

Reimagining Communities in Contact Zones

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The fourth and final issue in the 78th volume of *Philosophy of Education* is distinct from those preceding it in form as well as in content: eleven of the eighteen papers are responses to three recent books in the field of education, presented in the style of “author-meets-critics” panel discussions. The format (a familiar sight on the Philosophy of Education Society conference program) lends itself to a final reflection on the 2022 conference theme of examining Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of “contact zones,” which she describes as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.”¹ Considering the meeting between author and critics as a kind of contact zone in itself may help us discern another aspect of Pratt’s framework in this volume.

We begin with a question: in contact zones, what comes into contact? Previous issues looked at the contact zones encountered by teachers, at the affective and bodily experience of contact such as touch, and at the asymmetries of power that characterize the meeting of communities in contact zones. Common to all of them is the inherent difference of contact, touch, or meeting, which necessarily involves more than one. But that difference does not indicate the stability or certainty of the number one. Part of Pratt’s notion of contact zones is aimed at challenging the idea of communities in contact as “discrete, self-defined, coherent entities, held together by a homogeneous competence or grammar shared identically and equally among all the members.”² Rather, building upon (or even stretching) Benjamin Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities,” Pratt illustrates the constantly negotiated forms of relation that somehow—and sometimes—come to define a group. In other words, what comes into contact are imagined communities, entities that are not objective or utopian but imagined by their constituent members as well as by neighbours and others. Pratt’s invitation to theorize contact zones in order to “reconsider models

of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing” underscores that the way those communities are imagined affects the ways in which we relate to one another, and therefore to how we teach and learn.³

The first group of papers comes from an “author-meets-critics” panel in response to Kevin Burke and Adam Greteman’s 2021 book, *On Liking the Other: Subjects as Religious Discourse*. Burke and Greteman’s text considers the affective, educative, and ethical relations that emerge from liking one another—relations, they propose, that could diffuse the heightened tensions in a contact zone between religious and gender and/or sexuality identities in teacher education.

Barbara Stengel begins the responses from the belief, based on her own teacher education courses, that that tension can be mediated when the conditions exist for habitual recognition that extends to acknowledgement. While “liking” one another may not be philosophically robust enough to accomplish the task, as her fellow critics discuss in the papers to follow, Stengel argues that Burke and Greteman’s conception of liking still retains a practical value, which in turn suggests that “the ‘tension’ that seems to exist between queer and religious is itself manufactured rather than intrinsic,” and that “the quality of religious experience and the quality of queer experience might be understood as contrapuntal rather than . . . incompatible.”⁴ In this sense, Burke and Greteman’s deconstruction of the religious and queer through their discussion of liking helps us imagine a common ground within teacher education.

While Stengel adds the conditions of recognition and acknowledgement to liking, Ann Chinnery expresses concern for what an ethics of liking, and more particularly, of likeability, might demand beyond what the authors intended. Chinnery argues that the notion of liking, which she notes Burke and Greteman take from the Roman Catholic theologian James Alison, might have potential to “reframe the relations of education” according to nonhierarchical models as the authors claim, but it lacks the ethical dimensionality of Nel Noddings’ ethics of care and, more concerning for Chinnery, “puts an implicit burden on the other to be at least somewhat likeable.”⁵ Indeed, the focus on liking and likability can displace professional and pedagogical relations of respect and care

with personal ones, and thus change the basis of our relations—or the way we imagine them—to the perpetual disadvantage of the unliked or unlikeable other.

The final critique by Clarence Joldersma draws our attention further to what the reimagining of pedagogical relations through “liking” has displaced: Burke and Greteman’s move towards “liking” the other is also move *away* from “loving” the other. Reflecting on his own teaching practice at a private religious institution in Canada, Joldersma calls into question the limitations of loving by illustrating how the expansion of a “narrow idea of religious love to involve basic justice in community, especially for those who are on the margins of society,” can transform and even dissolve the binary between the religious and queer to precisely address the tension at the core of Burke and Greteman’s text.⁶ An expanded sense of religious love then imagines “human flourishing in inclusive ethical communities.”⁷

