

# READING CRITICALLY

Manuel Callahan  
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**Center for Convivial Research & Autonomy**

As a small collective dedicated to collective pedagogies, the CCRA currently claims a number of interconnected projects that weave together innovative, community-centered research, learning, and local capacity-building. The CCRA's investment in co-learning spaces promotes critical analytical skills, research tools, facilitation techniques, and community service strategies able to address the intersections of environmental regeneration, community well-being, community safety, food sovereignty, and community health. For more info: [ccra@mitotedigital.org](mailto:ccra@mitotedigital.org)

## 0.0 Introduction

The practice of reading is often taken for granted. Similarly, active, or critical reading, is generally assumed to be easily understood, generating little to no care as to its procedures and outcomes. We suggest actively engaging a text requires explicit strategies and a deliberate “reading” discipline. Critical reading strategies and tools are an essential part of convivial knowledge production, or collective horizontal ways of knowing.

A carefully prepared text is one in which a reader can accurately represent and evaluate the scope and complexity of the intervention a text makes. Thus, critical reading requires that key concepts and analytical framework(s) are identified and examined, enabling a more comprehensive assessment of the success of the intervention, especially the contribution the text makes to debates in a specific field and or the “archives” it disrupts. In other words, the text under examination must be evaluated in regards how it operates in what Jorge González calls a “symbolic ecology.”

## 1.0 A Series of Readings

Reading critically cannot be accomplished in a single reading. Rather, it requires a number of engagements, or a series of “readings.” Therefore, critical reading should not be viewed as a linear process, but as an on-going effort –with each new “reading” yielding unexpected interpretations, questions, and insights. Of course, it is important to remember, any “reading” or engagement with a text reveals as much about the reader(s) as it does about the text.

Generally traditional approaches to critical reading focus on the mechanics, stressing a certain number of procedures or steps. A thorough approach to get started might include the following steps suggested by Chris Hart. First, skim the text noting how it is organized in terms of structure, style, and resources (e.g. bibliography, footnotes). Second, survey the parts of the text, including chapters or sections noting how they relate in terms of the text's main argument and purpose. Third, read the introductory sections such as the preface, introduction, or first chapter to assess the overall intervention the text is making and the context it is operating in. Fourth, summarize the argument.

Reading a text often begins with an initial assessment of the text to

determine what exactly the text is trying to do. Additional steps should situate the text by noting the debates that animate it in an effort to uncover more specific information about the motivation behind the text, its purpose, and contribution. In order to satisfy specific research on a topic an additional step might include selecting a relevant chapter or section to advance the inquiry. It's always important to familiarize oneself with any new vocabulary or key concepts during your review.

- Skim the text noting how it is organized in terms of structure, style, and resources (bibliography and footnotes).
- Survey the parts of the text, i.e. quickly examine chapters or sections noting how they relate in terms of the general purpose of the text.
- Read the preface and or introduction to get a better idea of the motivation, aims and context of the book.
- Represent the argument of the text making sure to understand how it is being made and how it relates to previous debates.
- Situate the text and the intervention it makes in relation to the author's motivation and discursive community.
- Focus on a specific chapter or section of the text for further research especially noting key concepts.<sup>1</sup>

All texts whether novels, motion pictures, or monographs are cultural artifacts. Each is loaded with a “common sense,” or the views, attitudes, and practices determined by race, gender, and class dynamics as well as other cultural practices advanced by the dominant society. Thus, texts often betray unacknowledged interests, values, attitudes, and desires, either intentionally or unintentionally, of authors. While these may be taken for granted notions, they usually reflect “conscious manipulations” of images, narratives, and key ideas. These “artistic” decisions, or what bell hooks calls “motivated representations,” are decisions about the text intended to “produce a certain effect or have a particular impact.”<sup>2</sup> It is the task of an active, critical reader to uncover both the intended and unintended statements as well as interests that inform and determine a text.

