

Tending Neocolonial Gaps

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In *The Dreamkeepers*, Gloria Ladson-Billings describes philosophies and instructional strategies of several teachers who have created powerful learning environments with African American students. One teacher, Ms. Rossi, begins the school year with supererogatory efforts designed to break through the tension that often inhabits the space between her and her students. Ms. Rossi says she distributes a questionnaire to her students at the beginning of the year, so she can learn more about their leisure time pursuits and their interests in schoolwork. She says,

I try to find out as much as I can about the students early in the school year so I can plan an instructional program that motivates them and meets their needs...I think that it's hard for sixth graders in a community like this one to trust, white people especially. They've been lied to too many times. I don't blame them for not wanting to open up with me right away. But soon enough they begin to see that I take the information they give me to heart.¹

Ms. Rossi expects African American students in her classes to distrust her, that is, she suspects the possibilities for fruitful educational exchanges may be closed off even before she gets to know the students, and she has devised ways of coaxing them to "open up with me" — a process that she expects to take significant time.

In handing out the questionnaire, Ms. Rossi is tending what Gert Biesta calls the "gap" between her students and herself: she is preparing the groundwork for fruitful relationships by getting to know something about them, by seeking to build trust with them, and by asking them to volunteer statements to her. Once she knows something about her students, she expects to create curriculum and classroom projects that might call out the knowledge students bring to the classroom, and if she can gain the students' trust, they may be willing to speak out and enter the practices of intersubjective play that characterize dynamic learning and teaching. Ms. Rossi is seeking the sort of relational openness recommended by Biesta, who describes the gap as an enunciative space of possibility that indeed makes education possible. "A pedagogy of relation," he suggests, "should...acknowledge and affirm the uncertainties and risks and the possibilities that are at stake in this gap."² Biesta speaks of this "ethical space" both in terms of its potential and in terms of its risks: it is a place of natality where newness may enter the world and where self-cultivation becomes possible, however, it is also a place of violence, where the student's moorings in the world may be disrupted.³

Ms. Rossi seeks to coax her students into an educational relationship, because she knows it is a risky proposition for some of them, and indeed, we might say that the polarization between "middle-class white" teachers and "working-class African American" students makes this classroom especially dangerous. Ms. Rossi's judgment on the distrust her students hold may be in some degree of tension with the prescriptions of Biesta, because her quest to create an educationally productive gap

involves a proactive consideration of what social theorists call “structural” or “institutional” influences, that is, the ways in which educational exchanges in her classroom are partly shaped by the history of slavery in the United States and ongoing patterns of white surveillance and Black resistance. So when she seeks to create optimal conditions for educational exchanges, she responds to her students’ expressions, but she also interprets those expressions using her knowledge of polarization in the students’ communities. And as she makes inferences concerning the meaning of students’ acts, she relies upon totalizing descriptors such as “white” and “African American,” which run against the grain of Biesta’s commitment to relate to students as complex humans, without reducing them to an object of our knowledge.

In an effort to explore the possibilities and risks of some neocolonial gaps, I bring together two very different, sometimes opposing, accounts of educational events: the ethical and ontological analyses of Gert Biesta, and the pedagogical analyses of Gloria Ladson-Billings. Where Biesta seeks to describe educational interactions in ways that recognize the agency and presence of each of the participants, Ladson-Billings describes patterns of powerful teaching and learning as well as patterns of violence and oppression that occur within neocolonial contexts. Biesta does everything he can to avoid totalizing descriptions of the other, whereas Ladson-Billings relies on such descriptions. Yet, I argue that Ladson-Billings’ generalizations about teachers and students in neocolonial contexts are absolutely critical to helping students in neocolonial contexts attain the intersubjective possibilities for which Biesta argues.

