ABSTRACT. In this review essay, Mark Brenneman and Frank Margonis address three recent book-length contributions to the ongoing discussion around cosmopolitanism and educational thought: Mark Olssen’s *Liberalism, Neoliberalism, Social Democracy: Thin Communitarian Perspectives on Political Philosophy and Education*, Sharon Todd’s *Toward an Imperfect Education: Facing Humanity, Rethinking Cosmopolitanism*, and Ilan Gur-Ze’ev’s *Beyond the Modern-Postmodern Struggle in Education: Toward Counter-Education and Enduring Improvisation*. Brenneman and Margonis argue that these contributions exhibit a marked disenchantment with Enlightenment conceptions of human possibilities as these inform concrete recommendations in the field of the philosophy of education. All three books call for a rethinking of modernist categories in educational thought, a call that is supported by the authors’ respective distrust and ultimate disenchantment with the residual presence of ideas of human perfectibility harbored in the philosophical categories that animate discussions in multicultural, liberal, neoliberal, and postmodern educational discussion. Brenneman and Margonis argue that each of these books theorizes from its own respective regionally specific circumstances, and they therefore prove valuable to philosophers of education who struggle toward their own local responses to human difference and the pedagogical possibilities of educational relations.

I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives…. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal.¹

Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience. Look at them today swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration.²

These observations by Jean-François Lyotard and Frantz Fanon, respectively, offer us competing ways to understand the postmodern or postcolonial era. For Lyotard, the master narratives that have undergirded European endeavors and self-definition — stories of God, democratic progress, and socialist utopia — have lost their viability among intellectuals; they no longer direct us in our aims to make societies better nor do they work to justify our endeavors. For Fanon, the colonial battles for liberation — in Algeria, Vietnam, and Cuba, to name just a few — unmasked the hypocrisy of European humanism and forced us to recognize that the European Enlightenment was complicit in atrocities of gargantuan proportions (the colonization of major sections of the globe, two world wars, the Holocaust, the dropping of nuclear weapons, and the ecological destruction of the Earth). Postmodern and postcolonial strains of thought intersect at many

². Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 311.
points, while diverging on other points. Both strains question the Enlightenment legacy in fundamental ways and involve a search for new ethical and epistemological direction; particular theorists — such as Michel Foucault — have greatly influenced both strains of thought. Yet, the two strains stem from separate histories and foreground divergent concerns. Much of the postmodern literature is concerned with the withering away of support for the grand visions that guided European peoples and their descendants in pursuit of a more humane world. Thus, Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* focuses primarily on the state of knowledge in European societies, almost entirely neglecting colonial relations. While also questioning fundamental Enlightenment metaphors, postcolonial writings focus upon the most tragic legacy of European wrongdoing: the history of colonization throughout much of the globe. Consequently, these writings foreground the relation of colonizer and colonized; they take their political inspiration from the Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu and their philosophical impetus from Frantz Fanon. Thus, Fanon’s critique of European ethics begins with the oppression of colonized peoples and announces an era of postcolonial liberation.

Whether we join Lyotard and theorize the present as an era in which the old stories of meaning and legitimation have broken down, or we join Fanon and view the present as a period in which the colonial arrogance of Europe has come crashing down, there is ample evidence in the philosophical world of a backing away from the guiding concepts of European modernity. Some theorists place a theoretical response to the postmodern condition front and center in their theorizing, while others continue to write as though the trials of postmodernity are merely an irritating background noise, but even those in this latter group find their philosophies transformed as they respond to coded debates that have indeed emerged from the postmodern and postcolonial condition — such as debates over “multiculturalism” and “cosmopolitanism.”

For those who follow either Lyotard or Fanon, it is fair to say that this is an era of disenchantment in which authors either seek to set the metaphors of the Enlightenment aright, or seek out supplementary philosophical guideposts, or seek out new languages altogether. The books we discuss in this review essay offer us three different philosophical strategies in this era of disenchantment. Mark Olssen is a follower of neither Lyotard nor Fanon; his important work *Liberalism, Neoliberalism, Social Democracy* is nonetheless shaped by themes

MARK BRENNEMAN is a Doctoral Student in the Department of Education, Culture, and Society at the University of Utah, 1705 E. Campus Center Dr., Salt Lake City, Utah 84112; e-mail <mark.brenneman@utah.edu>. His primary areas of scholarship include the philosophical foundations of education, curriculum theory, critical pedagogy, critical theory, and political theology.