The section concludes with a further response from the authors, Greteman and Burke, who defend the power of liking as another means to imagine relations in teacher education, or as they put it, “an ethically open idea that is connected to, but possibly distinct, in generative ways, from loving, hating, and caring for the other.” Within the concrete context of teacher education, they argue, the generative potential of liking—and perhaps more importantly, our imaginings of it with and against other ideas—is worthy of further study. Greteman and Burke’s manner of defending their positions, moreover, embodies the less volatile ethic of liking by maintaining an eye to affinities as much as to argument. Despite tensions, there is something alike between authors and critics, in that they all still like one another. What emerges is a series of texts that helps us reconsider “the style in which [communities] are imagined” in teacher education, and by extension in teaching writ large, with (as Greteman and Burke hope for) a new language to describe theory and practice in education with a generous regard for “the queer and the religious in their simultaneity.”⁸

The next essay, and its response, emphasizes another facet of imagining and reimagining boundaries that are opened up by queer communities. In “Humility in Community: Uncertainty and Solidarity in Transgender Theory,” Cris Mayo advocates for relational humility (as per Vrinda Dalmiya) and com-

munity-based uncertainty as ethical and epistemic practices for responding to current attacks against transgender youth in schools. Humility is characterized by Mayo as open-mindedness toward others and doubt about one's own certainty. Relational humility is therefore the ability to build connections to how others think and feel and to form new knowledge that might very well shift one's pre-existing beliefs or assumptions.

In decisions surrounding transgender youth in schools, this means that educators and administrators ought to become more open and supportive toward those students who disrupt pre-existing models of gender that are reductive and exclusionary. Put another way, relational humility would enable teachers and administrators to collectively discuss definitions of sex and gender with the possibility that transgender youth might teach them something new about the fluidity of such categories. Mayo is hopeful that such dialogue might generate productive contact zones and by extension, cultivate transformative solidarities, writing that "teaching about gender diversities can help students and others in school communities understand that these are not new issues (nor is the current conservative trend toward studied ignorance and misrecognition new)."⁹

Here in the introduction, it is interesting to think about Mayo's theory of relational humility in terms of likeability and vice versa, as both are attempting to think through concepts that can cut across binary divisions and reductive assumptions in educationally progressive ways. Indeed, as Liz Jackson points out in her lively response to Mayo, humility as a humble and quiet response to ignorance (just one understanding among many) has often been overshadowed in philosophical discourse by stronger responses emphasizing bold claims and confident assertions. Humility and likeability lend themselves to uncertain communities with fuzzy boundaries and indeterminate limits, perhaps offering an alternative to the polarized and bifurcated notion of communities that characterizes current political realities.

Embracing the uncertainty of community is also a theme in Erica Colmenares' contribution, "Exploring Student Teacher's 'Stuckness': Assembling an Alternative to the Logic of Representation in Teacher Education." Colmenares argues that moments of pre-service teacher "stuckness" are not merely the result of a

theory/practice deadlock. Instead, they are multifaceted assemblages of discourses, affects, and materials. When teacher education reduces such complexity down to simple obstacles that can be overcome through the articulation of theoretical knowledge with classroom realities, emergent opportunities to think through the difficult and uncertain knowledge of teaching and learning found within the moment of stuckness is ignored. Through the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Colmenares thus provides an affirmative interpretation of stuckness as an educational opportunity in its own right. Her respondent, EunKyoung Chung, reads Colmenares' paper in the context of the posthumanist turn to emphasize how the author's "defamiliarization of stuckness" could challenge the seemingly impermeable boundaries of traditional school or academic systems and instead initiate new assemblages that can then enact new approaches to teaching, learning, and researching.

Gwen Bradford's 2015 book *Achievement* offers a philosophical account of a concept that many of us wrestle with when writing syllabi, evaluating participation, and grading assignments. Vikramaditya Joshi begins by summarizing Bradford's main argument and highlighting the basic definition of achievement as both a process and a product, before turning to applications of Bradford's philosophy in the field of education. The problem, as Joshi outlines it, is that in schools we find a shift from achieving personal meaning through the accomplishment of difficult processes, to the reification of outcomes separated out from the very processes which grant outcomes their value. Joshi concludes with suggestions for integrating Bradford's notion of achievement into schooling practices. Kirsten Welsh agrees with Joshi that Bradford's account of achievement has value for educators, yet she also calls upon Bradford to further clarify what excellence actually means in relation to achievement offering up a distinction between a high degree view and a directional view.

Bradford's response to her critics is generous, citing Joshi's suggestion to integrate narratives of effort into the assessment of educational accomplishments as an excellent solution while also taking up Welsh's suggestion of directional excellence as supplementing her own view. By this point, the question of achievement raises interesting issues related to schools as communities of

difference. How does the reification of achievement create gaps within school communities (especially in the form of achievement-based tracks) rather than contact zones between differing notions of personal achievement? How does the value and valuing of achievement affect the imagined borders of communities, especially in schools?

