

Difference, Power, and the Limits of Openness

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Imperialism still hurts, still destroys and is reforming itself constantly.

— Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*

Girl, you can't never give up on love.

— Sonia Sanchez, *Homegirls and Handgrenades*

In her provocative address, Barbara Stengel provides a compelling account of how current sociopolitical and economic conditions combine with dominant social imaginaries to produce a landscape of uncertainty and anxiety. She perceptively portrays an environment in which “a rhythm of human life lived communally” does not translate into a deep sense of safety or comfort, and rather, leads to a proliferation of “the social condition of fear” and technologies of security and surveillance as its cure. Despite attempts to manufacture hysterical fear out of dynamics of uncertainty, Stengel implores us, as philosophers of education, to remain “so open it hurts.” She asks, “Where are the openings, the places where we ourselves stay open to narratives and possibilities that are confusing?” Momentarily, I will provide a sketch of a few of the particular places, spaces and narratives from which I gain inspiration, and, invite others to consider as alternative possibilities for education. First, allow me to offer a few words on my embodied (and quite visceral) response to the concept of “openness.”

I absolutely agree with Stengel that the contradictory conditions of contemporary life create a constant state of embodied excitation that gets mobilized into fear (and that as philosophers of education we might offer alternate possibilities). I especially appreciate the interest in an ethics of vulnerability that makes use of, and responds to the messy complexity of everyday life. In this way, I am a little cautious about the metaphor of openness in theorizing pedagogical relations given the classic and contemporary deployment of this discourse in political, financial, and social reform. A brief discussion of the historicity of the concept reveals a disjunction between openness as an ethical stance and the material effects and asymmetrical consequences for particular persons and groups. Specifically, an imperial logic of openness legitimate(d) Euro-American expansion, regulation and/or destruction of indigenous and/or local ways of being, living and learning. From the legacy of eighteenth-century frontier logic to the contemporary emphasis on “open/ing markets” as the neoliberal ticket for participation in transnational capitalism, one thing is certain: the price of “global development” is increasing disparities (economic, social, and political) between and among groups, communities, nation-states, and regions within Global North/South divisions. As many transnational, postcolonial, and indigenous scholars have argued, new technologies of “bioengineering” (a mix of discourses of social engineering and biopolitics) have rapidly developed for the expansion of corporate capital at the expense and destruction of multiple forms of life in particular places and spaces. (Put differently, some lives and experiences are granted worth if they are objectified, commodified, and made

available to those who are imagined to be leaders of tomorrow.) Caribbean scholar Sylvia Wynter aptly condenses the situation: there is a Colonial and Color line that divides between “life considered worth protecting” against that which is either undeserving or even necessary to be destroyed in the name of progress and Civilization. And the future. And Civilization’s future, even in the wake of insecurity and uncertainty.

Racialized colonial frameworks, embedded in centuries-long social institutions (including schooling) have transfigured the logic of openness into policies and practices of assimilation, surveillance, and regulation. Thus, schools (may) not only serve as sites of physical, emotional, and linguistic violence, they also function as an imaginary space where “some bodies become understood as the rightful occupants” through institutionalized practices of “stranger-making.”¹ As Tuhiwai Smith writes, “[I]mperialism still hurts, still destroys and is reforming itself constantly.” How might these insights inform an analysis of fear, the power of “difference as spectacle” and the possibilities of openness in pedagogical encounters?

For example, what if your body is the object of fear? What if your very presence reveals existing boundaries between the “us” and “them” of education? What if the legibility of your body not only “gives you away” as an outsider, but also reveals the implicit set of fear and desires around which education aims to “reform”: (the poster child of the school failer who is “pre-criminal”; the global intruder; the morally depraved body of sex and sin)? As Sara Ahmed notes, “Bodies stick out when they are out of place ... To stick out can mean to become a sore point, or even to experience oneself as being a sore point.”² What if we begin with the assumption that institutionalized schooling is fundamentally tied to “closing” or bounding of particular pasts as well as framing possible futures? How might we proceed given that education and schooling are tangled in the politics of “stranger-making” where “diversity talk” often serves to actually elide questions of power and privilege, especially in relation to race and racism.³ How might this framing reorient us to think about the possibilities and desirabilities of “openness” in formal pedagogical encounters?

