

Opting Out of Neocolonial Relationality

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In a settler society, such as the United States, it is enormously difficult to discern which social practices and institutions are ethically sound and which practices are the profoundly immoral continuations of colonial violence. Because the founding of the nation involved sustained patterns of violence, such as wars against Indigenous peoples and enslavement of Africans, patterns of thought in the country often rationalize and normalize those founding acts and their contemporary legacies. It is, thus, an extremely difficult philosophical problem to imagine a social world that is “delinked” from these legacies and patterns of thought, and the possibility of such delinking depends upon our ability to discern when colonial patterns shape our institutions and practices — so we can opt out of those tragic social patterns and develop healthier ways of relating to one another.¹ The practices of what Charles Mills calls “white ignorance” have prevented a society-wide discussion of the ways in which colonial domination is continually rearticulated to create new forms of control²; and deceptive versions of individualism — codified in talk of the “American Dream” and “individual responsibility” — systematically direct attention towards the surveillance of individuals, and away from historic patterns of violence. As a result, colonial violence is often enacted under the guise of “individual responsibility,” and educational policies designed to teach responsibility may reproduce colonial violence on a grand scale.

Several authors have charged that zero-tolerance disciplinary policies are a form of state-sanctioned violence,³ and my focus will not be on the policies themselves but on the ethical principle used to justify zero-tolerance policies, namely, the principle of responsibility. The now-routine practice of suspending and expelling students — theatrically declaring their expendability — offers a dramatic example of the misguided trust people place in the principle of responsibility and the ways in which it renders educators oblivious to their obligations to young people and their parents. Even though many educators defend harsh disciplinary policies by citing the importance of learning to act responsibly, the community members whose kids are targeted by these policies often view suspensions as an indicator of a school’s bankrupt social ethos and racial hostility. African American parents in Milwaukee, for instance, report that they pulled their kids out of public schools that enacted zero-tolerance policies and placed them in struggling charter schools, largely because the charter schools refused to cast youth off simply because a young person got in a fight or wrote on a desk.⁴ The parents justifiably fear their children are in danger of being marked for prison, and they appreciate the ethical commitments of educators who view youthful misbehavior as a regular part of life and who seek to work with students and parents for the good of all those involved.

These parents’ collectivist ethical commitments are not only justified but also offer us an intimation of a better world. In many of the cases now discussed under

the research title “school-to-prison pipeline,” educators have been misled by the principle of responsibility, which narrows the pedagogical focus to a youth’s acts and the resulting punishment, leaving out the multiplicity of relational factors that allow for powerful learning and humane discipline. Given the reductive conception of learning that accompanies the principle of responsibility, it makes perfect sense to make punishments more brutal when prior punishments fail to extinguish a youth’s misbehavior. But now that the United States has militarized many schools and made expulsions an everyday event, the tragically misguided character of this reasoning should be coming into focus. I would like to argue that the principle of responsibility often operates as a tool of colonial control and that its tragic role in neocolonial contexts helps disclose its general limitations as an educational ethic. The principle of responsibility encourages blindness to the relational contexts in which both learning and dehumanization occur, and, as a consequence, it often limits educators’ understanding of the harms they enact and, alternatively, to the possibilities that lie before them.

THE PATHOLOGIES OF RESPONSIBILITY

Educators commonly reference the importance of teaching youth responsibility, and a traditional conception of responsibility offers an implicit justification of much of what educators do in an everyday way.⁵ This widespread ethical orientation is heir to a philosophical tradition that has shaped the common sense understanding of responsibility. As François Raffoul argues, western philosophy has bequeathed a conception of responsibility which asserts that individuals are the authors of their actions, that each of us has a zone of activity under which we are in control, and that the voluntary character of our decisions justifies rewards when we act well and punishments when we act poorly.⁶ Youth, it is inferred, will learn to “take responsibility” when they are held responsible for their actions. Now, of course, there are many everyday exchanges in which people successfully rely upon this reasoning. However, I would like to argue that the reductive character of the principle of responsibility commonly leads to destructive educational acts, and this is most apparent in neocolonial contexts where youth are subjected to the principle of responsibility in its harshest forms.⁷

