

ZAPATISTA MAYA LITERACIES AND DECOLONIAL CIVIC PEDAGOGIES

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DECOLONIAL CIVIC PEDAGOGIES

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Gracias jnojpteswanej jVíctor and jwix xJen. Thanks to my dissertation committee, my family and friends and mi amorzón. Even though the inscriptions on this paper appear to be those of one person, they stand for a demand put forward by many voices. My job consisted only of enduring the fire set ablaze in the burning zeal of that collective heart.

PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

Zapatista Maya Literacies and Decolonial Civic Pedagogies evaluates an educational outreach project led by an Indigenous grass roots mobilization in the high plateau of central México, the Zapatista movement. Using retrospective narrative inquiry and theoretically informed perspectives, this dissertation shows that the program of the Zapatista *escuelita*, Spanish for “little school,” is rooted in the Maya educational paradigm of *nojptesel-p’ijubtsel*, a cultural and political process of socialization at the heart of contemporary Maya peasant families. The research focus of this study offers rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies two interrelated points of insight tied to the overall Maya conception of the conch shell, “*puy*”: first, a theoretical study ascribing to the Zapatista the conceptions of “*k’op*,” “language-struggle,” and “*ts’ib*,” “writing-plowing,” which represent alternative notions of literate activity understanding reading and writing as distributed and embodied modes of “bringing into being” dignified coexistence. Second, a concrete instructional model that stresses a political way of being in the world by situating students within the symbolic distribution of a council, a temporal and spatial dimension of encounter, dialogue, and accord where they are called to adopt a public (inter)subjectivity through mutual respect and recognition. This research responds directly to the call of contemporary Maya scholar-activists to decolonize cross-cultural power relations and to (re)create socially and culturally sustainable models of education and civic engagement. To that effect, the dissertation enacts a research methodology responsive to Maya culture both in continuity with their ancient inscription traditions and as a present possibility for recomposing colonizing power structures.

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This dissertation will let light fall upon Maya rhetorics,
artistic methods of cutting through the dark veil of coloniality,
rooted on the inmost heart and memory of my community,
here in this urban de-Indianized Mestizo barrio at the northern border region of
México.

Here I will cast a look at things put in shadow by coloniality and
brought back to light by true women and men who did not abandon the night,
imperviously gathered around the fires that awaken the common word of the
peoples.

As a student-instructor of rhetoric, composition, and literacy (RCL) drawn to non-hegemonic models of composition in which writing is “an act of world making” (Antczak and Eberly 145), two of the most exciting feats of literate action I ever witnessed happened at the margins of the formal boundaries of academia. The first one took place in March of 2017; after more than 170 years of legal struggle, the Māori tribal federations of New Zealand (Iwi) gained governance over the Whanganui River, a natural resource which constitutes the community’s “source of spiritual and physical sustenance” (Iorns Magallanes). Besides being an instance of political sovereignty, the restoration of the ancient right to an Indigenous-controlled model of governance became a legal precedent in which the Aotearoa New Zealand Parliament recognized the legal personhood of the Whanganui River. As an act where the topoi of personification

became the central means to foster communication and cooperation from an Indigenous intellectual standpoint, the legal victory of the Māori tribal federations was clearly an occurrence of what Scott Richard Lyons calls “rhetorical sovereignty.” Indeed, composition (re)structured the legal and social structure of interaction by emphasizing the dignity of other-than-human agents in the world; language style doing poetical work in the world through “one’s actions with one’s fellows” (Dunne 315; 244), or, as an old Maori saying has it, “beneath the herbs and plants are the writing of the ancestors” (Iors Magallanes).