BIESTA’S ARTICULATION OF “THE GAP”

In seeking out the students’ knowledge, Ms. Rossi is immediately focused on finding some of the topics she and the students might want to talk about and investigate together. This is in keeping with one of the strengths of Biesta’s articulation of the communicative gap: it focuses our attention upon the intersubjective possibilities of a particular group of students and teachers — bypassing the descriptors which erect barriers between people. Teachers are asked to be responsive to student expressions without relying upon summative understandings of the other’s being, for such summative statements reduce mysterious and complex individuals to our object of knowledge.⁴ In cross-group contexts like that of Ms. Rossi’s classroom, Biesta would probably agree with Homi Bhabha that it is especially important that teachers avoid the language of multiculturalism, which often makes us reliant upon broad generalizations about the culture or power of the other — preventing us from responding to students’ actual expressions and seeing many of the possibilities that might emerge in a particular space with a particular group of students and teachers. It is not that Bhabha recommends a lack of attention to the interpersonal dynamics of what multiculturalists call class, race, gender, and sexual orientation; it is that the generalizations tied to these aspects of human existence are too general and too laden with enlightenment metanarratives to be helpful in the enormously complex interactions of the urban classroom.⁵

Biesta's distrust of a teacher's description of the other is so thorough that he is not comfortable even with positive humanistic ideals concerning who the student might become. Philosophical commitments to educating "rational" humans or "empowered" students limit the intersubjective possibilities of students, because the teacher attempts to steer the student in the direction of a preset category and may inhibit a process in which the student comes to presence as herself.⁶ Students come to presence in the process of educational interactions, that is, in Biesta's view, human subjectivity is not an attribute of individuals but "a quality of human interaction."⁷ The ethical space of the classroom creates the possibility for education to occur as unlike beginners come to presence in relation to one another. Each individual brings to the world a novel set of possibilities that can be realized in their expression in a group context. Biesta argues that

*my subjectivity is only possible in the situation in which others can be subjects as well. Not any social situation will therefore do. In those situations in which we try to control the responses of others or deprive others of the opportunity to begin, we cannot come into the world; subjectivity is not a possibility.*⁸

Difference among people is thus absolutely basic in setting up the conditions for individuals to come to presence.⁹ Each individual must articulate her or his perspective in relation to those who do not hold the same perspectives, and in listening to one another, each individual must translate what the other has said in order to interpret their perspectives. Difference, on this view, is absolutely integral to the processes of learning.

In Biesta's work, the pursuit of dynamic enunciative spaces is educationally desirable, but such a pursuit is also an ethical calling. As a teacher, I have a responsibility to respect the newness students bring to the world and to create contexts in which students can indeed come to presence in fruitful ways.¹⁰ My proximity to students already obligates me to look out for them and respond to them. In Emmanuel Levinas's work, from which Biesta draws, this is a responsibility that emerges from the relation itself and is more basic than my decision.¹¹ This is a space in which the ethical concerns of responding to the other are prior to any effort to "know" the other. Indeed, in seeking to respond to the other, the teacher needs to respond to students' expressions, without any effort to trace those expressions to an overarching, or totalizing understanding of the student.

Even though the gap can be a space of freedom and is reflective of the teacher's obligation, Biesta represents the gap as a risky, potentially painful place. Students are likely to experience disruption in the process of education. When we ask students to take a stand on the dilemmas of human existence, the process can be demanding and potentially hurtful. The equilibrium of students might be undercut.¹² Thus, for both Biesta and Ms. Rossi building trust with students becomes a basic aspect of powerful education. Biesta emphasizes that students do not know where their education is taking them, so they need to believe this teacher is taking them somewhere that is beneficial even when it is hurtful.¹³ Trust, in a sense, opens the possibilities for powerful discussions because it prepares the participants for the difficult moments ahead.

