



Teaching in Higher Education

Critical Perspectives

ISSN: 1356-2517 (Print) 1470-1294 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cthe20

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To cite this article: Vivienne Bozalek & Nike Romano (2025) Immanent and diffractive critique for higher education practices, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 30:6, 1564-1572, DOI: [10.1080/13562517.2025.2488496](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2025.2488496)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2025.2488496>



Published online: 07 Apr 2025.



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POINTS OF DEPARTURE



Immanent and diffractive critique for higher education practices

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the concepts of *immanence* and *diffractive* might generate alternative critical practices in higher education. Expanding on our previous paper entitled ‘Immanent critique and diffractive reading’ [Bozalek, V., and N. Romano. 2023. Immanent and diffractive critique in scholarship and publication. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriStaL)* 11, no. si1: 1–18], we examine the resonances between immanence and diffraction to expand the discussion on why we believe that conventional notions of critique have ‘run out of steam’ [Latour, B. 2004. Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical inquiry* 30, no. 2: 225–248]. While Cartesian metaphysics assumes the existence of discrete individual entities with inherent properties or characteristics, immanence and diffraction are based on a relational ontology in which entities, whether human, non-human or more-than-human, do not pre-exist, but come into being through relations. We think-with theorists who use a relational ontology and practice an immanent diffractive critique, to explore how criticality might materialise differently in academic practices. In particular, we focus on the conditions of possibility for immanent diffractive critique, how it is an affirmative response-able attunement and decolonising practice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 October 2024
Accepted 11 March 2025

KEYWORDS

Immanent diffractive critique; affirmative response-able attunement; conditions of possibility; decolonising practice

Introduction

Critique, criticality and being critical are concepts and practices that are notoriously difficult to describe, as noted by Lockett and Bhatt (2024) in their Point of Departure piece, written as a provocation for the call for papers of this special issue of *Teaching in Higher Education (TiHE)*. The elusive quality of critique and criticality has also been a concern for the journal *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriStaL)* with which we are involved as editors. In 2022, *CriStaL* published a special issue on criticality, where we contributed a paper entitled ‘Immanent critique and diffractive reading’ (Bozalek and Romano 2023).

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In this paper for *TiHE*, we extend the discussion on why we believe that conventional notions of critique have ‘run out of steam’ (Latour 2004, 1), by delving deeper into how the concepts of *immanence* and *diffraction* might generate alternative critical practices in higher education. Immanence and diffraction are based on a relational ontology, which rejects a Cartesian metaphysics as it assumes the existence of discrete individual entities with inherent properties or characteristics. A relational ontology is predicated on the idea that entities, whether human, non-human or more-than-human, do not pre-exist, but rather emerge through relations. Furthermore, a relational ontology foregrounds the notions of entanglement and indeterminacy, and sees ethics, ontology, and epistemology as inextricably intertwined (referred to as ethico-onto-epistemology by Barad (2007)).

The paper is structured in the following way: To begin, we elaborate on the concepts of immanence and diffraction, indicating how they offer alternative ways of doing critique in higher education. We then look at the ethico-onto-epistemological conditions of possibility that may be discerned through immanent diffractive critique. We consider how immanent diffractive critique requires the cultivation of an affirmative responsive attunement. Finally, we consider how immanent diffractive critique might contribute to decolonising higher education academic practice, drawing on examples from the Global South.

Immanence

Immanence finds its roots in the Latin concept ‘dwelling within’. A philosophy of immanence was first theorised during the sixteenth century by philosopher Baruch Spinoza who proposed a one-world monist ontology in which everything exists/happens/becomes within (Braidotti 2016). Thus, monism is the belief that the universe, be it God or nature, is made up of a single infinite unified substance that is expressed through the material world. Spinoza’s philosophy of immanence moves away from traditional philosophical positions grounded in binary relations that set up transcendent universalised ideals as the norm against which all else is measured. As there are no innate separations between binaries within immanent philosophy, the entanglement between poles draws attention instead to how binaries *dwelt within* each other, rather than stand apart as polar opposites (Hein 2021, 514). Conventional modernist practices of critique, based on Hegelian dialectical thinking (as used by Freire and Macedo 2005), for example, rely on Enlightenment dualistic logics of reason and rationality. Immanent critique, on the other hand, refuses notions of binary or dualistic either/or thinking, as well as any kind of transcendence or separation. By shifting emphasis away from striving to emulate ideals of perfection, in other words how something should be, an ontology of immanence focuses rather on ‘what might be and what is coming into being’ (St. Pierre 2019, 4). Building on Spinoza’s philosophy of immanence, Gilles Deleuze conceptualises the plane of immanence as a field of becoming in which everything both virtual and actual are encompassed. For Deleuze, immanence is immanent to itself, and the plane of immanence becomes an ‘always differentiating, always becoming, never static’ (St Pierre 2019, 5) relational field, out of which ongoing possibilities and potentialities ‘that ensures that the more-than remains included’ and leans towards the not-yet, rather than fixating on the ‘what is’, that takes form (Manning 2020, 20).