To begin this path of thought, I would like to recount a portrait of an event where students are held responsible from Ann Arnett Ferguson’s *Bad Boys*, which portrays the disciplinary practices at Rosa Parks Elementary School — a school in which one half of the students are African American. One morning, Ferguson drops by the detention room to see what happens in that space. She writes,

I can hear laughter from the Punishing Room before I get to the door. A crumpled ball of paper sails by my face in the direction of a wastebasket as I enter. Five children — four boys and a girl, all African American — are in the Punishing Room this morning.... There is a feeling of excitement that is quickly shushed as I enter the room... [A young girl excitedly takes it upon herself to report to Ferguson.] Look what Alain did.... she begins to read aloud the words on the table. “Write 20 times. I will stop fucking 10 cent teachers and this five cent class. Fuck you. Ho! Ho! Yes Baby.”... The room is still as taboo words and deeds invade the silence. Five pairs of eyes filled with anticipation, awe, and suppressed giggles watch for my reaction.... Now one of the boys takes over for her. Shaking his head in mock sorrow, he begins to recite the words.

This space of resistant jubilation continues as the Student Specialist (in charge of the Punishing Room) enters. Ferguson continues,

So the girl chimes in again, rapidly, with an expression of pure innocent indignation, to recite the boy's composition, this time by heart. The words and the girl's perfect act of righteousness cause all the children to start giggling. By the time she gets to "Ho! Ho! Yes Baby!" I am ready to howl with laughter myself. The student specialist tells the girl to be quiet and get on with her work. But even she has a twinkle in her eye.⁸

Alain's act of what the school terms "defiance," namely, writing the taboo words on the table, earned the author a suspension; as with the parents in Milwaukee, the child's father was not pleased. Both this suspension and the act of sending this little boy to the Punishing Room are justified by reference to the principle of responsibility: he is being taught that his actions have consequences.⁹ However, as an act of teaching, suspending this little guy seems counterproductive. The author of the taboo prose is learning a good many things, but they don't seem to be the lessons his school intended. To better understand how the principle of responsibility led these educators astray, I would like to offer an interpretation of this event — one that relies upon the theoretical lens of existential phenomenology.

If we think first, as a teacher, and ask what the Punishing Room poet is telling us, it is somewhat difficult to capture the main point: the boy parodies the routine acts of detention, and he appears to be protesting his treatment, criticizing the teacher and the school, and rallying his peers. For educators, this indeterminacy of meaning, combined with the collective excitement of the kids, could be highly productive. A teacher might ask the youth to expound on their points in a focus group and then write persuasive essays arguing their case. In the process, the kids would advance their writing, and both youth and adults would learn significant lessons about the experiences of students in the school. But the principle of responsibility directs the attention of educators in a much less productive direction: the culprit must be singled out, and a decisive meaning must be assigned to his or her acts. The principle of responsibility facilitates this decisiveness by its reductiveness: it artificially detaches an individual from others around him and focuses only upon the act of the youth and the appropriate consequences. In this case, Alain was singled out, and his act was deemed "defiant."

Ferguson reports that "defiance" is part of a larger set of discourses which operate to identify "troublemakers," who are then targeted and subjected to heightened levels of surveillance.¹⁰ Indeed, Ferguson says it's common in this elementary school for faculty to refer to troublemakers as "future criminals," and this systemic pattern of deficit thinking should be understood in both its ethical and ontological aspects.

With regard to the ethics of the event described by Ferguson in the Punishing Room, it is helpful to think of the discussions that have surrounded the works of Emmanuel Levinas. In that philosophical tradition, the term "troublemaker" is a totalizing description which does violence to a student, by substituting the teacher's description of him for responsiveness to his message.¹¹ When the young poet's prose is labeled "defiant," educators are drawn away from responsiveness to the boy's messages and instead act on their "knowledge" of him. As such, the educators violate

the call voiced by Gert Biesta to be responsive when students address us — to be open to students' messages, recognizing that we can never know them, that responsiveness to their messages is an existential obligation.¹² These are the preconditions of ethical engagement. And, in extending that tradition, Mary Jo Hinsdale suggests that teachers seek to respond to youth in a way that invites the youth's response in return,¹³ that is, since meaningful engagement involves fostering a to-and-from movement amongst peoples, teachers should seek to respond to youth in ways that facilitate an open exchange of ideas.

