

## BOOK REVIEWS: EXCHANGE

### **Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World** by Eli Meyerhoff

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Review conducted as an iterative exchange  
between Helen E. Lees and Eli Meyerhoff

**Helen:** Dear Eli, we have not met before but I would like to review your fascinating book *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World*. I have been extremely taken with it as a work of scholarship—so much so that I contacted you directly by email—via your website <http://www.elimeyerhoff.com/>—to say how much it was affecting me. In the spirit of *Other Education* as a journal promoting face to face democratic modes (more of the word modes later perhaps, as it features so predominantly in your book: “modes of study”...) I have asked you if the review can be conducted as a “live” conversation via email exchanges. This, with a separate written response from yourself to each of my areas of enquiry and analysis; rather than a formal, usual book review format. You have agreed!

In my opinion that a book affects the reader is a serious, important requirement for a book to be called great. I consider your book is great. Books about education are all too often a tweak on an already known set of ideas and these books I find terribly boring more often than not. I don't read them. I can't! Life is too short. In a book about education I can or do read, I would always hope to be thrown in the air. Yet education is so entrenched with boring ideas of hegemonic assumptions that it is “good” or “beneficial” or like “school” (see e.g., Prakash & Esteva, 1998/2008) which is a book I came to know via *Beyond Education*, or that it only requires improvement to work well (see Flint & Peim, 2012; Peim, 2012 for critiques of this). Yawn. My own views of education are that it requires radical thought and complete deconstruction: a forgetting, a destroying of what we currently work with as a lost cause and that the current mainstream story is something with roots so negative and wrong we cannot involve such roots in anything now, if we want this now to be healthy, currently and moving

forwards. A de-toxification is required. My disappointment in the face of most education literature is manifold: the same old, bad story, with versions. Not with your work.

You take nothing of the usual tropes for granted. You critique these unhealthy roots. You provide superb detail as to how and why—a Foucauldian style genealogy—these assumptions I seek to see blown up matter to be exposed. A terrorist of education are you? Thank goodness: I think you are. About time we had some quality, dedicated bombs under the nightmare that is the idea schooling is education or that education is schooling (as we most commonly currently experience it). What I felt as I read your text is that it is possible to put a bomb under education as we tragically experience it and to light the fuse. I have often wondered if it was possible for the spark to travel the fuse to its destination, rather than what I too often understand as a wet fuse, about to do nothing. Hence why I got in touch. I was so thrilled. Nevertheless, it is often the case that people who love ideas get carried away with this joy and newly ignited belief when they encounter great work (me?) and then that great work is read by too few or not read with attention and misunderstood, such that this bomb-affect a reviewer like me might identify for a reviewer's reading audience has no power to change anything. Perhaps this is the cynic in me speaking... The one who sees too little change in education and too much resistance to change, or that the work of change is too stubborn, too strange.

So my first questions to you are (and do feel free to comment on what I write above): Do you think genealogies of education can affect real life practices practiced by people without an interest in reading an academic level genealogy of the disaster (in which they are personally invested in some way for livelihood or personal “development”) that is the history of education? How? Why?

**Eli:** I'm happy to hear that my book's incendiary character has resonated with you! When I was writing the book, I reflected on how it would affect my potential audiences. I'm a hardcore materialist, partly influenced by my former career when I worked briefly as a chemical engineer in the wastewater industry, at the City of Los Angeles's biggest sewage treatment plant. So, I'm very concerned about the material circulation of my writing. If you read my book's endnotes, you might notice that Bruno Latour's “actor-network-theory” influenced my approach. The second hyphen, between “network” and “theory,” gestures to how theories materially circulate within networks of actors just like all other entities, rather than existing in a plane of ideas separate from the material world. In addition to this “new materialist” insight, my composition of the book was also guided by a more politically driven approach: the Marxist idea of a “critical theory” (such as from Max Horkheimer), that a theorist should reflect on their theory's contexts of origin and application in political struggles, and to try to write in ways that could resonate with audiences, helping them understand the terrain of struggles but also pushing them to take certain sides in those struggles. In the book's conclusion, I briefly situate the book as a contribution to abolitionist movements on the terrain of universities, as part of “abolitionist university studies,” a project that I've elaborated in much more depth collaboratively (see the essay, *Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation*,

which I co-wrote with Abigail Boggs, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein). One of our projects' tenets is that critique alone isn't enough for making revolutionary changes, and that it should be decentered by situating it as one mode of organizing within a wider ecology of organizing practices.