That same year, in June 2017, on a different geography, the CNI (National Indigenous Congress) of México announced the creation of the CIG, a Council of Indigenous Government whose spokeswoman went on to become the first female Indigenous presidential candidate in the history of the country. The CNI was the result of a long struggle an Indigenous political and cultural grouping in the high plateau of central México advocating for a grass-roots globalism premised on radical democracy. The appointment of María de Jesús Patricio Martínez, “Marichuy,” took place within the confines of an assembly, and it was envisioned as a political means to face a war waged against communality, the commodification of life that results in the murdering of women, children, and Native peoples (Ejército Zapatista). The ultimate purpose of the CNI was to call urban subaltern communities and other social actors to build a coalition envisioning alternatives to the existing capitalist orientation, “Nuestra pelea es por la vida, no vamos por votos. Vamos por la organización y la construcción del poder desde abajo” (Editorial Board). This expression of conjoint communication materialized in the appointment of Marichuy was yet another assertion of rhetorical sovereignty, pointing to

a striking correspondence with the Iwi's efforts, a struggle for the emancipation of Nature, land, and life, "la tierra es la madre, es la depositaria de la cultura, . . . ahí vive la historia y . . . ahí viven los muertos" (Marcos, "¿Cuáles son" 89). An important cultural politics remaking culture is emerging, and at forefront of this shift, there come an Indigenous mobilization with a sophisticated notion of critical modes of agency and rhetorical tactics.

At the time the Iwi and the CIG enacted the purification of capitalist war, I was taking a course on global rhetorics as part of my coursework towards my PhD. I was particularly fascinated with Jürgen Habermas theorization of what some call deliberative democracy, considered a groundbreaking political model (Mouffe 192) based on a political organization where power emanates from "private people coming together as a public to subject the prevailing norms to critical examination and discussion" (Scrivener 2). While the foundations for a *theory* on deliberative democracy has been tied in academia to the theories like Kant's political cosmopolitanism (cfr. Scrivener), the "post-political" turn in political theory (Webb), Indigenous movements all over the world were in the process of enacting critical modes of civic agency, and, in the case of the struggle of the CIG, in continuity with centuries long practices of consensus of which the West had taken notice at least since the xvi century, "muchas de las naciones y gentes de indios no sufren reyes ni señores absolutos, sino viven en behetrías, en comunidades donde se gobiernan por concejos de muchos" (Lenkersdorf in Contreras 11).

Both the Iwi's and the CNI's assertions of rhetorical sovereignty constitute a disruption of the disciplinary landscape of RCL. They make visible the existence of a non-normative subject from a non-normative arena coexisting at the margins of

rhetorical Western, “male-dominated and elite ways” (Royster “Disciplinary Landscaping” 149-150). For my coming of age as an RCL scholar, they marked the culmination of my disciplinary shuddering, what Jesús Martín-Barbero calls an *escalofrío epistemológico*, or a moment of epiphany where academy-based intellectuals realize the ways in which their “liberatory/transformative” methodologies in actuality enable oppressive power relationships. As Martín-Barbero claims, this realization entails taking on the commitment to dismantling hegemonic research methodologies by enacting *ver con los otros*, a respectful disposition towards the contemplation of the intellectual specialties of the oppressed. On a personal level, it meant realizing my complicity in reproducing a structure of erasure and dominance where rhetorical agency was interpreted exclusively as a domain of the European cultural archive. Therefore, my *escalofrío epistemológico* shaped the present study as an attempt at responding to the extended call in Latino decolonial thought for cognitive justice, an articulation of global epistemological diversity into a coalitional consciousness resisting the colonality of power.

Scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition have responded to the call of cognitive justice in academia by turning to Pre-Columbian Americas and by emphasizing its continuity with present Mestiz@ (Mestize) history. Nevertheless, limiting research to these sites of inquiry risks misrepresenting Indigenous peoples as absent from or irrelevant to the contemporary society at large. Responding to such issue, my work bears witness to the survivance of Indigenous cultures of México sharing the world and time with us. It focuses on an often under-theorized area of rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies: contemporary Latin American Indigenous literacies. More

specifically, my hope is to contribute to the effort of contemporary Maya scholar-activists to decolonize cross-cultural power relations and to (re)create socially and culturally sustainable models of education and civic engagement (Gómez Lara; Bolom Pale; Sánchez Álvarez; López Intzín). To that effect, I will look at the *escuelita zapatista*, or “Zapatista Little school,” a cross-cultural immersion program on emancipation and sovereignty facilitated by the Zapatista *pask’op*, or Zapatista movement.