Given that immanence is immanent only to itself, criticality emerges within relations in the middle. A practice of immanent critique therefore attunes to the specific quality of these ongoing entanglements (Manning 2016, 29) by attending to what else might be possible in its becoming, rather than what is not. Such a practice circumvents Western enactments of epistemological violence and notions of lack that have neither efficacy, nor relevance to that which is, or who is, being critiqued (Ahmad 2011, 109). Moreover, immanent critique can offer a much-needed antidote to the intimidating effects of humanist critique that 'keeps snapping at the world as if the whole point of being and thinking is just to catch it in a lie' (Berlant and Stewart 2019, 42), that might be experienced as epistemologically damaging (Karen Barad interviewed by Juelskjær and Schwennesen 2012), or even sadistic (Massumi 2015). In immanent critique, the critic is also positioned as a participant within, rather than 'being outside the situation' (Massumi 2015, 71) and is therefore released from the role of transcendent authoritative outsider pronouncing judgment from a distance.

Diffraction

Barad, a queer theorist and feminist philosopher has developed a diffractive methodology. Diffraction is a physical phenomenon that is unique to wave behaviours including water, light, and sound. Through diffraction, waves can be in the same place at multiple times (temporal diffraction) and one wave can be in multiple places at the same time (spatial diffraction). Barad builds on Haraway's (2000) proposition of diffraction – as an alternative to reflection and reflexivity – which they see as representationalist, producing more of the same rather than paying attention to differences that matter. Representationalism is problematic because it assumes that the material world can only be accessed through human thought and language. A diffractive methodology questions assumptions that there are representations on the one hand, and separately existing entities on the other, awaiting representation. Instead, diffraction foregrounds performativity, as a form of non-representationalist thought, and sees the world and all that is part of it, as entangled. It would, therefore, not be possible to step outside of a situation, in order to view it from a distance, as conventional critique or reflection would require us to do. In other words, knowledge does not happen at a distance from the world, but through a direct, material and performative engagement, always part of the world.

A diffractive methodology assumes that the world is dynamic and indeterminate. Unlike uncertainty, which is based on epistemology (not knowing whether something is or is not), indeterminacy is ontological. Indeterminacy eschews the idea of individually existing determinate entities and proposes phenomena-in-their-becoming and the world as radically open to ongoing possibilities of being reconfigured (Barad 2007; Bozalek 2022).

Indeterminacy is thus an un/doing of identity that unsettles the very foundations of being and non-being. There is no static givenness, no determinately here/there, no fact of the matter where and when phenomena are, rather they are in a superposition of all possible positions and times. In a diffractive methodology, there is no pre-existing this or that to be compared or contrasted – rather it is suggested that the conditions under which this or that come to be constituted are what is needed to be investigated. As mentioned above, diffraction can be viewed as spatial or temporal. Spatial diffraction,

according to quantum physics, means that a particle can exist in two places at the same time, and in temporal diffraction, a particle can exist multiple times. Understood in this way, the past and future both bleed into the present. The notion of linear time, which is self-evident in representationalist forms of critique, is troubled in a diffractive methodology. Hence a diffractive methodology uses *historicity* to investigate boundary-making material-discursive practices that produce subjects and objects – it asks questions about the conditions of possibility, of what kinds of questions become intelligible, of what entanglements come to the fore, or not (Barad interviewed in Juelskjær, Plauborg and Adrian 2020).

In the next section, we propose an immanent diffractive approach to critique and criticality for doing higher education differently.

How might immanence and diffraction change critique in academia?

According to Barad (2007) a diffractive methodology involves a close and attentive reading of the fine details of a text. Diffraction assumes that texts, oeuvres, disciplines, theories, are always already entangled with one another (Barad and Gandorfer 2021). Diffraction does not set up one oeuvre, text, theory, or discipline against the other, comparing or contrasting them, or setting one up as a foil for the other, but rather reads the texts, theories, etc. *through* each other, looking for consequential resonances and dissonances. For example, in Barad's (2007) work, they¹ read the quantum physics of Niels Bohr through social science poststructural theorists such as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, in order to come to new and generative insights.

Critical reflection or reflexivity assumes an already constituted self-other, or subject and object (Pillow 2015). Thus, critical reflection or reflexivity might be used in research for questioning assumptions the self makes about the production of knowledge, or by conducting a comparison between two or more pre-existing theories or positions. In an immanent diffractive critique, subjects and objects do not pre-exist relations. Critique happens in the middle, from within, and it is impossible to look at something from a distant or transcendent viewpoint. The reverberations emanating from this view, spawn possibilities for doing critique differently from conventional Western critique. Rather than hingeing on universalised and generalised judgements that reinforce subject/object boundaries, immanent diffractive critique attends to the specificity and context in which the work is generated and how cuts between subject and object have been made. What matters, therefore, is how entities are entangled and how their relationships affect who, what and how they become.

