

FINDING THE SELF IN THE CITY OF MULTITUDES – A SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE CREATIVE NON-FICTION SLIDE/TEXT AND WORKSHOP, 22 NOVEMBER 2018

Ranjana Thapalyal

The Glasgow School of Art, United Kingdom

[Return to Chapter Contents](#)

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a concise glimpse of the research that lies behind the creative non-fiction presentation “Finding the Self in the City of Multitudes,” the full detail of which is available in the author’s book *Education as Mutual Translation – A Yoruba and Vedantic Interface for Pedagogy in the Creative Arts* (Brill, 2018). In the research, Hindu Vedantist (Ancient Indian) and Yoruba (West African) philosophical concepts of self and mutuality with others are shown to have resonance with each other, with Paulo Freire’s critical consciousness, and with Ronald Barnett’s student being. These sources are placed in theoretical dialogue with each other in the context of art school environments, which expect high levels of individuality. It is proposed that a more resilient original voice emerges from awareness of society and community, and that genuine pedagogic exchange changes student, tutor, and the work of both.

Keywords:

art pedagogy
Ronald Barnett
Paulo Friere
Walter Benjamin
postcolonial pedagogy
African philosophy
critical autobiographical
reflection
critical consciousness
mutual translation

self in education
Vedanta education
viveka
will-to-learn
Yoruba education

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Slides:

All photographs Ranjana Thapalyal, taken between 1983 and 2018, with the exception of the final two slides: slide 31: Paul Hyland, 2017; slide 32: online sources credited within the slide.

Spoken Text:

Three lines extracted from Rabindranath Tagore, verse 82 of "Gitanjali," written in 1910 (Papermac, 1986: 76).

With thanks for translation of the French lines to Vibha Thapalyal, and to Anjana Rajan for context of Tamil language posters.

This paper follows a presentation given at the 15th ELIA Biennale in Rotterdam. Through images accompanied by creative non-fiction spoken text, preceding a brief workshop that invited speculation on the nature of the self, the presentation was a demonstration of possibilities, rather than a description of the research and interdisciplinary theory on which it was based. That pedagogic theory for the arts is published in book form, titled *Education as Mutual Translation - A Yoruba and Vedantic Interface for Pedagogy in the Creative Arts* (Thapalyal, 2018). This paper summarises the main arguments and findings recounted in the book that were the inspiration for the presentation.

The performance element of "Finding the Self in the City of Multitudes" was a reflection on what the individual *is*, in relation to the group in the multiple interactions of the contemporary city. It suggested that only when we know ourselves can we behave fairly with others, and that the self exists at social, cultural, political, and also metaphysical levels. For creative pedagogy, the challenge is to address not only ourselves, but also our students (tomorrow's artists in the field) in more meaningful and comprehensive ways that recognise difference and the need for wholeness. A series of projected images from cities in various countries captured fleeting glimpses of other lives, unknown yet familiar backdrops, the momentary intimations of peace, isolation, or communion that are the everyday stuff of living in cities. Delivered for the most part in English, two other languages, Hindi and French, were unexpectedly woven into the spoken text; this multilingual delivery meant that it was at times comprehensible to all in the audience, at others only to some, and at moments to none. It played with our ability to know and yet not know each other, and questioned how we can take for granted the efforts of others to translate themselves to us, and not expect to translate ourselves to them.

In my research, mutual translation, a phrase used by Walter Benjamin (1999) in his deliberations on language, and the translatable emerged as a significant metaphor for the complexities of learner- teacher exchanges, especially in the context of the theoretical sources employed. Vedanta is a circa 8th century BCE school of Hindu philosophy originating in ancient India (Radhakrishnan, 1989: 430-444). Yoruba philosophy is recognisable in West Africa from 5th century BCE to 5th century CE (Fagg, 1982: ix). Paulo Freire (1996) is the well-known 20th-century education theorist and social reformer whose work has influenced such significant contemporaries as Henry Giroux and the fields of education and social work across the world. Ronald Barnett (2007) is a contemporary education theorist whose ideas on higher education and universities themselves deal with the very core of these institutions and their reason for being.

