

Economies of Childcare, Debates Over Matter, and the  
Discursive Illegitimacy of an Educational Philosophy of  
the Nursery: Re-reading Irigaray after Butler

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Nothing, in fact, is less common and less communicable, and therefore more securely shielded against the visibility and audibility of the public realm, than what goes on within the confines of the body.

— Hannah Arendt<sup>1</sup>

What I would propose ... is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.

— Judith Butler<sup>2</sup>

THE DISCURSIVE LIMITS OF THE NURSERY

Fifty years have passed since Hannah Arendt admonished that “politics is not like the *nursery*.”<sup>3</sup> Twenty years have passed since Susan Kontos called for the early childhood field to bring family child care “out of the shadows.”<sup>4</sup> In between these seemingly contradictory appeals, the economy of domestic care, hinging on the precarious intimate labor of women from the global South, has evolved into a major field of biopolitics.<sup>5</sup> With state educational policy, classroom pedagogy, educational ideals and values, and teacher-student identities and relationships becoming established as paradigmatic fields for philosophy of education, biopolitics of care become excluded *from* and *through* the territorialization of philosophy of education as a discipline. Bringing the nursery into the scenography of subjectification is meant as a double gesture that, on the one hand, turns the attention of philosophy of education to topics of biopolitics and, on the other hand, subjects to critique the field’s own disciplinarity.

To talk of the nursery is to talk of place and the *aporia* of place for philosophy in general and philosophy of education in particular. This essay reiterates Judith Butler’s deconstructive take on the irreducibility of matter and Luce Irigaray’s redoubling of *fort-da* against the Freudian scenography of the nursery. It points out that Butler’s attribution of essentialism to Irigaray’s articulation of maternal nursing evades Irigaray’s spectral articulation of the nursery. This discussion opens up possibilities for philosophy of education to forge new links with migration studies, gender studies, and studies on biopolitics by displacing frames of discourse that have become normalized in and through contemporary debates on care, migration, and new roles of the welfare state.

In the last pages of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt’s judgment strikes against the procedural rationality that Eichmann reiterates throughout his trial by articulating, *like* playing building blocks, the problems and solutions, procedures and proceduralities, of a sinister administration of death: “there still remains the fact that you have carried out, and therefore actively

supported, a policy of mass murder. For politics is not like the *nursery*; in politics obedience and support are the same” (*EJ*, 279, emphasis added).

Arendt’s “Judgment” is resumed here in order to dramatize and deconstruct the role played by her allusion to the “nursery” in exposing the relevance of the discursive banalization of evil to the social’s encroachment over the political. This deconstructive approach aims to bring forth the materialization of the nursery and also, in doing that, to render its matter (matter in its double sense, as materiality and as meaning) pedagogically, philosophically, and politically relevant. This amounts to bringing the nursery in discourse by, in Irigaray’s manner,

“reopening” the figures of philosophical discourse ... For example the “matter” from which the speaking subject draws nourishment in order to produce itself, to reproduce itself, the *scenography* that makes representation feasible, representation as defined in philosophy, that is, the architectonics of its theatre, its framing in space-time, its geometric organization, its props, its actors, their respective positions, their dialogues ... All these are interventions on the scene; they ensure its coherence so long as they remain uninterpreted.<sup>6</sup>

Butler concedes that Irigaray’s “reopening” of the figures of philosophical discourse” shows how binary oppositions “between bodies and souls or matter and meaning” are formulated “through the exclusion of a field of disruptive possibilities” (*BM*, 35). Butler, however, also detects in Irigaray’s re-materializing of philosophy’s scenography a privileging of the maternal as the paradigmatic figure of the body’s disavowal:

To claim, though, as Irigaray does, that the logic of identity is potentially disruptible by the insurgence of metonymy, and then to identify this metonymy with the repressed and insurgent feminine is to consolidate the place of the feminine in and as the irruptive chora, that which cannot be figured, but which is necessary for any figuration. That is, of course, to figure that chora nevertheless, and in such a way that the feminine is “always” the outside, and the outside is “always” the feminine. (*BM*, 48)

My deconstruction of Arendt’s exclusion of the nursery from the realm of politics reenacts the kind of “reopening” that Irigaray puts forward. This reopening is pursued not by defending the irreducibility of nursery on grounds of a pre-discursive and unmediated, idealist or somatic, maternal presence but rather by redoubling the nursery outside traditional metaphysical properties and showing how it partakes of both discursive and materializing processes.

