In this address, I want to offer some reflections on the current predicaments of arts education in schools, specifically in the context of public schools. I want to locate this predicament historically as well as contemporarily, and offer some suggestions for how to approach the question of why and to what end we might engage arts education today as well some ideas about how to frame arts education research productively.

I should say that I come to these questions both from a place of commitment as well as a place of deep suspicion. I entered into these conversations some 20 years ago with the conviction that the arts and arts education in particular had a significant role to play in social change and the transformation of unequal relations. Since then, the more I learn about the arts and about their role in society in general and in education in particular, the more suspicious and critical I have become, to the point where I have come to believe that the very notion of “the arts” (in quotations) undermines educational projects committed to anti-discrimination, decolonization, and other liberation projects; but I will get to that later in this essay.

I have framed this essay around a set of interrelated questions that I think are critical if we are to provide effective ways of engaging the arts in education, particularly if our intention is to do so in ways that seek to address inequality, and to engage in projects of social change, like anti-racism and anti-discrimination more generally as well as projects of decolonization and anti-imperialist critique.

First, I want to address a few questions about the predicaments of arts education and why the field has historically found itself in such a precarious position vis a vis educational projects and schooling. This position has had significant implications for arts education, and I want to point to some of these in order to offer a critique of the empirical frames that have been put forward as a way to support the arts in education and to stimulate their development. Second, I want to tackle some questions about possible alternative frames and about the specific approach to the arts as cultural production that I have put forward elsewhere. I will end by returning to the

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problem of how some conceptualization of “the arts” (again, in quotations) might figure within a cultural production framework (see Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).²

I should underscore from the beginning that my approach to these questions is informed by my experiences in and my knowledge of the field of the arts in education in the particular contexts of Canada and the United States. I believe, however, that although my work has been situated in and responds to these national contexts, it has relevance for the field in other national contexts, and I hope that you will find some of what I have to say relevant to your particular situation in Germany and other parts of Europe. I suspect the some of the ideas I express here will seem foreign or unexpected, perhaps even jarring to some of you. Please know that these ideas emerge from a deep commitment to the possibilities of cultural production as part of an emancipatory and anti-discriminatory educational project. I am eager to hear your questions and to consider the relevance of these ideas for your own context.

What is the predicament of arts education today?

To be succinct, the problem that arts education faces today can be described as a paradox of legitimacy. As subject matter, at least in the US and Canada, the arts have always found themselves in a precarious position within the school curriculum, particularly the curriculum of mass public education (see Efland, 1990). This last point is important, because it is not possible to make sense of this predicament – its antecedents and its implications – if we do not recognize that the situation for arts education is not generalized but rather paradoxical.

For example, arts education is a staple of elite schooling, and although some disciplines have more legitimacy than others – and although the Bologna process has put the humanities in general in a rather precarious position – most elite universities still provide education in some artistic disciplines without major disputes or arguments. This is because “the arts,” for as long as such a term has had relevance as a concept linked to the enlightenment and to humanism, have always had a unique role to play in the production of high status knowledge and the consecration of such status for the elites (see Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio & Useem, 1978; Wolff, 1993). This is also why almost every nation-state has made some investments in the preparation of professional artists and in the institutionalization of arts practices; a nation cannot be a nation without a consecrated national “culture” that can find representation in the work of recognized “national” artists. Indeed, if we begin from the recognition that arts education has always been a legitimate field of practice within certain educational spheres and that it has historically served the needs of particular social groups, we begin to understand the predicament of the arts in its proper and paradoxical relationship to structured inequality.

While arts education research surely has relevance for a wide range of educational projects and resonates with the education of elites, it is within the context of government schooling that arts education typically finds itself at the margins and looking for a way inside or to justify its relevance for broader projects of mass education. Even when arts education has a formal place in the official curriculum, resources are often lacking and often teachers lack relevant expertise (see Fowler, 2001). In the context of Toronto, where I work, for example, although there are official curriculum documents for arts education in elementary grades, arts subjects are typically often taught by teachers who have no prior training and seldom even have the minimal resources provided to meet the expectations that the Province has stipulated. At the secondary level, there is a serious dearth of teachers who are prepared to provide adequate training, and resources are also severely lacking (see People for Education, 2013). Paradoxically, and illustrating the previous point about inequality, the Toronto District School Board also funds four public secondary schools that specialize in pre-professional training in the arts, and the students who are able to access this education (which is based on a selective application process), come disproportionately from affluent families of European descent (Gaztambide-Fernández 2010; Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017).