FRANK MARGONIS is Professor in the Department of Education, Culture, and Society at the University of Utah, 1705 E. Campus Center Dr., Rm. 307, Salt Lake City, Utah 84112-9256; e-mail <frank.margonis@utah.edu>. His primary areas of scholarship are relational and critical pedagogies, phenomenological and Marxist philosophies, and educational policy.
of disenchantment. Olssen shows a clear sensitivity to the ways in which neoliberal economic policies have allowed the extension of colonial practices through a form of market fundamentalism; moreover, he offers an explicit response to the postcolonial era in his sharp criticisms of the most egregious forms of imperialism, such as the United States’ invasion of Iraq. Olssen’s political theory, however, endeavors to tailor the themes of Enlightenment theorizing to deal with the issues of a new day: he seeks to limit the claims of reason en route to making European nations more accommodating of cultural and individual difference within their borders and more committed to establishing a just and egalitarian global order. In her insightful book *Toward an Imperfect Education*, Sharon Todd confronts Enlightenment metaphors far more directly than Olssen does, for she argues that the very perfectibility of Enlightenment thought operates theoretically to limit Europeans’ self-understanding of atrocities they have committed, while locating the evils of the world outside themselves in the acts of “terrorists.” Todd seeks to supplement the principle-based ethics and politics of the Enlightenment with a relational commitment to the other, and she believes the space for this sort of intervention occurs within the inconsistencies, ambivalences, and omissions of Enlightenment theorizing. Ilan Gur-Ze’ev’s unique and powerful book, *Beyond the Modern-Postmodern Struggle in Education*, is the most disenchanted of the three books we examine in this review, for Gur-Ze’ev found little hope in the contemporary political terrain. Contemporary political movements — whether they find affinity with the practices of critical pedagogy or anticolonial movements — seem mired in normalization and orthodoxy, from Gur-Ze’ev’s vantage point. Thus, Gur-Ze’ev’s theoretical endeavors were focused upon preparing the way for an as-yet-undiscovered critical language, one that will move beyond the normalizations of the Enlightenment era, the relativism of postmodernism, and the ethnocentrisms of postcoloniality.

A great deal of Gur-Ze’ev’s pessimism stemmed from his disillusionment with the national project of Israel. We are saddened to say that Professor Gur-Ze’ev has recently passed away. When he was alive, teaching at the University of Haifa, Ilan Gur-Ze’ev was engaged daily with what he considered to be the impossible politics of the failed Israeli experiment, and we greatly appreciate his commitment to theorize from a regionally located perspective. Philosophy sometimes offers us the illusion of universality: we use the same words, and it leads us to think we are all talking about the same problem. This review enacts the assumption that

3. Mark Olssen, *Liberalism, Neoliberalism, Social Democracy: Thin Communitarian Perspectives on Political Philosophy and Education* [New York: Routledge, 2009]. This work will be cited in the text as LNS for all subsequent references.

4. Sharon Todd, *Toward an Imperfect Education: Facing Humanity, Rethinking Cosmopolitanism* [Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2009]. This work will be cited in the text as TIE for all subsequent references.

5. Ilan Gur-Ze’ev, *Beyond the Modern-Postmodern Struggle in Education: Toward Counter-Education and Enduring Improvisation* [Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2007]. This work will be cited in the text as BMP for all subsequent references.
philosophies respond to regionally specific circumstances, offer locally valuable responses to those circumstances, and should not be assumed to be speaking about the same matters — even when the same words are used. Todd and Olssen, for instance, take up discussions of “multiculturalism” and respond to the European debates that have sprung up over the appropriateness of Muslim women’s dress. In contrast, our own context in the southwestern United States leads us to associate debates over “multiculturalism” with the fractured, sometimes tragic, educational relations stemming from the still-recent colonial acts of the taking of Mexican territories in 1848 and the enslavement of African Americans until 1863. Todd and Olssen express concern for the ways in which the voices of Muslim women are silenced in the public realm, while we are focused on ways in which schools are used as mechanisms of neocolonialism. Such disparate concerns will probably not be fruitfully addressed by the same theory; hence, our insistence upon considering philosophies within their regional context. Given the significant disparity in the locations and concomitant concerns of the authors under review, we will seek only to offer fruitful comparisons of perspective, without attempting to argue for the superiority of any particular viewpoint. We hope the reader will be satisfied with not one conclusion, but many insights.

**Olssen: Seeking a New Non-normalizing Social Democracy**

In comparison to Todd and Gur-Ze’ev, Olssen is the least disenchanted, for even though he is sharply critical of the neoliberal economic policies that presently hold sway in Western nations, he finds the corrective for this state of affairs in a political theory that might be characterized as a new form of modernism, a reconstructed conception of social democracy designed to avoid the totalizing tendencies of previous versions of new liberalism. Olssen replaces the organic metaphors of self and society employed by neo-Hegelian thinkers, such as T.H. Green, with metaphors drawn from Foucault and complexity theories, which portray individuals as nodes amid open and always-unfolding systems of social relations. Individuals, on this view, draw intellectual and moral sustenance from communities without being mere cells in a larger organism. By reenvisioning individuals’ relations to their groups, Olssen hopes to retain much of the social democracy package: a representative conception of democracy, governments committed to protecting the well-being of all peoples within the nation, and nations that recognize the imperative to protect the well-being of citizens in other nations.

Olssen’s criticism of the neoliberal economic policies in Europe and settler states such as the United States is strong indeed. He blames U.S. leaders for exporting a form of “market fundamentalism” (LNS, 10), where elites assert the efficiency of a social realm governed by economic dictates and the fairness of institutions shaped by the market — a stance he refutes directly. The illusion that markets lead to just institutions has produced profound global inequalities, the exclusion of many people from meaningful political participation, and the
concentration of power and wealth in the hands of private interests \([LNS, 12]\). Crass economic decision making has also undermined the communities and community understandings needed in a democratic society and an efficiently organized society \([LNS, 11]\). Internationally, neoliberalism “insulates economic power from the nation-state and produces forces which nation-states cannot control” \([LNS, 10]\). Markets have not been able to make good on what are indeed shared interests among people — such as the health of our ecosystem — and what are basic ethical imperatives in terms of ensuring the well-being of all people.