Although the most widely known component of the Zapatista *pask’op* is their armed self-defense group, the true heart of the movement is a social base of federated Indigenous communities made up largely by Maya Tseltal-, Tsotsil-, Ch’ol, and Tojol-ab’al-speaking *Originario* Nations peoples from the South of México. As a result of their long struggle for self-determination, the Zapatista *pask’op* called into being a series of encounters that culminated in the creation of the CNI. The goal of this study is to trace the practices of consensus that inform the rhetorical agencies used by the CNI at the core of the Zapatista movement. These sets of practices offer RCL studies a critical-rhetorical paradigm where Western and non-Western cultures can intersect, broadening our conception of reading and writing to include multimodal modes of inscription that cultivate the sustenance and continuance of community life. In this way, my study reinscribes into RCL studies practices specific to the Maya people both in continuity with their ancient inscription traditions, and as a sovereign and very present possibility for cross-cultural, coalitional recomposing of unjust power structures.

The Zapatista *pask’op* created the *escuelita* in order to educate non-Indigenous populations on the civic mission of their struggle. As a critical-rhetorical civic pedagogy, the *escuelita* stressed the need to subvert the past collective experience of Indigenous

peoples with State educational programs, an experience marked by a racialized extractivist-assimilationist model. Taking this goal into account, I seek to advance a reconsideration of the terms with which our field has approached the Zapatista guided by what Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch identify as a “feminist rhetorical” framework. Royster and Kirsch distilled this methodology from their work of rescuing/recovering/(re)inscribing subaltern subjects in the dominant rhetorical tradition. Their approach creates a “dialectical and reciprocal intellectual” space for nonnormative “traditions,” (14), expanding and re-forming the ways in which we value and recognize rhetorical activity in the discipline. Therefore, rather than trying to enforce traditional standards of rhetorical expertise on the practices of the Zapatistas, I will identify what Royster and Kirsch call “*qualities of excellence*” (19) by “listening deeply, reflexively, and multisensibly” through “humility, respect and care” (21). This will entail a flexibility welcoming unexpected “practices, values, properties, and processes” (15) with an open mind and “heart,” placing them in relation to traditional and “nonnormative” (16) notions of rhetoric, composition, and literacy. To that end, the point of entry for this study will be:

How do the rhetorical practices of the Zapatista speak to us, to our field, and to our lived experience?

How do we render their work and lives meaningfully, honoring their ways of being in the world?

How do we respond to it, and what new possibilities emerge in that space of mutual and respectful contemplation?

In addition to this ethical framework, the research design will be laid out in terms of a

systematic literature review and a rhetorical ethnographic content analysis. Through the chapters, I will use systematic literature reviews as a syntheses approach for generating interpretations of the qualitative data. Besides mapping out the research space of the existing disciplinary landscape in the first chapter, the main objective for this approach will be to enable a dialectical and dialogical relation between RCL studies and the Zapatista paradigms. This means that the use of literature reviews for synthesizing qualitative primary-level studies will go beyond the preliminary function usually associated with this processes by constituting a method of meta-analysis offering “new interpretations in the process” (Noblit and Hare 9). By bringing together texts from RCL studies and Originario Nations scholars, and the Zapatista pask’op, I will derive a translation examining relationships of reciprocity, refutation, and/or argumentation (Heyvaert et al.) which will provide inspiration for creating concrete practices and actions. In this way, the systematic reviews of literature will act as comparative matrices enabling the Indigenization of the field of RCL.

Complementarily, the *field texts* of the study—consisting broadly of the materials of the first level of the *escuelita*—will be studied following a rhetorical ethnographic content analysis methodology. I will rely on Klaus Krippendorff’s conceptualization of this methodology in which the study “places the analyzed text within the context of who produced it” (Leslie 149). By and large, this will entail what curriculum studies call a retrospective narrative study in which I enter the “life space” of the curriculum of the *escuelita* through the field texts so, in general terms, the methodology will take the form of an exploratory archival research. The main focus of this approach will be “the language, logic of arguments, logics of circulation, modes of evidence, norms of

propriety, and stylistic devices that define issues and construct rhetorically salient meanings” (Hauser 17). More specifically, I will be investigating the symbolic interactions of the Zapatista pask’op with rhetorics of coloniality, and I will attend those lived realities as inducements to attitudes organizing the cultural and political life of the movement. This approach will emphasize the intersection of the fields of RCL and educational research as concerned with a realm where identities are shaped (cfr. George; Schubert), which is also a major area of interest for contemporary Maya scholars (cfr. Bolom Pale, López Intzín). Moreover, this design will recognize the paradigm shift of New Rhetorics to vernacular modes of discourse (Hauser), a move that will enable this study to spread over a number of different modes and media, from historical and theoretical artifacts to vernacular, non-traditional rhetorical enactments.

