Neither Harlem, nor the Harlem Branch Y: The Taught Public

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In this paper, I will make a case that education has its own particular type of public sphere. I argue that while the notion of "public," as opposed to "private," might at first glance seem easy to pinpoint, this same notion takes on new meaning in educational circumstances. This educational type of public sphere I will name the "taught public." As the name "taught public" implies, public space in education is different from other public spaces. It is different because it entails teaching and, of course, a teacher. To get at this notion of the taught public, I will begin with a reading of Langston Hughes's poem, "Theme for English B."[1] Then, I will come back to the particularity of the taught public with the aid of Gert Biesta's recent recuperation of teaching, and D. W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic perspective.[2] In the end, I hope to show that educators not only contribute to the public sphere but also add a distinct dimension to the public sphere—the taught public—that demands attention, and demands to be fostered.

BETWEEN COLUMBIA AND THE HARLEM BRANCH Y

In his poem, "Theme for English B," Hughes offers the following narrative, a narrative bearing directly on the public versus private spheres of education. At the risk of repeating what is well known, I include the poem in its entirety.

Theme for English B

The instructor said,

Go home and write

a page tonight.

And let that page come out of you—

Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.

I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.

The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you.
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page.
(I hear New York, too.) Me—who?

Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.
I guess being colored doesn't make me *not* like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.

Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you're older—and white—
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

In this work, Hughes quite literally traverses the divide from public to private. One can feel the movement over concrete, the steps traversed, the time it takes to get home, the relief—and empowerment—of sitting down, in private, to "write this page." While I will come back to "Theme for English B" in the course of this essay, I want initially to point out the way in which the work posits the significant space between the college and the author's room. It is as if the distance itself enables the lines of this poem to be written.

The college on the hill is an educational space, perhaps public, perhaps private. Then the Y, the narrator's private space. A wide swath of urban distance exists in between. The hill, the steps, the concrete, the noise of Harlem. The space traversed is certainly public space. The noise of Harlem is properly public noise. This noise reminds us, for now, that the classroom, if it is a public space, is somehow different in quality from public of the streets traversed on the way home from school. It is this difference that will be explored as this essay continues.

THIS CONFERENCE'S PUBLIC SPACE

As stated, this essay aims to explore the nature of the "taught public." A close look at the 2020 Philosophy of Education Society (PES) conference call for papers shows that the notion of "public" is not unpacked well enough. For the most part "public" is juxtaposed to pedagogy, and to

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educational institutions. For example, three major themes of the call for papers—"Creating Public Knowledge," "Understanding Public Interests and Education," "Education for Public Life"—posit a public that is separate from education itself, separate from pedagogy, and separate from educational institutions.[3] Indeed, one way to understand the conference theme, "Creating Public Knowledge," is this: The conference is intended to engage questions around how education might serve the public good, where "public" is distinct from education.

Yet within the call for papers, there are sub-themes where the obviousness of "the public" being distinct from education is undermined. As just one example, take the suggested paper topic, "How might emergent circumstances justifiably shift the public/private distribution of educational labor?"[4] This sub-theme (which is placed under the rubric of "Understanding Public Interests and Education") makes quite the opposite presumption. It assumes that education *is* the public. And learners are the private. Assumedly the logic of this sub-theme is the following: If, after Covid-19, education is increasingly "zoomified," and if private individuals and their parents are increasingly responsible for learning, then what are the implications for this form of privatization?

PUBLIC SPACE: TRADITIONAL, PROGRESSIVE, AND CRITICAL

My intention is absolutely *not* to point fingers at this year's PES conference call for papers. It is rather to note that this particular PES inconsistency derives from a century-old legacy in philosophy of education that is itself ambivalent about the public nature of education. Here I would like to detail a history of public/private along the lines of three well-known educational orientations: the traditional, the progressive, and the critical.

