomes central to Agamben's later work on *homo sacer*, is Nazi Germany. A more subtle and recent example is the increasingly successful attacks on ethnic studies programs in high schools and colleges in the USA. What is at issue in these two different examples is the desire to 'purify' the community by redefining and enforcing the criteria for inclusion and, therefore, the criteria for exclusion. Political projects based on such a notion of the common, from humanism to fascism, have been animated by the language of the 'lost' or 'broken' community and have each, in their own way, argued for a return to an imaginary 'lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infragible bonds' (Nancy, 1991, p. 9). This, of course, was not new in the twentieth century. In fact, Marx (1973/1993) made a similar argument in his *Grundrisse* notebooks, in which he repeatedly polemicized against the 'illusion' of 'the Natural Individual' (p. 28) and the idea of a 'return' to some 'original fullness' (p. 162).

The debate about community, then, centered most explicitly on the first problem of identity that we defined above. And the problem that Agamben set out to answer in *The coming community* is how to conceive of a community without any criteria for exclusion and, thus, also without any criteria for inclusion. Agamben introduces his notion of 'whatever' and the figure of 'whatever singularity' in order to begin to think of community in such a way, for this radical rethinking of community necessarily entails, implicitly or explicitly, a radical rethinking of the subject.

Agamben (1990/1993) begins *The coming community* with the sentence 'The coming being is whatever being' (p. 1). 'Whatever' is the English translation of the Latin *quodlibet*, which Agamben translates as 'being such that it always matters' instead of the traditional translation, 'being, it does not matter which' (p. 1). 'The Whatever in question here', Agamben writes, 'relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being *such as it is*' (p. 1). It is this formulation of the subject and this conception of singularity *such as it is* that is at the heart of whatever singularity and the coming community and that may, perhaps, move critical pedagogy from an emancipatory to a liberatory project.

Thinking of the singular subject *such as it is* is to think of the singular not in its identity or difference, but in all of its singularity, in its *indifference*; it is to conceive of the singular subject without, or in its *indifference* to its predicates (its being *x* or having *y*). Whatever singularity is 'singularity seen from an unfamiliar side—that of the singular' (de la Durantaye, 2009, p. 162). The figure of whatever singularity thus

points *beyond* the binary of the particular/universal, which in pedagogical literature has been written as ‘you know me/I know you’/‘you can’t know me/I can’t know you’ (Ellsworth, 1989, pp. 321–322).

How exactly does whatever singularity escape the binary between the particular and the universal? To answer this question, Agamben characteristically turns to linguistics. He offers that the category of ‘the example’ is an exemplar here because it ‘is characterized by the fact that it holds for all cases of the same time and, at the same time, it is included among these. It is one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all’ (Agamben, 1990/1993, pp. 9–10). The example is an ‘empty space’ where whatever singularities can communicate with each other without surrendering to the totalizing force of identity. This empty space, however, is not properly a physical or conceptual location or place, but is instead the experience of a *taking-place*. To begin to understand what Agamben means by taking-place it may be helpful to retreat from the work at hand and consider what we might, reluctantly, and perhaps even against Agamben’s wishes, call his project.

The Taking-Place of Language

Those who come to Agamben from deconstruction, poststructuralism and postmodernism may be struck initially (and maybe permanently) by his unqualified use of adjectives and adverbs such as ‘pure’, ‘true’ and ‘absolute’, words and concepts that in recent continental philosophy are almost always circumscribed, historicized, contested or rejected. This difference, which is almost visceral, speaks to the uniqueness of Agamben’s approach to philosophy and politics, which is illustrated concisely in his 1984 essay ‘The idea of language’. Towards the end of the essay, Agamben turns to Wittgenstein’s image of the fly in the bottle:

... we can say that contemporary thought has finally recognized the inevitability, for the fly, of the glass in which it is imprisoned. The preexistence and anonymity of the signifying function constitute the insuperable presupposition that always already anticipates speaking beings. Human beings are condemned to understand each other in language. But, once again, what is left aside is precisely the original project assigned to this image: the possibility that the fly might leave the glass. (Agamben, 1999a, p. 46)