NEOCOLONIAL HERMENEUTICS: INTERSUBJECTIVE RISKS AND
POSSIBILITIES IN NEOCOLONIAL CLASSROOMS

Biesta represents gaps in general — that is, spaces where people are free to come to presence with one another — as extremely fragile places.¹⁴ Creating the possibility for educationally exciting gaps in neocolonial settings is especially difficult, but Ms. Rossi is able to overcome the odds. The dynamic intersubjective play among students and teachers can be seen in Ladson-Billings' description of Ms. Rossi's sixth grade mathematics class. Instead of sending students to their desks to solve problems on their own, Ms. Rossi moves around the room, posing problems to be solved, and the students respond by solving the problems, explaining their solutions to the class, and posing their own problems out loud for other students to solve. When students are stumped by one of the problems posed, Ms. Rossi redirects the question to the entire class, and students come up with answers. When students offer solutions to a problem without explaining their reasoning, Ms. Rossi asks the student and the class, "how do you know this is the solution?" When the problems encountered by an individual or the whole class are too difficult, Ms. Rossi stops to explain to a student or to offer didactic instruction to the class. In Ladson-Billings' words,

The busy hum of activity in the classroom was directed toward mathematics. Every so often, Ms. Rossi would suggest a problem and the students would work frantically to solve it. Each time she did this, a new set of questions and possible solutions entered the discussion. I was amazed at how 'comfortable' the students seemed as the discussion proceeded. No one student, or group of students, dominated the discussion. Responses and questions came from throughout the classroom.¹⁵

Even though this pedagogical event appears to be an example of the sorts of intersubjective play Biesta finds most promising, it's critical to recognize that, on Ladson-Billings' interpretation, Ms. Rossi was only able to enact this sort of learning and teaching because she employed what Sharon Todd calls "knowledge about" students: generalizations about their communicative preferences and generalizations about the ways in which the neocolonial context could operate to prevent the emergence of such dynamic interactions.¹⁶

Ladson-Billings offers us insightful descriptions of patterns of student-teacher interaction in neocolonial contexts, yet these descriptions are in tension with Biesta's and Todd's suggestion that teachers should focus on the expressions that come from the students and not rely upon totalizing descriptions of the students. Thus, in Biesta's worldview, Ms. Rossi is on tenuous ground when she says African American students are distrustful of her, and I am on tenuous ground in seeking principles to guide teaching in "neocolonial" contexts. When I use the concept "neocolonial educational contexts," I am referring to social and historical situations marred by the still living legacy of colonization. Dominant group members, who previously controlled colonized people through violence and bondage, now use less direct means to maintain race and class privilege: job discrimination, housing and educational segregation, and schooling designed to rob students of their people's heritage while preparing them for low-level jobs in society. These institutional strategies occur along with enunciative patterns which Ladson-Billings delineates with painful accuracy: teachers who denigrate their students, who establish informal

hierarchies in the classroom, and who distance themselves from the students and refuse to take responsibility for their educational development; such interaction patterns call out students who withdraw, resist, and bide their time.¹⁷ Teachers from any background can find themselves enacting the enunciative strategies of neocolonialism, and thus it is critical that we develop interpretive means of discerning when schooling has descended into a form of domination.

Some of the risks and possibilities of neocolonial educational gaps might be fruitfully explored by contrasting the pedagogies of teachers who enact neocolonial educational patterns with the dynamic teaching of Ms. Rossi. The first contrast Ladson-Billings draws is between teachers who denigrate their students and Ms. Rossi who works to bolster the students' confidence. Ladson-Billings and others have documented the widespread denigration of students in neocolonial contexts, and these ascriptions — whether the students are called lazy, unintelligent, illegal, behavior problems, or culturally deficient — operate intersubjectively in the same way the designation "Negro" worked in the life of Frantz Fanon: they circumscribe and preempt the intersubjective play that would allow students to come to presence as powerful people. Fanon first described the ways in which colonial control was partly achieved via the interpersonal domination of colonized peoples in intersubjective exchanges. In Fanon's work, the everyday designation of him as a "Negro" served to tie his enunciative possibilities to a history of "tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency fetishism, racial defects, [and] slave-ships." He was not free to engage in educative play with a teacher from the colonial group. Any presence he would come to in this intersubjective context would have to be in keeping with these colonial expectations. Due to the colonizer's gaze, he was "overdetermined from without."¹⁸