The question arises, how can a cohesive, and contemporary creative arts pedagogy emerge from these seemingly disparate sources? And why should any existent theory or philosophy be applicable to creative education, which deals with the latest and most up-to-date creative enterprises? Art schools in particular specialise in encouraging unique, personalised visions, and the cultural climate of an art school tends to value high levels of

individuality. Rule breaking is encouraged, and often a modernist privileging of newness and celebration of "artist genius" perseveres. The answer lies in an observation made over many years of teaching, that art school environments expect a high level of individuality, and yet seem ill-equipped to nurture the self that is consistently asked to expose itself to critical judgement. A quest for a kind of pedagogy that could combine freedom with support and encourage resilience, led to the realisation that contemporary creative pedagogies rarely address the ontological self. It was there that a source for the required resilience could lie, and ancient philosophies had ample theory and practice aimed at recognition of the metaphysical in our make-up. A short foray into this direction revealed that placing Vedanta, Yoruba, Freire, and Barnett in theoretical dialogue with each other produced astonishingly resonant readings applicable to art education.

The critical inquiry required in each of these theoretical spaces, aimed at instilling mutuality, seemed facilitated by personal autobiographical reflection. What I came to call "critical autobiographic reflection," CRD, or *retrospection* worked in most interesting ways. It became a tool for locating cultural, political, and ontological self, by sifting through personal and external influences in one's life, and clarifying a way forward. In the research process this phenomenon was discussed with students in a project called 4Minds, alongside their views on the experience of being an art student and being a person with specific history in art school. From this mix of self-reflection and exposure to theory new to them, deeply insightful observations emerged from the students, and exciting possibilities for art school pedagogy found expression. Ultimately the research suggested that more resilient original voices emerge from awareness of society and community than from individualism, and that genuine pedagogic exchange changes student, tutor, and the work of both.

Apart from a potential danger of too many and too different sources as base, and the need for constant reappraisal of differentiation between self and group, another area of concern had to be thought through from the outset. This regards the origins and nature of Yoruba and Vedantist ideas. Beyond the lack of familiarity with these thought systems within the research and pedagogic environment in which the research was conducted, (especially when Vedantic and Yoruba ideas were coupled together), a further complication lay in the fact that both have cosmogonic and spiritual aspects. This made their incorporation into a contemporary educational paradigm an act of deep contradiction, since it may appear to strike at the very heart of modern, postmodern, democratic, and secular impulses in education. The latter tend (quite rightly) to be wary of proselytising missions and undue influence on individual beliefs. By contrast, the theories and practices of Yoruba and Hindu philosophies operate in what appear to be simultaneous streams of mythology and religious faith, as well as critical analysis of a rigorous kind.

This research, however, began in the first place with the remarkable engagement by art students to the complexity of Yoruba and ancient Indian thought and their arts, introduced to them through an eight-week elective course. Apart from responding with interest to such different worldviews, and to notions of the self not normally encountered at art school, student comments in feedback questionnaires, tutorials, and extracurricular voluntary discussions also often strayed into critique of social, and specifically art educational power structures. Such conversations, recurring over a period of ten years (in which the course was delivered eight times), provided an indication of students' own awareness of some of the problems within art education; they also shed light on several factors in the art school experience in general. These include the place of skill-based learning and teaching, or the imparting of discipline-specific skill sets and material knowledge; self-esteem in relation to tutor student relationships, grading systems, and professional practice; the relationship of studio practice to the academic component of art school degrees; and the ways in which these are perceived by students and tutors.

The purpose of this research, however, was not to critique art school pedagogy and current practices as a whole. The objective was to acquire in-depth understanding of how a group of students had harnessed their own energies and passions to extract, construct, or reveal meaning from both the positive and the problematic pedagogies they had encountered. Having in common their attendance of the Yoruba/Vedanta course, their case studies demonstrate how ideas from these thought systems resonated powerfully with them, and could consciously be used in contemporary pedagogy. At later stages, Yoruba and Vedantic principles were applied to analysing student and staff narratives, leading to the identifiable aspects of their transferrable principles.

Vedanta and Yoruba philosophy both contain another key tool for this research and provide more widely recognisable context. This tool is criticality, and an expectation that it will be employed to determine correct action at any given time. This expectation is embedded in the concepts of mind and self found in the two thought systems, and evident in their linguistic and metaphoric vocabulary.

In Vedanta, the Sanskrit term *viveka* means discernment between Real and unreal.⁵⁹ It also applies to the ability to distinguish difference between different actions, in order to make ethical, analytical, and relational judgements.

