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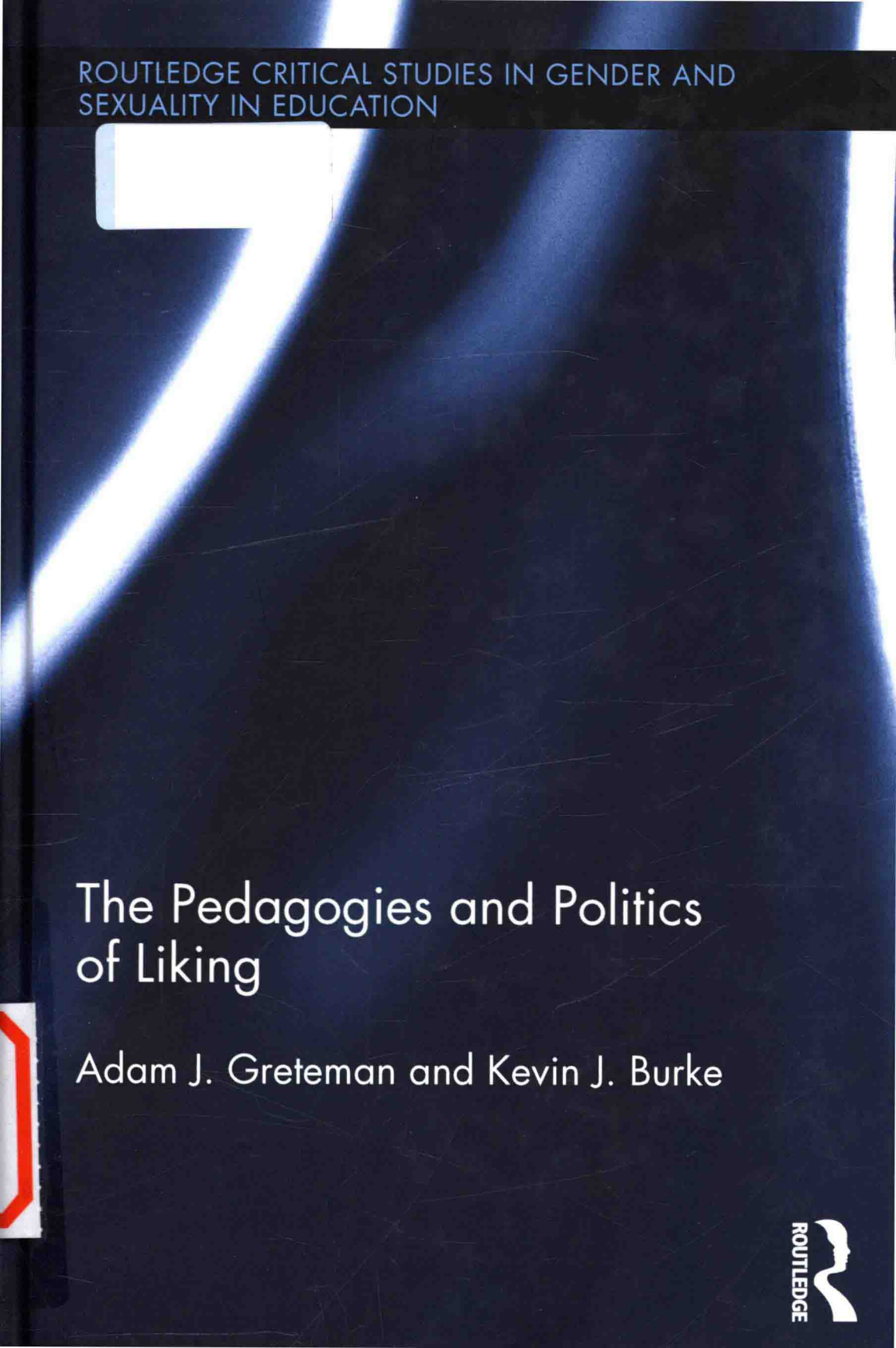

The Pedagogies and Politics of Liking

Adam J. Greteman and Kevin J. Burke

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The Pedagogies and Politics of Liking

This book explores the usage and significance of the word "like" across a wide range of disciplines, focusing in particular on its influence in education and pedagogy. From the advent of the "like button" on Facebook to the common verbal tic, liking has become an integral part of our everyday lives. By drawing on feminist, queer, and other critical traditions, the authors evaluate this phenomenon in order to interrogate its history, its linguistic function, its role in labor and economics, and its ties to, and separation from, religion. As the notion of "like" becomes more and more ubiquitous, this critical volume demonstrates the need to consider like, liking, and likability when thinking about the institutions that impact us daily.