We see creeping disenchantment in Olssen’s decision to substitute Foucault’s conceptions of disciplinary control for neo-Hegelian metaphors of organic societies. On his view, European societies, beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, have developed an array of “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, [and] scientific statements” that target human bodies within particular spaces \(\text{Olssen, quoting Foucault, } LNS, 70\). The new technologies operate to create certain types of humans, or particular life forms, hence the term “biopolitics” \([LNS, 71–72]\). The constellation of differing discourses and institutions does not follow any overriding principle, and thus Foucault — in Olssen’s interpretation — offers us a form of complexity theory, where totality becomes “reconfigured as an always open, relatively borderless system of infinite interconnections, possibilities, and developments” \([LNS, 69]\).

However, Olssen’s disenchantment only goes so far: he refuses to adopt a “postmodern” interpretation of Foucault and instead interprets Foucault in a way that inserts a positive normative stance. Following the “unfashionable” interpretation of James Johnson, Olssen argues that Foucault’s portraits of power, such as that in \emph{Discipline and Punish}, reveal Foucault’s commitments to norms of inclusion and equity. 7 He quotes Johnson at length on this point:

Disciplinary power is normatively objectionable [for Foucault] precisely because it imposes unequal, asymmetrical, nonreciprocal relations of power and because, in so doing, it obliterates the sorts of extant communicative relation that, potentially at least, could produce social relations characterized by equality, symmetry and reciprocity. \([LNS, 72]\)

For Olssen, Foucault’s biopolitics is part of a much longer strand of nondisciplinary ethical theorizing that focuses on the fundamental value of “life” and its continuation — a historical tradition that includes Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Gilles Deleuze. Ethically, a focus on the continuation of life offers a common ground for humans, one that is less prescriptive and paternalistic than theories that seek a common ground in ethical principles, in a theory of rights, or in epistemological foundationalism. Olssen says that “life philosophy” allows for a “wide perfectionism”: “Life philosophy enables an objective theory of good at an

---

abstract and general level based on that which enhances life, and what diminishes life. It is a wide, rather than narrow, conception of good...and can thus avoid the charges of elitism or perfectionism” ([LNS, 199]).

Olssen’s conception of the social good, which governments should be asked to ensure, embodies this wide perfectionism. Olssen is especially appreciative of Martha Nussbaum’s effort to specify the positive traits, abilities, and conditions all people should enjoy; her list of the capabilities governments should ensure includes the ability to live a healthy life, where one is able to sense, imagine, and think; the ability to exercise practical reasoning; and the power to have basic control over the political and material aspects of one’s environment ([LNS, 178]). For Olssen, Nussbaum’s willingness to state and defend positive social goods, for which governments are responsible, makes her philosophy a valuable alternative to neoliberal theories that only offer minimalistic conceptions of shared human needs ([LNS, 179]). Thus, Olssen takes up Nussbaum’s commitment to capabilities as a universalistic but vague commitment, so that we have a standard for the sorts of conditions governments should seek to create, with wiggle room, so that the basic precept might be realized differently in different social, cultural, and political contexts ([LNS, 200]). Even though Olssen prefers that a universalistic conception of capabilities enjoys the status of an objective good, he proposes that these social commitments come along with the institutional mechanisms and the public engagement that would allow for the continual discussion and negotiation over the public good.

**Todd: Working the Fissures of Cosmopolitan Discourse**

In Sharon Todd’s engaging and insightful work, *Toward an Imperfect Education*, the disenchantment of the postmodern era emerges clearly. In contrast to Olssen, who seeks to breathe new life into modernistic metaphors of democracy and deliberation, Todd accepts the Enlightenment legacy with resignation, and her sense of possibility emerges in the tensions, contradictions, and fissures that arise in Enlightenment discourses. In Todd’s view, the perfectionism of the Enlightenment has not prepared its proponents to act justly, for the eighteenth-century vision of “rational men” performs a pernicious theoretical task: “we” define ourselves as rational, ignoring our record of violent acts, and accuse others of being violent. Enlightenment ideals thus operate to blind us to our own propensity to do evil and limit our ability to hear the perspectives of those whom we have already defined as less moral than ourselves. Relying upon the relational ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, Todd seeks to develop a cosmopolitan perspective that will allow European-influenced peoples to see their own ability to act wrongly and that will open them to the perspectives of people with whom they disagree in a radical fashion. [9]

---


Todd seeks to locate the theoretical event in which the human propensity for evil was submerged so we might bring that aspect of our character back into the light of day. In doing so, she offers an intriguing interpretation of Kant, suggesting that he consigned human evil to the subconscious. In Todd’s interpretation of Kant,

Evil is itself rendered paradoxically as being at once an “uncontrolled,” uneducated aspect of “nature” and as that which cannot be found entirely within man’s “natural” disposition. Indeed, there is an apparent struggle at play here: at one moment Kant introduces evil as nature insofar as it must be brought under control, and the next he claims that it is a deformation of man’s “natural” goodness. It appears, then, that evil is something not quite naturally human; it is depicted as belonging to the spheres of both human potentiality and of human impossibility. Kant ultimately positions evil outside the boundaries of a more “fundamental” aspect of human nature — namely, the good — and thereby turns evil into a betrayal of humanity itself. (*TIE*, 14)

Todd believes the Enlightenment tendency to view humans as good allows us to dissociate ourselves from our own acts of evil (viewing them as foreign contaminants that have caused us to abandon our fundamental character) and to dehumanize those who we say are responsible for current evils (*TIE*, 21).

