

Changing Systems or Relationships? Responding to Neocolonial Violence

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As I read the story of the students in the Punishing Room that Frank Margonis describes in his thoughtful presidential address, “Opting Out of Neocolonial Relationality,” I can’t help but be moved by their plight. Reading how marginalized students are held responsible for their own behavior in a school context that exhibits so little care about these students is deeply disturbing. An individual model of responsibility in a structurally unjust society is inherently problematic. Reading this story, I was reminded of Jonathan Kozol’s harsh critique of “the high officials of our government”¹ who subject the children of “apartheid schooling” in the United States to soulless, skill, drill, and test educational practices that deny them both meaningful learning and any sense of joy in schools. Kozol argues, “There is something deeply hypocritical in a society that holds an inner-city child ... accountable for her performance on a high-stakes standardized exam” but that does not hold those in power accountable for denying her access to what the children of the privileged already receive (sometimes in abundance) as a foundation for their success: high quality preschool, small classes with qualified teachers, engaged learning activities, welcoming school facilities, nutritious food, adequate health care, and extensive social support.² Like Margonis, Kozol points to the hypocrisy of an individual model of responsibility in a systemically inequitable and historically colonizing society.

As a parallel to Margonis’s story of the nonresponsive Student Specialist (and it is telling that she doesn’t seem to be an actual teacher but some kind of disciplinary monitor), I want to tell the story of my friend Jean. Jean has been teaching overseas for a number of years in economically privileged, International Baccalaureate schools, insulated from the ever-looming demands of No Child Left Behind to raise student tests scores and further student achievement overall, seemingly at all costs. She recently returned to the United States and took a position as a high school English teacher in a high-poverty, high-need district, where she was largely responsible for teaching writing. She started the year with four different course preps and a total of 109 students. In the second half of the school year, she was asked to take on a fifth course, bringing her total student load up to 138. Already stretched to the limit trying to respond to so many students burdened with the myriad challenges of poverty, she felt overwhelmed and ethically conflicted by the request to take on even more students with no additional resources. Inevitably, more students means less ability to be responsive in every way, from giving feedback on student writing, to being present for them in and out of class, to listening to their needs.

Exhausting every effort at the school to garner adequate support to meet the increasingly unrealistic demands being placed on her, Jean “opted-out,” though not quite in the way Margonis celebrates. For her, opting out meant quitting midyear and returning to a position overseas, where she is not subject to the harsh realities faced

by so many teachers in U.S. schools: increasing demands, inadequate compensation, limited resources, and precarious stability. In the past two years in North Carolina, where both Jean and I work, the legislature has cut school funding, eliminated teacher tenure, fired most teaching assistants, increased class sizes, and ended pay raises for graduate education in a state that already has one of the lowest teacher salaries in the country. Given this context, what sense can we make of the call for teachers to be more attentive to their students? What sense can we make of the ethical obligation for responsiveness that Margonis discusses, and that, in many ways, sounds ideal, in a context where teachers themselves are hardly treated ethically and where there is so little responsiveness to their needs? What does it mean to ask my friend Jean to be more caring, make more of a concerted effort to forge relationships with the 138 students she will teach every day, be more generous in her engagements with them, and embody a commitment to joy and nonviolence as she struggles in her overcrowded and under resourced classrooms?

Despite my concerns about the conclusions he draws, for the most part I completely agree with Margonis's argument and project. I appreciate the nuanced ways in which he illustrates how an individual notion of responsibility, especially when addressing the misbehavior of students of color in schools, is rooted in a problematic colonial past. He shows well how we haven't given up the desire to control bodies of color; rather, we simply have changed the ways in which we do so. We no longer have the violence of someone like Covey the "slave breaker" — instead, we have the imperial violence of zero-tolerance policies, apartheid schooling, punishing rooms, and the school to prison pipeline. No doubt holding kids individually responsible for their behavior in an educational system that actively harms them, in part through a consistent and relentless devaluing of their cultural capital, is ethically egregious. Margonis convincingly argues that a model of individual responsibility for problems that are so clearly systemic and structural is rooted in legacies of colonialism.

Yet given his powerful and persuasive argument against this model of individual responsibility, I am perplexed by what seems to be the primary solution Margonis suggests, namely, that teachers should individually "opt out" of problematic relationships. Ironically, this opting out is actually opting into much greater personal responsibility. It entails giving more of themselves, becoming more invested in students' personal lives, caring for their full being, listening deeply and intently to each of them, and creating joyful educational spaces despite oppressive expectations and the "ongoing demoralizing emotional fatigue" they often face in contemporary classrooms.³ If colonial violence is enacted under the guise of the principle of individual responsibility when responding to student misbehavior, aren't we also doing violence to teachers when we ask them to "dedicate themselves to finding the least violent, most joyful, path of education possible," that is, to be individually responsible for the climate in their classroom? How are we not doing violence to teachers when we ask them to be more present for their students, to engage with them on a deeply personal level, especially when there is no doubt that current educational systems punish them for doing so? It is challenging to raise test scores when you spend your time getting to know students, listening to their music, hanging out with them and their families,

and sharing their spaces in the ways that Ferguson does in her ethnography of Rosa Parks Elementary School. Indeed, it seems a bit unfair to hold up a researcher who isn't responsible for teaching more than a hundred students, who doesn't have to worry about their test scores or achievement growth, and who doesn't have to grade them and have her salary potentially dependent on how well they achieve, as a model for how teachers should relate to their students.

At the same time, if I read Margonis's central claims more generously, I hear in his call for "convivial collectivities" in schools an implicit critique of the alienating and dehumanizing educational systems that currently exist and that harm both students and teachers. I would argue that students and teachers alike are subject to oppressive colonial dances and that we actually have to change school systems themselves more than we need to change individual teachers. Every teacher I know would love to be more joyful and responsive in the classroom. They would love to be able to get to know their students in the ways that Ferguson is afforded as a researcher. And many do already opt out by subverting existing educational policies that ask them to expend increasing amounts of energy surveilling and punishing students. Angela Valenzuela's authentic approach to caring is a good example; so too are the examples provided by many teachers who enact culturally responsive education. Here, I am thinking about the teachers in Gloria Ladson-Billings's study *The Dreamkeepers*, who, in keeping with one of their core educational values, demonstrate connectedness with each of their students through regular acts of recognition, kindness, and civility, or the Native American teacher described by Lisa Delpit who, when asked to silently monitor the detention of one of her students, instead discussed with him the many accomplishments of his great-grandfather.⁴

I firmly believe in the transformative potential of classrooms marked by inter-subjective student-teacher relationships and mutual generosity. The vision of such classrooms that Margonis offers provides an ethical ideal for which we should strive. Moreover, I agree that it would behoove all educators to learn about the deep wounds enacted as part of neocolonial education systems. Yet opting out of neocolonial relationality requires changing the systems that significantly limit teachers' ability to create genuine relationships, not blaming them for systemic inequities or holding them accountable to an ethical ideal that is not sustainable absent the convivial collectives that Margonis imagines. In the end, however, Margonis offers us a powerful ethical vision for responsive human relations to keep in mind as we work to disrupt both metaphoric and literal school-to-prison pipelines.

1. Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005), 53.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Juan F. Carrillo, "Teaching That Breaks Your Heart: Reflections on the Soul Wounds of a First-Year Latina Teacher," *Harvard Educational Review*, 80, no. 1 (2010).

4. Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 72–73; Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 143.