Toward a Pedagogy of the Absurd: Constitutive Ambiguity, Tension, and the Postmodern Academy

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Over the course of the past few decades, scholars and theorists have engaged in a dynamic and concerted effort to interpret, make sense of, and resist a variety of social phenomena often categorized under the concept of "postmodernism." This project has also been taken up by educators of various stripes, especially those who identify their work as belonging in a "critical" tradition such as critical theory or critical pedagogy. In this paper, I aim to join the discussion of critical education scholars through an analysis of Albert Camus's work on the concept of the absurd. In particular, I interpret the absurd as it relates to the identity and work of critical academics in the postmodern university. After providing an orienting perspective of the key elements of postmodernity and critical pedagogy that are relevant to my project, I move into a discussion of the connections between Camus's concept of the absurd and postmodernism. Working from this basis, I then suggest the relevance and value of the absurd to critical academics within two general constellations of challenges: critical thought/identity and moving from theory to practice, especially in the absence of any forthcoming consensus or unity of intellectual or ethical systems. I conclude by recapitulating my main arguments and gesturing toward potential for further development. Ultimately, the essay ends by raising the question of the value of raising a question.

Albert Camus and Education: A New Project

The thought and work of Albert Camus, the French novelist and journalist, has been studied and used by theorists from a wide variety of disciplines (Bowker, 2014). Not until recently, however, has his writing been taken up in any consistent manner by educational theorists. As Curzon-Hobson (2013) notes, while there are many educational themes strewn throughout his thought, an established literature or agreed upon educational reading of Camus is still forthcoming. Presently, scholars are only beginning the project of applying his work to educational practice, policy, and philosophy.

But while this literature is still in its infancy, a number of notable articles warrant brief mention. Peter Roberts (2008), for instance, has addressed the supposed gap between the genres of literature and philosophy, arguing that while Camus himself never expressly identified as a philosopher, there exists the possibility of a robust philosophical reading of his literary work. He endeavors to show both the relevance of literature to philosophy and the relevance of Camus to

education through an analysis of Camus's novel *The Fall*. Roberts (2013) also investigates the educational and communicational insights in Camus's play *The Misunderstanding*. Working in a similar vein but with a different focus, Gibbons and Heraud (2007) explore how the experience of the absurd – particularly as rendered through Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* – can inform the work of educators in addressing the neoliberal dimensions of contemporary pedagogical settings. They argue that much of contemporary education, including its attendant philosophy, practice, and constructing of participants (i.e., teachers, students, the market), has been organized and animated by an entrepreneurial reason that casts students as consumers and enterprising subjects. By constructing students in this manner, the authors suggest that an enterprise-based education limits creativity in thought and action and creates an absurdity in the educational relationship between teacher/student. They conclude by discussing how *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the notion of the absurd contain resources for educators and students to critically resist such constraining entrepreneurial reason.

Another recent article by Weddington (2007) also mines *The Myth of Sisyphus* for educational insight, but in a rather different context. Weddington approaches the question of (transformative) education as a fundamentally existential and aesthetic question. Following Camus's (1955) infamous pronouncement, Weddington suggests that suicide is the only serious educational problem. He proceeds to delineate the related themes of absurdity, lucidity, nostalgia, and suicide as they pertain to educational pursuits. In the end, he claims that "education conceptualized as a rhythmic progression pulsed by periods of comfort and discomfort or nostalgia and absurdity represents a potentially perpetual suicide" (p. 125). Such a conception of education, for Weddington, provides necessary and fertile ground for self-transcendence, transformation, and sustained action.