Todd seeks a corrective for Kant’s elision of evil from human character in the tensions between Kant’s universalistic and particularistic claims concerning cosmopolitanism. In his 1795 “On Perpetual Peace” essay, Kant argued for a universal observance of human rights, yet he tempered this universalism with the suggestion that all people have a right to universal hospitality, that strangers and noncitizens have the right to visit a nation and be taken in as guests on a temporary basis. Todd makes the interesting argument that the universal observance of rights is in tension with the injunction to respond to the specific circumstances of noncitizens: “To be hospitable necessarily requires attentiveness to accommodation that suits the other’s particular needs. And this would seem to rub against the grain of the very universalism that underpins the idea of humanity upon which this right rests” (*TIE*, 34).

The need to be hospitable to noncitizens presents the individual with the opportunity to do good or evil. In Levinas’s terms, the face presents itself to the other along with the quiet injunction, “thou shall not kill,” yet its vulnerability makes a violent response entirely possible (*TIE*, 17). According to Levinas, the face of the other presents us with a responsibility, to which we may respond supportively or unsupportively. If the individual accepts this responsibility — that is, his or her subjection to the other — this is a “good” response; and if the individual refuses this responsibility, it is a form of evil (*TIE*, 18). By locating the potential for good and evil in human relations, Todd seeks to focus our attention upon the complex, indefinable, contested nature of human interaction, and she, in effect, exhorts each of us to take on the response-ability of responding supportively to others.

---

Todd emphasizes that a world in which real human tensions are faced is a world of dissensus, not consensus; that is, as cross-group communication increases and people articulate their perspectives with integrity, we should expect growing disagreement about major issues (TIE, 110). For Todd, a commitment to cosmopolitanism requires an improved ability to deal with profound disagreements in the political process, and consequently she emphasizes that cosmopolitan conceptions should straightforwardly address the processes of translation and negotiation required by intercultural communication, and further that cosmopolitanism must be willing to allow agonistic political debate where parties hear one another out without the theoretical reassurance that agreement will be reached at the end of the day (TIE, 114).

Thus Todd is far less enchanted with cosmopolitan theory than Olssen; theorists such as Nussbaum, who emphasize the importance of universal rights, cross-cultural understanding, and procedural approaches to democracy, do not — in Todd’s view — recognize the profound levels of disagreement operative in the world. Nussbaum does not recognize the difficulties involved in cross-group understanding, nor does she acknowledge the history of pain and violence that mars many cross-group exchanges. In Todd’s view, because Nussbaum and others have too much confidence in the principles of Western democracies and do not wrestle with the intimidating tensions that inhere in the cosmopolitan project, they end up proposing a narcissistic vision of intercultural exchange — one that makes “‘us’ better people on ‘our’ own terms” — while “universal” Western principles serve to “filter diversity” (TIE, 30). Intercultural exchange would not, on such views, lead to a real openness to others we do not understand, nor would it lead to a fundamental questioning of ourselves — including the possibility that Western conceptions of democracy have underwritten colonial projects.

Todd fears that this narcissistic ideal of cosmopolitanism will actually serve as one tool in the establishment of Western hegemony in international communication. Specifically, if universal norms are emphasized by Western nations, without sufficient willingness to face disagreement and conflict, the norms themselves will become a type of cultural colonialism by elevating the moral status of European cultures while being used to coerce other people and other nations into accepting Western practices and institutions (TIE, 103).

Gur-Ze’ev: Disenchantment on Two Fronts and a New Critical Language of Education

Of the three authors we discuss in this review, Ilan Gur-Ze’ev was the most disenchanted. For Gur-Ze’ev, modernist discourses have always “aimed at a positive mission: reestablishing the world as a ‘home’, offering a ‘home returning’ project for humans” (BMP, 14). Modernist “homecoming” is “enhanced by rational, solidarian, dialogical, individuals” (BMP, 14). The entire conceptual language that animates such discourses presupposes an autonomous individual who reasons critically and becomes an integral part of a collective rational-political praxis. According to Gur-Ze’ev, this mission has failed. Instead of greater
autonomy we are in fact driven by “unreflective popular consumption” (BMP, 224). Subsequent discourses have sought to reinvigorate a critical modernism and embrace a project meant to stem the devolution of modern subjectivity in the face of market-based logics and the alienation they produce. Seeking to effect a turn toward a collective utopian praxis, these critical strategies have also failed because they normalize educational relations as they pursue change. Gur-Ze’ev maintained that both of these paths within the modern project hold in common debunked Enlightenment certainties and survive within our current historical horizon only as utopian illusions.

As to the status of the “postmodern,” Gur-Ze’ev considered it to be equally bleak. Even though, as Frederic Jameson argues, postmodernity initiates “a thunderous unblocking of logjams and a release of new productivity,” helping us better scrutinize universalisms and offering a sense of “relief” from oppressive metanarratives — we now think quite differently about race, gender, colonial exploitation, migration, the uses of tradition, and otherness (the list continues) within education — Gur-Ze’ev remained pessimistic. His disenchantment with postmodern and postcolonial educational possibilities stemmed from his view that they often valorize “difference” and become susceptible to “normalizing” tendencies, such as ethnocentrism (BMP, 167). As the title of his book suggests, Gur-Ze’ev sought to move us beyond educational projects inspired by the promises of modernism and postmodernism, respectively. With this in mind, he embraced his despair and advocated what he called “counter-education” that seeks to abandon a whole host of what Lyotard described as “functors” supporting modern, postmodern, and postcolonial discourses.