Boundaries and borders are a part of imagined communities, which involves some kind of separation. The separating, or in this case segregating, of students in schools focuses our attention on the systemic, political tenor and stakes of the imagining. Lawrence Blum and Zoë Burkholder's 2021 book *Integrations: The Struggle for Racial Equality and Civic Renewal in Public Education* calls for an egalitarian and integrationist pluralism capable of reclaiming public schooling for moral, personal, and civic flourishing. Despite issues with integrationist approaches to schooling, the authors nevertheless see it as an essential means for fostering democratic community. Schools, in this sense, can be thought of as contact zones across differences.

Sarah M. Stitzlein, the first respondent, provides a helpful outline of the book as a whole while also offering some prescient worries concerning the ability of Blum and Burkholder's project to intervene in contemporary political struggles over schools, and in particular, legislative attempts to ban certain "divisive concepts."¹⁰ Although highly sympathetic with their attempts to argue for the continued relevance of integration as an (incomplete) means for working toward racial and educational equality, Stitzlein calls into question whether the authors' recommendations to teachers are capable of addressing the growing conservative backlash against many of the civic and moral principles the authors desire to uphold. Furthermore, she indicates some confusion over the plurality of goals at stake in Blum and Burkholder's agenda, moving as they do between cultivating civic capacities, personal flourishing, intellectual growth, promoting equality, and so forth. Thus, Stitzlein's critique concerns the coherence of the goals (when taken as a whole) and their implementation.

Sheron Fraser-Burgess insightfully summarizes the book's arguments through the lens of critical race theory, which draws attention to the gap between Blum and Burkholder's vision for an "egalitarian civic integrationist pluralism"

and the text of the US Supreme Court decision that instigated the troubled and, Fraser-Burgess points out, ultimately unsuccessful school desegregation program. Fraser-Burgess' political analysis pushes Blum and Burkholder to interrogate the ways in which educational equality and racial justice are conceptualized through the educational good standard laid out in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Embedded in John Rawls' political liberalism (which she describes as "a capitalism in which educational is instrumental"), the educational good standard, in Fraser-Burgess' analysis, reveals a great deal about how American political, legal, and educational institutions shape the boundaries of schools as imagined communities. Fraser-Burgess calls upon the authors to clarify exactly what they are carrying forward from *Brown v. Board of Education* for the purpose of presenting a "wholly disruptive paradigm that places inclusion of democratic educational aims in its superstructure."¹¹ She concludes her commentary by questioning whether Blum and Burkholder's book is able to strike "a proper balance between the racist forces in our history and the aspirations of our founding documents."¹²

The third response from Ronald Glass reminds Blum and Burkholder that they should not forget that underlying any call to integration in schools is another form of education, one that emerges from liberation struggles. In this sense, Glass seems to cast doubt on the ability of schools as such to achieve the aims set forth by Blum and Burkholder, challenging the fundamental assumption of Blum and Burkholder's argument: that, despite hundreds of years of evidence to the contrary, schools still have the power to give each child the educational goods they deserve. While Blum and Burkholder admit that schools cannot actualize equal outcomes without larger forces of racism and classism being dismantled, for Glass, it seems that such an argument does not adequately emphasize the role of liberatory struggles by BIPOC communities as a prerequisite for creating the conditions for schools to promote equality, or, echoing Fraser-Burgess' attentive reading, as providing a guiding sense of what ought to count as an educational good in the first place. Blum's reply rounds off the discussion by turning attention to current conditions facing teachers in schools and the attack against racial justice education.

In “The Eurocentrism of Afro-Pessimism: An Educational Recipe for Defeat,” Derek Ford and Nino Brown argue that recent iterations of the discourse of Afro-Pessimism in the academy by white authors is ultimately a misleading and anti-revolutionary theory predicated on a misreading of Marxian theory. Afro-Pessimists, such as Clayton Pierce (who offers the response to this essay), argue that Marx was ultimately Eurocentric, failing to recognize the primacy of race as a constituting feature of capitalism. Yet this perspective misses the deep engagement with questions of slavery and class exploitation found in Marx himself as well as in many non-Western Marxist writers. Grounding anti-racist struggles within the anti-capitalist struggle is not a mere theoretical point; it also has on-the-ground political consequences. As the authors point out, anti-capitalist struggle articulates various community-based movements into a larger framework capable of mitigating differences that might pit various racialized groups against one another. Or, from a Marxian perspective, the notion of contact zones is transformed into the notion of mediation through a shared struggle against capitalism.