Ms. Rossi, in contrast, seeks to bolster students' confidence, so they will be able to define themselves and knowledgeably set their own direction in life. Because she is aware of the ways in which the media portrays African American students as criminals and athletes, as well as the ways in which white people often respond to African American community members in patronizing ways, Ms. Rossi exerts extra effort to bolster the confidence of students in the face of daily messages circulating in the larger society. She emphasizes the students' intellectual abilities and the power of their intellectual heritage. Ms. Rossi offers an advanced prealgebra curriculum, and she tells the students of the Egyptian mathematician Ahmes, so they might know the African roots of algebra and not succumb to dominant group images that associate mathematical knowledge with white people. As Ms. Rossi's fast-paced class proceeds, she misses no opportunity to celebrate students' successful solutions of problems with the other students. She repeatedly tells the students how intelligent they are, and she is rewarded when a student exclaims, "This is easy!"¹⁹

The second contrast Ladson-Billings draws is between teachers who create informal hierarchies in the classroom, which subordinate African American students, and Ms. Rossi's attempts to run an egalitarian classroom. Neocolonial pedagogical practices, which imply that African American students are less capable

and less well behaved than white students, truncate productive educational dialogue and redirect students' expressions away from the flow of the lesson. African American students are routinely exposed to less exciting and less demanding curricula than other students. In Ladson-Billings' words, middle-class whites students "are treated as if they come with knowledge" while African American students are "treated as if they have no knowledge."²⁰ As African American students receive the message that the teacher expects less of them, they are likely to withdraw from the risky give and take that is involved in high-powered educational exchanges. One teacher observed by Ladson-Billings exerted extra effort in controlling African American students and disciplined them far more commonly than the other students in the class, while another teacher she describes was more lax with African American students than with white students, because she felt sorry for them and wanted them to know that she cared.²¹ The creation of hierarchies in the classroom is noticed by the students, and it undercuts the sort of trust that Biesta rightly says is needed for powerful learning and teaching.

Ms. Rossi works to avoid these hierarchical patterns. She seeks to be equitable and fair in her relationship with all the students.²² As a consequence, students are more likely to trust her and more likely to speak their minds in her presence. Because Ms. Rossi works to develop relationships with the students that will allow them to offer their perspectives freely and thoughtfully, she is able to enact a high level curriculum. The absence of informal hierarchies in the classroom maximizes the number of students who are actively engaged in the lesson. In short, she works to create a dynamic intersubjective space where the collective intelligence of the class is high; each student comes to presence as they contribute to the group's problem solving process.

A third contrast Ladson-Billings draws is between the neocolonial pattern where a teacher distances herself from African American students and does not take responsibility for their growth; Ms. Rossi seeks connection with students rather than dissociation. Teachers enacting neocolonial patterns often do not feel a personal commitment to the students' success, and are often content to adopt pedagogical practices that keep African American students in a holding pattern during their stay in the teacher's classroom. Patterns of dissociation in classrooms may well be contemporary expressions of prior laws and practices maintaining segregation between races. In a ethno-historical account of inter-ethnic relationships in a California town populated by Chicanas/os, Mexicanas/os, and Anglos, Martha Menchaca argues that previous patterns of segregation have now become relationships of "social apartness," where substantive cross-race communication is rare and when it does occur, it occurs in public spaces on Anglo terms (that is, Latinas/os are expected to be deferential, to speak English, and to enact an American identity).²³ The neocolonial teachers in Ladson-Billings' research may be enacting similar forms of dissociation, where they would prefer to keep their distance from African American students and expect that interactions with students will generally occur on the teacher's terms. When teachers enact forms of social apartness in classrooms, it precludes the mutuality needed to open up dynamic intersubjective spaces.