Two points of departure figure prominently in Gur-Ze’ev’s sustained elaboration of his idea of counter-education. First, as we have noted, his theoretical work began within his own regional reality: the conditions of present-day Israel provide a backdrop to his philosophy. According to his painful assessment of Israeli life, the “homecoming project” of building the state of Israel in Palestine has proven impossible. For Gur-Ze’ev, “Israel has become a space where there is less and less room for genuine creative spirit and for social justice” (BMP, 2). Second, his educational project developed in direct response to the discourse of critical education. Gur-Ze’ev found little relief in a “critical education” motivated by the homecoming logic of securing emancipation through current conceptions of pedagogy and collective struggle (BMP, 65). Just as Israelis reassure themselves with uncritical assessments of their actuality, critical educators reassure themselves with promises of revolutionary hope. For Gur-Ze’ev neither language is admissible in present realities. For this reason, his philosophical quest was to move toward a “new critical language in education,” one that will not succumb to contemporary normalizing tendencies or be bound up with false promises of homecoming and utopia. Attuned as it is to its initial context, and pessimistic about educational

discourses that boast “self-evident” progress, for us Gur-Ze’ev’s philosophy provokes a rethinking of our own “settler state” realities.

Gur-Ze’ev’s pessimism developed in conversation with Frankfurt School Critical Theory. He distinguished between a first phase of Critical Theory that was preoccupied with the revolutionary project of Marxism and a second phase that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer honed in dialogue with the work of Walter Benjamin ([BMP, 99]). This second, “mature” phase of Critical Theory abandoned an earlier positive utopian focus, “forcefully cast aside its philosophical foundations and historical justifications,” and began reconstructing a “tradition of philosophical pessimism” that Gur-Ze’ev took up as his philosophical lineage and strove to continue ([BMP, 92]). Recasting the Enlightenment as continuous with the barbarous acts of the twentieth century, mature Critical Theory “rejected the entire tradition, which supported and manifested optimism about the possibility of a non-repressive revolution and about an unproblematic emancipatory critique” ([BMP, 92]). Like Todd, Gur-Ze’ev found few resources in the current “self-understanding” of human beings based in Enlightenment philosophies. He followed Adorno’s critique of Kant’s notions of freedom and cosmopolitan purpose. Adorno saw in Kant an inability to face squarely history’s devastating track record. This led Kant to the conclusion that in order to avoid catastrophe, we must collectively develop as a unified “self-conscious global subject.”12 According to the cosmopolitan Kant, the correctly conceived global society would move all persons toward achieving “humanity” as an ontological benchmark. For Gur-Ze’ev, following Adorno, Kant’s benchmark “humanity” results in modernity’s “oppressive regression” ([BMP, 101]). In other words, like Todd, Gur-Ze’ev felt that Kant’s idea of “humanity” works at the behest of a culturally determinate, historically bound European subjectivity. The consequence, as Adorno made clear, is that this positivity, this content, becomes wed to a notion of progress, thus resulting in a pernicious logic of “control.”13 Accordingly, in Gur-Ze’ev’s view, we now live with the disappearance of the preconditions for any ethics based in past universals.

Following in the tradition of Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Levinas, Gur-Ze’ev developed his own particular pessimism as a “negative theology.” His negative, or apophatic, theology seeks to critique and ultimately loosen the commitments that we uphold when we reason as we do, all the while continuing to pattern our communities and relations accordingly. Gur-Ze’ev’s apophatic refusal is meant to turn us back to the world in its actuality, suggesting that we approach it with a “renewed intimacy” devoid of intervening justifications, “coded social manipulations,” and “validity parameters” ([BMP, 14 and 245]). Here Gur-Ze’ev’s important concept of “Diasporic” was central to his thinking. For Gur-Ze’ev, our histories are tangled in fantasies of “home,” that is, narratives of ownership, collective identity, and the like. These provide us with our ideas

13. Ibid., 148.
of “self protection and reproduction in the sense of ‘becoming’” (BMP, 15). The call for a “Diasporic” existence is meant to negate the very possibility of “self-constitution and edification” that our patterns of commitment set in motion (BMP, 15). In other words, Gur-Ze’ev’s call to “Diasporic” life asks that we refuse to live within the world according to old intimacies, normalizing educational strategies based on incessantly rehearsed promises of “home,” and other timeworn bids for self-understanding. Diasporic education is a quest, a venturing forth into the open space, the aportia that necessarily attends all forms of experience of otherness. In other words, Gur-Ze’ev’s apophatic call rallies an “ecstatic” contact with the world made possible by transcending the limits of mere wish as well as all forms of “reasoned” appropriation. At its core is a radical call to relation.

In his early essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” Jacques Derrida located a similar “negative theology” in Levinas’s work, pointing out that Levinas often took advantage of theological strains of thought in his philosophical work precisely because they afforded a manner of expression that escaped the illusions of a conciseness of relation and the bid for certainty that animates much philosophical discourse. Levinas engaged the “theological” in order to dismantle the habits of Enlightenment reason. As Derrida argued, this use of negative theology “is developed in its discourse neither as a theology, nor as a Jewish mysticism (it can even be understood as the trial of theology and mysticism); neither as a dogmatics, nor as a religion, nor as a morality.” Following this strategy, Gur-Ze’ev’s apophatic theology sets its sights on the possibility of new meaning that emerges in the attempt to transcend all our current horizons of self-evidence as we venture into Diasporic relation with the world.