George Yancy’s book, *Look! A White*, offers a critical phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of the (racialized) spectacle.⁴ According to Cris Mayo’s review:

Yancy shows what it feels like to point out a problem and to try to shift relations away from that problem. Shifting the narrative, one hopes, shifts too the sense of responsibility from his necessity of becoming a spectacle to problematizing the spectacles and absences caused by white supremacy — his gesture is the excessive wave toward the obfuscatory workings of whiteness. It isn’t easy to be a spectacle or to self-consciously decide to take on the position of raising the profile of one’s misrecognized state. Queers of all colors and inclinations have grappled with this problem of making a spectacle of themselves while also wanting accurate recognition and the justice that we think should flow from that ... The difficulty is avoiding the likely unavoidable problem of having an already established response to such spectacularity folding back on the rearticulated performance.⁵

Mayo suggests that the problem of recognition, (for example, articulating or claiming onto-epistemological space through processes of identification) will

necessarily subject the Subject to the (myriad) possibilities of misrecognition and spectacularization of selves through the stranger-making of disciplinary knowledges. Yet, like many critical and queer-of-color scholars argue, a race-centered critical pedagogy can attack the “densities of racism” through “serious play through embodiments and re-ritualizing responses to violence and insult” whether or not they generate better readings.⁶ Here I think of Troy Richardson’s work as particularly insightful on the crafting of responsible selves “open” to the demands of decolonization.⁷

Another model for understanding the race-based pedagogical relations as constituted by ethical and epistemological considerations, comes via Frank Margonis, in what he terms “tending neocolonial gaps.”⁸ Drawing from Gert Biesta and Gloria Ladson-Billings, Margonis suggests that generalizations about teachers and students in neocolonial contexts are absolutely critical to creating the conditions necessary for the “willingness to follow the flow of intersubjective play.” Margonis refers to this as the need to balance “knowledge about” with “learning from” individuals and groups in pedagogical relations.⁹

In the tradition of woman-of-color feminisms, these practices are known as “showing up,” *convivimiento*, *testimonio*, and story circles.¹⁰ These are communal pedagogical activities where teaching and learning are considered circuitous within a shared space of storytelling AND listening; collaboration and action. The same principles of minding the neocolonial gap imagined in the individual/dual/dialogic might apply — (for example, that there is intersubjective play made possible by through “knowledge about” and “learning from”). Within these traditions, it is made clear that coming together and learning involves risks, uncertainties, room for honoring multiple traditions and new imaginaries. The contemporary resurgence of First Nations activism known as Idle No More provides an excellent example of an emphasis on rhetorical and physical resistance. As Little Bear writes, “Decolonization as a tangible unknown leaves room for dialogue and for dissent, as well as for coming together to each contribute to one another’s shared visions and goals.”¹¹

In my experience, some of the most effective pedagogical relationships are formed in reaction to an event and a desire to take some form of action or “doing.” Along the way, however, participants are encouraged to analyze issues of power and difference through critical reflection of social practices that impact women’s lives. Furthermore, such spaces often involve identifying, discussing, and working through forms of trauma and violence whether they are institutionalized, structural, community-based, familial, or interpersonal. I participate in multiple such circles, some more successful than others, and by that I mean that WHEN conflict arises (not IF), there is room for disagreement, dissent, and sometimes even peaceful disbandment. Sometimes the psycho-social wounds are too deep to “overcome” differences or to try to build common bridges with “shared visions and goals.” I think that recognizing and respecting these cleavages and gaps is imperative for *imagining solidarity and alliances* in struggles against racism, heteronormativity, and colonization, and in the future, even if, or especially if “reciprocal dialogue” is unrealizable in the present. Though it may be difficult for us as philosophers trained in the arts of persuasion and

rhetoric, it may be important to consider the important “education” that occurs through the visual, creative, and performance arts that purposefully seeks to “touch” and “make” feeling and healing of an audience where the connection and effects are purposefully interpretive and multiple yet intangible and unknown.

In conclusion, just as I respect the invitation to be “so open it hurts,” I also want to honor the position of being “too hurt to remain open.” Moreover, I suggest that, like the core principles of indigenous, feminist, and decolonizing pedagogies, the beginning principles of self-determination, critical investment in collective forms of knowledge-production and praxis, can serve as some of the productive limits or boundaries in the necessary processes of recovery, healing, and perhaps even transformation of the aims, processes, and effects of this thing we call education. Because, as many radical queer women of color argue, whether poets or philosophers, even in the heat of anger, “Girl, you can’t never given up on love.”

1. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism, Diversity and Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2012), 2.

2. *Ibid.*, 41.

3. *Ibid.*, 61.

4. George Yancy, *Look, A White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

5. Cris Mayo, “Pedagogies of Spectacle,” *American Philosophical Association Newsletter* 12, no. 1 (2012): http://www.apaonline.org/APAOnline/Publication_Info/Newsletters/APAOnline/Publications/Newsletters/HTML_Newsletters/Vol12N1Fall2012/Black.aspx#Mayo_

6. *Ibid.*

7. Troy Richardson, “Between Native American and Continental Philosophy: A Comparative Approach to Narrative and the Emergence of Responsible Selves,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44, no. 6 (2012): 663–674.

8. Frank Margonis, “Tending Neocolonial Gaps,” in *Philosophy of Education* 2010, ed. Gert Biesta (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011), 70–78.

9. *Ibid.*

10. See, M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University, 2006); and Andrea Nye, “It’s Not Philosophy,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 107–115.

11. Quoted in Aman Sium, Chandi Desai, and Eric Ritskes, “Towards the ‘Tangible Unknown’: Decolonization and the Indigenous Future,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1, (2012): I–XIII.