Now the youth of the Punishing Room are indeed addressing their elders; the young girl immediately reads Ferguson the boy's writing when she enters detention, and all the youth look to see how Ferguson will respond. Ferguson responds with attentiveness, but does not respond verbally, and the Student Specialist responds by telling the girl to get to work. Neither engages the content of the youth's message, and Ferguson describes the youth's words as "taboo," perhaps because the youth in detention have — by the rules of detention and punishment — lost their right to be heard or perhaps because the school proscribes utterances critical of teachers. If we accept the suggestion that others have an ethical weight — "the weight of the other" in Shilpi Sinha's account — which calls the addressed individuals to a type of obligation,¹⁴ both Ferguson and the Student Specialist were being called to attention by the students, and they had the opportunity to speak meaningfully with the kids about the situation, but they probably felt obligated to maintain the boundaries established by the school's disciplinary practices. These youth were banished, and the regime of the school marked them to be punished, not talked to, and certainly not played with.¹⁵ Given the ethics of Levinas, Biesta, and Hinsdale, this banishment appears as a fundamental refusal to accept one's existential obligation, but, given the ethic of responsibility, it's the action adults need to take to teach youth a lesson.

From an ontological perspective, the unwillingness of the Student Specialist and Ferguson to respond to the message of the jubilant youth in the Punishing Room needs to be understood. It is as if a social divide — a chasm — separates the youth and the adults. What might have been intellectually engaging intersubjective play amongst youth and adults was closed off as the Student Specialist told the kids to get back to work. By introducing the term "intersubjectivity" here, I'm invoking the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hans Georg Gadamer. In this worldview, the bodies of the youth in detention are already connected at a preconscious level, and they spontaneously play off of one another in the way that Merleau-Ponty describes a discussion: "my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion," which is part of a "shared operation of which neither of us is the creator."¹⁶ The youth have set in motion a to-and-fro movement of rhythm and protest, where each of their performances are called out of them by the patterns of intersubjective play. Think analogously of the play amongst improvisational jazz musicians, where the melody and the rhythm call out interwoven performances from the band members. In Gadamer's words, "the structure of play absorbs the player into itself and thus takes from him the burden of the initiative."¹⁷ The expressive excitement that addresses Ferguson as she enters detention that morning is the collective play of

bodies who have all been banished from the confines of the classroom and feel a new sense of power: the feeling of strength that emerges when outcasts are freed from the surveillance of the classroom and come together to “fight the power.” When Alain writes his taboo prose, he does so with the strength of collectivity, and, immediately, his coauthors offer competing interpretations of his words — each altering the tone and rhythm of the prior rendition. But this felicitous play of intersubjectivity — a cornerstone of some of the best pedagogy (such as that of John Dewey and Paulo Freire) — is limited to the youth.

The social chasm that runs through the Punishing Room ensures that the adults do not get to play along with the kids. The adults — like the youth — *are* swept away by the intersubjective play set in motion by the kids, but they resist: Ferguson suppresses her incipient “howl” of “laughter,” and the Student Specialist allows only a “twinkle in her eye.” The adults’ unwillingness to join the youth, despite the intersubjective movement that already claimed their bodies and thoughts, discloses the divide — the social reality in operation in the space. For social realities are precisely that: forces to which we adapt. And the youth are well aware of the social divide in the room, and it’s an effort to transgress this boundary that leads them to fashion an outrageous and taboo message, and to keep escalating the excitement even as the adults shun them.