In the first part of this quote, Agamben almost surely has in mind Jacques Derrida. Agamben is highly critical of Derrida and deconstruction, which he accuses of remaining hopelessly trapped in nihilism; in *Homo sacer*, Agamben (1995/1998, p. 54) implies that deconstruction ‘threatens thinking’.³ Deconstruction, for Agamben, is obsessed with the bottle that the fly is in and, as de la Durantaye (2009, p. 190) puts it, ‘has set up shop in this place of exile and is content to remain there’. Of course, Agamben does not want to restore a metaphysics of presence in political philosophy. Philosophy, for him, ‘concerns itself with what is at issue not in this or that meaningful statement but in the very fact that human beings speak, that there is language and opening to sense, beyond, before, or, rather, *in* every determinate event of signification’ (Agamben, 1999b, p. 104). This is the *taking-place* of language, an experience of pure language that escapes representation: the *event* of language.

In a more recent essay, Agamben offers an interesting corporeal example of the taking-place of language: the friend. The friend, he writes ‘belongs to the class of terms that linguists define as nonpredicative’ (Agamben, 2009, p. 29). In other words, ‘Calling someone “friend” is not the same as calling him “white”, “Italian”, or “hot”, since friendship is neither a property nor a quality of a subject’ (p. 31). The example of the friend is not only linguistic, it is also carnal: ‘Friends do not share something (birth, law, place, taste): they are shared by the experience of friendship’ (p. 36). This experience of friendship is like the experience of pure language. The communication of whatever singularities, then, and the (anti)foundation of the coming community, is not about a shared identity (predicative belonging) nor is it about pure vacuity.⁴ The coming community is constituted by the being-together of whatever singularities, by a nonpredicative (not necessarily a predicate-less) being-in-common. Agamben (1990/1993, p. 19) conjures Spinoza’s notion of the common, writing that the taking-place of singularities ‘does not unite them in essence, but scatters them in existence’. In this sense, then, the coming community of whatever singularities is not held together by some ‘glue’, which pushes us, critical educators and students, to think and experience community radically otherwise.

Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Ineffability

To take seriously Agamben’s response to the problems of identity and exclusion, critical pedagogy has to ask itself whether and how it can serve to call for, or facilitate, the *taking-place of whatever singularities*. There is a teleological difficulty here, however, for the whatever is not properly a ‘project’.

In the translation of ‘the coming community’ there is an ambiguity with the verb tense of ‘coming’. Alex Murray (2010, pp. 50–51) has suggested that ‘a more accurate, if clumsy, English title is “the community which/that comes”, capturing the present tense and avoiding any futural connotations’. This is similar to the way that Nancy (1991, p. 71) wrote about ‘community without community’ or ‘communism without community’, which is ‘*to come*, in the sense that it is always *coming*’. The coming community, therefore, and whatever singularity, do not constitute necessarily an end for which we should strive. For Agamben (1990/1993, p. 43), ‘there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize’ and it is precisely this premise that allows for the possibility of ethics (and politics). This is in part why Agamben (2011) has said that he ‘avoid[s] conclusions in general, even in the investigation is, so to speak, finished’. If critical pedagogy can take on the teleological challenge that Agamben poses, perhaps it can finally confront the ‘essentially paternalistic project of education itself’ (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 306). The whatever, that is, cannot somehow be constructed or made to come by the critical pedagogue, in some ways circumventing debates about authority and power in the critical pedagogy literature. Instead, for Agamben, the whatever is more of an excavation of the present.⁵

How, then, might critical pedagogy excavate the whatever? If critical pedagogy is to take seriously the figure of whatever singularity it will be necessary to put forward a respect for the *ineffable*, for being such as it is, for being that escapes and resists

representation. While this may seem paradoxical, given the previous excursus on the taking-place of language, I want to propose here that it may in fact be that the temporary (strategic, perhaps) *suspension* of dialogue is what can allow for whatever singularities to take place in the classroom. It is this respect for the ineffability of being and being-in-common that can help us encounter the present future, the 'community that/which comes'. Within the progressive classroom today, the demand for voice as an expression of being is ubiquitous, students are assigned confessions, and graded on how well they share their experiences. Well intentioned as this may be, there is a terror that haunts this method.