In Yoruba thought, an expectation of criticality is exemplified by its perceptions of civic governance and education. Moses Oke sheds light on "tenure ethics" (Oke, 2007: 85), or declared expectations of behaviour that shape the conduct and tenure of those in

59 The Real in Vedantic discourse, capitalised here for clarity, refers to causal consciousness, beyond the mundane sensory world. It is called *Atman*, or Brahman; this self-emanating "Sole Reality" (Nikhilananda, 1978, p. xii) "Pure Consciousness" (p. 42), formless and omnipresent, is beyond the laws of causation that bring about the experiential world we perceive as real.

powerful functionary positions of traditional Yoruba custom. Customs and restrictions that go hand in hand with holding traditional Yoruba religious or civic positions of power over others are embedded, explicitly and implicitly, with expectations of self-criticality and reminders of the limits and temporal nature of their roles. Similarly, Fayemi and Macaulay-Adeyelu demonstrate that the nuanced Yoruba vocabulary on education is replete with applications to contemporary times (Fayemi, 2009). This is exemplified by differentiation between the accumulation of facts, and wisdom, which includes an ability to interact with others in a meaningful way. True to this multiplicity of purpose,

The word "education" in Yoruba is eko [which] has a broader meaning than imo (knowledge). Ogbon (understanding), iwe (literacy), ile-iwe (schooling) and oye (wisdom). ...eko means the actual display and consistent demonstration of the epistemic features of knowledge, understanding, wisdom and other ethical values (Fayemi, 2005: 45).

Thus the Yoruba concept of socially related individual, personal self is entwined with the imperative of maintaining power balances by making those with power open to critique by those without; the function of education is to prepare individuals for this engaged and dynamic citizenship. In Vedanta, the *jiva-atman* engaged in *karma*, or work done for its own sake without attachment, is faced with the same challenges throughout society, whether those faced by the monarch or the humble citizen. Work done with detachment, *karma-yoga*, leads ultimately to the individual *jiva-atma* realising that it is, in fact, part of the Real that is unaffected by everyday events and emotions, and that all fellow beings contain this same kernel. Therefore, rather than such self-awareness moving the individual away from others, it can heighten their sense of connection and shared humanity.

Hence all... are entitled to our respect. The divinity of the [jiva-atman] is the unshakable spiritual basis of democracy, self-determination, freedom, and other aspirations of modern minds. Even a noble ideal, when guided only by expediency, can be an instrument of oppression and exploitation (Nikhilananda, 1978: xviii).

In less religious parlance this idea translates to a right to dignity and freedom for all in a pedagogic environment, and a need for distance from immediate emotional responses to a given situation. This aspiration is enshrined in equalities legislation and embedded in expectations of all schools and universities in Britain. Vedanta and Yoruba philosophy, then, turn out not to be so foreign to us after all.

Within a pedagogy that draws from Yoruba and Vedantic influences, therefore, the individual can be supported in rigorously questioning, while at the same time being nurtured by the very systems they critically engage with. Is this not what an educational environment should aspire to do, in any case? Thus the metaphor of mutual translation extends also to the capability of contemporary users of ancient ideas to filter and/or

challenge those ideas that may belong to outdated convention, or to contextualise and analyse those that may have been misunderstood or oversimplified through time.

Comparing Yoruba and Vedantic ideas with progressive education theories of Freire and Barnett opened many possibilities and formed a bridge to Yoruba and Vedantic thought. In this highly condensed summary of the research, it is possible only to highlight the terminology from these sources that allowed for a comparative analysis and correlation with data that came from dialogic conversations with students who formed a student research team. Barnett develops the idea of "student being" from a Heideggerian perspective (Barnett, 2007), paralleling the way in which this research utilises Vedantic ontological theory. Freire's "conscientisation" (Freire, 1996: 17), developed throughout his work as critical consciousness,⁶⁰ like Yoruba thought, cites agency in determining our relationship with others and with history, and points to the role of education in bringing this about. Reading the sources with such intercultural and interdisciplinary perspectives serves to underline the relevance of Yoruba and Vedantic thought to contemporary education, and vice versa. For creative education, relying so much on self-motivation and self-presentation, these juxtapositions and comparisons offer a viable way to discern in the creative student a different and emergent sense of who one is, beyond the all too easily damaged ego, and to introduce nuance to expectations of originality and individuality. For any of the above to be successful, however, students and teachers have to be open to challenges to their own perceptions of disciplinary boundaries, of worth attached to various intellectual traditions, and to questions of freedom and individuality in the acquisition of knowledge and its relationship to society. The methodology of pedagogy of mutual translation has such active reflexivity built into it.