**Negotiating Difference in Postmodern Contexts**

For Lyotard, Gur-Ze’ev’s pessimism concerning the promises of the Enlightenment reflects one of the many intellectual currents that have undermined the stories of democratic progress and socialist utopia, which previously offered meaning to many of our intellectual quests. Lyotard suggested that once we no longer believe in a democratic populace who will devise ways to make society more just and egalitarian, the authority we grant to concepts of “reason” and “democracy” itself becomes subject to question. Put differently, if what has come to be called “reason” is merely a specific set of language games — which our stories of democratic progress have elevated to an exalted status — then once the story is shaken, the legitimacy of reason itself becomes questionable.

Olssen is not among those theorists who would consider “reason” to be merely one form of language game, although he clearly shows sensitivity to the ways in which liberal conceptions of rationality have served both to exclude other ways of thinking and to coerce people into accepting the dictates of reason. Olssen seeks

---


to develop a more humble and pluralistic conception of reason — reason, he says, with a small “r” — by considering Isaiah Berlin’s critique of the ways in which predominant conceptions of rationality, from Plato to Kant, have worked to justify state paternalism \([LNS, 99–100]\). Berlin argues that people reflect a plurality of value orientations, among which reason cannot adjudicate; thus, theories that rely upon rationality to locate truths among conflicting values operate to coerce one party or another to subordinate themselves to the calculations of others \([LNS, 84–85]\). Olssen quotes Gerald Gaus to characterize Berlin’s position: “his radical pluralism points to what might be called a ‘post-modern ethic’ — the view that moral positions are inherently plural and incommensurable, and we are thus unable to privilege any one as uniquely true or correct” \([LNS, 91]\). Olssen partly agrees with Berlin, in that “there are no eternal truths, and that the world is open, complex, uncertain, unpredictable and, as goods and conflict and ends collide, it is not harmonious” \([LNS, 101]\). But he is not willing to adopt Berlin’s radical pluralism, for such a view, in Olssen’s perspective, undermines the justification of liberalism itself, preventing us from seeing the superiority of liberal institutions; moreover, Berlin’s view does not allow us to censor inhumane or evil worldviews \([LNS, 91]\). Olssen believes Berlin’s pluralism needs to be tempered by the understanding that there are identifiable common values among humans: the need to sustain life and the conditions required for people to be able to live healthy lives with sufficient nutrition and opportunity to think and grow \([LNS, 111\text{ and } 178]\). Instead of being called upon to adjudicate between value systems, reason with a small “r” can operate within this realm of shared values, Olssen believes; it can help us identify the means for realizing the goals shared by humans \([LNS, 110]\). Olssen thus remains committed to some doctrine of an objective social good, and he believes rationality is basic to discerning such a good.

We appreciate Olssen’s willingness to view reason as a potentially exclusionary way of making decisions, but the position he develops would probably be stronger if he had engaged the works of contemporary postmodern authors instead of developing his position in relation to the works of Berlin. It is misleading to identify postmodernism with relativism and pluralism, as Olssen does. Postmodern authors have offered systemic attention to patterns of exclusion in Western thought and practice,\(^{18}\) and Todd would probably agree that Olssen’s more humble conception of rationality would allow some people to reach sound political decisions while excluding people who do not play these language games and who are already defined as outsiders. In Todd’s view, a hospitable relation to the other prepares us to receive the perspectives of others whether or not they conform to standards of reason. As Todd says it, “respect … is not about treating the other as another

---

18. Gert Biesta, for example, suggests that Derrida’s work has been focused upon deconstructing the exclusions in Western thought. See Michael Peters and Gert Biesta, *Derrida, Deconstruction, and the Politics of Pedagogy* [New York: Peter Lang, 2009], 27.
rational subject like myself, but about *responding* to her specificity in a way that secures her right to be other. That is, as hospitality faces the other as other, she is welcomed without limits and without conditions” (*TIE*, 111).

By prioritizing an ethical relation to the other over a focus on rationality, Todd deviates from the traditional line of liberal theorizing, which postulates good and rational humans [recall Kant’s philosophical card trick] and assumes that the aim of political theory is the articulation of fair rules of procedure that will allow all citizens to be heard and facilitate political decisions that reflect their collective reason. When Olssen discusses the issue of whether Muslim women should be allowed to wear traditional Muslim dress in schools in Europe, he follows the traditional strain of liberal theorizing in seeking to discern the fairest rules. Olssen improves upon the liberal tradition by arguing that the state’s authority extends so far as to support the continuance of life. Indeed, Olssen’s commentary on a Canadian judge’s decision to expel a woman dressed in a *hijab* from a courtroom and the French decision to expel school girls from school for the same offense shows the relatively nonpaternalistic character of his “continuance of life” perspective. As Olssen puts it,

> it is not clear how state actions to coerce conformity to dress codes can be justified with respect to promoting life continuance…. Such actions seem premised purely and simply on the interest in promoting uniformity in the public sphere. I would argue here that the state has traversed the sphere of individual and sub-group discretion. (*LNS*, 148–149)

Todd may well appreciate Olssen’s efforts to render liberalism less paternalistic, but she would be uncomfortable with his assumption that theorists and political agencies can successfully stipulate rules of fair procedure from their own vantage points. Indeed, Olssen’s perfectionism is likely to render those of us committed to such a perspective less capable of hearing the voices of people who have a drastically different perspective than our own (*TIE*, 63). According to Todd’s analysis, hospitable decisions about the appropriate dress of Muslim women could only be achieved by means of a messy relational process in which Muslim women would have the opportunity to voice their perspectives upon the significance the *hijab, jibah, burqa, or niqab* have for them and the implications French and Canadian laws have for their lives (*TIE*, 90–96). A dialogue between Muslim women and Christian or secular peoples would first need to attend to the difficult issues of translation, where French and Canadian law would be translated into the value systems and languages of the disparate women involved (*TIE*, 87–88). Those participating in this dialogue would need to enter the discussion with a commitment to hearing perspectives profoundly different from their own and without any clear sense that the worldviews expressed would be reconcilable in the end. That is, in following such an approach, we need to be prepared to live in a “fragile space of ‘conflictual consensus’” (*TIE*, 114).