In order to engage with the complexity of non-traditional field materials, I will use a decolonial Indigenous research methodology interrogating the traditional conceptualization of rhetorical discourse. As indicated by Bagele Chilisa, Indigenous methodologies focus on localized phenomena and combine Western and Indigenous paradigms all the while showing sensitivity to the context of the research participants. For this study, this approach will serve chiefly to construct a culturally relevant methodology drawing directly from the Zapatista Maya intellectual specialties. This culturally responsive rendering will take the guise of an inductive analysis typical of grounded theory methods (Noisy Hawk and Trimble), meaning it will involve the disruption of linearity by a recursive, mutually informing process in which the content analysis will generate a methodology which will in turn provide emerging categories for ulterior content analysis. My adoption of this spiralic, culturally relevant design responds

to an interest in decolonizing damage- and deficit-centered methodologies that perpetuate “existing structures of domination” (Chilisa 142).

Therefore, the enactment of this concentric methodology will consist at the outset of two phases. First, in Chapter One, “Decolonization and Indigenization as a Feminist-Rhetorical Informed Operational Framework,” I will explore Western paradigms of RCL in order to find a niche where a structuring of “interknowledge” can germinate. Through literature reviews, I will locate a non-hegemonic theory of rhetorical excellence within New Rhetorics and New Literacy Studies, and articulate it with Latin American decolonial theories so that Western and non-Western paradigms can unfold dialogically and dialectically. This interposed mode of theorization, or “pensamiento fronterizo,” is a space of contact between intellectual traditions that creates the necessary tension to weave anti-racist and anti-patriarchal patterns alternative to colonial ways of being in the world. Subsequently, in Chapter Two, “Towards a Puy Research Methodology,” I will propose a culturally responsive Indigenous research methodology rooted on the Zapatista Maya paradigm of the conch shell, or “*puy*.” This chapter will use the metonymic contiguity of *puy* with the act of summoning to council to describe a methodology of encounter, dialogue, and accord. I will formulate the guiding principles of *puy* methodology as follows: (1) “*laja*,” enactment of intersubjectivity through a respect for the research participants and the community’s equality of expertise; (2) “*k’op*,” ethical awareness of language’s function in mediating traditional and novel patterns of coexistence; and (3) “*pasel*,” observance of research as a process of consultation to reach agreements that set forth commitments.

After establishing the methodology for this study, Chapter Three, “Zapatista

Rooted Literacies,” will offer a theoretical exploration of the Tseltal-Tsotsil categories of literacy through the concepts of *k’op*, “language-struggle,” and *ts’ib*, “writing-plowing.” I will provide an account of literate activity as “inscribing” or “making appear” patterns of dignified co-existence, expanding the sense of written and spoken language beyond the historical experience of Western culture. Zapatista understanding of language encompasses speaking as a process that uses tension to spin together cultural frames of orientation through *k’asesel*, “translation-infection.” Rather than seeking command and assimilation over mute objects, *k’asesel* advocates for an open and responsible orientation towards the cultural dispositions of others. This process of intercultural translation enables an ideological transition-revolution towards mutual respect and recognition necessary to (re)create the fabric of communality.

Upon determining the conception of literacy for the Zapatista, Chapter four, “The Composing of *Bats’i Vinik Antsetik*,” will show the *escuelita* educational program as concerned with the composing of a virtuous public humanity—*bats’i winik antsetik*—critically situated against and envisioning alternatives to existing unmarked processes of identity formation. These unmarked processes of colonial provenance, will be identified as “alfabetizaciones de la crueldad.” Additionally, I will explore the connection of the learning intentions and success criteria of the *escuelita* through the contemporary Maya conception of *p’ijubtasel*, an educational model tied to the overall philosophical conception of *puy*. *P’ijubtasel* is a process of socialization into a collective identity premised on the social, cultural, and political significance of sovereign self-determination. It aspires to a conscious orientation cultivating public subjectivities ethically rooted on the territory.