When Alain is suspended in obedience to the principle of responsibility, the school punishes him with imaginary reference to a world in which he acts alone, implementing decisions he made consciously — an imaginary world entirely out of touch with the intersubjective play of the Punishing Room. The principle of responsibility (and its postulated world of self-regulating individuals) fosters an insensitivity — a blindness — to the pedagogical possibilities and the educational crimes enacted in the Punishing Room drama. The youth — who respond to the social divisions in their school with ingenuity and creativity — were appreciated by the adults in the room, but the youth are nonetheless treated as insubordinate. It’s likely that the Student Specialist and Ferguson felt ambivalent about Alain’s suspension, but the disciplinary policies of the school required them to treat the youth like “future criminals” in need of punishment. The School Specialist’s felt obligation to the youth was overridden by the disciplinary dictates of the school. Indeed, the possibility that the kids were reaching out, attempting to bridge the social divide in the school, is not even considered when we view the situation via the lens of responsibility. Thanks to the blinders of the principle of responsibility, youth learn that they are threatened with expendability and that they will need to navigate a social world in which they will be treated as objects.

COLONIAL DANCES

Close interpretations of the adversarial play of the Punishing Room may help us understand the social patterns at Rosa Parks Elementary School, but they do not prepare us to see the ways in which similar events are replayed in many schools throughout the society. We can gain a more complete understanding of the school’s commitment to punishing Alain, and the strange social divide that separates youth and adults, by interpreting them with the aid of decolonial theories. The play of

imposition and defiance described by Ferguson may be a colonial legacy, an old colonial dance, a variation of the battle that transpired between many slaves and slave owners. Bernard Boxill offers us an ethical reinterpretation of one such colonial dance, which Fredrick Douglass describes as the “fight with Covey.” Douglass was viewed as a recalcitrant slave and was sent to be “broken” by Covey — a process drawn out over many months. In Boxill’s interpretation of the adversarial play that transpired between Douglass and Covey, Douglass reached the point where he felt compelled to fight back so aggressively that he would risk death in the name of securing his self-respect. Boxill explains this existential commitment to self-respect by quoting Douglass, who states that he was “not only ashamed to be contented in slavery, but ashamed to *seem* to be contented.”¹⁸ To counter this threat of shame, Douglass risked his life and took a key step in claiming his self-respect, partly because he showed his own resoluteness and partly because he incited fear in the man who was supposed to break him. In Boxill’s portrait of the dance of imposition and resistance, Douglass was not only justified, but a model of heroism and an intimation of the political direction African American social justice movements should assume.¹⁹

In a way that is analogous to the fight with Covey, the school treats Alain as a recalcitrant youth, who needs to be broken, and the kids in the Punishing Room act as though they have little to lose in contesting adult authority. I suggest we consider the adversarial play between Douglass and Covey as one of many colonial dances that were choreographed during that period of tragic violence — dances which we continue to replay and reinvent in a variety of ways. The continuity between Douglass’s fight with Covey and the Punishing Room drama helps us understand why there are always “troublemakers” at Rosa Parks Elementary and why suspensions have become an everyday phenomenon. Just as the institution of slavery reliably called out slave resistance and thus required people like Covey, the routine imposition of authority at Rosa Parks Elementary reliably calls out resistance and thus requires an elaborate system of discipline. The youth in the Punishing Room, like Douglass, find the strength to act out, and Boxill might say they are enacting their existential commitment to self-respect.

It is, of course, speculative to suggest that the educators at Rosa Parks Elementary were initiating a colonial dance choreographed in the period of slavery. For as Sara Ahmed aptly argues, there is no clear line of causality tying the period of slavery to the present. Granting that “colonialism is central to the historical constitution of modernity,” Ahmed nonetheless argues that “history is not the continuous line of emergence of a people, but a series of discontinuous encounters” amongst peoples and nations.²⁰ Without suggesting that contemporary relationships are determined by the history of slavery, I would suggest that co-ordered patterns of relationships, or dances, can be seen — both in their colonial form and in the present. Like other dances, they offer contemporary participants an intimation of the role they should play, but participants carry out those roles in ways that are tied to their own bodily understandings and to contemporary circumstances; the dances are an extension of behaviors and scripts handed down from prior generations, and they are a re-creation that occurs with new contours and new moves. Yet there is a type of continuity, and

— indeed — there is a degree of social force and coercion that accompanies these dances, such that educators and students often fall into these dances in obedience to the institutions and social relationships they inhabit. Educators would do well to study these dances in both their colonial and current form so they might avoid them.