Whatever the strategy of representation embodied in any given text might be, audiences do not necessarily follow the intended conclusions or draw the expected lessons in the manner hoped for by the author. Readers are notoriously surly when it comes to reading. They actively interpret texts in multiple, often contradictory ways. Their reading posture depends on a number of factors related specifically to the text and the situation, or context, in which it was engaged. Although multiple readings are always possible, the text provides constraints or limits to what readings are appropriate. Consequently, the task of the “critic” is to determine the most likely reading based on what the text allows. A critical reader anticipates the likely interpretation by most readers. So, we note how a text is, according to Stuart Hall, both *encoded* and *decoded*.<sup>3</sup>

Accepting that “texts” are not innocent, a thorough examination must situate the text in a cycle of production, circulation, consumption, and interpretation noting the specific context (historical, political, social, economic, and cultural) from which it emerges. Recognizing the cycle helps explain how and why it was generated and how it might be read. In other words, how a text is distributed and later consumed is equally important as how and why it was imagined and produced. Not surprisingly, the process of production, circulation, and consumption of a text is also informed by a number of other forces such as market conditions and technological innovations. Similarly, a text will be “read” differently if it is

consumed by a lone reader or a group with a purpose.

A thorough assessment evaluates the text’s success in making its claim in relation to specific contexts, key debates, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies associated with a specific field and or issue. Therefore, a more thorough analysis of a text requires a number of additional steps. First, a text must be summarized, striving to be as accurate and generous as possible in fully representing the complexity of the argument offered. The text must be read on its own merits as a coherent statement. Second, a text must be situated in the context from which it emerges. How and why was it produced; under what circumstance was it circulated; who consumed it; and how have specific audiences interpreted it. The context always provides clues about the text and how it is likely to be interpreted. All texts have a history. Third, a text must be classified based on an examination of its constituent parts, including the motives, perspectives, concepts, claims, evidence, questions, and conclusions it makes available. Fourth, a text should be read as a project in relation to other

## 1.2 Evaluating the Argument

projects. All texts make an intervention. No text is innocent.

A politically engaged level of analysis requires paying close attention to what kind of intervention the text makes in relation to a discursive community and the debates that animate it as well as the political forces that made it possible.

One critical dimension of evaluating the success and significance of a text’s intervention involves evaluating the argument’s *architecture*. Most researchers rarely concern themselves with how arguments are actually constructed. Understanding arguments as both structure and process makes it easier to advance a critical analysis. A clear evaluation of an argument’s architecture can contribute to more accurately predicting what impact the text is likely to have with different discursive communities. More importantly, paying close attention to how authors assemble all the parts necessary to make their intervention assists researchers in evaluating the text’s significance. Critique is an opportunity to open up political space.

In order to fully “deconstruct” or unpack an argument, we suggest following what González calls “reverse engineering,” or a process that exposes how an author

assembled the architecture of the argument including the claim, evidence, qualifications(s), warrant, and methodology. Reverse engineering works as strategy to interrogate an author’s epistemological grounding, pedagogical purpose, and political intentions.<sup>4</sup> Exposing the scaffolding of an argument enables readers to generate additional knowledge by not only interrogating the overall intervention and key concepts but also highlighting the analytical frameworks that might be present although not explicit in the text. More importantly, reverse engineering exposes the ideological residue, institutional exigency, and socio-cultural determinates that inform, circumscribe, or motivate a particular intervention. In other words, reverse engineering focuses attention on the cultural processes both in its production and engagement that might provide crucial information about the text and its impact in public discourse. Thus, as a reading strategy reverse engineering makes processes of knowledge production transparent, reflexive, and collective.

Additionally, encouraging collaborative readings through reverse engineering invites an organized group of readers to insert themselves into the text in order to collectively analyze elements

## 1.3 Architecture of an Argument

of the text that might be lost to a solitary reader.

The essential architecture of an argument contains *at least* five components. These include claim, evidence, qualification(s), warrant, and methodology. What follows is an

### 1.3.1 Claim

explanation of each of these key elements.<sup>5</sup>

The actual claim being made by the author is the fundamental component of any argument. In some cases there can be more than one claim or a hierarchy of primary and lesser claims in any given text. The main claim, or thesis, provides the focus of the entire text. Supporting claims contribute to the overall intervention, making it more compelling. Drawing on the work of Wayne Booth and his colleagues, we note that a claim must be: *explicit*, *substantive*, and *contestable*. No matter how arcane the subject matter or how exclusive the audience may seem, a claim should be viewed as an *intervention* in public discourse.