Paradoxically valued in the education of a few while sidelined in the education of the most, arts education is mostly under-resourced and unappreciated and practitioners find themselves scurrying for justifications to secure a place for the arts in mass schooling, along with the necessary curriculum frameworks to sustain its relevance and deliver on its promise of improving education (see Davis, 2005).

I suspect that arts education is perhaps not nearly as precariously positioned in the German school curriculum as it is in the US and Canada, where to some extent we still carry the 19th century populist suspicion of the arts. The recent “Kultur nacht Stark” initiative of the Bündnisse für Bildung and the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung may be a good illustration of the differences. Yet, I suspect that similar disciplinary hierarchies persist, and that arts education still find itself vying for legitimacy among school subjects. At the risk of overgeneralizing, I take the position that the predicament of arts education is how to justify itself by demonstrating that it has a role to play in the educational context of schools. By and large, these justifications are framed through the language of what I have called elsewhere “the rhetoric of effects” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013), in which something called “the arts” is construed as having an “impact” on something else, whether it is cognitive capacities, aesthetic sensitivities, or even civic dispositions (here, “Kultur nacht Stark” may be a good illustration). In short, the purpose of arts education is to make people – that is students – better; it is a project of improvement. The predicament of arts education today is the problem of demonstrating that it can make people better, and the dilemmas of research in arts education are usually predicated on the problem of effects.

**Why does arts education find itself in this predicament?**

The answer to this question is, at first, straightforward; the problem of making people better is not just the problem of arts education, it is the project of schooling. We school because we see
children as incomplete subjects in need of the proper direction and preparation to become productive (and maybe even “happy”) citizens. We also school – and I write this with an indisputable sense of irony – because we need docile bodies; because we need employable citizens; because we want to reproduce ourselves; in short, we school because we want to acculturate. And thus arts education is caught in the quagmire of how to demonstrate it can do all these things; and more. This is also why the challenges as well as current trend in arts education research often mirror challenges and trends in educational research more broadly, including for instance recent moves toward neuroscience.

But to blame the larger project of schooling for the predicaments of arts education is to miss an important historical point. From its inception in the 18th century, as demonstrated in the outstanding historical work of Carmen Mórsch (2017), arts education has always been a civilizing project of enculturation premised on the superiority of European civilization and the inferiority of a racialized “Other.” In this project, “the arts” have always been construed as the property of European civilization and as such have always been implicated in colonial projects that hinge on the specter of “the Other.” In such projects, the arts emerged as a significant manifestation of racial superiority, and as such arts education was construed as a project that carried the good fortunes of European civilization to conquered people (Mignolo, 2003; Wynter, 2003).

I want to suggest that there is a curious metonymic elision at work in how arts education becomes entrapped in its own logic and why it finds itself in its current predicament. As the concept of “the arts” metonymically stands in for all that is good and beautiful (in that uniquely Arnoldian way) as well as for the presumed capacity for beauty of European culture, it emerges as an apparently benign form of enculturation, in contrast to brute force. This view then elides the particularity of colonial projects and reinserts arts education in the context of schooling as a particular form of betterment. But here the terms of reference are distinct. No longer responsible for the enculturation of the inferior racial other, arts education now finds itself having to make other kinds of promises, mainly that it can make pupils into better citizens, more aesthetically sensible, even, if we believe the hype, smarter and more mathematically savvy. And it is here that “the arts” are construed as substance – as a set of “things” or “practices” that can be implemented – or injected – into students to particular effects (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). And it is here that contemporary research in arts education finds itself in the difficult quagmire of a banal empiricism.

What implications does this predicament have for research in arts education?

To understand the implications of this predicament it is crucial to distinguish between scientism (or what I will refer to here as “banal empiricism”) and a more general and open understanding of empiricism. As it will become evident later in this address, I am not against empiricism myself (although I am quite sensitive to and understand the critiques and limitations of empiricist projects). My views on cultural production as an empirical frame no doubt reflect a pragmatist and interpretive understanding of empiricism. What I want to highlight here are the ways in which the predicament of the arts in education has led to an embrace of a scientism, or banal
empiricism, that has permeated educational research since its inception (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007).