The first step in the colonial dance of imposition and resistance is initiated by the assertion of complete authority — an authority not responsive to the perspectives of the one disciplined — such as, the teacher’s actions when she sent Alain from the classroom. The tendency to assert complete authority might be viewed, in the theorization of Nelson Maldonado-Torres, as an enactment of the “imperial attitude,” which involves a claim to superiority and a suspicion of people of color; it is an attitude forged in the historical acts of seizing land, killing people, and enslaving Africans, and it is an attitude that intermittently reappears in social interactions throughout the society — on the streets, in schools, or in the writing of philosophy.²¹ Many teaching acts might be seen as such exertions of such imperial authority. For example, Sundry Watanabe describes an exchange between a teacher and a Native student: the teacher asked the student a question, and the student deferred, saying she preferred to think about it. The teacher responded by walking in front of the student, demanding eye contact, and insisting that she answer immediately. This attitude of imperialism is a continual temptation when teachers want students to act in ways other than they do.²² The imperial attitude can even infect standard forms of didactic instruction, such as, when students experience a teacher-centered classroom as one in which certainty lies in the teacher’s hands, the role of the student is passive absorption, and there is an expectation that the student probably will not learn the material as delivered.

As with other dances, both partners have a sense of their roles, and as the educators at Rosa Parks repeatedly enact the imperial attitude, youth respond in ways that are self-protective or resistant. At Rosa Parks, these dances of imposition and resistance appear to be so routine that students and teachers continually approach one another with apprehension and distance — meaning the social chasm is constantly re-created in multiple relational events during the day. Ferguson says kids are always vulnerable to being called out for breaking rules they don’t even know about and for which they don’t understand the rationale. She describes an escalating incident in which a young girl is called out by the Vice Principal, first for talking in the hall, then for having a slight bounce in her step as she carried out the Vice Principal’s demand to retrace her steps without talking, and then for not standing motionless while listening to the reprimand she received for having a bounce in her step. She responded to these repeated commands both by trying to comply with the Vice Principal and with ever-so-slight indications of frustration, and she was given the day in detention as a result.²³ This is a version of the dance of imposition and resistance, which appears to be about breaking this girl’s spirit, and not about education. The repeated enactment of these sorts of events creates a school atmosphere in which youth are routinely on edge and fearful because adults are watchful and vigilant.

The repeated enactment of the dance of imposition and resistance creates a relational economy in the school that frames and predisposes many social relationships.²⁴ If we combine our understanding of the “imperial attitude” with Merleau-Ponty’s

conception of “intersubjectivity,” it’s possible to see how imperial acts by teachers and administrators can set in motion an intersubjective play of bodies in classrooms and hallways — creating feelings of tension and a social chasm, a space of distance and objectification between teachers and youth that fractures many of the exchanges in the school.²⁵ As educators enact patterns of surveillance and control, relying upon objectified portraits of the youth as “troublemakers,” youth either withdraw or prepare for battle. The youth probably stop responding to the actual adult in front of them and instead create their own objectifications of the adults in power. In short, by acting aggressively, based upon objectified conceptions of youth, the adults have fostered adversarial patterns of exchange between the kids and their teachers and the creation of social distance.

Thus, the social divide between youth and adults at Rosa Parks Elementary is continually remade everyday as the dance of imposition and resistance plays out in classrooms and hallways. And it’s this social chasm between youth and adults — especially African American youth — that makes the use of the principle of responsibility most pernicious. Educators commonly rely upon the principle of responsibility in nonpolarized contexts, and often carry out its prescriptions without violence, largely because the principle is enacted in ways that do show an attunement to the youth in question and the larger relational context: for instance, teachers commonly overlook youths’ lapses when they don’t consider it a teaching moment; they often notice if a kid has acted out because they were retaliating to mistreatment from another kid; they factor in the possibility that they themselves created a situation that called out the youth’s response. But, in polarized contexts, actual responsiveness to youth, and attunement to the relational context is set aside, and the principle of responsibility becomes a decontextualized way of placing blame, for the aim is no longer education, but, instead, the dance calls upon educators to break the child’s spirit.