Materializing the nursery in philosophy of education is not meant as “bringing in” discourse a materiality that is external to it and different in kind (that is, feminine and not masculine, an essence and not a discursive effect). Rather, it is meant as enabling the nursery to matter politically by enabling the nursery’s quivering in discourse. Jacques Derrida has many names for those places where the text undercuts itself by pulling itself apart: *supplement*, *trace*, *pharmakon*, and so on. “Hinge” (*la brisure*), articulated as “a single word for designating difference and articulation,”<sup>7</sup> is the Derridean term that I find most useful for destabilizing the coherent organization, spatial and conceptual, that Arendt bestows to the nursery through her catachrestic reference to that as the proper private *topos* for the “processes of life.” Contouring matter and scaffolding departures in a single place, through a single move, the nursery pushes both maternalism and matter’s aversion to a point of extremity where they undercut themselves.

In the sections that follow, I (a) re-enact Butler's critique of feminist discourses on the irreducibility of matter toward a critique of Arendt's dichotomy of *zoe* and *bios*, (b) restage Irigaray's investigation of maternal matter and point out that Butler's critique evades Irigaray's spectral articulation of the nursery, and (c) explain how this deconstruction of materiality creates new possibilities for philosophy of education to take a critical approach to frames of discourse that become normalized in and through biopolitics of care and academic debates on home-based child care.

THE NURSERY AS "INTERNAL EXCLUSION":  
INCLUDED IN THE FORM OF THE EXCEPTION

Arendt's reference to the nursery operates as a caution to the dangerous "indistinction"<sup>8</sup> between obedience (necessity) and support (choice), process and action, *zoe* and *bios*. The nursery belongs to the realm of *zoe* and should stay "there." At the same time, however, the nursery is displaced from its proper place, recited in a public place (that is, the fictional courtroom invoked by Arendt in passing judgment) and used as a pedagogical device in order to explain why Eichmann's engagement in the Final Solution amounted to committing crimes against humanity and not just carrying out procedures. What I am suggesting here is that the nursery matters for Arendt's philosophical pedagogics in a double way: it is invoked by Arendt as the essential condition of *life's preproduction* against which the difference of political *bios* must be preserved; at the same time, it is used in a figurative way in order to elucidate the reasoning behind the Judgment. This figurative use of the nursery both presumes and materializes in discourse the separable-ness of the nursery from the immanence of the home. In other words, the nursery is excluded from the political realm at the same time its figurative use assists the philosophical articulation of the difference between home and polis, life's matter and matters of polis.

What makes possible this philosophical figurative use of the nursery is the fact that it can be assumed that it is already other than home. To revert to the cosmological figures of Plato's *Timaeus*, the nursery partakes of pedagogical philosophizing in the same manner the *chora* partakes in the making of the forms: it enables the imprinting while not being able to take form itself and can be represented only through the means of illegitimate discourse.

THE NURSERY AS A MATERIALIZING PROCESSES:  
IRIGARAY'S SPECTRAL SCENOGRAPHY OF *FORT-DA*

Irigaray mimics Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysics of place and exposes their inability to think of life's becoming without territorializing the nursing of life through feminine metaphors of immobility, engulfment, and nurturing substrata (vessel, *ypodoche*, matrix). Her reading renders inoperative the dichotomies of nursing and action, matter and form, and elaborates the scenography, intersubjectivities and affects which are implicated in an enveloping kind of pedagogical agency.

Irigaray's stage for redoubling the platonic *ypodoche* ("receptacle"), undoing the poles of fixity and mastery, and opening up the nursery to a "process of

materialization” (Butler) is the Freudian scene of *fort-da*. Sigmund Freud analyzes the scene of little Ernst playing *fort-da* with his wooden reel as the paradigm for the child’s entry into symbolic order. Ernst throws his reel onto his mother’s bed where it disappears (“*fort*,” [gone], says little Ernst) and then, pulls the reel back in full visibility through the string that is tied to it (“*da*,” [here], says little Ernst): “As he did this (as he threw away his Spielzeug) he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out ‘o-o-o-o,’ accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction. His mother and the writer of the present account were agreed in thinking that this was not mere interjection but represented the German word *fort* (gone, far-away).”<sup>9</sup>

Irigaray re-reads the Freudian depiction of *fort-da* as a mother-child game of intersubjectivity rather than as a boy’s game of mastery. She does this not by vindicating the feminine as conditional for thinking matter and materializing but rather by temporalizing nursing and interjecting spacing into the scene (and into Freud’s text). It is through this spacing that an alternative scenography of nursing becomes signifiable. Paraphernalia depicted by Freud as marginal to Ernst’s play (threads, sheets, permeable membranes) and the spectrality of the room’s own materiality — which Freud’s scopophilic gaze reduces to, to cite Butler, “brute positivity” — become pivotal in the new scenography Irigaray sets up.