Most recently, Curzon-Hobson (2013) joins this literature by surveying a wide range of themes from Camus's work that might have educational value. He draws on a number of Camus's best-known works, but focuses primarily on the concept of *strangeness* as developed in Camus's *The Stranger* (1982). In outlining what he calls a pedagogy of the stranger, Curzon-Hobson (2013) explores a number of themes, traits, and concepts involved in this approach, including the absurd, doubt, limits, ambiguity, dialogue, solidarity, creativity, diversity, and hope (p. 462). He sees Camus as addressing a society, a moment of humanity, as it confronts "its own sense of individual and communal strangeness" (p. 462) and experiences the resultant feeling of

dislocation. This strangeness and dislocation is animated/represented by the absurd, and as such, "a lucidity of the absurd…is at the heart" (p. 462) of a pedagogy of strangeness.

It is here that I intend to enter and further the conversation. More precisely, in this paper I want to extend the exploration of the concept of the absurd as an educational experience and resource for critical scholars and educators in the contemporary academy. In order to do this, I will draw from a variety of scholars from different disciplinary perspectives. In addition to the works on Camus and education surveyed above, I will reference scholars writing on the absurd from the perspectives of the philosophy of religion, theology, and political theory, as these provide the conceptual, cultural, and social insights necessary to build my arguments. Moreover, I will not offer an original reading of Camus; rather, I will act as a synthesizing philosopher more than a formalist or analytic specialist (Frodeman, 2013). This, I believe, is more in line with Camus's own philosophical spirit. To set the stage for my particular contributions to the larger discussion, the following section includes an overview of the project of critical pedagogy and the cultural/intellectual phenomenon of postmodernity.

Critical Pedagogy in Postmodern Times: Who and What can be "Critical"?

The broad project of critical pedagogy encompasses a wide variety of educators, scholars, and theorists from around the world. Given this, I cannot come close to a comprehensive summary of the many traditions of critical pedagogues. For the sake of brevity and general accuracy, therefore, I will simply touch on some of the common features of projects that are offered as part of a critical pedagogical effort.

Whereas "plain" pedagogy refers simply to the practices and methods of teaching and instruction, "critical pedagogy" incorporates the political and transformative dimensions of the critical theory tradition from which it derives its name (Geuss, 1981). It posits that teaching and educating are inherently political, moral, and socially embedded practices (Giroux, 2006). Moreover, critical pedagogues are not content to relay information to passively receptive students; they rather seek to engage education in a way that contributes to the liberation of oppressed peoples and thus engenders social justice (Freire, 2000; McLaren, 2009). And finally, given its emphasis on social context, critical pedagogy entails a responsiveness to changes in social systems and situations; it is dynamic and never fully complete (McArthur, 2013). Thus, proponents and practitioners of critical pedagogy must continually engage in refining and

augmenting their strategies and theories so as to remain effective and truly critical (Kincheloe, 2007).

The Postmodern

Among the voluminous literature on "the postmodern" and the extensive set of related phenomena, Jean-Francois Lyotard's (1984) characterization of the condition as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv) is perhaps one of the most popular. And while I find much of interest in Lyotard's report, in this paper I want to instead use Fredric Jameson's (1991) thinking on the postmodern. In his book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (an expanded collection named by the original article and first chapter of the book), Jameson endeavors to make sense of both the function of the concept of the postmodern in contemporary thinking and postmodernity as a cultural/historical condition. Here I will focus more on the former dimension of the question; that is, how "postmodernism" as a conceptual and theoretical phenomenon is best understood. At the same time, however, this discussion will blend into thinking about the material and psychological conditions of postmodernity as well.

In introducing his book, Jameson stresses that he has not attempted to systematize a usage of, or impose coherence on, the term "postmodernism" (p. xxii). Indeed, he argues that the best way to understand and productively use the concept of the postmodern is to leave it unsettled and contested. This conclusion is a consequence of his historicist reading of the postmodern turn, by which is meant simply that Jameson seeks to interpret the postmodern as a truly new historical epoch in human temporality. If the "post" is taken at its word, then, modernist history is the first casualty in the postmodern period (p. xi). In other words, the concept of the postmodern is "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (p. ix). It signifies an effort to gauge the present (historical) situation which itself is felt to be characterized by an uncertainty regarding the coherence of notions such as an "age," "zeitgeist," or "current situation."