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To our mothers, who continue to accompany us in the difficult work of liking the world in which we live

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1 On the Ubiquity of Like

> How can we be better at liking? It feels as though we have no choice—as though liking and not liking just happen to us. I don't really understand this business. I'd love to hear discussion about the mystery of liking—the phenomenology of liking.
>
> —Peter Elbow (2000, p. 449)

The 21st century has started off, it seems, as a century of liking. We cannot really do anything or go anywhere without being asked to "like" something or someone in various iterations of social media. If we like a product, we might be rewarded with a coupon, just as we might be liking away our right to legal recourse in the event of a defective product, like it or not (Strom, 2014). If we like a friend's profile picture we are showing our appreciation for, perhaps, their beauty or style or political views. If we like a status update about the death of a family member, we've expressed a rather odd form of condolence. That is, up until the spring of 2016 when Facebook added other reactions, after sites like Yik Yak allowed one to signal one's dislike by downvoting posts and Facebook piloted its own Dislike button in 2015 (see Goel, 2015; Stinson, 2016). To "like"—at least on Facebook—offers us ways of expressing things to others. Liking is an action that shows support to others while also allowing others to support us. To be liked and to like is to feel something in some way. It is, as our word choice implies, rather amorphous and undefined, yet strangely comforting and affirming. That action of pushing the "like" button acts on others and us in a seemingly social way. We socialize through liking, but we also do a great deal more. In the current book, we explore this four-letter word and what it does for and with us in the 21st century.

Gehl (2013) argued:

> The Like button is a logical extension of the studies and practices developed by marketing since the 1990 ARF [Advertising Research Foundation] study and the *USA Today* Ad Meter system which, after all, have asked us to tell them what we like for decades.
>
> (para. 13)

No longer do marketers have to do the work they once did, for the consumer will do the work for them through their social uses of the web. Marketers now engage the information differently; information given to them through the social buttons that illustrate what particular consumers *like* allow for tailored ads. Like becomes here action and affect. However, we ponder why like has come to occupy such a place in our 21st-century economy. Gehl suggested:

> At first it seems like one of those accidents of popular culture, where an arbitrary boardroom decision eventually dictates our everyday language. In fact, one history of Facebook's Like button presents it in these very terms: Facebook engineer Adam Bosworth noted that the button began as an Awesome button but was later changed to Like because *like* is more universal. If it had stayed Awesome, perhaps we'd be talking about an economy of Awesomes binding together the social Web and we would sound more like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles than Valley Girls.
>
> (para. 2)

In Gehl's explanation, we sound like Valley Girls—rather than a different popular culture object—due to a somewhat arbitrary decision that sought a universal form of expression that has, in many ways, become universal. Individuals across the globe are *liking* things all the time as Facebook users who are consuming everything from BuzzFeed quizzes, YouTube videos, and other seemingly inane things to more "cultured" things like NPR podcasts or *New York Times* op-eds. All of them, however, be they "popular" or "elite," are things that are liked and exchanged for any number of reasons by consumers.

Yet, as Kristofferson, White, and Peloza (2014) illustrated, liking something on Facebook might not be as social as initially thought. In fact, they argue, liking may lead to less "prosocial" action. Liking might allow us to feel in a particular way, but may not prompt us to do something (or much of anything beyond the click of a button) about such feelings. When liking a cause on Facebook, we run the risk of becoming, quite easily, "slacktivists," whereby we are able to appear "down for the cause" but are not inspired to act beyond mouse clicks. Slacktivism, Kristofferson et al. argued, is "a willingness to perform a relatively costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change" (p. 1149). We like the idea of change, it seems, but cannot commit to doing more than "liking" it conceptually, at our desks or on our phones navigating our everyday.

Change, meaningful change, is needed on many fronts—from addressing rising economic inequality, to engaging the systemic racism revealed again and again with the killing of unarmed black boys and men, to eradicating the transphobia, homophobia, and many other forms of "phobia" that

continue to cut short too many lives. We need change and merely liking op-eds, cover stories, art openings, blog posts, and other forms of media about such topics is not, we think, enough. We like the idea of change; we really do. But, perhaps liking is inadequate; perhaps it is necessary as well. We might say and hopefully illustrate throughout this book that as we move to like—things, others, ourselves—through the mediated spaces of social media, that we need serious inquiries into the politics and pedagogies of liking. Liking may not be enough. It may also be more than enough at times. Liking, we believe, offers something important and complicated and enjoyable. And therefore "like" needs investigating. It may not be enough all the time online, but it may be enough, in some regards, to live in, encounter, and understand our worlds. Following Peter Elbow (2000) in our epigraph, we explore how we might get better at liking—either critiquing it or critically utilizing it beyond the click as an affect and form of relating to others. In order to move in that direction, we need to take the concept, the word, more seriously but not so much so that it loses its playful potential. Like Elbow, we don't yet fully understand this business of liking and so seek to offer a conversation about the ubiquity of like as it emerges, operates, and is taken up in various ways in our contemporary physical and digital worlds.