With this essay, we shift from questions of reform of institutions and/or dialogic, ethical models of inclusion to the question of organizing and mobilizing against capitalist oppression, a project that resonates with Glass’s criticism of Blum and Burkholder outlined above. In Pierce’s response to Ford and Brown, he pivots from academic arguments for or against Afro-Pessimism to the pragmatic use of such theory both in terms of pedagogy and in terms of political organizing. In particular, these discourses have particular force for white educators and activists who might otherwise lose sight of their accumulated material and psychological privileges if they operated solely from within a Marxian perspective. At stake here is precisely how insurgent and revolutionary communities can emerge within and against capitalist exploitation and racialized dispossession.

Sheeva Sabati and Jason Wozniak’s response to Sandy Grande’s Kneller Lecture titled “Pedagogies of Mourning and Morning: Zones of Contact and Elsewhere” offers a stronger critique of educational institutions than Blum and Burkholder and calls for stronger affective responses of rage, love, and hope than Greteman and Burke’s more modest appeal to queer likeability. For Grande, the

university is an “arm of the settler state,” or, as Sabati and Wozniak summarize, a site of racial-colonial capital accumulation.¹³ Grande rejects liberal notions of diversity, equity, and inclusion as insufficient responses to white supremacy and settler colonialism, both of which remain essential dimensions of universities. Instead of reform, Grande argues that scholar-activists ought to let the existing university die in order to let alternative notions of education and educational communities thrive in its wake.

In Grande’s reading, the death of the university is not a tragedy so much as a promise for a more life-affirming notion of education that serves the interests of marginal, fugitive, and invisible communities traditionally sacrificed by the university. This means that an ethic of hospice is necessary: an ethic that attends to the dying of an institution with care and love but without sentimental attachment or nostalgia for what is passing. Sabati and Wozniak then pivot to how this ethic of hospice emerges from within collective struggles such as university abolitionism, experiments building the Autonomous University in New York City during Occupy Wall Street, and Critical University Studies classes in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In all cases, what is at stake is a new notion of education as contact zones in fugitive but open spaces that emerge when universities die and new communities of learning and studying pirate its remains in the name of education from “elsewhere.”

“In this piece, we’ve built on Sandy Grande’s 2022 PES Kneller Lecture with the intention of opening space for philosophers of education to further problematize the current formation of ‘the university,’” Sabati and Wozniak write.¹⁴ Their questions about that possible space constitute a fitting end for the last issue, prompting us to ask, at this very moment, “how we might collectively envision, practice, and co-create relationships to learning and to one other that are not rooted in domination, but in life-affirmation.”¹⁵

1 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33-40; 34.

2 Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” 37.

3 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 34.

4 Barbara S. Stengel, "Exploring the Nexus of Queer and Religious," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 4 (same issue).

5 Ann Chinnery, "The Challenges of Liking in Pedagogical Relations," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 4 (same issue).

6 Clarence W. Joldersma, "Reducing the Tension Between Queer Identity and Religious Discourses by Expanding the Idea of Religious Love: An Example," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 4 (same issue).

7 Joldersma, "Reducing the Tension."

8 Benjamin Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1984), 15; quoted in Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 37; Adam J. Greteman and Kevin J. Burke, "An Introduction to *On Liking the Other*: Queer Subjects and Religious Discourses," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 4 (same issue).

9 Cris Mayo, "Humility in Community: Uncertainty and Solidarity in Transgender Theory," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 4 (same issue).

10 Sarah M. Stitzlein, "Integrations: The Struggle for Racial Equality and Civic Renewal in Public Education," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 4 (same issue).

11 Sheron Fraser-Burgess, "Resolving the American Dilemma of Racial Inequity that Desegregating Education Failed to Solve," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 4 (same issue).

12 Fraser-Burgess, "Resolving the American Dilemma of Racial Inequity."

13 Sheeva Sabati and Jason Wozniak, "The University as a Site of Struggle, or Raging Against the Dying of the 'Light,'" *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 4 (same issue).

14 Sabati and Wozniak, "The University as a Site of Struggle."

15 Sabati and Wozniak, "The University as a Site of Struggle."