The result is that for Jameson, postmodernism is at bottom an attempt to theorize its own condition of possibility (p. ix). This is achieved by the fact that

> Virtually any observation about the present can be mobilized in the very search for the
> present itself and pressed into service as a symptom and an index of the deeper logic of
> the postmodern, which imperceptibly turns into its own theory and the theory of itself. ...

> [This] strike[s] one sometimes as harboring a pathology distinctively autoreferential, as
> though our utter forgetfulness of the past exhausted itself in the vacant but mesmerized
> contemplation of a schizophrenic present that is incomparable virtually by definition. p.
> xii.

In narrating the end of masternarratives, chronicling the end of modern teleological history and progress, and grounding itself in an antifoundationalist posture, postmodernism theory sets itself up as "necessarily imperfect or impure" (p. xii). For Jameson, this impurity is constitutive; the concept itself is "internally conflicted and contradictory" (p. xxii). And as such, he suggests that the only way to continue to productively engage the concept of the postmodern is "to rehearse those inner contradictions and to stage those representational inconsistencies and dilemmas: we have to work all that through every time around" (p. xxii).

It is my intention to do just that; in setting the postmodern in conversation with Camus's absurd thought, I am aiming not to ask whether the absurd "is" a postmodern notion/experience but to ask anew what the postmodern might be, or better yet what it might reveal and how it might challenge the work of critical scholars. Indeed, I am much less concerned with defining, categorizing, or delineating the postmodern and the absurd as I am with actually rehearsing or performing these ideas. And that I find such an approach most appropriate should do more to express how I understand the concepts than traditional exposition would.

The Absurdity of Postmodernism

In this section I begin tracing the contours between the philosophy and experience of the absurd and postmodern theory and culture. After setting forth some of the basic characteristics and issues of the absurd and the postmodern, I survey how these dynamics contribute to the current situation facing scholars in the academy today. In the final section, I explore what an absurd posture can contribute to facing such challenges and dilemmas.

It should first be noted that I am not particularly interested in making the claim that Camus *is* a postmodern thinker, even if it is the case that his thought shares much with other postmodern theorists. Indeed, Camus's work is difficult to neatly categorize and he expressly deflected attempts at labeling him this or that sort of thinker. For instance, he denied that he was an existentialist or a philosopher (Judt, 1998, p. 90). What is clear is that – as he mentions on the heels of his denial of trying to do philosophy – he is more concerned with knowing how to think,

live, and act: "I don't think I'm worth a red cent as a philosopher; what really concerns me is knowing how one should act" (as quoted in Bowker, 2014, p. 18). In this spirit, in what follows I am interested not in determining the "correct" rendering of the absurd but rather in what thinking the absurd can do in the present moment. Further, this is done not only as a methodological pragmatic but with a belief in the psychological and practical efficacy of such an approach. This will hopefully become clearer through the rest of the paper.

Nonetheless, despite the admittedly loose conceptual machinations above, it will help to begin with some basic statements about the notion of the absurd. Here I will detail Camus's development of the term as taken up in recent scholarship having to do with education, politics, and/or social change. It should be noted that absurdity as a studied condition and concept has an ancient history; scores of theorists, scholars, and writers have used some version of the idea in their work (see e.g., Bowker, 2014, pp. 11-14; Skrimshire, 2013, p. 286). Omission of attention to this history is due to lack of space, not any sort of principled or philosophical dislike of those works.