An immanent diffractive critique involves dwelling within the specificity of a text. When the critic dwells within the inquiry as a participant, the work is freed from the burden of transcendent presuppositions and impositions of pre-existing methodologies that pin research to pre-determined outcomes (Hein 2021, 517). This allows new forms and modes of knowledge to be expressed. Manning also cautions against the suffocating effects of traditional modes of critique that are oblivious to how learning is a 'fragile enterprise' that is all too often derailed by 'questions that already have answers, or whose answers are close at hand, contained within preexisting academic discourse' (2016, 9).

Immanent diffractive critique avoids the limitations of pre-determined academic tropes that insist on a reproduction of knowledge framed through questions that produce pre-existing answers. Instead, it seeds possibilities and potentialities lodged within the inquiry in ways that are generous, imaginative, and inventive. In responding to whatever is presented, immanent diffractive critique, coming from the middle, or within, or being read through the other, leads to the ‘what else’ and the ‘not-yet-thought’ (Manning 2016). This resonates with Berlant and Stewart’s (2019, 42) comment on the limitations of evaluative critique described as ‘a mental habit of demagnetizing things for the sake of clarity’ and their call to ‘try remagnetizing and then think again’.

Ethico-onto-epistemological conditions of possibility for immanent diffractive critique

A fundamental aspect of immanent diffractive critique pertains to a process of accounting for how ethico-onto-epistemologies come to be formed. Recall that an immanent diffractive critique eschews the idea of a pre-existing givenness of the world, proposing instead that the world is dynamic and indeterminate, and also open to iterative reworking and becoming. This allows for ‘an undoing of the conventional notions of ontology and an undercutting of the colonizing epistemic impulse to give over what the world is’ (Barad and Gandorfer 2021, 16). Such an immanent diffractive practice requires attentiveness to how agential cuts produce specific material-discursive conditions of possibilities, through simultaneous enactments of inclusions and exclusions. In addition, this means taking account ‘of the (material-discursive) conditions of possibility in their historical-social-political-(natural)cultural contingency’ (Barad 2014, 187 fn.63).

The conditions of possibility are not external to, but very much part of the enactment of immanent diffractive critique. In other words, the agential cuts themselves are part of the analysis informing immanent diffractive critique. For example, art history pedagogies that seek to engage in an immanent diffractive critique of the western canon pay attention to the fine details of how western thinking is always already sedimented in art history’s historicity (2). By engaging with these cuts and how they matter, a movement beyond representational thinking towards ‘getting underneath thought and thinking thinking otherwise’ is activated (Barad and Gandorfer 2021, 20).

Immanent diffractive critique as affirmative, response-able attunement

For Barad (2014), a diffractive reading is a form of affirmative engagement of being reworked by, and reworking patterns of mattering or what matters. This means that in immanent diffractive critique, the reader is affected by the text, as well as affecting it in meaningful ways. This has resonance with Deleuze (2020) who refers to immanent critique as the capacity to affect and be affected through encounters. Rather than judging a piece of work as something that is inherently good or bad, an immanent diffractive critique draws out the potential of the work, its more-than and what it might yet become. This requires an attunement to what Manning (2016, 37) refers to as the ‘incipient activity summoning intensities towards a coming to expression’. Unlike Hegelian dialectics that relies on contradiction and opposition as the basis of critique, Nietzschean

affirmation neither seeks to counter nor accept what is seen as given (Deleuze 2006). Affirmation is aligned with the points of inflection where the form of experience within the event has not yet emerged (Manning 2016). For Nietzsche, affirmation should be distinguished from what he terms ‘reactivity’. Reactivity is an interpreting, judging stance, examining what is, whereas affirmation requires an affective attunement, a dwelling within, rather than a ‘peering in from the edges’ (Manning 2016, 202). Attunement is also a form of responsiveness or response-ability (the ability to respond) that requires the cultivation of attentiveness through care-full and sensitive listening. For example, an affirmative review would not focus on the givenness of a manuscript, but rather dwell within its potential, and in so doing, seed new ways of enhancing the capacity to invent, experiment and speculate with the text. When this happens, critique becomes a mode of encounter that sparks ‘a new set of relations’ ‘where ‘what if?’ becomes ‘what else?’’ (Manning 2016, 202).