Irigaray notes how the importance of the gestures and movements has been neglected in the dis-embodied framing of the “patient” (little Ernst). In particular, she notes how Freud reduces the mother’s nursing role to that of, to rephrase Irigaray through Butler, “slate awaiting an external signification” (*BM*, 31): “it is with a gesture of the hand and arm, accompanied by certain spoken syllables, that the little boy masters the absence of his mother and is thus able to enter the symbolic universe”<sup>10</sup> The articulation of absence/presence is made possible through the temporality of a relationship with the other. “She” participates in the scene of *fort-da* neither as a shadow nor as a nurturing placenta. She speaks *to* little Ernst and *for* little Ernst. When the only language he can produce is a “long-drawn-out ‘o-o-o-o,’” she is *already* there ready to bestow meaning and force to his gestures, clothe his sounds with words and not just stuff his throat with food.

How matter/*mater* comes to support *fort-da* — the mother’s speech, the sheets of the bed, the contiguity between his thread and the fabric of the bed (her bed?) — can be understood by theorizing nursing as a process of materialization. Irigaray notes that Freud’s assumption that Ernst is playing *fort-da* with his own crib or bed might as well be wrong. It is possible that he is playing *fort* with his mother’s or his parents’ high bed and that is where, partly, pleasure comes from rather than from the control of his reel: “[Children] love to climb out of the bed when they like, especially if the bed is rather high and difficult to climb down from. It seems to me that little Ernst’s pleasure comes in part from this” (*SG*, 30). Around and between the fully transparent veil that covers the crib (presence of the mother) and the curtain behind which little Ernst’s throws the reel (absence of the mother) Irigaray’s scenography unfolds like layers of semi-transparent membranes. It is this layering that brings out of matter the spectrality of materialization. It is also this spectrality that differentiates

the nursery from both mirror and matrix, making the binaries disappearance and presence, mother-as-engulfing and mother as mastered object inoperable:

Freud does not seem to care about the nature or texture or indeed the color of this veil. Apart from the veil and the reel he has nothing to say about any of the things that *ensure the return* — how they are located in reference to the child, the presence or absence [already] in the room or the house of the main actors in the play. He has nothing to say about what properties in the veil make the *going-return* possible. (SG, 30)

But what that enables little Ernst's playing with the reel involves more than a spatial spectrality. It also involves a spectral temporalizing of matter/*mater*. Little Ernst's throwing and pulling back of the reel, his giving vent to that "long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o'," his accompanying of that long "o-o-o-o" with interest, his sharing of that interest and satisfaction with his present/absent mother, his mother's deferring of her identification of his "o-o-o-o" as interjection and her "throwing" of a projected meaning of *fort*, all gestures implicate an awaiting and a temporal, affective economy of hope. This affective economy unfolds in tandem with a temporalized intersubjectivity.

How much does Freud really care for little Ernst, turning him to his own reel that he [Freud] throws and pulls back as he [Freud] instrumentalizes his "body" [Ernst's] to develop his [Freud's] theory of instincts? Freud's "patient," the matter/*mater*'s child, and the host of Irigaray's visit in the nursery are frames that connote different kinds of affective economy. Little Ernst hardly becomes a protagonist, notwithstanding a "body that matters," in Freud's text. For Freud, the analyst, the case of "Little Ernst" is only a parenthesis to his theory of instincts. For Irigaray, the nursing philosopher, Ernst's play is the host for a new genealogy of the nurse-child relationship. By hosting *fort-da* as a story rather than a scene, Irigaray transforms it from a Freudian monologue to a polyphonic text where various voices can be heard, various gestures can be anticipated, and various shades of disavowed materiality enter the realm of discourse.

#### THE DEMATERIALIZATION OF THE NURSERY IN BIOPOLITICS OF CHILDCARE

Irigaray's scenography of the nursery and her story of *fort-da* troubles Arendt's exception of the nursery from the domain of politics (*EJ*) in a similar way Butler's opening up of matter to multiple meanings troubles Arendt's co-opting of the Aristotelian concepts of *oikos* and *polis*. Whereas the restriction of the processes of life within the realm of *oikos* is authenticated phenomenologically through the articulation of the private as clandestine — "the sacredness of this privacy was like the sacredness of the hidden" (*HC*, 62) — the separation of action from the necessities of life is established prohibitively through a mandate that masquerades its aversion for the body behind the noble ambiance of Aristotelian remembrance: "No activity that served only the purpose of making a living, of sustaining only the life process, was permitted to enter the political realm" (*HC*, 25 and 37). Anything "economic," related to the life of the individual and the survival of the species, was a "non-political," a "household affair by definition," and had to be strictly excluded from the *bios politikos*, the realm of freedom. By warding off the twin dangers of expediency and process in order to protect the autonomy of action, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin argues, Arendt also sought to divorce it from all motives, purposes, antecedent

conditions, and consequences, eventually “banishing justice” from her vision of the political.<sup>11</sup>