In Camus's various works, the absurd refers to the general experiences of confronting the utter meaninglessness of life and being faced with a strangeness to oneself and the rest of the world. It is the moment when we realize that our reason, our desires and demands for certainty, hope, and meaning, have failed and gone unfulfilled (Curzon-Hobson, 2013, p. 463). It describes a forlornness of the human condition, brought about by the disconnect between the longing for meaning and the cruel, irrational silence of the world (Berthold, 2013, p. 137; Skrimshire, 2006, p. 290). The absurd involves "a tension between nihilism and the impulse to resist it at the heart of human experience" (Skrimshire p. 286). These dynamics, collectively, congeal into an acute sense of strangeness and alienation from oneself, one's reason and values, and the world at large. In addition, and perhaps not surprisingly, the absurd in Camus's thought is offered as a context of contradiction, doubt, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

Before I delve more deeply into how Camus responded to absurdity, however, and how this might inform the situation of contemporary academics, I want to connect these ideas with the condition of postmodernity as described above. At least three main themes might be compared here. First, the absurd and the postmodern involve a sense of loss of roots, a disconnect from the self and history. Chela Sandoval (2001), interpreting and extending Jameson's account, writes that the postmodern cultural ethos stands as "an original epoch wherein consciousness is

becoming threatened with an irrevocable and tragic fall into despair" (p. 17). This despair –
another feature and result of the absurd in Camus's thought – stems from the deconstruction of
society's diachronic sensibilities; that is, civilization today lacks a self-comprehension that
incorporates any sort of continuity through past, present, and future. The result is a
"hyperreality" (Baudrillard, 1988) of pure randomness, heterogeneity, and undecidability.
Essentially, it is chaos and meaningless (Sandoval, 2001, p. 17).

At the individual level, this break in modernist historical temporality is accompanied by a
destruction or death of the subject, or at least the modern self. While the absurd involves a self
marked by alienation and strangeness, Jameson (1991) suggests that alienation is no longer the
primary experience of the postmodern subject. Instead, the "cultural pathology" of the
postmodern is that of a fragmented, dispersed, un-locatable subject (p. 14). The distinction here
might very well be conceptually significant, but the result is similar: in both the postmodern and
the absurd, the self is dislocated, estranged, and effectively undermined as consciousness
becomes uncertain, confused, despairing, and schizophrenic. This leads to issues in establishing
any sort of oppositional or critical disposition or stance, as will be further discussed below.

A second common theme between postmodern theory and the philosophy of the absurd is
that each is essentially characterized by a constitutive impurity and ambiguity. As noted
previously, Jameson (1991) argues that the postmodern theorizing is internally contradictory and
conflicted insofar as its essence or foundation corresponds to a rejection of the notion of essences
and foundations (see also St. Pierre, 2002, p. 25). Similarly, Bowker (2014) notes that Camus
and his contemporaries never clearly defined or explicated the absurd precisely because its force
is contained within its ambiguous and obscure nature (p. 16). For both the postmodern and the
absurd, then, it can be said that their appeal stems from their mystifying, unsettling, and
indeterminate effects. And this relates to another unique theme both of these phenomena share.

The third similarity I find intriguing in this context is the "self-theorizing" dimension of
both postmodern thought and absurd thinking. As explained above, Jameson (1991) writes that
postmodern consciousness may amount to not much more than an effort to think its own
conditions of possibility. Camus's rendering of the absurd seems to share this self-reflexive
nature, insofar as he admonishes his readers not to try to understand, explain, or escape the
absurd. In other words, both ways of thinking and perceiving take their respective notions as
naming the present condition but proffer no need to, or even possibility of, transcending that

condition. As Skrimshire says, the challenge of the absurd is to "live at the point where logic exhausts itself" (p. 288), without appeal to any universal reason or system of values. The postmodern, in repudiating such modern ideals, essentially poses the same challenge. While this may seem particularly limiting in a certain sense, it might also be seen as uniquely liberating and constructive. These thoughts will be further developed in the final section.

Challenges for Critical Academics

The value of drawing connections between the constitutive features and dynamics of postmodernism and absurdity is that when they are seen as possessing similar dilemmas, Camus's writing on how to respond to the absurd can inform efforts at responding to the postmodern academy in turn. Before doing that, however, one final task is in order; namely, what exactly are the challenges and dilemmas presented by the postmodern? Of the many potential issues to be explored here, I will focus on just two: critical identity and thought within the academy and working collectively for social justice in the absence of any forthcoming ideological consensus or transcendent set of values.

