Called to Listen

Response to Bialystok

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Lauren Bialystok's essay gave me pause—as a member of my campus community, as a teacher, and as a citizen in a troubled democracy. Although Bialystok focuses on first-person authority and positionality as epistemic moves that bring identity into philosophical methods, her thoughts are useful for those of us engaged in social justice work across many domains. As I reflected on her essay, I shifted contexts—moving from scholarly philosophical debates toward the ethical and relational implications of her argument. I wondered: How can my grounding in relational pedagogy guide me through the important questions Bialystok poses? Seeking an answer, I found myself returning to the work of Gert Biesta on the educative gap, Frank Margonis on political intersubjectivity, and Sharon Todd on vulnerability and listening.[1]

Bialystok defines first-person authority as a "stance that recognizes someone as an epistemic authority in virtue of their identity" because "self-knowledge is unassailable in a way that other types of knowledge generally cannot be."[2] As a member of my campus community, the connection she draws between first-person authority and "testimonial injustice"—that is, "injustice . . . committed against someone in her capacity as knower"—helps me to understand certain relational dynamics that carry both epistemic and ethical implications.[3] For example, similar to many college campuses, young women faculty of color at my institution find themselves subject to testimonial injustice, whether in student evaluations or confrontational faculty meetings. Some faculty and staff offer anemic statements of positionality as a cover—absolving themselves of responsibility to engage in the continual hard work of transforming our campus into a more equitable place. And yet, I know white male colleagues from privileged backgrounds who open them-

selves to the possibility that there are teacher/student dynamics they do not, and cannot, easily see. When shown the relevant research, they are brought to accept the first-person authority of their colleagues, and willingly shift their views.

As a teacher, I am charged with helping undergraduates to see the complicated intersections of Science, Power, and Diversity. My teaching partner (an astronomer) and I hope they will come to understand that social justice concerns in science go far beyond matters of representation or exploitation: yes, there are far too few women in physics, but what would it mean to do critical, feminist research in physics? Yes, genetic research continually reproduces colonial relations with indigenous people, but is it possible to transform problematic scientific endeavors? Can we call them into question using indigenous epistemologies and develop research methodologies that serve the needs of marginalized communities?

To accomplish our goals, we take an expanded view of first-person authority, using it as a pedagogical tool to begin to chip away at our students' everyday conception of science as "objective" and "neutral." Rather than limiting first-person authority to self-knowledge, we affirm that to know from a marginalized social position is to know differently. "Outsider" knowledge can offer new scientific perspectives and new ways of solving problems, so we grant first-person authority to feminist and indigenous theorists, scientists, and statisticians. Among others, we read Karen Barad on teaching physics, Sara Giordano on the barriers revealed when one attempts to do neuroscience research using a critical feminist-informed methodology, Banu Subramaniam on identity and becoming a scientist, and Gregory Cajete on the philosophy of native science.[4] We also honor students' first-person authority when they share lived experiences related to our course content, although we certainly ask them to dig a little deeper and reflect on those experiences in light of the theories they have learned in class.

And yet from the first day of class, I use my own positionality in ways that Bialystok asks me to re-consider. In her essay, she defines positionality as "the stance of disavowing one's authority by identifying oneself

outside specified classes of marginalized people."[5] However, when I offer my various identities in class, I have a different, twofold intent. First, I hope to convey to white-identified students that I understand that I benefit from—and am therefore complicit in—racialized systems of power, yet I hope to contribute in whatever ways I can to the decolonization of our institution. Second, I hope to create openings for more dynamic teacher/student relations across difference by communicating self-awareness, as well as my understanding that, as Bialystok writes, the classroom is "a context where the background conditions of unequal power are an exhausting, even prohibitive, hurdle for some people to even participate in an educational setting."[6] She is quite right: my positionality statement does not confer "immunity from critique or inability to possess or acquire knowledge of a topic."[7] I may hope to convey my commitment to increasingly ethical relations with people from marginalized groups, but that requires vigilance: calling myself into question again and again, and a willingness to learn from the Other.[8]

A colleague of mine provides an apt example of vigilance and a willingness to learn from students. Irene is an older white woman from a highly educated family; to look at her, you would not think immediately "here is an ardent social justice activist."[9] Yet, she is known on our campus for her support of marginalized students, particularly Latinx students. In spite of her social position and the power differential between her and the students, she signals her openness in myriad ways: her history of work in Central America and her fluency in Spanish, the art on her office walls, the activist, social-justice orientation of her course content. Recently, she told me that one of her queer-identifying students was hurt she had mentioned "preferred" pronouns—rather than simply "pronouns" —as the class started a "getting to know you" exercise early in the semester. Irene's student asked a peer to explain their concern after class, and Irene's response to this challenge was to apologize and to thank the student for teaching her. Given her expertise in critical pedagogies and her long history of self-reflection, Irene maintains an open, vulnerable stance toward her students that allows them to challenge her, and she was responsive to their critique.