The exclusion of the processes of life (and of the concerns about forms of injustice that serve to master the necessities of life) from the realm of politics carries significant political ramifications for how we perceive respect and care for humanity in an epoch of liquid modernity. In liquid times, to cite Zygmunt Bauman, “it is now left to the individuals to seek, find and practice individual solutions to socially produced tools and resources that are blatantly inadequate to the task.”<sup>12</sup> However, Bauman’s de-gendered diagnosis of “inadequate tools” and “tasks” (and this is where Irigaray’s critique on masculine discourse remains pertinent) fails to address the gendering of “tasks” and “solutions”, “liquidity” and “privatization.” Despite the liquidation of public responsibility, “tasks” pertaining to nursing — and we have to concede that the term “tasks”, unlike Arendt’s terms “endlessness” and “ever-recurring”, falls short of doing justice either to “high-dependency care”<sup>13</sup> and “affective labour”<sup>14</sup> — continue to be carried out “adequately” through a biopolitics of care. Biopolitics at the level of state governmentality<sup>15</sup> operate in tandem with biopolitics of home management<sup>16</sup> to provide an informal economy of flexible care and a clandestine intimate economy of racial aversion that work together to secure the sustainability of the nursery. Butler’s critical reading of Irigaray becomes theoretically and politically crucial here.

The economy of flexible care labor, that is, matter/*mater* perceived as raw material to acquire the desired form in the matrix of the household, is served by intersecting processes of the racial and gender subjection of precarious others. The racialization of intimate labor is intrinsically related to the nursery’s imprinting as female nature. Butler’s critique of Irigaray’s privileging of the maternal *chora* is mis-targeted because Irigaray attributes discursive primacy to the gendering of the feminine’s exclusion from discourse but not pre-discursive primacy to the mother’s nursing. Further, Butler’s argument that Irigaray’s feminization of matter’s exclusion excludes other bodies is politically coarse. In politics, gendering, racialization, governmentality, and psychic powers of aversion are inextricably intersecting axes in precarious life’s<sup>17</sup> subjection.

The encroachment of the social over the political that Arendt exposes in *The Human Condition* now takes up the form of a biopolitical encroachment of the social over the private. This can be seen in the restructuring of family childcare, which includes a joined deregulation and re-regulation of the nursery. This includes a number of processes:

- a. The female trouble for/of care is increasingly privatized and increasingly racialized as it is becoming privatized. Households in the United States, Europe, and other privileged zones of the “first world” are not looking to employ nannies with flexible schedules but rather looking to incorporate flexible “domestics.”
- b. The sustainability of the western model of “intimate life” is secured through the global restructuring of both the care economy and the intimacy

of the home. The proper “darkness” that Arendt bestows to the home comes to naturalize the racial rationality that now regulates the productivity of the global nursery. The racialization of the nursery implicates two processes of dematerialization of other bodies. First, flexible care provided increasingly by migrant women, mostly women of color from the Global South, belongs to the immaterial kind of labor. Second, the private sphere’s intimacy is racially restructured as the private is transformed into a belligerent zone due to the perceived intrusion of the “other” other woman. (The global nanny is othered as the “master” mother’s cast out burden of “nursing nature” but also other-ed through intimate processes of subjection.) Against this other other woman, the household recuperates its intimacy by enclosing her into a clandestine zone of bare life (Giorgio Agamben) *within* the household.

c. Governmental panic over the increase of irregular childcare and parents’ increased dependence on migrant care intensify the militarization and securitization of intimate life. The training and surveillance of informal carers seems to be more effective in normalizing new forms of governmentality and rituals of regularization than actually improving the quality of care.<sup>18</sup> Policies of family care professionalization polarize further the persistent division between normalized categories of pedagogically oriented scaffolding (provided by qualified carers) and care for bare necessities (provided by unqualified carers/surrogate mothers), spiritual and menial forms of care, maternal nurturance and succor (“spiritual domesticity”) in opposition to the tedious physical tasks of reproductive labor (“menial domesticity”).<sup>19</sup> The polarization of these dichotomies recovers the kinds of the metaphysical thinking over matter (feminization of the irreducibility of matter and phantasmatic dematerialization of masculinity), which, as Butler shows, carries a violating sense of “subjection.”