The Secret Life of Whatever

The two problems of identity described above, that of inclusion/exclusion and that of the descriptivist ideal, are illustrative of the inability of knowledge and the word to represent the singular and the coming community. If critical pedagogy is to move beyond the emancipatory constraints of identity, then it must re-evaluate the call for voice and dialogue, for the whatever of singularity is precisely that which resists representation and exceeds the word. This proposal that critical pedagogy should uphold a respect for the ineffable can be fleshed out more, I believe, by juxtaposing it with a fragment of Jean-Francois Lyotard's philosophy.

In 'The general line', a fable published in 1993, Lyotard writes that the subject lives two kinds of existence: the 'general life' and the 'secret life'. The general life is, as Lyotard (1993/1997) quotes Nina Berberova, 'The life everyone sees' (p. 115), the public life that speaks, engages in deliberation and civil society. The secret life, by contrast, is the subject's 'no man's-land' (p. 115), an internal alterity, one that 'is utterly other than "the others"' (p. 121), the inhuman region that allows for the human. The secret life is not private in the sense of solitude; 'There is room for several in the second life, me, you, the other' (p. 116). It is in this second life where one learns what one has to say. But one cannot, properly speaking, have knowledge of this inhuman region, one can only 'encounter' it. In this sense, the secret life, like whatever singularity, escapes knowledge and representation, and exceeds the word.

Terror takes place, according to Lyotard, when 'the general life seeks to take hold of the secret life' (p. 118). This is his critique of democracy:

The democratic state denies the subject her secret existence ... by pressuring her to exert her rights at all times, to be exhaustively, absolutely public. One must be crazy not to exercise the rights one has! 'Why didn't you do this, do that? You had the right!' (Grebowicz, 2011, p. 151)

In response to democracy's tendency towards terror, Lyotard contends that the secret life must be granted an amnesty. As Margret Grebowicz writes, he 'calls for the political accommodation of that which is secret, singular, and mute' (p. 151).

The secret life and whatever singularity are surely not identical, and I am not particularly interested in delineating one concept from the other. Instead, I call upon Lyotard's writing on the secret life to help illustrate the way in which I propose that critical pedagogy might engage Agamben's paradigm of whatever singularity. For note

that Lyotard's critique in many ways runs up against critical pedagogy's call for voice and dialogue in the classroom, where 'Heavy pressures are put on silence, to give birth to expression' (Lyotard, 1993/1997, p. 120). Indeed, the critical pedagogy classroom can certainly be seen as one place where the secret life is held hostage and subsumed by the general life, where the ineffable is clawed at by the demand for voice, a condition particularly problematic for oppressed groups (Jones, 1999). Allowing for the suspension of dialogue, resisting the urge for expression, then, is one way to keep guard over the ineffability of being and to allow for a being-in-common.

Agamben and Tiananmen Square: Ontological Ignorance

Before concluding, it is necessary to return to the question of identity by way of a weighty critique of whatever singularity, namely that the concept 'begs the question of what significance race, gender, sexuality, class and other determinants of political subjectivity and power have within the context of global biopolitics' (Mills, 2008, pp. 135–136).⁶ Agamben, that is, remains dangerously within the realm of the ideal, and the critical reader should sense certain invisible privileges at play here. I believe that this danger of whatever singularity is illustrated well by Agamben's reading of Tiananmen Square, which he offers as an example of 'the politics of whatever singularity' (Agamben, 1990/1993, p. 85).

Agamben sees in Tiananmen Square a political expression of being in itself, of being *such as it is*, in large part because of the absence of concrete demands: 'In Tiananmen the state found itself facing something that could not and did not want to be represented, but that presented itself nonetheless as a community and as a common life' (Agamben, 1996/2000, p. 99). Repression, he concludes, was the Chinese state's response to this refusal to mobilize under the banner of identity.

Agamben's interpretation of Tiananmen Square, however, runs almost completely counter to what we now know about the protests. First, we now know that the student protest leaders *wanted* bloodshed and that many Chinese soldiers were killed in the confrontation, which might be more appropriately described as a battle than a massacre.⁷ Second, Agamben says that the 'peaceful' protests were exemplary of the coming community as the absence of clear demands denotes 'that it was not undertaken in the name of common interest deriving from a shared identity' (Mills, 2008, p. 130). What Agamben ignores is that the protesters *did* share a common identity: the overwhelming majority were students from the upper and middle classes attending elite universities in Beijing. The protesters were a remarkably homogeneous group. Moreover, however, while the absence of concrete demands may have been, in part, an expression of being-in-common, did it not also leave the movement open to co-optation, and can it not also mask the presence of nefarious forces acting within the movement, or from outside?