In Maldonado-Torres’s account, the disciplinary treatment of youth at Rosa Parks Elementary would be considered an example of the “non-ethics of war.”²⁶ As, the large-scale overt violence of early colonization gave way to the more decentralized forms of violence that characterize current social practices in the United States, the color line became the site along which the non-ethics of war are still practiced. Just as on the battlefield, ethical considerations are secondary along the axis of the color line, and the unethical acts of marking youth as troublemakers, suspending them, and preparing them for the school-to-prison pipeline indicates that Rosa Parks Elementary is one battlefield in a long-term, low-intensity war.

The dance of imposition and resistance was choreographed with the aim of preparing slaves to accept manifestly unjust institutions. Douglas was sent to Covey so he might be broken, and if a trip to detention and then suspension is a matter of breaking a person’s spirit, it’s very clear that this is war and not something called education. Anthony Bogues, amongst many scholars of coloniality, has argued that slavery left the descendants of slaves with deep wounds — wounds that are still fresh and are easily reopened.²⁷ This process was and is the antithesis of education; in John Dewey’s terms, it is an experience that will hardly lead to further growth.²⁸ When colonial dances are repeated today, as neocolonial dances, they continue to

wound and rewound. Despite their jubilation in the Punishing Room, Alain and his comrades are likely to take some pain away from this event of banishment, both because it signals their expendability and because that signal may reopen wounds. When the educators at Rosa Parks appear to be dissociated from the wounds they administer, we may well be seeing the work of the principle of responsibility in action.

OPTING OUT OF COLONIAL DANCES²⁹

Educators at Rosa Parks Elementary, and other neocolonial educational sites, would do well to approach their teaching with care, knowing many students are easily rewounded. As a corrective to the violent history of the nation, teachers might dedicate themselves to finding the least violent, most joyful, path of education possible. An embodied commitment to joy and nonviolence, I submit, is far more important than any specific curriculum or act of instruction. Educators may be able to reduce the violence in their pedagogy by familiarizing themselves with the wounding dances choreographed during the colonial era. By studying and discussing these dances, educators might become sensitized to the manifold ways in which the imperial attitude may appear in educational policy and practice, as well as in our own actions. If we look for the play of the imperial attitude in the world of contemporary schooling, it emerges in the most taken-for-grant phenomena: compulsory schooling, Eurocentric curricula, English-only policies — even the very concept “youth.”³⁰ Compelling Alain to go to school, requiring that he master a curriculum that embodies a demeaning conception of African American peoples, and conducting surveillance over his every move — these invite Alain and his peers to dances of imperialism. Indeed, once we disclose the repeated play of the imperial attitude, it’s unclear whether schooling as we presently enact it should be continued at all.

For educators seeking joy and nonviolence in neocolonial spaces, there is a need to think and feel imaginatively and intersubjectively, for it’s terribly unclear what path leads out of this colonial malaise. If the Student Specialist and Ferguson had followed their felt connection to the kids in the Punishing Room and allowed themselves to laugh and talk with the kids, healing — not wounding — may have resulted, and instead of furthering the social divide in the school, the kids’ connection with the adults may have been strengthened. Levinasian calls for openness and receptivity helpfully direct educators to listen to students, even when the context is tense and the message is critical. And if we combine this commitment to receptivity with Merleau-Ponty’s portrait of intersubjectivity, we can see that hearing students involves more than a willingness to listen when students speak. Students and educators do well when they work to foster relational contexts in which youth speak freely and a healthy to-and-fro play takes place amongst students and teachers. Belinda ‘Otukolo Saltiban writes of how the ethics and ontologies of Oceania call upon adults to “tend” or “nurture” the spaces between themselves and younger people — keeping them healthy and capable of carrying whatever communicative content the relationship requires.³¹