Traditional education, as it has been described and criticized by John Dewey, has what might be called a "preparatory" understanding of education and public life. That is, education is a private station in life where one *prepares* for public life. This view of traditional education is most obvious in Dewey's critique of spectatorship in traditional education. As Dewey puts it,

> In schools, those under instruction are too customarily looked upon as acquiring knowledge as theoretical spectators, minds which appropriate knowledge by direct energy of intellect. The very word pupil has almost come to mean one who is engaged not in having fruitful experiences but in absorbing knowledge directly. Something which is called mind or consciousness is severed from the physical organs of activity.[5]

If traditional pedagogy posits education as a private endeavor, progressive pedagogy sees education as a public event. This is evident in Dewey's famous response to the traditional habit of spectatorship. For Dewey, one must be more than a private spectator. One must practice life itself during the process of education:

> ...education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living… I believe that education which does not occur through forms of life, or that are worth living for their own sake, is always a poor substitute for the genuine reality and tends to cramp and to deaden.[6]

Following this Deweyan analysis, progressive education is an education *in public*, in actual living. The progressive educator is about doing things now, while traditional education is about watching things now and doing them later, when well prepared.

I take Henry Giroux's work as an example of critical pedagogy. Interestingly, the critical stance is closer to the traditional stance, at least with regard to the public role of education. Giroux advocates for teachers and professors to engage in the work of the "public intellectual."[7] Of course, the gist of Giroux's advocacy of public intellectualism is that pedagogy is not inherently a public endeavor. Teachers and professors must take their work *into* the public sphere. Giroux is critical of the private nature of education:

> Even when pedagogy is related to issues of democracy, citizenship, and the struggle over the shaping of identities and identifications, it is rarely taken up as part of a broader public politics—as part of a

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> larger attempt to explain how learning takes place outside of schools or what it means to assess the political significance of understanding the broader educational force of culture…[8]

Thus, traditional education posits education as a private space, progressivists insist that education is a public practice, and critical pedagogy, while siding with the traditional understanding of education-as-private, advocates a re-orientation of pedagogy so that it becomes part of a "broader public politics." Of course, this is a rough-and-ready sketch of the traditional, progressive, and critical approaches. I am not trying to pinpoint these positions as much as I am trying to map their terrain in order to indicate what is *not* on the map. What is not on the map is this: Does education's public role have unique public qualities that are related to teaching and the teacher?

"HARLEM, I HEAR YOU"

Let us return for a moment to the public/private travels of Hughes's narrator. Following the traditional, progressive, and critical theories of education, there are three ways to look at this walk through Harlem to the Y. First, the traditional. The instructor has assigned a "page" for the student to write. From the perspective of traditional pedagogy, the assignment itself emanates from the private sphere of the classroom. It is assigned with the intention of preparing the narrator for public life at some later date. This traditional assignment is intended to be preparatory to future flourishing. The very narrative of the poem supports this traditional understanding of private educational work. Not only is the page assigned as a private endeavor ("let this page come out of you"), but it is completed in the private space of the student's room in the Harlem Branch Y.

One can imagine the progressive criticism of this poem's narrative. The problem with the narrator's experience, like the problem of traditional pedagogy in general, is that the classroom itself is not considered a "part of living." The classroom is shrouded behind private, preparatory, closed doors. The only thing we know of this shrouded classroom are the words of the instructor ("Go home and write a page tonight"), and the striking fact that

"I am the only coloured student in my class." One can only assume from the visual and aural refences of the poem ("the park," "Eighth Avenue," "Harlem I hear you") that Dewey's "process of living" does not happen in the classroom. This English classroom is not living, nor is it meant to be, at least not in the narrative presentation of Hughes's poem.

One can also imagine a criticism of this poem's instructor from the perspective of critical pedagogy. Through a critical lens, it is not *per se* a bad thing that the classroom is a place of private preparation. What is wrong with this particular pedagogical scenario is that the instructor does not *come down the hill*. The instructor remains ensconced in the rarified air of college life. The poem's description of the narrator's walk home intimates that the streets, the sounds, the "steps from the hill" are foreign to that instructor. Henry Giroux reminds us:

> how we respond as educators and critics to the spheres in which we work is conditioned by the interrelationship between the theoretical resources we bring to specific contexts and the worldly space of public-ness that produces distinct problems and conditions particular responses to them.[9]

With this reminder, we recall that the instructor does not engage with the "worldly space of public-ness." It is left to the narrator of the poem to engage with the world of street noise and concrete steps. The instructor is the one who *gives* assignments, not the one who connects the work to "distinct problems and conditions."