Finally, in Chapter Five, “Zapatista Civic Pedagogies as *Pask’op*,” I will come to understand pedagogy within the frame of the Zapatista “*pask’op*” (*pasel-k’op*), or “enactment of the word-struggle,” as a locally relevant model for rhetorical instruction. Through meta-aggregative synthesis of educational projects influenced by the Zapatista movement, I translate theory into praxis to inform, guide, and inspire concrete practices for the writing classroom. As a result, I propose the implementation of a critical-rhetorical mapping workshop, “*lok’tayel te lum k’inal*,” to reveal the secret pulse of the community in the guise of iconic images and multimodal storytelling. Through a Maya conception of visibility and following the tradition of (Latin) American critical cartography, these workshops afford educators the opportunity for envisioning *with* students, local communities, and social actors, “premonitory” perspectival landscapes where respect across difference slowly begins to kindle.

CHAPTER ONE

RHETORICAL EXCELLENCE AND THE ESCUELITA ZAPATISTA



As a crucial step towards an ethical framework for indigenous literacies, this chapter will open by conceptualizing literacy as sets of practices always-already inhabiting and producing particular socially constructed spaces. In particular, I will draw attention to the ways in which this approach disrupts a model of reading and writing as an autonomous process that unwittingly sets into place oppressive power relations that disparage non-Western intellectual specialties (Street). This will entail making my inquiry accountable to “adhering to cultural expectations and to fostering ethical relationships along the way” (Tuck and McKenzie 10), which will largely mean this study will be guided by the hope to advance the decolonizing / emancipatory interests of the Zapatista movement. In a first move, I will identify and occupy a niche in the field / discipline of RCL studies that recognizes language as symbolic action and that understands knowledge, culture, and identity as socially constructed through that rhetorical process. I will also frame this process of collective and individual identity formation as being at the core of civic pedagogies.

Therefore, this dissertation is deeply indebted to scholars working in cultural rhetorics (Ríos; Cobos et al.; Sackey, Haas; Mailloux) and scholars of critical literacies (Freire and Macedo, Giroux, hooks, Morrell) who shake the semantic foundations of terms like “rhetoric” and “culture.” My hope in adopting this approach is that contributing to this body of scholarship will follow the lead of feminist rhetorical practices in enacting a shift in the field of RCL from Western patriarchal criteria for “excellence” (Royster and

Kirsch), towards new terms of rhetorical engagement that can be translated into decolonial literacy pedagogies.

A Rhetorically Informed Framework for Pedagogical Literacy Inquiry

As a *Kaxlan Ladino* scholar engaged in literacy inquiry for a long time, the construct of *alfabetización*, understood as a pedagogy of writing-reading specific to Latin America, played a crucial role in my everyday practices all through academia. The expectations established by peers, instructors, family, friends, and myself were molded after a colonial model of literacy that from the times of the *Conquista* seeks to assimilate the “indio” and “las masas” to Hispanic culture. Therefore, one of the most challenging aspects of my current inquiry has become bridging vernacular expressions of conjoint communicative action to dominant institutions, especially as non-abstract, spiritual, non-alphabetical literacies are often characterized as early developmental stages in the attainment of a dominant, more “advanced” variation. To avoid perpetuating the oppressive power relations around literacy instruction, the following sections explore alternative definitions of literacy to the ones used to maintain the epistemological violence canonizing one socially situated literacy as universal. Besides identifying the niche in the territory where this inquiry stands, this move will serve to mark the particularities, contingencies, and politics that inform my work, and will suggest the provisional character of my theoretical apparatus in the hope to serve as an entry point for its revaluation.