Rather than a bridge to social justice education, Bialystok conceives of first-person authority and positionality statements as ways we might learn to "mind the gap" between two separate individuals. For me, however, Bialystok's metaphor immediately brought to mind the dynamic, intersubjective gap in which teacher and student are called into being by one another. In "'Mind the Gap!' Communication and the Educational Relation," Gert Biesta concludes that education "exists only in and through the communicative interaction between the teacher and learner," and the relation between teacher and learner "is only possible because of the existence of the unrepresentable, transformative gap, a space of enunciation that cannot be controlled by any of the partners in the interaction. . . ."[10] According to Biesta, the separation between the two is a necessary condition for the educational relation to arise, and that indeed, education is located in the gap, a space of intersubjectivity "where people—individual, singular beings—can reveal who they are, can 'come into presence.'"[11] It is a space of agency for both the teacher and the student. Irene's relations with her students are, in my view, a living example of intersubjectivity.

However, Frank Margonis reminds us that the enunciative gap, this space of possibility and agency, is haunted by the "deep relational wounds" and ghosts of our nation's colonial history.[12] These wounds are easily reopened in educational encounters, and manifest within the gap as tensions that must be addressed. Margonis' concept of political intersubjectivity asks educators to hesitate—before we enter into the educative gap, we must consider both our own positionality and what we do not, and often cannot, know about our students. We must, as Cris Mayo admonishes, hold a "suspicion that one does not know as much as one thinks one knows."[13] If we can maintain a suspicious stance toward ourselves, and simultaneously remain aware of "the felt weight" of the Other, it becomes more possible to remain open to the mysterious Other in all their alterity, and to respond with care and humility as Irene was able to do.[14] I hear Margonis and Mayo in Bialystok's call to mind the gap between ourselves and others from different social locations. The sociohistorical gap requires our attention, but it also opens the

possibility for transformative learning such as my friend Irene experienced. Her mindfulness of the many-layered gap is something I strive to emulate.

Although I understand Bialystok's concern that positionality statements can easily become pro-forma gestures, I remain optimistic that if done with care and vulnerability, they may continue to be useful teaching tools. My declaration of social position must be backed with a commitment to sounding the depths of meaning in my identity, to enter the "deeper philosophical work that we ought to do."[15] The first step may be to announce my heritage, and to acknowledge the unceded land on which our college stands. But I, as a descendant of white settler colonialism, must continue to openly share the ongoing process of calling myself into question as I listen to the Other. The enunciative gap is the only location where this can take place. Perhaps Bialystok's "modest sign" of "Mind the Gap" is foundational if there is ever to be a firm footing on which a bridge may be constructed.

With Bialystok, I lament the "fractured discourses and accusations of political and academic failure," but collegial faculty (and philosophers) offer a tentative way forward.[16] Maybe it all comes down to realizing the gap calls us to listen deeply, and to be open to being called into question by the Other. Sharon Todd asks: "What is it we listen to when we listen? What effects does listening have on the one who listens? How does listening contribute to establishing a specifically ethical attentiveness to difference?"[17] Todd pulls these strands together in a "notion of listening that does not merely respect the Other's alterity but indeed *attends* to it."[18] As listeners, we accept that the Other presents us with a world we cannot share: the student, the trans philosopher, the Other, is unknowable, yet we can learn from them as we listen and remain open to the Otherness of the Other. As a citizen of a deeply troubled democracy, I know that attentive, open listening is in ever-shorter supply, and it can be frightening to contemplate being open to Others' pain. But the act of listening to alterity can change us, and perhaps we may find the democratic renewal we crave, if we will only take the risk.

1 Frank Margonis, "Addressing Students Responsively and Critically," in *Philosophy of Education* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 2011); Gert Biesta, "'Mind the Gap!' Communicaton and the Educational Relation," in Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin (eds.), *No Education without Relation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); and Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

2 Lauren Bialystok, "First-Person Authority and Positionality as Bridges in Social Justice Education, "*Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 2 (2020).

3 Bialystok, "First-Person Authority."

4 See Karen Barad, "Reconceiving Scientific Literacy as Agential Literacy, or Learning How to Intra-act Responsibly Within the World," in *Doing Culture + Science*, ed. by Roddey Reid and Sharon Traweek. NY: Routledge, 2000.; Sara Giordano, "Scientific Reforms, Feminist Interventions, and the Politics of Knowing: An Auto-ethnography of a Feminist Neuroscientist" *Hypatia* 29, no. 4 (Fall 2014); Banu Subramaniam, *Ghost Stories for Darwin: The Science of Variation and the Politics of Diversity* (University of Illinois, 2014); Gregory Cajete "Philosophy of Native Science" in *American Indian Thought,* ed. by Anne Waters. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004; Maggie Walter and Chris Andersen (eds.), *Indigenous Statistics: A Quantitative Research Methodology* (NY: Routledge, 2016).

5 Bialystok.

6 Bialystok.

7 Bialystok.

8 See Todd's discussion of Kelly Oliver's *Witnessing*, p. 80, 87.

9 The name is a pseudonym.

10 Biesta, "Mind the Gap!", 21.

11 Biesta, 22.

12 Frank Margonis "In Pursuit of Respectful Teaching and Intellectually-Dynamic Social Fields," *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 30 (2011): 433-439.

13 Cris Mayo, "Relations Are Difficult" in Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin (eds.), *No Education without Relation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 125.

14 Shilpi Sinha, "Dialogue as a Site of Transformative Possibility," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29 (2010).

15 Bialystok.

16 Bialystok.

17 Todd, *Learning from the Other*, 117-118.

18 Todd, 118.