THE TAUGHT PUBLIC

It is clear that these three positions of traditional, progressive, and critical education have distinct and diverging attitudes toward the educational relation to public space. What interests me in this essay, however, is not only how pedagogy is situated in relation to public space. For it strikes me that identifying the relation of education to public space already presumes that we know what public space vis-à-vis education *is*. I write this essay for a different reason. I write it to ponder whether teaching and teachers create situations

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where public space is different from what it was. It is here that I would like to re-think the various publics offered by the traditional, progressive, and critical strands. I argue that even progressive education has overlooked the centrality of the teacher and thus the centrality of the taught public. To get at the teacher's public role, I turn to Gert Biesta and the psychoanalysis of D. W. Winnicott.

GIVING TEACHING BACK TO THE PUBLIC

Gert Biesta has of late offered a powerful critique of progressive education's legacy. His critique is based on the insightful observation that John Dewey's progressivism has landed us in a situation where *learning* has become the order of the day. This situation, which Biesta calls "learnification," has established the conditions where teaching is rendered expendable. Biesta describes this situation as follows:

> The problem with the language of learning and with the wider "learnification" of educational discourse is that it makes it far more difficult, if not impossible, to ask the crucial educational questions about *content*, *purpose* and *relationships*. Yet it is in relation to these dimensions, so I wish to suggest, that teaching matters and that teachers should teach and should be allowed to teach.[10]

Biesta's argument is this: From progressivism, to constructivism, to learnification, educational practices have systematically eclipsed the role of the teacher. Here I want to echo Biesta's sentiment about the loss of teaching, but cast it in a bit of a different light. I would add to Biesta's argument that discussions of the educational public sphere have *also* eclipsed the role of the teacher. For, at the same time that the educational eclipse of the teacher has happened slowly but surely over decades, a parallel eclipse of the teacher has occurred in the three major educational discourses around public space. To put this in a simple way, if there are no teachers to be found in education, then there are

certainly no teachers to be found in education's public sphere.

Or, to go back to the analysis offered earlier about traditional, progressive, and critical public spheres, it is only progressive education that affords teachers a public role. However, as Biesta's work has documented, the public role of the progressive educator has tended to wither away to the point where teachers give way to students, and learning becomes the order of the day. Indeed, progressive education has always been involved in a paradox. If education is not a preparation for living, but is in fact the process of living itself, then education ceases to exist. Education becomes indistinguishable from life itself. My point is not to belabor this paradox, but rather to point out that Biesta's observation that the teacher has given way to the learner is perhaps one logical outcome of the disappearing line between education and other forms of life. Whatever the case, one is left in a situation where the public role of teacher has largely been ceded even in progressive education.

Biesta's response to the withering away of teaching is that we must "give teaching back to education."[11] And he is quick to point out that the sort of teaching he imagines "giving back" is not teaching that includes modes of control or domination. Referring, of course, to the trope of the traditional teacher who exercises control over students, as distinct from the progressive teacher who does not aim to control, Biesta notes,

> My ambition is to develop an argument for teaching and the teacher that is explicitly progressive, in order to counter conservative calls for a return of the teacher as a figure of (authoritarian) authority and control.[12]

Thus, Biesta insists that there should be a place for progressive teaching, a mode of teaching that has been stifled by the advent of learnification.