This approach can help answer your brilliant question about what I'm trying to do with the critical genealogies of education in my book. (I'll summarize these genealogies for folks who haven't read my book yet: the middle three chapters offer histories of the emergence of different elements of what I call, the education-based mode of study, including a vertical trajectory of individualized development up educational levels, an ideology of education to prepare people for participation in governance, a pedagogy based on an emotional economy of credits and debts that becomes institutionalized with graded exams, and dichotomous figures of educational waste and value, such as the dropout and the graduate. I show how these elements emerged historically out of political struggles along with the world-making project of racial-colonial capitalism, in opposition to alternative modes of study that were bound up with alternative world-making projects). The short answer to your question is: no, I don't think that academic level genealogies of education will resonate well with most people. I imagine that most people who will read this book are people who have already "snapped" at the education system and/or people who are participants in radical leftist social movements, such as abolitionism, anarchism, and decolonization.

Yet, there are two ways that I hope my book can resonate with a wider audience. First, I wrote the two introductory chapters with an aim to draw people into the critical genealogies in the subsequent three chapters. I begin with the story of Corey Menafee, a Black service worker at Yale University who snapped by smashing a stained-glass window that depicted images of "happy" slaves. I talk about how his motivation for breaking the window emerged from his lifetime of radical studying, and I discuss how the administration at Yale attempted to silence him, to devalue his studying as illegitimate, and to co-opt his story by presenting Yale as having reconciled with the shame of their violent history. This opening introduces readers to a distinction between different modes of studying, to expand their horizons to possibilities for alternatives against and beyond the mode of studying seen as legitimate in higher education institutions. The next chapter shows how normal discourses about education centrally include romance narratives, with a romantic hero who climbs up the educational ladder (from K to 12 grade levels to higher education), overcoming challenges along the way. Then, I try to destabilize that romance narrative by presenting stories from people who have had bad experiences in higher education, such as those who have left before graduation and been stigmatized as dropouts, and by presenting stories from people who have seen universities as terrains for organizing toward radical changes.

My aim with presenting these narratives in the first two chapters was so that readers could identify with some aspects of the subjects' experiences, and in doing so, to unsettle the readers' belief in the legitimacy of the different elements of the education-based mode of study (the romantic, vertical trajectory up education's levels, graded exams, the dichotomous figures of graduate/dropout, etc). Through destabilizing the readers' attachments, I hope to

incite their interest in taking on deeper critical perspectives through genealogies of these elements that reveal their historical contingency and mutability, and conversely, that open the reader's horizons to the possibility of legitimate alternative modes of study. The second main way that I hope my book can resonate with a broader audience is by articulating these ideas more intentionally in popular fora, whether in interviews like this one or in collaboration with others such as in the abolitionist university studies projects.

**Helen:** This response is enlightening. I wonder, then, in this context of activism by writing, how you see the book itself as a project and as a structure? To start with I found the genealogy aspects of the dropout, verticality and so on very stimulating. When it got to the co-written chapter/s (?) I was less taken by this although and despite that I have a personal interest in how alternative education projects might function and then go awry. The writing on the "messy college" activity was for me interesting indeed but it wasn't as compelling as the preceding parts for me simply because these read like a Foucauldian story, fascinating in historical or sociological detail. These chapters blew me away and then I felt somehow gently let down back to earth with the nitty gritty exposition of meetings, organising, decisions, politics, policies and so on of the university beyond the university work description. Yet, despite this disjuncture I found the book as a whole truly represented the reality, authenticity of the university-beyond project and its calling. We aren't in the non-education (as you put it - whereas I would not use the word education in that way) game to be glamorously thrilled by a roller coaster ride of the story of how it creates horrible ideas that impact people in such negative ways. Surely we are part of challenging "education" in order to find a more authentic tale. It might be, I wonder..., that Foucault failed in some way just because he told such astonishing stories and never offered less astonishing moments: a super star acting like a super star remains a fantasy and so does their work? Yet this isn't what it means to live, surely? It's not ordinary and frankly most of us are and so are our lives in their beautiful "ordinary" (not famous, non super-high-flyer) ways....And your book for me reflects this truer understanding of life: that it is messy, chaotic, unpredictable, about the struggle of human-other relations and in all of this we seek to understand and find meaning. So, I did appreciate the book as a whole and its structure as being slightly choppy from one voice and then to another. A part of me would have been more entertained if the blockbusterness had been the whole book (without the co-written aspects) because I think you are a superb writer just as one voice. But I wonder if this would have served you? What do you think about my comment that your book is messy structurally and has mixed voices which make it less impactful in a glamorous way, than otherwise? Also, do you think that to have impact we might seek, we need to smash and grab people's minds with a great story that avoids the down-to-earth messiness of life? In other words, do we have a responsibility as writers of books which seek to create difference to tell a bloody amazing story that soars to the sky and has no muddy walking boots? I hope my meaning is clear...?