We began such work thinking that we should develop a theory—perhaps theories—of liking (Burke & Greteman, 2013). Yet, upon further reading, writing, discussing, and researching we have grown weary of theory, though not because we dislike theory. We both like theory very much and find it necessary in navigating significant parts of our professional and personal lives. However, theory seems strangely at odds with the ubiquity of like. Like, in all its iterations—uses, and abuses—provides us, as we will show throughout this book, a constellation of things that cannot render or be rendered as (ever only) "theory." Rather, we come at liking as a possible toy that can be used to play with happenings in the 21st century. Like Play-Doh, the word like becomes malleable to do and investigate things happening in the world around social media, diversity, teaching, and relationships. Less an overarching theory or a theoretical concept, like strikes us as useful to do things that are simultaneously playful and critical.

To begin this task of playing with like, we work at decentering the focus on love, hate, and care as constructed ideals and ideas for human relationality across disciplines and media. Such decentering, we have found, is necessary because liking has long been taken as a giving up on or a not quite getting to, in particular, "love." Drawing from James Alison (2003), we seek the "shape of a new story" through a lens that attends seriously to the notion that, for example, "I love you so I want to change you," as Alison puts it, is damaging (p. xi). Liking, we propose, offers a different, unexplored pedagogy and politics with ethical implications. And this proposal is not aimed at offering a solution to perennial problems, but provides an alternative way to engage such problems and perhaps new words to do things with in the 21st century. Such work is partly the work of imagination—to notice

like in the everyday and imagine how it can be played with to make sense (or nonsense) of the world. Such work is also the work of critique, as we will more fully explore in the next chapter, to provide ways to gather new things within the academy to play with and do the work—diverse work to be sure—that needs to be done.

Our work is indebted to feminist, queer, critical, and poststructural theories that allow us to look at both the material conditions implicated in "liking" as well as the discursive challenges liking presents. Liking, we will illustrate, impacts our material lives and worlds; for instance, being liked as a job candidate in the Academy can secure the ever-elusive tenure-track position. Liking is also embedded in particular discourses as noted in the ever-expanding discourse of social media and consumerism. Because of like's ubiquity—its long tenure as mere banality—social science is limited in its analyses of social phenomena (schooling, literature, relationality, economics, etc.) because of the long and interesting (though problematic) human focus on the importance of love, hate, and care. We are, in a sense, disciplined by these histories, but not necessarily in restrictive ways. There is room, in other words, at the margins of the conceptualization (long and labored as it is) of care and hate and love to suggest new concepts. These things—love, hate, and care—matter, of course, but in order to push at the edges of a new or newly interesting way of orienting to the world, we need to stop rehearsing the same arguments (Pinar, 2013). We'd like to try something new. So to eschew the language of love, hate, and care, we offer readings of "like" to see what *like* has to do with it and how liking, being liked, and other derivatives of like matter to our lives, our livelihoods, and our abilities to critically play under conditions that are challenging for various economic, political, environmental, and aesthetic reasons.

We are in the midst of a cultural moment that is permeated by liking. Because of this, thinking through this mostly untouched concept is apropos. This is a complicated moment, as we will show, because "like" as a word does a great many different things for us. It operates as a verbal placeholder—the linguistic tick—that . . . like . . . fills silent spaces . . . like . . . as we express ideas . . . like, you know. It operates as a seemingly less passionate feeling whereby we "like" something, but do not "love" it, as in "I like that sweater, but I just don't love it." It helps companies sell products. And it is central to having products sold to us seen notably in, for instance, Amazon's customized advertisements based on our search histories, products that are like those we have purchased or stumbled across, and things we have liked on Facebook. Like pervades our discussions, often without our knowing. Like's ubiquity is profound in the 21st century, even for its cloying character.[1] And we think because of this, "like" deserves critical and playful attention. This attention is not to decimate our "love" of liking or cause us to hate it for what it is doing to us. Nor is it to uphold "liking" as an entirely new thing that offers a panacea of new answers to

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