This banal empiricism is characterized by two related logics; substantialist and successionist. Central to positivism, these interrelated logics are inherited from a scientistic view of education that treats individuals (or students) as objects of study and that views education as the process on inculcating (or to use a Freirean term, “depositing”) knowledge and shaping individual behavior. Such a view frames education as an individual rather than a social process, and seeks to remove educational experience from social context to isolate and control the right “inputs” in order to determine and predict the desired “outcomes.” I don’t have time here to develop a thorough critique of this view of education (although others have done that, e.g. Taubman, 2010). Instead, I want to point out that arts education research has embraced this banal empiricism to its own detriment.

First, the substantialist logic requires that arts education frame “the arts” as a thing; as a substance to be inserted or injected into educational contexts and experiences to desired effects (Galloway, 2009). It is also the logic through which some researchers seek to dissect and parse experiences deemed “artistic” or the worldviews of those deemed “artists” (as if that worldview was apart from the socially constructed label itself) in order to isolate variables and determine behaviors and attitudes to be enhanced or improved. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, “the arts” are not a thing that can be inserted into particular circumstances or that can be removed from its social and cultural context in order to be studied and teased into its constituent parts. Rather, “the arts” are better understood as a set of discourses, or ideas and ways of talking that categorize particular practices and objects as deserving of the label.

Here I want to return for a moment to my earlier reference to the metonymic role of the concept of “the arts.” As a synecdoche of European civilization, “the arts” metonymically stand in for all that is “good” and “beautiful” (and underneath this, although usually elided in educational projects, is the racist ideology of European cultural supremacy, a point to which I will return later). This Arnoldian view insists on framing “the arts” – and all the objects and practices that are lucky enough to be captured by its discourses – as substances that can be mobilized in educational projects in order to improve or enhance educational outcomes, sometimes through transference and others through transformation (Davis, 2005). Even – I would even say especially -- when they are viewed as valuable “for their own sake,” the arts are construed as having the capacity to yield – to educate – better human subjects, more capable of and more sensitive to beauty, perhaps more civilized, but in fact more European (and of course, European and civilized are only very loosely linked, perhaps only rhetorically).

This view, or this project, if you wish, relies on the second central logic of scientistic educational research; causal successionism. Similar to a medical model in which a treatment is expected to cure an illness or eliminate a symptom, like a pill getting rid of a headache, the successionist logic holds that given the right conditions, something called “the arts” will yield a desired educational outcome. Again, this is not unlike the educational instrumentalism that frames teaching as a science in search of laws that can predict learning, or more typically behavioral
outcomes (i.e. learning is only comprehended through the changes in behaviors that it supposedly yields). And here again only a banal empiricism makes logical sense, as it insists not only on the faulty premise that specific behaviors are a good proxy for learning and internal states (e.g., if you are not looking at me, you must not be listening), but also on removing behaviors from social context and treating social relations as if prescribed scripts could be dropped, like food dropped from an airplane into a conflict zone, expecting that warring factions will equally share the bounty.

The consequences of such a way of framing arts education are dire (as they are, I should add, for educational projects more generally). But here I want to focus on one key consequence as a way to set the stage for an alternative view. Framing the practices that are sometimes associated with the discourses of “the arts” through a substantialist and successionist logic removes them from the very contexts that give them meaning and that, ultimately, make them significant for teaching and learning and, by extension, to educational projects committed to anti-discrimination and social transformation. When we remove the arts from the social and cultural context of their production we are left with a set of reified practices and in the process empty these practices of their cultural significance. It is this emptying that ultimately allows the discourses of “the arts” to elide their intimate relationship to concepts of civilization and the civilizing project of education. Yet this elision does not render “the arts” innocent or apolitical, as some would have it (Winner & Hetland, 2008). On the contrary, the apparently empty signifier perniciously carries this metonymic elision, allowing it to continue operating in colonial ways that ultimately undermine educative projects.

Perhaps this critique will not resonate with arts educators who can hardly care less about projects of emancipation or anti-racist critique. But I have argued that removing “the arts” from their social and cultural context actually has the effect of undermining the very scientistic project that requires such an emptying of meaning (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). The fact is that the practices and processes that are sometimes associated with the discourses of “the arts” cannot be isolated from the social and cultural context that gives them meaning, precisely because it is “meaning” that gives them substance. But of course, “meanings” cannot be effectively operationalized as substances on to themselves that can be proven to have this or that effect; once stripped of meaning, the dicing and slicing of arts practices render them nothing more than behaviours that are only remotely connected to the educational experiences previously presumed. What is required, then, is a re-framing of those practices and processes that places them back squarely in the material and symbolic context of their production; what is required is a cultural production empirical frame.