The first issue posed by Jameson's (1991) postmodernism contains two interrelated sub-issues. On the one hand, Jameson critiques postmodern theorists who embrace and celebrate postmodern sensibility because he claims that such thinking merely gives credence to what he sees as the global, neocolonizing nature of postmodernism. His concern here is based on his understanding of postmodernism as not the radical break from the constraints of modernist sensibilities but actually the "cultural logic" of late capitalism. In other words, he sees postmodern aesthetics as facilitating and emanating from what is simply the contemporary, global manifestations of capitalism in a neocolonizing socioeconomic system. Thus, postmodern critiques dangerously undergird the systems they analyze because "this globalizing cultural force paradoxically generates, inspires, and demands these very same intellectual 'analyses' of it" (Sandoval, 2001, p. 18).

Bill Readings (1996) offers the same warning in his analysis of the contemporary (he prefers the term "posthistorical") university, which he understands to exist more as a transnational market-oriented corporation than an institution of intellectual and cultural production. Referencing what are commonly thought to be standard methods of counter-cultural resistance, he argues that "practices such as punk music and dress styles are offered their self-

consciousness in academic essays, but the dignity they acquire is not that of authenticity but of marketability" (p. 121).   In short, "radicalism sells well in the University marketplace" (p. 163). He concludes that in this way, we can see

> the futility of the radicalism that calls for a University that will produce more radical kinds of knowledge, more radical students, more of anything. Such appeals, because they do not take into account the institutional status of the University as a capitalist bureaucracy, are doomed to confirm the very system they oppose. p. 163.

This difficulty in maintaining a truly critical edge in academic thought is tied up with the second sub-issue, that of creating or maintaining an identity as a critical academic. Jameson (1991) despairs of the fragmentation of the modern subject and the consequent inability of postmoderns to locate themselves in any coherent way. The modern subject, he explains, was able to level critiques of the dominant social order by establishing a critical distance from the object(s) or value(s) of critique. Now, however,

> Distance in general (including 'critical distance' in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism. We are submerged in its henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distantiation… (p. 48)

Jan McArthur (2013) also confronts the dilemma of being a critical academic in the contemporary academy. She explains that despite noble visions of higher education standing as some sort of independent, autonomous sphere in which intellectual inquiry is given free reign, the reality is that institutions of higher education are inextricably intertwined with the larger social order. As such, there is no distinct separation between a university and structures of social injustice and inequality. This means that to identify and act as a critical scholar in the academy does not preclude one from participating, even if unwittingly, in those structures and systems of injustice.

A second challenge facing educators and scholars today concerns putting theory into practice. From where does one work, and toward what? If the postmodern is truly ahistorical and no new revolutionary subject of history is forthcoming (Jameson, 1991; Sandoval, 2001), what might animate an oppositional consciousness and posture? Another way to phrase the question is in the familiar theory v. practice divide (McArthur, 2013). I cannot review the

extensive history of this debate and the vast number and range of solutions previously offered, but much of the question concerns the relationship (or lack thereof) between the two "sides." Some action-oriented thinkers critique theorists for being too abstract and not engaging the material world and the practical implications of their theorizing, while some theorists critique practitioners for neglecting theory while dangerously privileging efficiency, convenience, and instrumental rationality. How much should theory inform practice, and how "practical" should theory be? These are some of the typical questions raised in this context. In addressing the matter here, I offer some thoughts on how absurd philosophy might regard the supposed dichotomy between theory and practice.