Ladson-Billings contrasts the practices of dissociation with the pedagogies of teachers like Ms. Rossi, who strive to create contexts in which complex webs of intersubjective possibility emerge: they seek to connect students to their community, to their nation and race, to herself, and to each other. By creating lots of possible relationships, Ms. Rossi expands the intersubjective possibilities available to each student. As Ladson-Billings describes Ms. Rossi and other teachers like her, she says:

They help students make connections between their local, national, racial, cultural, and global identities. Such teachers can also be identified by the ways in which they structure their social interactions: Their relationships with students are fluid and equitable and extend beyond the classroom. They demonstrate a connectedness with all of their students and encourage that same connectedness between the students. They encourage a community of learners; they encourage their students to learn collaboratively. Finally, such teachers are identified by their notions of knowledge: They believe that knowledge is continuously re-created, recycled, and shared by teachers and students alike.²⁴

Ms. Rossi thus places her hopes in the dynamic patterns of intersubjective interactions that emerge when she commits to her students, connects them with each other and the community, and teaches them truly difficult educational material.

BALANCING “KNOWLEDGE ABOUT” NEOCOLONIAL CONTEXTS AND “LEARNING FROM” STUDENTS

The questionnaire passed out by Ms. Rossi at the beginning of the school is a simple and modest act, yet it gains its power partly because it violates the neocolonial patterns of denigration, hierarchicalization, and dissociation. In sincerely asking students to tell her something about themselves, Ms. Rossi immediately distances herself from the neocolonial patterns many of the students have experienced. Instead of demeaning or marginalizing them, she asks students to write about themselves in whatever way they choose. She seeks connection, not dissociation. Here, Ladson-Billings’ neocolonial hermeneutic operates to name the absent patterns that give meaning to Ms. Rossi’s insightful pedagogical intervention. With acts such as these, Ms. Rossi probably gives the students a sense of relief that they will not be suffering the pedagogies of surveillance that operate in many neocolonial contexts.

The neocolonial hermeneutic developed by Ladson-Billings is perhaps most helpful in this regard: it highlights oppressive pedagogies that commonly preempt the sort of intersubjective play Biesta describes. Thus, teachers seeking to create educationally exciting gaps in their classrooms, must not only steer clear of classroom exchanges that enact patterns of denigration, hierarchicalization, or dissociation, but they must also make sure that their actions cannot easily be interpreted to be in keeping with these patterns. Many students in neocolonial contexts are on guard in the classroom and thus are primed to find the ways in which neocolonial control is implicit in the teacher’s acts. In keeping with Elizabeth Ellsworth’s description of the “power of address,” students read teachers’ acts partly in terms of what those acts say about the assumptions teachers hold about the students.²⁵ An elaborate and punitive classroom management scheme tells the students the teacher expects them to misbehave, and in turn, a difficult curriculum that calls upon students to assume responsibility tells the students the teacher

believes in their abilities. Thus, a white teacher had best be careful in carrying out didactic instruction, for even if she intends to deliver an educational message in the most meaningful manner, students in neocolonial contexts will sometimes respond negatively to hierarchical interactions, thinking that the teacher is attempting to erect a racial hierarchy in the classroom. Even though Ms. Rossi enacts a directive pedagogy and is seen by the students as “stern,” her teaching is unlikely to be interpreted as a form of neocolonial control because her classroom strategies are so dependent upon student input. She makes it clear that she wants to hear from the students on their terms.

Despite the usefulness of the neocolonial hermeneutic, it is in tension with the Levinasian principles articulated by Biesta and Todd, for it relies upon totalizing generalizations about teachers and students and a rigid structural logic that predicts the stability of controlling patterns in classrooms. In Todd’s terminology, a teacher who looks for a student to be “on guard,” privileges her “knowledge about” students over “learning from” students.²⁶ Teachers who assume they know a student in advance are likely to act disrespectfully, and they may very well reinscribe patterns of racial and class control by assuming students will act in ways characteristic of students in neocolonial contexts. Here, Biesta’s exhortation to “mind the gap” is extremely helpful, for it focuses our attention on intersubjective possibilities and not upon the overly rigid lines of difference drawn by the neocolonial hermeneutic.

