

The Asymmetrical Relations of Contact Zones

Adi Burton

University of British Columbia

Susan Verducci

San José State University

The third issue of *Philosophy of Education* 2022 continues the conference theme of examining Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of “contact zones.” The first issue was concerned with contact zones between teachers and students, including the preparation of teachers. The second issue explored embodiment and “touch” in contact zones. This issue includes discussions that highlight the “highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” of contact zones in which we teach and learn.¹ Pratt draws attention towards asymmetry to emphasize the social differences and fluidity of relations that characterize communities (including classrooms), over and against ideas of community that are homogeneous or horizontal.² In this issue, we invite readers to consider how these asymmetries play out beyond the classroom itself, through institutional contact as well as through political systems that shape our relationships.

The first set of contributions encourages teachers and philosophers of education to consider contact zones between schools and the state that are entangled in school governance policies and politics. Martha Perez-Mugg’s entry shows how state accountability measures (such as standardized testing) deepen asymmetries by functioning in ways typical of a hierarchical and disciplinary penal system. Her analysis in the case of Colorado state accountability reforms illustrates how standardized testing scores reflect the social and historical context of the community, and not simply the performance of an individual school. In reality, the very reforms that aim to decrease education inequities perpetuate the status quo.

Similarly, Ellis Reid’s essay takes aim at urban school reform initiatives like mayoral control, state takeovers, and market reforms that focus on matters of school governance without attending to the “fractured, racially and econom-

ically segregated metropolitan regions that are both the source of and partly constitutive of deep educational injustice.”²³ Using Seana Shiffrin’s work on democratic law, Reid argues that these reforms neglect something fundamental; they do not allow people “to make our mutual respect clear.”²⁴ The opportunity to manifest mutual respect is a critical component of negotiating the tension between democratic participation in school reform and providing equitable educational opportunities in contact zones of schooling.

Rachel Wahl shifts focus from the school to the “contact” between communities and police, showing another dimension of the educational problems in deeply asymmetrical contact zones. Her reflective analysis of efforts to establish contact between communities and police through dialogue following the 2017 neo-Nazi rally in Charleston, Virginia, questions whether “deliberation in settings of inequality and distrust is an appropriate means to navigate a political struggle.”²⁵ The fraught contact zone prompts questions about who should learn from whom, and who can learn from whom.

Against the backdrop of the first three articles, Henry Lara-Steidel’s piece raises issues around misinformation and disinformation in asymmetrical contact zones of virtual spaces. Places of meeting on social media are not neutral ground with equal opportunity toward free speech but are, rather, heavily skewed and manipulated corporate environments with bias toward endangering the public. Lara-Steidel argues that, as with broadcasters on more traditional media, countering misinformation on social media platforms is the responsibility of the state, and not the platforms themselves. He justifies this position via analysis of Dewey’s conception of the origins of the right to free speech and the shift from focus on the public sphere to the private sphere.

In the second set of essays, we return to teaching and learning not from an institutional standpoint, but through the experiences of thinking, questioning, and listening to others. These discussions ask: *how do the ways in which we think and communicate with one another affect contact zones?* The first two authors propose that the pedagogical arts of contact zones require the cultivation of critical thinking. Drawing on Richard Rorty’s acceptance of Donald Davidson’s notion of “triangulation,” Trent Davis argues that the “inescapability of the normative” leads to Laurance Splitter’s “community of inquiry,” but more significantly, Harvey

Siegel's conception of "critical thinking" in the form of "critical spiritedness." The pedagogical arts of the contact zone require helping students care about finding, assessing, and sharing the best of reasons with others – a fundamental component of Siegel's conception.

Davis' essay and the paper from Shannon Rodgers elicited spirited rebuttals from their respondents, who challenge the fundamental assumptions of critical thinking discourse and urge its proponents to think critically about their own concepts, from the value of affect in (a tense if not flawed) contradistinction to reason and to the false neutrality of reason itself. Rodger's respondent, Tone Kvernbekk, emphasizes the need to engage in contact zones not just through critical reasoning, but also with narrative reasoning, sensitivity, charity, and skills of meta-communication, among others. These encounters between the authors and respondents highlight Kvernbekk's point about the importance of learning to handle differences in contact zones, which in Pratt's conception are not abstract but conditioned by complex asymmetrical relations.