### 1.3.2 Evidence

As would be expected, any claim must be supported by evidence. It can be useful to view evidence as something of a minor claim since it is an effort to gather specific information that can be put in service of the overarching intervention. Evidence, like a claim, is constructed by the author. Once again, drawing from the *Craft of Research*, we note evidence serves an author's claim when it is *accurate, precise, sufficient, representative, authoritative, and apparent*. Readers should not have to guess as to what is being used as evidence nor should they doubt how it is being used to advance the claim.

The more consistent and rigorous a piece of evidence, the more likely it is to be compelling such that it is treated as a "fact." Evidence is often conflated with "data." Unfortunately, there is a "common sense" about "data" –the mere invocation of "data" suggests an empirical quality, an instance of the certainty of unassailable information.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, we often speak of, or refer to, "the data," as something transparent, timeless, and unimpeachable. However, "data" should not be viewed as unassailable information outside of any historical contexts, social processes, and cultural productions. Data and evidence, like any other component of the research process, are cultural tools and, therefore, social constructions. Consequently, "data" is never innocent. Contaminated with relations of power, "data" emerges from the situated interests of researchers negotiating the social, cultural, political, and historical parameters of specific projects. "Data" always reflects the "motivated representations" of specific researchers.

### 1.3.3 Qualification

Qualifications are simply statements that anticipate the concerns, questions, and objections readers might have about the evidence presented. A successful qualification explains or reiterates the appropriateness of certain evidence in service of a specific claim. An astute author successfully anticipates reader's potential concerns about the evidence with explanations about why it is appropriate for a specific argument. A qualification can speak to limitations within the field of study or archive that might also indicate why the evidence is partial or incomplete, but still might be useful in the context it is offered despite

any potential limitations. An example of a qualification might be a reference to the condition of an archive explaining that the collection might not be fully indexed yet still contain critical information and opportunities for research.

### 1.3.4 Warrant

Probably the most complex and often overlooked element of an argument is the warrant. Unfortunately, authors are rarely careful or explicit about their warrants. Most researchers pay little attention to the different warrants that might be operating or informing their intervention and making it possible for them to advance their claim. There are two approaches to warrants. The first presents warrants as common sense notions while the second recognizes warrants as political.

Booth and his colleagues approach a warrant as a generalization, or common place that allows certain evidence to be used for a specific claim. Thus, a warrant is a statement that authorizes the use of specific evidence for a particular claim. *The Craft of Research* suggests that a warrant is composed of two components: a general circumstance and a general consequence. In the following example they demonstrate how a warrant works such that with each general circumstance follows a general consequence (when(ever) X, then Y).

*Despite Congress' doubling the budget to reduce drug smuggling, the amount of drugs smuggled into this country has risen [reason]. Clearly, we are wasting our money [claim].*

Warrant: *When more resources are invested to prevent something but its incidence rises [general circumstance], those resources have been wasted [general consequence].*<sup>7</sup>

In the example above the suggested warrant is understood to be relatively straightforward. In this instance we take as a common place the notion that any effort that yields little to nothing in return has been a waste of resources. However, much more can be said about the taken-for-granted values and attitudes that define what are resources and determine when or how they might be wasted. Overlooked in this specific example is the very

context of the U.S-Mexico border and the history of border militarization, including the "costs" in the extreme loss of life due to the U.S. War on Drugs and investment in increasingly lethal immigration controls and enforcement strategies.

More complex still are the social warrants, or the second approach to warrants. Social warrants, like warrants in general, reveal the decisions authors have made in constructing an argument. The result of political struggle, social warrants are more often explicit and can be much more complex. The social warrant works, according to George Lipsitz, as a "collectively sanctioned understanding of obligations and entitlements that has the force of law, even though it is rarely written down." Thus, a social warrant emerges as a result of struggle, underscoring that once established each social warrant "author and authorize new ways of knowing and new ways of being; they challenge and transform what is permitted and what is forbidden."<sup>8</sup> Social warrants, Lipsitz warns, must be examined in relation to, or in tension with, other social warrants. Over the years social movements have successfully introduced new social warrants. The battle for the eight hour day, civil rights of racialized minorities and women, as well as the struggle for access by the differently abled are just a few examples of movements that provide new authorizations for dignity, inclusion, and opportunity.