In philosophical debates, we might say that Biesta is arguing for a paradigm that prioritizes ethics over epistemology, that responding to the other is far more important than trying to know the other.²⁷ Biesta prefers that the teacher enter intersubjective exchanges with students with a willingness to follow the flow of the intersubjective play that emerges. When Biesta suggested that we consider the risks and possibilities of educative gaps, he also said we should seek to understand the “uncertainties” of these gaps, and it’s this straightforward acknowledgment of uncertainty that should characterize teachers’ employment of neocolonial hermeneutics. The patterns of denigration, hierarchicalization, and dissociation may or may not appear, so educators should consider these possibilities, but they must — as Biesta would suggest — focus primarily upon the actual expressions of students and the dynamics that occur in the classroom. Instead of thinking she knows that a classroom will involve patterns of hierarchicalization, the teacher should be attuned to the possibility, just as she is attuned to a myriad of possibilities: possibilities that the students are hungry for educational exchanges, that they are in need of the teacher’s attention, that they are despondent about the state of their society, that they are concerned about their younger siblings, that they live for basketball after school, and that they might be on guard. That is, if we proliferate all the possible orientations kids might bring to the classroom, it prevents us from privileging one and it prevents us from placing too much credence in the predications offered by the neocolonial hermeneutic. And indeed this is the power of Ms. Rossi’s questionnaire: it does double duty in breaking through possible tensions in the classroom while also sending the basic message that she wants to relate to the students as multifaceted beings with interests far beyond school. In a language that has been rightfully

questioned, we might say that Ms. Rossi wishes to address her students as human beings.

1. Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 67.
2. Gert Biesta, "'Mind the Gap!' Communication and the Educational Relation," in *No Education Without Relation*, eds. Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 12.
3. Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning* (London: Paradigm, 2006), 29, 48, 51; and Gert Biesta, "Radical Intersubjectivity: Reflections on the 'Different' Foundation of Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 18 (1999): 211.
4. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 50–52.
5. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 34–35.
6. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 34, 39–40; and Gert Biesta, "Pedagogy with Empty Hands," in *Levinas and Education*, ed. Denise Egea-Kuehne (New York: Routledge, 2008), 202.
7. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 134; and Biesta, "Radical Intersubjectivity," 212.
8. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 135.
9. *Ibid.*, 49; and Biesta, "Mind the Gap!" 17.
10. *Ibid.*, 30.
11. Biesta, "Pedagogy with Empty Hands," 203.
12. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 29; Biesta, "Radical Intersubjectivity," 211.
13. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 25–26.
14. *Ibid.*, 88.
15. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Making Mathematics Meaningful in Multicultural Contexts," in *New Directions for Equity in Mathematics Education*, eds. Walter Secada, Elizabeth Fennema, and Lis Adajian (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 135.
16. Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003), 8–11.
17. Many scholarly accounts of schooling in neocolonial contexts are available. For instance, Donna Deyhle, *Reflections in Place: Connected Lives of Navajo Women* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009); Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); and Signithia Fordham, *Blacked Out* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
18. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markman (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 112, 116.
19. Ladson-Billings, "Making Mathematics Meaningful," 134–35.
20. *Ibid.*, 138.
21. Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*, 20.
22. *Ibid.*, 66.
23. Martha Menchaca, *The Mexican Outsiders* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 206.
24. Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*, 25.
25. Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 7, 22.
26. Todd, *Learning from the Other*, 8–11.
27. Gert Biesta, "Justice and the Vocation of Education," in *Derrida, Deconstruction, and the Politics of Pedagogy*, eds. Michael Peters and Gert Biesta (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 28–29.