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While Biesta offers a fantastic explanation of how teaching has been assailed, and why we should bring teaching back, I find his work less compelling than it could be when it comes to considering the public role of the teacher. While it is clear that Biesta wants to bring back the progressive teacher, it is not so clear how such a progressive teacher enters into a public *relation* with students. To put this another way, how does teaching maintain a distinct public practice without falling back into the paradox of progressive education noted above? What is it about the teacher that remains distinct within Dewey's "process of living?" How is the teacher's relation to students different from other non-educational public relationships? To address these questions, I am convinced we must look to the relational work of psychoanalysis.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC: PSYCHIC DYNAMICS OF THE TAUGHT PUBLIC

In what follows, I want to show that it is possible to map psychic dynamics—that is, relational dynamics—onto the experience of educational public space. Michael Diamond, coming from the discipline of Public Affairs, has used psychoanalytic work to map the *personal, psychic* experience onto more general notions of private and public spheres. What I find fascinating, following Diamond, about this sort of psychic mapping is that it precisely formulates a relational conception of public space that helps us to understand the teacher's role therein.

As Diamond points out, private space can be seen as more than a geographical location. Private space is also a personal experience where one's inner life is fairly protected from the incursion of others. "When I speak of private space," writes Diamond, "I refer to the metaphoric processes of mind that promote a safe haven, much like a cocoon, for the private self."[13] Citing D. W. Winnicott, Diamond goes on to note, "Private space is experienced as an extension of the self: private space means that this space is *mine*—it is not neutral territory or space shared with others."[14] In this sense, private space is more a matter of personal orientation to self and other—more to the self,

less to an other—than it is a matter of where one is located, or with whom one associates.

Public space can be also described as a relational experience rather than a geographical location. Public space is where I encounter others who are not under my control. In contrast to the private space where others fairly conform to my expectations, public space can be described psychoanalytically as that intersubjective space where my inner expectations are often pulled up short. If private space is predominately peopled with unchallenged psychic bonds, public space is a place where psychic familiarities are met with the reality of distinct others who exceed our expectations. Jessica Benjamin writes that such a space "refers to that zone of experience in which the other is not merely the object of the ego's need/drive or cognition/perception but has a separate and equivalent center of self."[15]

Of course, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the opposite pairs of private and public, inner and outer, control and challenge, sameness and difference, these are polarities that require one another in order for human beings to flourish. Benjamin speaks of the relational need for reciprocity, where "sameness and difference exist simultaneously in mutual recognition."[16] Another way of saying this is that individuals, whether in the private space of inner experience, or in the public space of otherness, cannot navigate completely on their own. The presence of significant others who authorize transitional spaces where inner life and outer threats comingle in life affirming ways, such presence enables human beings to negotiate the competing demands of private and public in ways that encourage growth rather than stagnation.

THE TAUGHT PUBLIC'S TEACHER

This is where the role of the teacher can be forcefully articulated in its relation to public space. The teacher, unlike other strangers one meets in the public sphere, enacts a relation of authority, a relation that can serve to foster reciprocity between the private and the public. I have referred elsewhere to this relational authority as an enactment where the teacher can be

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called "good enough."[17] The term "good enough" derives from D. W. Winnicott's "good enough mother."[18] For Winnicott, the "good enough mother" serves as an authoritative presence for the child as the child learns to negotiate the tensions between inner life that is under one's control, and outer life that does not accede to one's expectations. The good enough mother helps the child to negotiate the tension between inner fantasy and outer reality. The good enough mother stays steady as the child tantrums through the conflicts between inner desire and outer reality.

Similarly, the teacher has a "good enough" role when it comes to the taught public space. The teacher of the taught public space establishes a relational role, a role that fosters the student's ability to reside in a space where private needs exist in a balance with public demands. Or to put this another way, the teacher fosters a space where the student does not feel compelled to ask, "Is this my space, or is it someone else's?" In the taught public space, the teacher is a public example of what it is to be "good enough." The teacher serves as a steadfast presence while students negotiate the tension between private needs and public demands. The teacher establishes this negotiable public space, this space that Winnicott describes as an "intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work."[19]

Such a teacher transforms public space into *taught* public space. Taught public space is distinct from other public space because it enables students to engage with the tensions that exist between private and public life. It enables students *not* to respond to the question posed by familiar traditional and progressive arguments. Students need *not* respond to: "Is education a preparation for living? Or, is it the practice of living?" In the taught public space, there is a teacher who understands the importance of *not* forcing an answer to this question. Teachers of the taught public space know that they transform public life. They add to it this transitional dimension. They also know that without teachers, public space lacks an introduction. Without this taught dimension, public space is lessened. It becomes less educated. Teachers of the taught public not only "give teaching back to education." They

also give teaching back to public space.