The point here is not to argue necessarily that there is one truth or correct narrative about Tiananmen Square, but rather that Agamben reads the events hastily and with a naïve idealism, looking only for what he wants to see, and ignoring what certain privileges allow him to discount.⁸ There may well have been expressions of the what-

ever in Tiananmen, but was that all that there was? If the mere presence of bodies in the streets and the absence of concrete demands are the only criteria for evaluating a protest movement, then Agamben could just as easily justify support for the Tea Party movement in the USA, which had a lot in common with the Tiananmen Square protesters: they were also organizing under the banner of ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, came from similar class backgrounds, and they too used to Statue of Liberty as a rallying symbol.

This is the inherent danger in whatever singularity: no matter how much we may wish otherwise, identity *does* currently structure being and thus must be given ontological bearing into a philosophy of education. Thus, Antonio Negri (2008b, p. 88) writes: ‘Missing in Agamben is a value that might distinguish between the anarchic lure of the void and the loving construction of the social’. This is particularly important for critical pedagogy, and why I am arguing here for an engagement between critical pedagogy and the whatever, as the former may provide the value lacking in Agamben that Negri identifies.

Conclusion: Presenting Ambivalence

Oppression and exploitation, occurring along lines of identity, necessitate, to some degree, critical pedagogy to mobilize and call upon identity terms and categories. But if critical pedagogy can move from an emancipatory to a liberatory project, it must seek to resist and move beyond both the exclusionary criteria and the descriptivist ideal that such a mobilization entails. The purpose of the theoretical intervention of this article is to begin an exploration of how the figure of whatever singularity may aid in such a movement. It is my contention that, for critical pedagogy to become a liberatory project, it has to hold the ontological reality of identity in tension with the secret life of whatever singularity.

The critical pedagogy of ineffability that I am intimating here is similar in some respect to Zeus Leonardo’s (2011) notion of race ambivalence. In his article ‘After the glow’, Leonardo looks at the space opened up by the deployment of race ambivalence, which he argues ‘allows educators to establish some distance from the naturalness of race, its seeming permanence, which is the first step at making its familiarity appear strange’ (p. 676). Similarly, I have argued that critical pedagogy can deploy the whatever—upholding respect for the ineffability of being—to make ourselves appear ineffable to ourselves; to excavate a non-predicative being-in-common in the present; to think the common outside of identity. To be sure, such an orientation is not thoroughly ‘Agambenian’; it instead entails a *materialist appropriation* of the whatever, one that guards against the forces that pressure the ineffable into expression and coerce through subtle terror the secret life into the general life, while simultaneously acknowledging the ontological weight of identity.

Acknowledgements

Work on this article was supported by the Central New York Humanities Corridor, from an award by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. I express my gratitude to the participants of this workshop, most notably Barbara Applebaum and Troy Richardson.

Notes

1. I articulate Agamben's figure of 'whatever singularity' primarily in relation to identity and subjectivity, an approach which differs from that of Tyson Lewis (2011, p. 589), whose compelling article on studying and stupidity touches on the figure in an investigation into the role of (im)potentiality in Agamben's thought.
2. For what is probably the central critique of the role of voice and dialogue in critical pedagogy, see Jones (1999).
3. For a comprehensive analysis of Agamben's philosophical relationship to Derrida and deconstruction, see de la Durantaye (2009, pp. 184–191): de la Durantaye shows how Agamben's critiques of Derrida appear consistently throughout his writing.
4. Agamben throughout *The coming community* stresses a positive formulation instead of the negative formulations of his other interlocutors (e.g. Nancy's 'community without community' and Blanchot's 'unavowable' or 'negative' community).
5. For more about Agamben's philosophy of temporality and teleology, see Cesare Casarino's (2008) excellent essay, 'Time matters: Marx, Negri, Agamben, and the corporeal'.
6. A similar criticism is sustained by Antonio Negri, who takes aim at Agamben's notion of 'bare' or 'naked' life. See Negri (2008a) in particular.
7. Even the *Wall Street Journal*, which could never be accused of having a pro-China bias, on June 12, 1989, wrote that 'Aerial pictures of the conflagration and columns of smoke have powerfully bolstered the [Chinese] government's arguments that the troops were victims, not executioners'.
8. Mills (2008, p. 115) writes that 'The consistent use of gender-specific pronouns [in Agamben's work] as if their reference were universal is surely indicative of a philosophical blindness'.