Immanent diffractive critique as decolonising practice

Conventional forms of critique pose challenges, but more intensely for scholars in the Global South. In this section, we explore how immanent diffractive critique offers potentialities for decolonising higher educational academic practices. We consider how such critique resonates with the disease that Black and Global Southern decolonial scholars experience with regard to conventional critique and what they propose in its place. Examples of such alternatives to critique from Global South and Black perspectives are Canham and Musila (2024) openness and generosity, Glissant’s (1997) notions of opacity and refusal, and Harney and Moten’s (2013) practice of *study* in the undercommons.

Canham and Musila (2024) reflect on how African and other marginalised scholarly communities in the Global South experience frustration working in the ‘publish-or-perish’ culture of the ‘publishing industrial complex’ (2024, 105). As editors of a special issue on writing, reviewing and editing from the Global South, they suggest sensitivity, openness to transdisciplinarity and generosity, and an ethics of opacity as alternative practices of critique. Thinking with these alternative practices of critique is useful for thinking about how an immanent diffractive critique might become a decolonising practice in higher education.

In his critique of the alleged transparency of Eurocentric knowledge, Glissant puts forward opacity as a strategy that refuses the scopic colonial gaze and logics on which the modern university is founded (Bozalek and Zembylas 2023). Rather than cement knowledge as fixed and universalised, immanent diffractive critique uncovers iterative sedimentations of knowledge, revealing how texts dwell within each other, and how they can be read diffractively through each other, gleaning resonant patterns of difference that we sense but do not necessarily see. Similarly, Canham and Musila liken opacity to a practice of care that is generative of mutual learning and curiosity in the process of reviewing. They explore ‘what might be made possible when we do not insist on transparency, ... [seeking] ... to respect and to work productively with our differences’ (2024, 113).

Harney and Moten’s (2013) practice of study, which they describe as ‘a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you’ is helpful

for immanent diffractive critique, in that it encourages thinking otherwise. For them study is ‘what you do with other people’ in the undercommons, it is a speculative practice (2013, 10). In other words, the study does not begin in the classroom nor is it limited to the university, it is ‘already going on’ (2013, 113), as diffraction is always already happening through different spaces and times. For Harney and Moten, text becomes ‘a social space [...] where the text is open enough that instead of being studied, it actually becomes the occasion for study’ (2013, 109), where, as with a practice of immanent diffractive critique, authoritative, and hierarchical distancing is rejected. Instead, they posit the time-space of study as an invitation for people to ‘take turns doing things for each other or for the others, and where you allow yourself to be possessed by others as they do something’ (2013, 109). Like immanent diffractive critique, the study also refutes both the subject and object of study, beginning in the inbetween as a productive location of engagement.

An example of such an immanent diffractive decolonising pedagogy from the Global South can be found in Romano (2021) that offers an account of how South African design students draw and write with the ghost of Saartjie Baartman. The students’ artworks manifest a ‘frequency of feeling [as they are] drawn into the vibrational charge’ of the Baartman’s ghost (Canham and Musila 2024, 32). In a series of lessons structured around the construction of the Venus figure in Western art history and how the black female body is positioned as less than human in the canon, students write to the ghost of Baartman and Baartman writes back. They then make an artwork as an act of visual redress in which they touch upon opacity in ways that centre indigenous knowledges without re-inscribing the obliterating Eurocentric effects of the western canon. The process is important because the students access the canon through Baartman’s ghost and come to recognise how the sedimented patterns of difference not only undo the hegemony of the canon but echo Baartman’s powerful refusal of the European racialised gaze. When encountering students’ artworks, careful, and attentive attunement nurtures compassionate and response-able pedagogies in which artefacts are not objects to be judged as good or bad in relation to the canon. This offers an occasion for response-able wit(h)-nessing (Ettinger 2001) of students’ work, and ignites a compassionate ethical response towards the specificity of the work and its potential, rather than conventional judgement at a distance (Romano 2021).²

Conclusion

The paper has argued that an immanent diffractive approach to critique is generative in the following ways. Firstly, it troubles the notion of binary or dualistic either/or thinking, which is implicit in conventional modernist practices of critique. Secondly, by making visible the terms of engagement and conditions under which knowledge is constructed through sedimented intra-actions, immanent diffractive critique foregrounds that knowing, becoming and doing are inextricably intertwined in relations that matter. Thirdly, rather than diagnosing what is lacking and critiquing what is wrong, an immanent diffractive critique prioritises potentialities and possibilities through what Manning (2020) refers to as the ‘more-than’ and ‘what else’. Fourthly, immanent diffractive critique is dependent on the cultivation of an affirmative response-able attunement and wit(h)nessing of the work at hand. Finally, we note that although immanent diffractive

critique takes time and effort and is generally a form of unpaid labour (Canham and Musila 2024), we believe it prizes open potentialities for thinking otherwise within current debates on decolonising higher educational academic practices.

Notes

1. Barad uses the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’.
2. The neologism wit(h)nessing undoes self/other associations of witness (Pollock 2022, 445) and highlights instead how critique enacts a relational with-ness rather than separateness.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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