Tending the spaces between the youth and teachers at Rosa Parks Elementary would involve concerted efforts by educators to forge relational connections that might displace the social chasm currently dividing adults and youth. Adult objectification

and surveillance of youth would need to be displaced by a generous engagement with kids in their situations: the languages and rhythms they use to interpret and navigate their lives. Ferguson models this approach as a researcher: she listened to rap music kids introduced her to, hung with their families, and shared their entertainment. Ferguson was willing to take on the languages and rhythms of the youth with which she worked, and when she showed students an intense interest in their lives, they responded with ample testimony and instruction.³² Ferguson models a type of generosity that might be described as an open and active engagement with youth as they want to express themselves.³³ By teaching Ferguson, the kids in her study probably learned more than they did in their classes, for as Deborah Meier states it, “teaching is mostly listening and learning is mostly telling.”³⁴ Were teachers to follow Ferguson’s lead, the kids and the adults could learn far more than they do at present, and both would be relieved of the pain and tension that accompanies colonial dances.

Imagining educational patterns of intersubjective connection is challenging in a settler context, but the creation of convivial collectivities is not extraneous to education, but its very substance. Teachers hoping to foster joyful patterns of intersubjective play may find their work enabled if they think past the individualism of the principle of responsibility — thinking instead of chains of human connection and difference. Instead of dissecting the world of relationships into individuals who are each responsible for their behavior, it might be liberating for all involved to conceive of teaching as the initiation of multiple acts in succession, patterns of play that immediately move beyond the teacher’s ability to predict and control. Reasoning that the most devastating aspect of coloniality is the imperial refusal to accept the gifts of people of color, Maldonado-Torres suggests that decolonization involves the restoration of a gift-giving economy, where “racialized subjects could give and receive freely in societies founded on the principle of receptive generosity.”³⁵ In such a relational context, everyone is positioned as a giver, who decides what they shall give, and everyone is positioned as a receiver, who owe responsiveness to one another. Educators might envision their classrooms as intersubjective spaces in which youth and teachers offer one another the gifts of expression, of writing, of performance. In such an economy of giving, educators would appreciate and engage with Alain and his coauthors’ Punishing Room performance. And in such a relational economy, there would be no taboo subjects and no taboo languages, for the knowledge the students bring to bear would be respected as their gift. Students and teachers may find that such relational economies only become possible when, as Troy Richardson suggests, the location of educational events occurs in contexts where the languages and rhythms of students shape the atmosphere of the space and “European ontologies lose something of their habitability.”³⁶

However, I do not wish to imply that anticolonial teaching is limited to the dramatic re-creation of the educational world, for educators are continually enjoined to enact colonial dances, and there are many ways to opt out. In Angela Valenzuela’s study of a polarized high school, in which many of the Latina/o students are treated in demeaning ways that reliably call out their resistance, she quotes one teacher who describes her disciplinary strategy:

Whenever kids are acting up, I take them out of the classroom and ask them, “What have I done that would cause you to act that way?” *This question always disarms them because usually they can’t imagine that me, a teacher, would suggest that I had done something wrong.* And then after they say either yes, that I was the problem because they thought I was picking on them in class or no. I ask them what it is that’s causing them to act in the way that they do? I always try to work things out with them individually.³⁷

Even though discourses of responsibility authorize the teacher to find the student at fault, she opts out of the power discursively assigned her. She refuses to enact an imperial attitude and refuses to engage in the non-ethics of war. Explaining her action, she says she “disarms” students by asking if she is the problem. One envisions a student who knows the dance and is ready to fight, but the dancing partner refuses to initiate the battle. The teacher addresses the very real issue of the youth’s disruptive behavior while remaining attuned to the ethical weight of the student. Believing that we are all intersubjective beings whose actions emerge in relation to one another, this teacher insightfully surmises that it may actually be her own behavior that is problematic. She carefully guards against rewounding her students by choosing a nonviolent path, and she has no interest in playing out the pathologies of a colonial dance.

Instead, the teacher invites the student to a new dance, and in Valenzuela’s view, this is a dance that foregrounds the teacher’s *cariño* for the student. Because the student and teacher are intersubjectively tied together, the teacher makes it clear that she is ready to alter her own approach for the student — that her primary concern is to make the relationship work for the student, the other students, and herself. By seeking connection and discussion, she conveys the expectation that she and the student ought to be part of a social world in which difficulties are equitably and reciprocally addressed. By her very comportment, the student knows that this teacher would never simply cast him off.