**Eli:** At the Walker Art Center building in Minneapolis, one of its brick exterior walls features an artwork with the statement: “BITS & PIECES PUT TOGETHER TO PRESENT A SEMBLANCE OF A WHOLE.” I wrote my book as a kind of bricolage, pulling together different elements and trying to unify them with a common throughline of interwoven arguments. In composing this throughline, I was thinking a lot about genres of writing about education. I wanted to avoid the usual, boring genres. As I discuss in the book’s second chapter, most books about education politics tend to give a narrative of crisis. They make a moral distinction between the past and the future, saying “the education system used to be better; now things are worse; where did we go wrong and how can we make it better?” They usually fall back on the tired genres of jeremiad and melodrama to narrate simplified answers to these questions. Progressive jeremiads call for the restoration of a lost ideal (such as a “golden age” of the public university), and they are often combined with melodramatic narratives that portray villains (such as neoliberal politicians and corporatizing administrators) preying on victims (such as students and professors) who can be saved by heroes and/or themselves become heroes (such as by reviving the lost ideal). Education book authors often align themselves with the heroes in such narratives. I think that this move tends to fall into wishful thinking, which can help sell books, appealing to readers’ desires for hope and optimism. But it isn’t helpful for navigating the complex terrain of education struggles.

Instead of narratives of crisis, jeremiad, and melodrama, I opted for a writing approach that centers the impasse (inspired by Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*). An impasse is a situation that seems so complicatedly problematic that we can’t move beyond it. I see the many intersecting controversies around higher education as creating such an impasse—controversies brought up by many different, intersecting kinds of struggles: around corporatization, skyrocketing student debt, adjunctification, ableism, sexism, colonialism, racial capitalism, and now the COVID-19 pandemic, among others. Crisis narratives offer simplifying short-cuts around, and short-circuiting of, the challenges involved in grappling with these many complexly intersecting controversies. I found that these crisis narratives in the genres of jeremiad and melodrama often perform this short-circuiting by populating their narratives’ characters—the melodramatic victims and heroes—with figures whose individual life trajectories presume the education romance. In this romance narrative, the student or professor is seen as overcoming obstacles on their way up the levels of the education system, gaining expertise along the way that can be used to resolve the crisis.

Given this central role of the education romance in such simplifying, crisis narratives, I designed my book as a counter-response that seeks to frustrate such simplifying moves. By treating the conceptual foundations of the education romance narrative (theorized as what I call “the education-based mode of study”) as objects of critical genealogies, I aim to unsettle the reader’s subscriptions to them. By turning the reader away from simplifying short-cuts, I hope to throw them into the uncomfortable but generative situation of having to grapple with the complexity of the impasse of intersecting controversies around higher education, including their own complex relations with the many-sided struggles in that impasse. Then, in the chapter after these critical genealogies, I gave an example of a messy process of trying to

grapple with such controversies, drawing on my co-authored writings with Erin Dyke about our organizing with the Experimental College of the Twin Cities, an alternative free university that was situated within, against, and beyond the normal universities and the education-based mode of study. This chapter was geared less toward providing answers or solutions and more toward articulating new questions that could help organizers of such alternative study projects—or people interested in creating such projects—to grapple with the practical-theoretical tensions they face in more nuanced ways.

**Helen:** Thank you Eli for this eloquent response and once again I see we inhabit some similar terrain of thought and the processes of thinking. Finally, recently, after years of deliberating, I too have come to a point where I am sick of drama. Drama in e.g., a film, play or a novel is great and very entertaining, but in education I find it false, misleading and useless. Alternative education is messy, as my refusal to define it in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Alternative Education* (Lees and Noddings, 2016) explores. There is no obvious definition and nor need there be. There is no one “gateway.” I discovered this with my PhD research on home education discovery (titled “The Gateless Gate of Home Education Discovery”) and it holds I find for any ways forward from this “impasse,”—that there is no one right path. There is a messy path. Many gateways, singularly, simultaneously, or even none but nevertheless some kind of entrance. A paradox perhaps. That there is a solution to a way forward into the light of the “best” most “right” education is just a nonsense drama made up by egotistical players who do not seek solutions but merely the limelight, whatever the plot twists. There are solutions however to no clear solutions? I see them as involving openness to diversity of every aspect of the story.

I find your book, and its refusal to be the hero that saves, such a solution without solution. However, for those able to bear some dissonance and interested to ponder various solutions I consider the reader will need to read your book attentively. The changes in tone and voice matter then as a type of deliberate but difficult messiness and the reader will need to appreciate it for its lack of grande finale: the tidy ending that saves.