#### CLOSING REMARKS

“There are good reasons,” writes Butler with regards to Irigaray’s persistent use of the maternal as a metonymy for matter that exceeds matter, “to reject the notion that the feminine monopolizes the sphere of the excluded.” Why do we have to assume, she argues, that it is always the maternal *chora* that has to be disavowed for the autogenetic form/matter coupling to thrive? She writes:

Indeed, to enforce such a monopoly redoubles the effect of foreclosure performed by the phallogocentric discourse itself, one which “mimes” its founding violence in a way that works against the explicit claim to have found a linguistic site in metonymy that works as disruption. After all, Plato’s scenography of intelligibility depends on the exclusion of women, slaves, children, and animals, where slaves are characterized as those who do not speak his language, and who, in not speaking his language, are considered diminished in their capacity for reason. This xenophobic exclusion operates through the production of racialized Others, and those whose “natures” are considered less rational by virtue of their appointed task in the process of laboring to reproduce the conditions of private life. (*BM*, 48)

Butler is right in pointing out the limits and limitations of an opening up of Irigaray's nursery to a radical reading of materialization. The privileging of the metonymic link between women and matter does not help us to also reveal how other Others are excluded. The privileging of the nursery, however, as a stage for exposing the phantasmatic dematerialization of masculinity, provides also the spatial geographics for understanding how racial biopolitics and biopolitics of infantilization, gender regimes and migration regimes can be applied to the same single bodies. If the "hidden matrix of the politics in which we all live," to dare a displacement of Agamben's paradigm of biopolitics, is not the camp but the nursery, philosophy of education faces a new field of intellectual and political responsibilities. Reconciling *bios* with *zoe* might be one way to respond to the first; re-turning the nursery from biopolitics back to politics might be one way to respond to the latter.

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1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 97. This work will be cited as *HC* in the text for all subsequent references.
  2. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), 9. This work will be cited as *BM* in the text for all subsequent references.
  3. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 279 (emphasis added). This work will be cited as *EJ* in the text for all subsequent references.
  4. Susan Kontos, *Family Child Care: Out of the Shadows and into the Limelight* (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1992).
  5. Biopolitics could briefly be defined as techniques with which power strategizes and utilizes life in the name of life necessity: the right to kill becomes aligned in proximity to the new necessity to "make live"; see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), 137; and Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, trans. David Macey (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 256.
  6. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 74–75 (emphasis in original).
  7. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 65.
  8. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 122. By reclaiming matter from its identification with "brute positivity" and by re-opening materiality to its multiple meanings, Butler is also reclaiming the Aristotelian meaning of *zoe* from its catachrestic reading by Agamben as "bare life." This essay does not pick up on these possibilities as the reading of Arendt's conceptual distinctions remains, strategically, catachrestic.
  9. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle 1920*, trans. James B. Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVIII, ed. James B. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 1–64.
  10. Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University, 1993), 96. This work will be cited as *SG* in the text for all subsequent references.
  11. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (1981): 340.
  12. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 14.
  13. Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999).



14. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008); and Jayne Osgood, *Narratives from the Nursery* (London: Routledge, 2012).

15. The causal framing of the care economy — outsourcing care as an effect of a withering welfare state's indifference “to the needs of women” — sidesteps the biopolitical restructuring of the state's role. As Fiona Williams eloquently argues, the state does have a role in constructing markets for care. For this discussion see “Trends in Women's Employment, Domestic Service and Female Migration: Changing and Competing Patterns of Solidarity,” in *Solidarity Between the Sexes and Generations: Transformations in Europe*, eds. Trudie Knijn and Aafke E. Komter (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2003). This is where Butler's queering of the bodily exclusions becomes crucial for analyzing the biopolitics of care. With the nuclear family perpetuating heteronormative kin relations and its naturalness being imagined as a retreat from state interference, intrusions of the “nanny state” into private life remain highly morally contentious.

16. Employers use national characteristics to indicate who they would like or not like in their homes, construing as positive employee qualities characteristics which are covertly racist: “‘caring’, ‘warm’, ‘docile’, ‘natural housekeepers’, ‘happy.’” See Bridget Anderson, “A Very Private Business: Exploring the Demand for Migrant Domestic Workers,” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 14, no. 3 (2007): 253.

17. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

18. Rebecca O'Connell, “Paperwork, Rotas, Words and Posters: An Anthropological Account of Some Inner London Childminders' Encounters with Professionalization,” *Sociological Review* 59, no. 4 (2011): 779-802.

19. Mignon Duffy, “Reproducing Labor Inequalities: Challenges for Feminists Conceptualizing Care at the Intersections of Gender, Race, and Class,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 1 (2005): 66–82.