Such pedagogy would also instil an ability to read complex motifs in a multidisciplinary manner; both traditions employ a multifaceted layering of linguistic and visual metaphor that are often belied by the apparent formality of their artefacts; a cross-referencing of visual, textual, and historical and philosophical data is required in order to read them. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, such a pedagogy would instil a desire to come to terms with the other and with plurality; within the language of Yoruba and Vedantic thought is evidence of discourse, disagreement, and recognition of the significance of individual agency. Such cultural signs are encountered at different sites, ranging from myth to detailed intellectual analysis and discourse, depending on the contexts of specific purpose.

The brief workshop that followed the slide/text performance was a sharing of one that students had responded to in very interesting ways, and which, in turn, elicited thoughtful responses from the ELIA audience. It is a simple two- to three-minute experiment aimed at introducing the idea of the self as constituted of many parts, some more evident than

⁶⁰ Critical consciousness as applied in this research refers to the entirety of Freire's aspiration for education, and not specifically to *Education for Critical Consciousness*, first published in 1973.

others. This was conducted early in the Yoruba/Vedanta course, since a basic grasp of the concept is necessary in order to understand Yoruba and Indian art and thought. The students are asked to sit up straight, close their eyes and relax. They are asked to become very aware of the textures of the chair they are seated on, the clothes they are wearing, and the weight of their bodies on the chairs. They are asked, in other words, to become viscerally aware of their physical presence. They are then asked to visualise themselves seated in this position as though seen from the ceiling. A rich silence fills the room as these visually astute individuals are able to take quite naturally to this mental exercise. After a minute or so they are asked to return to the earlier awareness of their physical bodies seated in particular ways in particular chairs. Next they are invited to slowly open their eyes and resume a normal stance. They are then asked if they all managed to “see” themselves seated on their seats, as if from an aerial view. In the various groups with which this has been tried, the general consensus has been affirmative. The students are then asked, “Who was watching you in a seated position, if you were seated in the chair?” Responses are given such as “the imagination,” “the mind,” etc. These are all accepted as valid, and the Yoruba and Vedantic idea of the mind being one part of a composition of physical, psychological, and metaphysical aspects of the self is introduced. Students are told that much of the philosophical quests of these cultures are aimed at understanding and defining the mind, the self, and a metaphysical self; that this quest has spawned many analytical traditions in the case of ancient India, and great discourse embedded in myths and artworks of both. The concept of a multifaceted self and its expression in art and literature is therefore introduced early on, and present in the backdrop of all the lectures.

Many of the students would refer back to this brief exercise and comment on how it introduced another way of thinking in a very embodied way. Similarly, at the ELIA presentation it was heartening to find that a great deal of shift had occurred in these few moments, including some participants becoming aware that, in order to understand certain types of work, they would have to recalibrate their entire conceptual framework; and this was not a threatening, but a thought-provoking revelation. This observation seemed to underline the ideas of mutuality that the performance had aimed to evoke, and seemed to invite further exploration of the ideas and findings of the book in wider contexts.

Within the confines of this short paper, this introductory synopsis is all that is possible. If colleagues would like to look into the book and/or discuss further, I would be happy to hear from you. The final word here goes to a student, who asserted simply and profoundly:

As an art student, I am a person (Thapalyal, 2018: 207).

It is this whole person that pedagogy of mutual translation addresses.

REFERENCES

- Barnett. (2007). *A will to learn - Being a student in an age of uncertainty*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Benjamin, W. H. (1999). *Illuminations*. London: Pimlico.
- Fagg, W. A. (1982). *Yoruba sculpture of West Africa*. .
- Fayemi, A. M.-A. (2009). A philosophical examination of the traditional Yoruba notion of education and its relevance to the contemporary African quest for development. *Thought and practice: A journal of the philosophical association of Kenya (PAK), New Series, 1(2)*, 41-59. Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/d5ea/8ac5c3c60f8df646feb771dd97728f3baefa.pdf>
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. Bergman Ramos, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- Nikhilananda, S. (1978). *Self knowledge: An English translation of Sankaracarya's Atmabodha*. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math.
- Oke, M. (2007). Precepts for tenure ethics in Yoruba Egungun (Masquerade) proverbs. *Journal of Pan African Studies, 1(9)*.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1989). *Indian Philosophy* (Vol. 2). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Thapalyal, R. (2018). *Education as mutual translation - A Yoruba and Vedantic interface for pedagogy in the creative arts*. Leiden: Brill/Sense.