CONCLUSION: BRINGING THE TEACHER BACK TO THE TAUGHT PUBLIC

To conclude, I would like to return to "Theme for English B." Earlier in this essay, I noted how this poem might be read from the perspective of traditional, progressive, and critical education. At this point, I would like to offer another reading. This time, from the perspective of the "taught public."

Unfortunately for the narrator of Hughes's poem, his instructor was hardly a "good enough" teacher. His instructor remains a traditional educator, well-distanced from public space, far from the streets of Harlem.

Nevertheless, one senses in Hughes's poem a distinct effort to force the issue. Hughes calls the instructor into his world. Poetically, Hughes calls on the instructor to be a *good enough* teacher, a teacher who facilitates the circumstances by which private identity and public life can be negotiated. Hughes brings his instructor out of the classroom and places him squarely into the foray of public life… whether or not the instructor wants to go there.

After all, this page of poetry, while ostensibly offering its reader a crisp aural, visual, and sensual glimpse into the narrator's life in Harlem, intends, in a performative sense, to take the instructor along with him.

When, at the end of the poem, we read:

> although you're older—and white—
> and somewhat more free.
>
> This is my page for English B.

When we read these lines, we realize that the narrator has actually taken the instructor public. Because the narrator submits this poem as his "page for English B," the instructor will inevitably read it. The instructor is forced to come down "from the hill," to partake in the public life of Harlem.

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Hughes creates a relation between the narrator and the instructor, a relation not unlike the relation between a student and the "good enough" teacher. In Hughes's lines, the instructor becomes an intermediary. It is the space of the instructor's assignment that allows this student to explore the tenuous fault line between inner life and outer difference, between private and public, between the Harlem Branch Y and the streets of Harlem, between the identity of the narrator and that of his white instructor.

It is of course presumptuous to read Hughes's poem as a comment on the taught public. And I do not intend for this poem to stand in for a piece of educational theory. Indeed, if this poem offers us a glimpse of the taught public, it does so only by recuperating a failure. As I have said, the instructor in this poem is hardly an exemplar. Yet Hughes does make an effort to *bring the teacher back*. What interests me is the extent to which Hughes intuits that a failure at teaching is also *a failure at public teaching*. And this is a sentiment I would like to echo.

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3 Philosophy of Education Society 2021 Conference Call for Papers, *Philosophy of Education Society,* accessed November 1, 2020, https://www.philosophyofeducation.org/conference-2.

4 Ibid.

5 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; repr. Online: Project Gutenberg, 2008), Chapter 11, last modified August 1, 2015, https://www.guten-

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8 Giroux, "Cultural Studies," 60.

9 Giroux, "Cultural Studies," 65.

10 Biesta, "Giving Teaching Back to Education," 36.

11 Biesta, "Giving Teaching Back to Education," 36.

12 Biesta, "Giving Teaching Back to Education," 36.

13 Michael Diamond, "Reflections on the Meaning and Experience of Public Space: A Critical Psychoanalytic Perspective," in *Re-Imagining Public Space: The Frankfurt School in the 21st Century*, eds. Diana Boros and James M. Glass (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 49.

14 Diamond, "Reflections on the Meaning," 49.

15 Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Social Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 30.

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17 Charles Bingham, "Those Who Can't: Fantasy, Reality, and the Teacher's Art," *Philosophy of Education* 2018, no. 1 (2018): 536–549.

18 D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971).

19 Winnicott, *Playing and Reality,* 14.

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