**What is a “cultural production” approach to arts education research?**

In order to introduce the concept of cultural production, it is important to provide some preliminary conceptual context, specifically around the very slippery idea of “culture.” Few concepts in the social sciences are as difficult to define and as messy to operationalize (Williams, 1983). The history of the conceptual debates around “culture” are long, and cannot be summarized here (see Kuper, 2009). But I take as my point of departure anthropologist
Clifford Geertz’s (1973) contention that “culture” are the “webs of significance” that human beings spin, and that the study of culture is not “an experimental science in search of law,” as a banal empiricism would suggest, “but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (p. 5). In short, we cannot study cultural phenomena, such as arts education, without accounting for the local conditions from which particular practices emerge and for the local meanings attached to such practices. Moreover, it is spurious to assume that we can “transfer” any given cultural practice, either in whole or in part – whether it is sculpting clay, harmonizing a melody, rhyming words, or frosting a cake – from one context to another without a significant shift in what gives them meaning – and therefore substance – to such a practice.

Generally speaking, the term cultural practice suggests that “culture” is not a given, but rather a constantly evolving process through which meanings are both conveyed and constructed, as people interact within localities, negotiating the material and symbolic orders and rules of engagement that define each context. Cultural practices evolve at the intersection between structures and agency, as relationships shift and materialize, attaching and reattaching both established as well as new meanings. While the concept of cultural practice is a general term that can be used to understand a whole range of activities, orientations, and dynamics, the term cultural production refers specifically to those activities that deliberately engage available materials for the purpose of arranging – and sometimes rearranging – available meanings (and in turn, the power structures that such meanings reify). While one could say, in a sense, that all behaviors are, or in some way engage, cultural practices, not all cultural practices involve or lead to cultural production. But the distinction is not so much categorical as it is one of emphasis. To speak of cultural practices as productive is to point to the ways in which particular practices yield concrete arrangements that are produced through a deliberate engagement with meanings and materials for the express purpose of communicating (and sometimes interrupting) meanings. Cultural production, then, is a deliberate and dialectic engagement with available materials and conditions in order to yield symbolic work.

To understand “the arts” as cultural production is to understand them as symbolic practices, processes, and products that are situated in local contexts, defined by specific material contexts and power relations. Yet the concept of cultural production does not grant any particular status to a given practice or product, as “the arts” do, but rather understands the granting of such status as itself the result of the conditions that shape a given cultural production. While all practices, processes, and products that can be labeled as “the arts” constitute forms of cultural production, not all cultural production is always granted the status of “the arts”; and the consequences and outcomes of being labeled as such are not always desirable or warranted.

A cultural production approach to arts education research understands that the very act of calling or framing something as “the arts” is the outcome of particular processes that position certain practices and products as not only apart from but as superior to others. That is, cultural production recognizes that “the arts” involve institutional and hierarchizing discourses that are always-already shaped by the very function of the term as a metonym for European civilization. Even when the discourses of “the arts” are used in reference to practices that are not usually associated with European conceptions of beauty and aesthetics, the term seeks to exalt and to
elevate the status of such practices over others, usually to their own detriment, although this is not always apparent. It does this precisely because of its metonymic function. In this ways, every time we invoke “the arts,” we also invoke its association with European civilization and superiority, even when that association is elided in function of a project of assimilation. This notion of metonymic elision begins to shed some light on why arts education finds itself in the paradoxical predicament I described earlier. An understanding of “the arts” as a manifestation of the superiority of European civilization makes logical sense when understood in relationship to the education of elites and the enforcement of extant cultural hierarchy. This connection, however, must be elided when “the arts” are positioned in the context of mass education, particularly when the “objects” of that education are racialized “others” who are to be enculturated or assimilated into hierarchical social orders only to be kept at the margins. This is also why, in the end, discourses of “the arts” neutralize the capacity of new forms to challenge established orders, both material and symbolic. This is important because it underscores that discourses of “the arts” are never innocent; they are always-already imbued with the power to categorize and to exalt, and in turn to reissue the supremacist ideology from which the very concept emerges and for which it implicitly stands. This, in and of itself, is a significant departure from extant approaches to arts education research, if for no other reason because it begins from a skeptical questioning of the value imputed to “the arts.”