For Todd, the ban on headscarves worn by Muslim women is a way of excluding Muslim women from the public sphere, for it not only erects rules without consulting the women affected, but it also creates public definitions of what the public sphere looks like and who has a voice in those spaces: “For to my mind, it is not only a question of religion that is at stake here, but a question of
how women and girls may be systemically excluded from participating freely in the public sphere, to the point of risking their right to an education” (TIE, 93). In Todd’s view,

the real tragedy of the situation is not that the decision to ban hijab was taken, but that the voices of Muslim women and girls were neither heard nor counted. Listening to these voices means listening to a translation of what freedom and rights mean in specific contexts; and acknowledging the dilemmas, tensions, and contestations of rights claims needs, in my view, to be the focus for new terms of democratic engagement across cultural and sexual differences. (TIE, 96)

Gur-Ze’ev would be sympathetic with Todd’s call to develop ethical and open cross-group exchanges with regard to the dress of Muslim women, yet he proposed that we seek an even higher aim. In her discussion of the hijab question, Todd gives us a vital glimpse into the content of her ethic of hospitality — emphasizing that we work within translation, listen within the boundaries of the contested and the conveyed, and really respond to what freedom, rights, and the like might mean in another’s context — but for Gur-Ze’ev these actions do not ensure that cross-group exchanges will escape the normalizing patterns of relations within advanced capitalist societies, nor the respective ethnocentrisms of those involved. In short, Gur-Ze’ev feared that ultimately both parties may remain mired in their own historically contingent constructions of reality. This is not to say that Gur-Ze’ev would be completely averse to either Olssen’s or Todd’s response to the hijab question. Gur-Ze’ev himself reached out to Palestinian scholars in dialogue and published his work in Arabic. Yet for Gur-Ze’ev these efforts were only a beginning; he took things a step further in asking that cross-group exchanges include an aspiration that all participants surpass the understandings they bring to the exchange in pursuit of that which is not yet understood. That is, he believed cross-group exchanges must seek both hospitality and transcendence. Exchanges, such as those around the hijab, must allow for an encounter with the other that does not rest content with the self-understandings participants bring to the dialogue, but instead propels the participants to understandings that are new and powerful.

As we have seen, Levinas’s work informs Gur-Ze’ev’s approach, adding nuance to his apophatic practice. Gur-Ze’ev, like Levinas, saw philosophy itself as a major source of modernity’s conflicts. Levinas felt that “Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the other where the other, in manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity.” Following this line of critique, it became clear to Levinas that alterity had always disturbed Western philosophy, but only long enough for Western philosophy to initiate its own return to itself. This logic of return is at the core of philosophy’s telltale violence toward the other. Yet, Levinas asserted, Western philosophy consoles itself despite its violence by assuring that its “daring” movement to the other will in the end be “recuperated in identification.” Dissembling and replete with self-doubt, Western philosophy

seeks to remake the other in its own image rather than contemplate its own dissolution. As an alternative, Levinas proposed that “a work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.”20 This call for no return finds poignant expression in Levinas’s statement, “To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure.”21 In addition to recalling for us the historic philosophical tension between Athens and Jerusalem, this story highlights Gur-Ze’ev’s sense of quest and the possibility of a Diasporic existence.

At present we engage in a realm of “self-evidence” that appears as “the realization of free will, creativity, determination in care for the self, and the ability to change and improvise,” wrote Gur-Ze’ev (BMP, 240). These ontological markers “are conceived, or at least are supposed to be conceived, as an expression of the privacy and autonomy in the world as a rewarding ‘home’” (BMP, 240). These ontological markers are integral to our Western educational systems. For Gur-Ze’ev, our critical educational philosophy and our educative praxis should not be satisfied with only the negation of the self-evident, for this too is only a veiled bid for the solace of return. In his concept of Diasporic counter-education Gur-Ze’ev advanced a vision of living and learning that seeks to answer what he saw as our current “normalizing” impasse by initiating a quest whose every encounter will condition the possibility of our own inception into the necessity of a “new language.” His apophatic turn moves us to the furthest limit of any promise of reason to which we are accustomed. His Diasporic counter-education sets out to evacuate the present of all its shrines as we strive for dialogue, reflection, and transcendence with no hope of return (BMP, 129).

**Orientations Toward Colonial Legacies**

If we agree with Frantz Fanon’s charge, that an awareness of colonization should undermine European confidence in the age of reason, one of the chief challenges for contemporary philosophers is to seek guidance in new concepts that can direct our ethical and political endeavors now that we have come to realize that the freedom of European humanity came at the price of the subjugation of those people colonized by Europeans.22 In a world context where Europeans have — over the past 500 years — killed millions of people, subjugated nations, enslaved millions of Africans, constructed settler states, and left tragic scars on the relations many Westerners have with many other peoples, we need urgently to envision an ethics and a politics that will stem the ongoing patterns of colonization that one finds in the global economy and guide us toward forms of reconciliation between people who have suffered violence and those who have perpetrated

---

20. Ibid., 348 (emphasis in original).
21. Ibid.
violence. This philosophical challenge is overwhelming in a context where so much of the present terrain is already unethical and unjust.