So, my final question to you is: if we can't or should rather not channel our emotions of education into a saving story in which to believe (vainly), what do we do with all our emotions (about education)? If the or a way forward is to maturely, carefully, sensibly, non-dramatically step into the winner's triangle which means to declare our vulnerabilities, seek productive ways forward with care of self and others, how do we *be* now emotionally engaged with education? We are so used to the dramatic narrative of the saviour that is education (which you identify in your book and debunk). There are so many emotions. Should we take up an art class as therapy amidst the mourning?

**Eli:** For thinking about our emotional relations with education, I've found crucial insights in Sara Ahmed's writing, especially her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed, 2004). The normal way we talk about emotions (e.g., “I feel sad,” “I am happy”) makes us think of them as states of being located within the bounds of a pre-existing self. Instead, Ahmed calls

for a paradigm shift to understand how circulating objects of emotions shape our ideas of the boundaries and surfaces of individual and collective bodies (“I,” “we,” “them,” etcetera). This insight guided my analysis of how, in the education-based mode of study, the self’s boundaries are imaginatively constructed through a circulating emotional economy of credit and debt. I analyse this in the educational writings of John Locke who frames the relations between teachers and students with “an economy with a currency of affects in the form of credits imagined and felt as love, friendship, trust, respect, and esteem, in contrast with debts imagined and felt as sorrow, guilt, disgrace, and shame, as well as anxiety about these relations” (*Beyond Education*, 159). I contend that this emotional economy forms a “mode of accounting” (Miranda Joseph, 2014) that constructs the self as self-regulating of its accounts, and this becomes institutionalized in practices of graded exams widely in the 19th century. This emotional economy provides the basis for a whole industry of educators who use their expertise about pedagogical methods to guide the self’s educational ascent (up the K-12 levels to higher education) as a transition to autonomous adulthood.

When we take a step back to reflect on how our imagined sense of self (our “I”) has been constructed through education’s emotional economy, we can unsettle our attachments to that imaginary of the self and open our horizons to alternative modes of studying, self-formation, and world-making. We can distinguish between our different affective relations to institutions of education, and choose which we want to keep or abandon in relation. These different affective relations to schools and universities include: desires for resources for studying, sense of community, escape from oppressive family situations, friendships with students and teachers, escape from poverty, climbing the class ladder, recognition of intelligence, sense of honor from high grades and prestigious credentials and wanting to avoid shame from low grades, dropping out, and lack of credentials, etc. For those of us who want to break away from, and create alternatives to, the capitalist world and its attendant modes of subject-formation, which of these affective relations to educational institutions should we retain and which should we abandon? A related question is whether we should engage within educational institutions and/or focus on creating institutions that support alternative modes of studying.

With alternatives, we have the possibility of breaking from education’s affective economy of credits and debts in the form of honor, shame, anxiety, and fear. Conversely, we can redirect our emotional investments toward study practices that are embedded with networks and movements that circulate and support more life-affirming emotions—such as care, solidarity, mutual aid, friendship, and love—with alternative processes of subject formation, against hyper-individualization and for collective subjects that support a dynamic interrelation of individual and collective autonomies. I’ve glimpsed such alternatives in my own experiences with the Experimental College of the Twin Cities, creating alternative, more open space-times for affective relations and radical studying, which I describe in detail in the fifth chapter of my book. More recently, I’ve been engaged in a mutual aid project in Durham, North Carolina that messily intertwines radical studying with practices of organizing and building affective relationships of solidarity, care, and friendship across the segregations and inequalities of our neighborhoods and wider city. By engaging in these boundary-destabilizing

projects, I've glimpsed and strengthened my desires for the possibilities of studying, relating, and world-making beyond education and capitalism.

**Helen:** Eli, your final comments capture for me some essence of why I have responded with such enthusiasm to your book. Yes, it's about emotions but those which set us free. That is what, for me, your book is about: actual, lived freedom. The heart and the soul of alternative education. You catch its fire and put it to good use with your words. Thank you for this excellent piece of scholarship and education.

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### Author Details

Helen E. Lees is an independent scholar based near Florence, Italy. She is editor-in-chief of *Other Education* and co-editor (with Michael Reiss) of *Palgrave Studies in Alternative Education*. [editor@othereducation.org](mailto:editor@othereducation.org)

Eli Meyerhoff works at Duke University in Durham, NC, USA as coordinator of the Health Humanities Lab and is a visiting scholar in the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute. He is on the collectives of *Abolition: A Journal of Insurgent Politics* and the Cops Off Campus Research Project (see <https://abolitionjournal.org/> and <https://abolition.university/> ).  
[eli.meyerhoff@gmail.com](mailto:eli.meyerhoff@gmail.com)



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