The above examples underscore that all warrants have specific ideological moorings. A closer examination reveals that a given warrant is far more complex than a simple generalization that serves as a "conceptual bridge" linking evidence to a particular claim. Warrants indicate the cultural formations and political motivations that explain the "motivated representations" and other processes of selection always present in strategies of representation. Thus, warrants conceal hegemonic processes and apparatuses. An argument's warrant articulates the hegemonic apparatus of a specific historical conjuncture by relying on the "common sense," or dominant ideas, of a specific cultural formation.<sup>9</sup>

**WARRANT:**

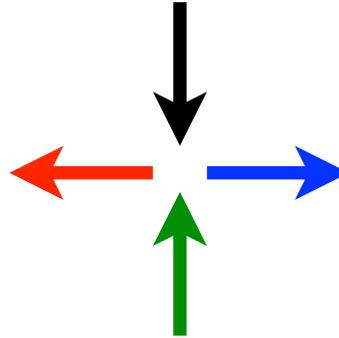
a statement that

- authorizes specific evidence for particular claim
- establishes bridge b/w evidence and claim
- general circumstance & general consequence: *whenever x than y*

**CLAIM:**

a statement that is

- explicit
- substantive
- contestable

**EVIDENCE:**

a statement that supports a claim when

- accurate
- precise
- representative
- sufficient
- authoritative
- apparent

**QUALIFICATION:**

a statement about the evidence that

- acknowledges limitations
- anticipates questions
- explains possible objections

### 1.3.5 Methodology

An argument also results from a particular methodology, or strategy of research. If warrants are often overlooked, the research methodology is also likely to be taken for granted when either producing or examining a text. The methodology speaks to how the author pursued the argument. Not only does it reveal the manner it was assembled and asserted; it also reflects the impact of the ideological and discursive elements that inform the conclusion. Again, few, if any, researchers link the strategic decisions related to research with the final determinations present in the claim. Thus, unpacking the investigative strategy that advanced the intervention can generate insights about the complexity of the intervention as well as clues how to determine its likely impact as an intervention.

Take for example the seminal pamphlet *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James.<sup>10</sup> A well known political tract often referenced by researchers in the radical feminist and Autonomist Marxist traditions, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* demonstrates how an argument and methodology can overlap. Dalla Costa and James argue that

women are at the center of both capitalism's reproduction and its dissolution. According to Dalla Costa women in every way "reproduce" the worker through the unwaged labor of birthing, care, pleasure, and housework. In order to support that radical assertion, they also claim that capital is, first and foremost, a relation determined and organized primarily by the wage. The exploitation of labor through the wage relies on a hierarchy of wages that depend on specific exclusions, especially those organized primarily through race and gender. Although women work in the labor market, reproduce the worker, and maintain the community that supports a workforce, their essential "reproductive work" remains largely unrecognized. Thus, the unwaged reproductive work of women that makes wage labor possible masks how women are central to the reproduction of capital. Relegated to the lowest rungs of a wage hierarchy as the wageless they are, until recently, generally overlooked in analysis of capital. From a methodological viewpoint, the argument is constructed and advanced by focusing the investigation on unwaged work of women as well as other sectors of the working class who generate value. With women as the focus of the analysis researchers can more fully expose the dynamics of the wage

relation exposing the impact of specific strategies and projects of exploitation on certain sectors. Revealing how women's work is less visible shows how they are de-valued in regards the wage.

### 1.4 Generating Questions

A successfully read text should provoke a wide range of critical questions that can motivate additional research. A critically read, or reversed engineered, text can discern the questions that the author asked and attempted to answer when initiating the research. In some instances, authors state their questions. However, in most cases the underlying question is implied. After the motivating questions have been determined new questions can be posed or directed at the text, further interrogating its claim, strategy, and purpose.