1. Walter Mignolo uses the language of “delinking” from colonial legacies. See “Delinking,” *Cultural Studies* 21 (March/May 2007): 449–514.

2. Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 139–166.

3. Victor Rios, *Punished* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Ronnie Casella, *At Zero Tolerance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); Henry Giroux, *America’s Education Deficit and the War on Youth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013).

4. Thomas Pedroni, *Market Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 77–78.

5. See, for example, Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character* (New York: Bantam, 1989).

6. François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 10–11.

7. Charles Mills persuasively shows that much philosophical work in the United States remains disconnected from social realities of the society because it relies upon idealizations disconnected from the history of slavery and its contemporary legacies. By taking the disciplinary practices of an elementary school in a neocolonial context as the object of this essay, I am hoping to counter the disconnection Mills documents, and I am hoping to suggest that the educational mistreatment of youth of color offers lessons that are of society-wide significance. See Mills, *Blackness Visible*, 150–151.

8. Ann Arnett Ferguson, *Bad Boys* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 29–30.

9. Ferguson reports that teaching responsibility is a theme stressed in the school. For example, the school pledge contains the line, “I pledge to accept responsibility,” *ibid.*, 49.

10. *Ibid.*, 1, 9–10.

11. Sharon Todd, *Listening to Students* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003), 8–11.
12. Gert Biesta, “No Education Without Hesitation,” *Philosophy of Education 2012*, ed., Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL, Philosophy of Education Society, 2013): 5–6, <http://ojs.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/pes/issue/view/31>.
13. Mary Jo Hinsdale, *Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentoring in Higher Education* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2015), 123–124; Mary Jo Hinsdale, “Choosing to Love,” *Paideusis* 20, no. 2 (2012): 38.
14. Shilpi Sinha, “Dialogue as a Site of Transformative Possibility,” *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 29, no. 5 (2010): 460, 462.
15. By foregrounding the ethical, as opposed to the ontological, I am trying to take one step toward addressing the insightful criticism Troy Richardson has made of my prior essays. See Troy Richardson, “Disrupting the Coloniality of Being,” *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 31, no. 6 (2012): 539–551.
16. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 354.
17. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 94.
18. Bernard Boxill, “The Fight with Covey,” in Lewis Gordon, ed., *Existence in Black* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 279.
19. *Ibid.*, 289–290.
20. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2000), 11.
21. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” from *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (March/May 2007), 245–247.
22. Sundy Wantanabe, *Tensions in Rhetorics of Presence and Performance* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Dissertation, 2012), 77.
23. Ferguson, *Bad Boys*, 64–65.
24. Alexander Sidorkin has offered an arresting perspective of reciprocal relational economies in schools, although he does not address how racial conflict comes to be part of those economies. See *Learning Relations* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).
25. Sara Ahmed makes the provocative suggestion that we need a theory of “inter-embodiment” that describes the intersubjective exchanges of bodies. See *Strange Encounters*, 47.
26. Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 247.
27. Anthony Bogues, *Empire of Liberty* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 40.
28. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1938).
29. Gregory Bourassa taught me to appreciate the value of opting out.
30. The literature in youth studies includes a colonial analysis of the category “youth.” See Nancy Lesko, *Act Your Age* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2001).
31. Belinda ‘Otukolo Saltiban, *Storying Academic Spaces* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2012), 164–167, 188.
32. Ferguson, *Bad Boys*, 11–17.
33. Romand Coles reconceptualizes the concept of generosity to refer to an openness to others in *Re-thinking Generosity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), and Rosalyn Diprose offers a powerful portrait of the possibilities of “corporeal generosity” in *Corporeal Generosity* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997).
34. Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xi.
35. Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 260.
36. Richardson, “Disrupting the Coloniality of Being,” 550.
37. Angela Valezuela, *Subtractive Schooling* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), 99–100 (emphasis added).

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