The explicit aim of this inquiry is to disrupt the positivist model of pedagogies of literacy and the oppressive power relations that they inform. By positivist in the context of writing instruction, I refer to the methodologies informed by a view of language as an

autonomous, clear, and stable system in hierarchical relation to non-Western literacies. As pointed by scholars like Brian Street, the influence of this ideology is evident in approaches that work under the assumption that language is a biological trait, as Steven Pinker suggests, or an abstract system separated from the individual, like in the views of Ferdinand de Saussure or Noam Chomsky (cfr. Bloome and Green). Countering the ideological hegemony of this approach became part of an explicit rationale that informed the work of both New Literacy and New Rhetoric scholars. For New Rhetoricians, the scientist orientation of positivism resulted in approaches to language focusing on writing as the process of putting together static words following straightforward rules of correct usage (Hauser). By rendering invisible the societal, contingent dimension of language, these models have failed to account for the ways in which rhetorical practices can serve as a means to reproduce and recompose social structures of coexistence. New Literacy scholars like Brian V. Street have pointed that a scientist perspective on literacy establishes a “great divide” that separates cultures on a hierarchy determined by a degree of literacy “development.” As Branwen Gruffyd Jones points, this metaphor of development functions as an anchor to recast the colonial discourse of civilization and evolution into a “technical” vocabulary, but without ever abandoning the logic of hierarchy and extraction (72). Literacy models of this sort stand in continuity with these colonial power relations, while rendering invisible their racial bias, “it is claimed that a culture is intellectually superior because it has acquired [the] technology [of literacy]” (Street *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, 29).

For Pierre Bourdieu, scientist approaches to language sometimes rely on the metaphorical anchor of the abstract treasure, where literacy is a patrimony of universal

access, turning a blind eye to the oppressive power relations enacted through the monopolization of symbolic systems. This relation of domination is normalized by the objectification of writing and the perception of a unified language in dominant educational institutions. The pedagogies circulated in these spaces tie writing to a neutral production of information and communication. Writing is commodified as an object of consumption, a skill, and a cultural capital accessible to just a few. According to Elsasser and Irvine, this uneven distribution of literacy education serves as a mechanism for the construction of communities and individuals as illiterate, promoting a deficit-oriented model, and helping to sustain a meritocracy through narratives where students that do not enact dominant literacy practices are categorized as resisting/failing to engage in a practice crucial to the very “skill” of critical thinking.

Sociocultural scholars of literacy seeking to break away from the implications of these models have increasingly focused on reading and writing as embedded in social practices that produce and transform both meaning and space (Leander and Sheehy; Mills and Comber; Gutiérrez; Moje et al.; Gee; Leander et al.). This body of work focuses on the problematization of scientific accounts of reading and writing by calling on an “ideological model” which regards literacy as “embedded in and constitutive of cultural ideologies” (Bloome and Green 20). From this perspective, literacy is conceptualized as both practice and event mediated by social institutions and spaces, i.e. by the interaction of people engaged in written communication, broadly conceived, and the discursive mechanisms that inform such an interaction. In rhetoric and composition, critical spatial-based approaches have served to procure theories on composition with a lens receptive to ideological dynamics (Fleming; Reynolds; Dobrin;

McComiskey and Ryan; Drew; Rice; Porter et al.). Among other things, this approach lends itself to challenge research on traditional sites of reading and writing, shifting attention to the rhetorical practices of local, historically disenfranchised populations (Hess). Drawing from the broader spatial turn in the social sciences, rhetorical theorization of space emphasizes an implicit theory in classical rhetoric that views language as a “distinctly *political* way of being” (Fleming 12), a social occurrence that by engaging in signifying practices in space writes “the script of hegemony” (Dobrin 50). Scholarship in New Literacy Studies has also adopted a view that transcends the conceptualization of reading and writing as a neutral skill or tool of communication, and instead emphasizes its ideological dimension. By contextualizing literacy practices in the reality of ideology, socio-spatial research recognizes literacy as situated “*lived, talked, enacted, value-and-belief-laden* practices” (Gee et al. 3) connected to specific types of “*social identities*” (Gee et al. xii), that is, as distinct “ways of being in the world” (Gee et al. 3).

Approaching literacies as producing the world rather than just passively occupying it has provided literacy research the tools to uncover oppressive and exclusionary power relations (Mills; New London Group). It has also expanded the site of inquiry beyond conventional literacy practices, as in the “rule-breaking” digitally-mediated literacies (Lankshear and Knobel), and back to local concerns, like the history and politics of cultural opposition enacted by Native American (Olivas). It is from this lens on language as a practice distributed socio-spatially, that Indigenous literacies can be ethically approached. The emphasis on literacies as producing, perpetuating, or disrupting oppressive/exclusionary power relations gives salience to the historical and