We have argued that reading critically requires a disciplined, committed engagement, underscoring that reading is an active, on-going process. Although active reading can entail aggressively and systematically taking notes in the margins, glossing the entire text, or writing brief summaries of key sections, it must also entail generating new questions about the text or because of it.

## Notes

1. The reading strategy presented here draws heavily from Chris Hart's, "Reading to Review." See, Chris Hart, *Doing a Literature Review* (London: Sage, 2003): 53-56.
2. Bell Hooks, "Cultural Criticism and Transformation," Media Education Foundation, Challenging Media Transcript, 1997, p. 5.
3. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 1972-79. (London: Hutchinson, 1980): 128-138.
4. The strategy of reverse engineering in relation to critical reading and research strategies and presented here has been developed by Jorge González and the Laboratorio de Comunicación Compleja (LabCOMplex). See Jorge González, *Cultura(s) y Ciber\_cultur@..(s): Incursiones no lineales entre Complejidad y Comunicacion* (México, D.F.: Universidad Iberoamericana Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, 2003).
5. The strategy to convert the architecture of an argument into a collective tool for critical analysis was first developed by Jorge González and his colleagues at the LabCOMplex. The elements of the research process were inspired by the work of Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*. It should be noted that the most recent edition of the *Craft of Research* substantially revises the elements and structure of a claim that were originally used by González and his colleagues. We have chosen to rely on the earlier version given that it follows González original innovation and lends itself more easily to our commitment to "reverse engineering" and conceptual mapping. See, Wayne C. Booth, et. al., *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
6. My use of "common sense" is borrowed from Antonio Gramsci and his insistence that "every social stratum has its own 'common sense' and its own 'good sense,' which are basically the most widespread conception of life and man." Most importantly, Gramsci argued that "every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of 'common sense': this is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life." Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds., Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey W. Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1989): 197; 323-343.
7. The example is taken from *The Craft of Research*, pp. 109-181.
8. George Lipsitz, "The Culture of War," *Critical Survey* 18: 3 (2006): 83-84.
9. Hegemony, according to Antonio Gramsci, describes the emergent processes that determine how society is organized or ruled through a mixed process of coercion and consent. A hegemonic apparatus manages or facilitates consent by incorporating the key interests of subordinated groups where these are made available through a popular system of ideas and practices or what Gramsci called "common sense."
10. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* (London: Falling Wall Press, 1972).

## For more information

Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams, *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003);

Jorge González, *Cultura(s) y Ciber\_cultur@..(s): Incursiones no lineales entre Complejidad y Comunicacion* (México, D.F.: Universidad Iberoamericana Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, 2003);

Chris Hart, *Doing a Literature Review* (London: Sage, 2003).

## Uni-Tierra Califas



Universidad de la Tierra Califas (UT Califas), one of the CCRA's primary projects, facilitates a number of interconnected spaces of co-learning that invite de-professionalized intellectuals, community-based scholars, and convivial learners to co-generate diverse knowledges and movement building resources from within the community. The UT Califas "campus" extends Universidad de la Tierra Oaxaca and Universidad de la Tierra Chiapas" in Mexico to make possible strategic exchanges of local folks whose community involvement and intellectual itineraries would benefit from travel and research between the Bay Area and other increasingly relevant global sites. Locally, UT Califas' commitment to collective pedagogies regenerates community, facilitates intercultural and intergenerational dialogues, and reclaims local commons through an "architecture" that includes a Center for Appropriat(ed) Technologies, Language and Literacy Institute, Theses Clinic, Study Travel Jornadas, and a Democracy Ateneo. Taken together, these projects/spaces facilitate the sharing of a wide variety of strategic, community-oriented technologies, or convivial tools, in the areas of community service, grassroots research, and conjunctural analysis.

## LEARNING SPACES:

Democracy Ateneo  
4th Saturday of the month  
@ Casa Vicky (17th St. & Julian St.)

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A web infrastructure designed to facilitate locally rooted participatory, action-oriented investigations generated in reflection and action spaces that regenerate community.