The challenge of connecting theory to action is compounded by another feature of postmodernism, namely the rejection or skepticism toward the possibility of developing consensus and unity. This, also, is a complex question that I cannot do justice to here. The basic idea, though, is that given the rejection of modern pursuits such as universal truth, transcendent/metaphysical inquiry, objective thinking, and linear historical progression toward an ever-more perfect future state, the ideals of inclusive consensus and representative unity have been called into question and often outright dismissed (see Blackmore, 2001; Haraway, 1991; Lyotard, 1984; Readings, 1996; Simpson, 2000). If this is indeed the case, how might we then work collectively in projects of social justice? And who exactly is the "we" in this question? In raising these questions I should not pretend to be able to give comprehensive answers. In fact, part of my answer involves the value of raising them without the pretense of being able to fully answer them.

Absurd Passion: Thinking and Living Within Tension and Ambiguity

To begin to come full circle, to the extent that this is possible, consider that Jameson's (1991) overall project concerns the question of how to theorize, think, and resist a neocolonizing, imperial cultural order "when the nature of this very expansion functions to take in any thought about it" (Sandoval, 2001, p. 18). My modest attempt at responding to this challenge is to posit the absurd as holding value precisely given its constitutive ambiguity, impurity, and disruptive capacities. Moreover, and crucially, this is what is unique and intriguing about the way Camus advocates responding to the absurd. In a word, he insists on not only facing and living within the absurd but embracing a commitment to it; this is the absurd passion.

Bowker (2014) notes that Camus spoke of the absurd as confronting a person as a harrowing passion. Here, the "harrowing" refers to an experience of tearing, shredding, or rending of the self and the coherence of thought. But instead of reacting by seeking escape or transcendence from this seemingly destructive energy, Camus sought to revere and preserve the absurd (p. 10). As he states plainly, "the first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me, consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. I have just defined it as a confrontation and unceasing struggle" (Camus, 1955, p. 34). If for no other reason, this is educational because it means stepping into a space of "pure disruptive, reflective energy" (Curzon-Hobson, 2013, p. 463).

The imperative to preserve this space of rupture, uncertainty, and strangeness provides a unique way to approach the matter of critical thought and identity in the contemporary academy. To Jameson's question about the possibility of creating/maintaining an oppositional consciousness, it might be answered that the absurd represents such a stance, or at least allows for it. Whereas Jameson's postmodern self is fragmented beyond the possibility of being located, Camus's alienated self is at least still coherent enough to *be* alienated. In fact, strangeness is a quality/characteristic of a subject; something or someone is alienated from something or someone else. So even if the absurd self is strange, uncertain, and unknowable, it at least still *is*.

Indeed, the uncertainty and disruption of the absurd self is precisely its strength against totalizing and reductionist systems. In a recent work on how to engage critical knowledge and thought in the academy, McArthur (2013) draws from Theodor Adorno to develop the value of non-identity in contexts of social justice education. She notes that when speaking of social identities such as race, gender, sexuality, or nationality, it is important to retain space for individual uniqueness and idiosyncrasy. Broad social categories cannot and should not be used to comprehensively describe a person, even while individuals are inseparable from such larger systems and social relations. In short, individuals are irreducible to any one or number of collective categories. This notion of non-identity resonates with absurd identity in an interesting way. As Bowker (2014) explains, both the absurd and the postmodern preserve difference and otherness by allowing the other to shatter one's me-ness, and vice versa. This "hostage being" (p. 8) for Camus is a means of resisting totalizing relations between individuals and among social

groups. In both cases – non-identity and hostage being – there is an opposition to reducing and totalizing tendencies.

If the concept of non-identity is incorporated into the absurd, there emerges the possibility for the creation of a new space for critical thought and action. Rather than requiring or utilizing distance from that which is being critiqued (recall Jameson), the absurd subject thinks from directly within the space of uncertainty, strangeness, and ambiguity that constitutes the self. If this seems perplexing, then we are on the right track. Desiring to preserve the tension of this way of speaking and thinking, I turn to the questions of theory, practice, and efforts toward collective social transformation.