Critical engagements with reason and rationalism continue into the next entry by Tony DeCesare. He reminds us that the lens of rationalism views children only in terms of deficit—not yet a person, not yet a citizen, not yet a rational being. He questions how the predominance of rationalism is used to justify the exclusion of children from political rights and life via circular logic and inspires his respondent Sarah Stiltzein to reflect on the ethical and political costs of this exclusion from the perspective of teachers and schools.

Stemhagen and Hytten attempt to address the historical and systemic violence of rationalism in their account of American pragmatism through traditions of Black pragmatists, who explore critical issues of truth, shared reality, and progress in ways accountable to the pain, tragedy, and mourning that accompany them for racialized peoples living in a world structured by white supremacy. In the end, they suggest three habits that can reconcile pragmatism with critical concerns: "strategically holding productive dualisms in tension; narrativizing our past while engaging in what Joseph Winters calls remembering against the grain; and learning to sit with discomfort."²⁶

Derek Gottlieb takes the challenge further to show how a Cartesian skepticism of other people's minds has played a "dominant role in producing

and maintaining racial hierarchies, in part by being logically immune to proofs of equality.”⁷ Situating Cartesian skepticism as a fundamentally colonial disposition (which he contrasts with Pyrrhic skepticism), Gottlieb turns the history of the Enlightenment back upon itself to expose the rationalization of white supremacy at its core, and at the core of US educational policy that demands proof of equality from the marginalized out of a skepticism of their humanity. Nassim Noroozi’s response deepens the challenge again to recover accounts of skepticism that precede Descartes to reveal the full violence of rationalist discourse in its political and ethical realities, affirming the importance of Gottlieb’s historical intervention while at the same time disrupting it.

Thinking with and against Pratt, John Hopkins rejects academic discourse’s “principles of cooperation and shared understanding – that inform an ‘imagined’ community of speakers who stand as equal and the assumption that the conversation ‘is governed by a single set of rules or norms shared by all participants.’”⁸ Borrowing Audra Simpson’s politics of refusal and Gerald Vizenor’s notion of survivance, Hopkins considers the power of refusal and disruption to “make explicit the historical and ongoing structural violence of settler colonialism that is already pervading the interaction between speakers and the lands on which their interaction takes place.”⁹ Refusal, Hopkins posits, “introduces a distinctive voice that exposes, survives, resists, and decolonizes” in what he terms “an Indigenous voice of survivance.”¹⁰ We return to the inherent asymmetry of contact zones, which calls into question the neutrality and benignity of the settler colonial world. For Hopkins, however, Pratt “remains captivated by the settler university,” concealing the ways in which refusal includes the willingness to allow foundational relations of violence to end and die.¹¹ Together, Hopkins and his respondent Buddy North conclude this issue of *Philosophy of Education* with a discussion of contact zones that decenters the whiteness of the discourse, pulling attention toward the many contact zones that exist in the context of and in resistance to the structures of settler colonialism and colonial violence that shape the lives of students and teachers on these lands.

Hopkin’s and North’s discussion on the politics of refusal, the relationship between philosophy and education, between universities and philosophy, and between colonial institutions and Indigenous survivance opens the wide

range of thinking and learning in contact zones and outside of it. Pushing philosophers of education to think more deeply about Pratt's concept, their open-ended dialogue accompanies the other essays in this issue in highlighting the ways that asymmetries of power in contact zones manifest and are perpetuated in the structures, theories, and practices of education.

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- 1 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 34.
 - 2 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 39.
 - 3 Ellis Reid, "Reforming School Governance in the Unequal Metropolis," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).
 - 4 Reid, "Reforming School Governance."
 - 5 Rachel Wahl, "Scraping the Bruise and Calling it Healing: Dialogue and Violence in Contact Zones," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).
 - 6 Kurt Stenhagen and Kathy Hytten, "Pragmatism, Antiracism, and New Democratic Possibilities," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).
 - 7 Derek Gottlieb, "Philosophical Skepticism, Racial Justice, and US Education Policy," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).
 - 8 John Hopkins, "Speaking with an Indigenous Voice of Survivance: Genuine Conversation, Refusal, and the Decolonized Contact Zone," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).
 - 9 Hopkins, "Speaking with an Indigenous Voice of Survivance."
 - 10 Hopkins, "Speaking with an Indigenous Voice of Survivance."
 - 11 Hopkins, "Speaking with an Indigenous Voice of Survivance."