References

- Agamben, G. (1993). *The coming community* (M. Hardt, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1990).
- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (D. Heller-Roazan, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1995).
- Agamben, G. (1999a). The idea of language (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). In D. Heller-Roazen (Ed.), *Potentialities: Collected essays in philosophy* (pp. 39–47). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (1999b). *Tradition of the immemorial* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). In D. Heller-Roazen (Ed.), *Potentialities: Collected essays in philosophy* (pp. 104–115). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (2000). *Means without end: Notes on politics* (V. Binetti & C. Casarino, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1996).
- Agamben, G. (2009). What is an apparatus? (D. Kishik & S. Pedatella, Trans.) Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (2011, August 19). Giorgio Agamben. Alternative ethics. Retrieved 02 August 2012 from: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/videos/alternative-ethics/>.
- Biesta, G. (1998). Say you want a revolution ... Suggestions for the impossible future of critical pedagogy. *Educational Theory*, 48, 499–510.
- Butler, J. (2000). Competing universalities. In J. Butler, E. Laclau, & S. Zizek (Eds.), *Contingency, hegemony, universality: Contemporary dialogues on the left* (pp. 136–181). London: Verso.
- Butler, J. (2011). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'*. London: Routledge. (Original work published 1993).
- Casarino, C. (2008). Time Matters: Marx, Negri, Agamben, and the corporeal. In C. Casarino & A. Negri (Eds.), *In Praise of the common: A conversation on philosophy and politics* (pp. 219–245). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

- de la Durantaye, L. (2009). *Giorgio Agamben: A critical introduction*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59, 297–324.
- Freire, P. (2011). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970).
- Frye, M. (1983). *The politics of reality: Essays in feminist theory*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.
- Giroux, H. (2011). *On critical pedagogy*. New York: Continuum.
- Giroux, H., & Aronowitz, S. (1991). *Postmodern education: Politics, culture, and social criticism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gore, J. (1993). *The struggle for pedagogies: Critical and feminist discourses as regimes of truth*. New York: Routledge.
- Grebowicz, M. (2011). Democracy and pornography: On speech, rights, privacies, and pleasures in conflict. *Hypatia*, 26, 150–165.
- Gur-Ze'ev, I. (2005). Critical theory, critical pedagogy and diaspora today: Toward a new critical language in education (Introduction). In I. Gur-Ze'ev (Ed.), *Critical theory, critical pedagogy and diaspora today: Toward a new critical language in education* (pp. 7–34). Haifa: Haifa University Press.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jones, A. (1999). The limits of cross-cultural dialogue: Pedagogy, desire, and absolution in the classroom. *Educational Theory*, 49, 299–316.
- Kincheloe, J. (2008). *Critical pedagogy primer* (2nd ed.). New York: Peter Lang.
- Leonardo, Z. (2011). After the glow: Race ambivalence and other educational prognoses. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 43, 675–698.
- Lewis, T. (2011). Rethinking the learning society: Giorgio Agamben on studying, stupidity, and impotence. *Studies in Philosophy of Education*, 30, 585–599.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1997). The general line. In *Postmodern fables* (G. Van Den Abbeele, Trans.), (pp. 115–122). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1993).
- Marx, K. (1978). On the Jewish question. In R.C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx–Engels reader* (pp. 26–52). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Marx, K. (1993). *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy (rough draft)* (M. Nicolaus, Trans.). London: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1973).
- McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. New York: Longman.
- Mills, C. (2008). *The philosophy of Agamben*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Murray, A. (2010). *Giorgio Agamben*. London: Routledge.
- Nancy, J.-L. (1991). *The inoperative community* (P. Connor, Ed., P. Connor, L. Garbus, M. Holland & S. Sawhney, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Negri, A. (2008a). The political monster: Power and naked life. In C. Casarino & A. Negri (Eds.), *In praise of the common: A conversation on philosophy and politics* (pp. 193–218). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Negri, A. (2008b). *The porcelain workshop: For a new grammar of politics* (N. Wedell, Trans.). Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).