Noting that Camus's philosophy of the absurd was "always expressly political," Skrimshire (2006, p. 286) explains how Camus worked to affirm a collective struggle for social transformation even in the absence of all common values. Much of Camus's effort was directed at finding a way to live with vitality in the absence of reasons for doing so. One of his attempts at doing so set forth *rebellion* as a category of resistance. Skrimshire writes that "rebellion is…an open-ended starting point for social transformation whose basic positive value is itself" (p. 289). The rebel is the person who faces the absurd and allows it to become a passion as described above. That is, to rebel is to reject the nihilistic consequences of absurdity while simultaneously refusing to seek recourse or escape in reason, meaning, or transcendence from the absurd. This enables collective social action through "a sort of realization of solidarity in absurdity, the recognition that absurdity, whilst alienating one from another, is also a *shared* human condition" (p. 289; emphasis original).

In addition to providing the conditions for collective effort toward social change in the absence of a unified or consensus-based value system, living and thinking the absurd breaks down the supposed divide between theory and practice. Indeed, I would argue that in the absurd, speaking of theory as somehow separate from action is nonsensical. Recall that some scholars regard the ambiguity and obscurity of the absurd as giving it its force. Part of the potency here is the ability of the absurd to be leveraged in a multitude of conceptual and practical ways. For example, Bowker (2014) enters the conversation explicitly to examine the absurd not as a philosophical proposition or system of thought but as a psychological dynamic, a mode of consciousness, a general posture or orientation to the world in all its complexity, strangeness, confusion, and violence (pp. 2; 15). Thus, the absurd is a condition, a reality, an experience of

that reality, a way of philosophizing, and a psychological and aesthetic posture all at once. It is the feeling of needing to confront and respond to all of these dimensions in a way that neither succumbs to nor seeks to rationalize the strangeness of those dynamics. And in this way, the maintaining of this tension between a feeling of perplexity and lucid reflection serves to create a condition where the absurd subject is perpetually prompted into action (Weddington, 2007).

This action- and lucidity-sustaining tension is a key part of the ultimate value of the absurd for critical academics. To think the absurd is to maintain this tension, to respect the constitutive contingency of its animating characteristics. In dealing with issues of identity, the self/subject, the limits of reason, and historical dislocation, the absurd thinker confronts many of the same troublesome (yet potentially productive) features of the postmodern condition. Indeed, such themes have proliferated in recent scholarship on pedagogy, educational philosophy, and higher education (see, e.g., Blackmore, 2001; Lewis, 2011, 2012, 2014; Lewis & Friedrich, 2015; McArthur, 2013; Readings, 1996; Simpson, 2000; Smith, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2012; Stengel, 2013). I suggest that much of what these scholars have been dealing with could be understood as the absurdity of the postmodern academy. And if that is the case, then Camus's thought and writing might be considered as a resource for trying to think and act in such absurd spaces.

To return, finally, to Jameson's admonition that the internal contradictions and conflicts of postmodern theory must be taken up each time one attempts to think the postmodern, I want to stress that I have endeavored to do the same with the absurd here. That is, I have not tried to comprehensively define, explain, or understand the absurd. I have also not tried to solve or answer the highly complex dilemmas facing critical educators and scholars today. Rather, I have attempted to rehearse its constitutive obscurity and tensions as a means of starting anew and (hopefully) prompting the reader into lucid reflection and action in turn. As Skrimshire states, "the absurd is not a new ethical system but a point of departure" (p. 289). Applying this to Jameson's approach to theorizing the postmodern, I end by rehearsing one final dynamic of the absurd. If the unsettling and doubt-instilling uncertainty and ambiguity (what Bowker [2014] refers to as the mystification) of the absurd are taken seriously as constitutive features of the concept/experience, then this effectively leads to a rethinking of even the act of asking questions and seeking answers. Typically, a question is raised expressly with the desire that it will be resolved through the giving of an appropriate answer. This seems commonsensical enough. But

what if, for an absurd moment, we thought otherwise? What if we allowed for the possibility of finding value in raising a question and leaving it open?

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