**How does such an approach reframe arts education research?**

Locating “the arts” through the paradigm of cultural production is, perhaps ironically, to deliberately oppose the hierarchies implied in the very discourses that give “the arts” their status and their meaning. Framing “the arts” as cultural production is to take up symbolic work in its full complexity by underscoring the particular material conditions and unequal relations that make such work possible to begin with and against which, at times, such work emerges. In short, unlike current approaches to arts education research, a cultural production approach does not presume the higher order of any practice labeled “the arts.” This is important because a cultural production approach does not begin from the premise that the goal is to determine the “goods” that arts education yields. Indeed, it begins by rejecting the “rhetoric of effects” along with its substantialist and successionist logic.

Instead, focusing on a dynamic and complex understanding of culture, a cultural production approach requires a direct engagement with local conditions and does not aim to strip such practices of their meanings. A cultural production approach brings attention to material conditions and symbolic orders, rather than pretending that such orders do not matter for how we come to understand some practices and not others as “the arts.” As such, it restores the metonymic function of “the arts” in order to acknowledge its hierarchizing force.

In doing this, a cultural production approach also encompasses a broader set of practices and processes and in so doing it insists that symbolic work is not the exclusive domain of some talented few, but a horizontal field of practice in which everyone, everywhere participates (see Willis, 1990). Because of its inclusivity, a cultural production approach does not ignore or attempt to dismiss the practices and products that are typically associated with the discourses
of “the arts”; it simply grants them no privileged position. Because it does not owe loyalties to particular institutions or depend on institutional recognitions, as “the arts” do, a cultural production approach promiscuously embraces all forms of symbolic work, taking each expression as a manifestation of important processes of both thickening and contestation. At the same time, it does not seek to colonize symbolic expression, as the discourses of “the arts” typically do, because it grants no elite status.

Lastly, a cultural production approach embraces the very pedagogical nature of symbolic work, and begins from the position that symbolic work should be central to educational projects, not because it has an “effect” on a desired outcome, but because education is inherently cultural work. As such, education is also inherently unpredictable and it is precisely in this unpredictability that lies the possibility that creative work might play a significant role in recasting oppressive social relations. This might mean, of course, that the very discourses of “the arts” on which arts education research relies might be subject to reconfiguration, maybe even elimination.

Conclusion: Can a cultural production approach save “the arts” in education?

The short answer to this question is no; but one caveat is in order. A cultural production analysis benefits from the recognition that discourses of “the arts” have significant force and that they are part of the symbolic orders that shape the meanings attached to particular practices in context. While it understands such a force as stemming from the metonymic role of the concept in relationship to European civilization, particularly as it is elided, it does not pretend that such a force is always detrimental, at least not immediately. Instead, a cultural production approach frames the problem of “the arts” by asking first what symbolic purpose such discourses play and what conditions it enables or disables in particular situations. In other words, a cultural production approach takes the very notion of “the arts” as part of the symbolic order that shapes cultural production. In that sense, while a cultural production framework does not oppose the arts, it also does not participate in the continued reproduction of the hierarchies the concept implies. In fact, I am willing to concede that if symbolic orders can be altered through cultural production, then it is also possible to relocate and re-signify what we mean by “the arts” in order to put the concept to work for other purposes.

I realize that I offer no easy solutions here, but the trajectories of arts education research to date have hardly provided a real exit for arts education out of its paradoxical predicament. The fact remains that most research remains focused on a banal empiricist logic that seeks to establish the effects of arts education in order to either justify its position or to demonstrate its contributions to larger educational projects. The substantialist and successionist logic has failed to grant arts education a secure place in educational projects, even though most mainstream educational projects are premised on the same banal empiricism. Instead, a cultural production approach starts from the premise that symbolic work is the stuff of daily life; it is the fodder of pedagogical relations across contexts and time. Rather than framing cultural practices as doing something to education experience, a cultural production approach begins from the premise that educational experience is always-already imbued with cultural practice; it takes symbolic
work as a point of departure, rather than a destination. In this way, a cultural production approach does not reject “the arts,” but rather it makes explicit the symbolic orders and ideologies that imbue such discourses with meaning, repositioning such discourses – along with the practices and products typically indexed within them – in a horizontal matrix of cultural practices. While “the arts,” as discourses, may have much to lose in such a recasting, I believe arts educators and researchers have much to gain from a cultural production approach that situates creative symbolic work at the heart of all learning.
Works Cited