Olssen’s criticisms of neoliberalism show a definite concern with correcting for the colonial legacy. In his mind, the U.S. invasion of Iraq resulted partly from a totalitarian neocorporate movement, which effectively mobilized the Republican Party to employ the resources of the state in the service of specific economic ends. The philosophy of neoliberalism and the nonregulatory character of the neoliberal state make it possible for groups such as the neoconservatives to exercise a form of unchecked power. Olssen believes that the war in Iraq constitutes a “lapse of conduct” of liberal democracy. Partly what was lacking was any system of global accountability and scrutiny with effective influence; partly an adherence to a robust system of rules and procedures which subjected governments to rules of conduct, and norms of legitimacy; partly a network of sufficiently powerful regional blocks and global agencies [inter-governmental or non-governmental organizations] which can scrutinize, monitor, facilitate and implement the necessary actions; and more generally, effective norms and rules of engagement governing processes through which positive action could be initiated. ([LNS, 119])

In short, Olssen thinks a more robust system of governmental checks and democratic decision making is needed to prevent opportunistic groups from using the power of national governments to achieve private gain. Olssen appears to believe in a much stronger United Nations that is able to hold even powerful nations accountable.

Todd may well agree with many of Olssen’s prescriptions for democratic processes; however, she definitely does not accept the philosophical premises that undergird Olssen’s confidence in democracy. Olssen’s suggestion that greater democracy would act as a check upon imperialist excursions, such as the Iraq War, does — quite problematically — assume that the war’s travesties were a result of actions by a small group of evil people, and it does not come to grips with the ways in which democracies are themselves quite capable of evil. As Todd convincingly argues, liberal confidence in democracy is due to historical associations suggesting both that human nature is good and that rational deliberation allows that goodness to hold sway in political decision making. Instead of relying upon democratic procedures — as if the procedures are sufficient to ensure good practices — Todd would focus our attention upon the ethics of each relational decision, and she would have us approach each decision fully aware that all of us have the ongoing ability to commit evil acts. Todd would also suggest that we adopt democratic forums that allow for the voicing of irreconcilable perspectives, so that as many perspectives as possible would be heard ([TIE, 114]). We believe that Todd does well to focus attention on the ethics of every decision, for even though Olssen is right to criticize the Bush administration for the horrors of Iraq, the blame is not theirs alone: the perspectives of those who would suffer in the Iraq War were not heard in deliberations leading up to the invasion, and the sensitivity to the other that Todd calls for was in short supply among the U.S. citizenry — factors the Bush administration could rely upon as it lobbied the populace to rally to their cause.23

The tendency among the U.S. populace to embrace imperial wars highlights the need to foreground patterns of colonization and neocolonization, the historical momentum behind imperialist endeavors — and ways of thinking that buttress those endeavors — call for political and epistemological counters to ongoing neocolonial practices. Gur-Ze’ev lamented imperialism and “the collective which it creates, activates, controls, represents, and victimizes every moment anew” [BMP, 261]. For Gur-Ze’ev, the degree to which the U.S. populace embraces imperial wars reflects “Precisely the depth of the evidence of selfhood, orientation, yardsticks and aims of individuals who feel at home in ‘their homeland’” [BMP, 261]. This marks our effective displacement and exile from ourselves as we might have been [BMP, 261]. From our vantage point — that is, the context of the southwestern United States — Gur-Ze’ev’s pessimism is provocative. Here the colonial history is recent [the Southwest was seized from Mexico by the U.S. and formally annexed in the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848], and we are faced daily with evidence of the ways in which, now, neocolonial institutions and practices prevent people of color from being heard, from being educated, and from participating in the practices whereby legitimate knowledge is created. Thus, in our country and region, we feel a need to focus upon the contemporary significance of colonization, more than the recommendations of either Olssen or Todd suggest. Like Fanon and Gur-Ze’ev, we are not in the least bit confident that Enlightenment epistemologies and ethics will lead to justice in this context. We are sympathetic with Walter Mignolo’s characterization of the Enlightenment: promises of freedom and equality have been consistently coupled with the denigration of Amerindian and African and Island and Asian peoples. Because authors such as Kant found no contradiction between calls for the rights of man and the subordination of those who stood on the other side of what W.E.B. Du Bois called the “color line,” the Enlightenment has largely justified colonial practices rather than countering them.24

With much of the globe carved into regions populated by Westerners or regions populated by peoples who have suffered Western aggression, Mignolo argues that the knowledge systems that have developed on each side of the color line betray a “colonial difference.” As a counter to these systemic divisions in global knowledge bases, he recommends a sustained intellectual exchange that brings together the “global designs” of neoliberalism or globalism with the local knowledge bases of subaltern peoples; he calls this “border thinking,” and he characterizes this thinking as an exchange that elevates the perspectives of subaltern intellectual traditions to counter the power that has historically been granted to the viewpoints of colonial groups.25 And, as Todd argues, such an exchange could not take European conceptions of reason or


democracy for granted. Mignolo observes that “Democracy for the Zapatistas is not conceptualized in terms of European political philosophy but in terms of Maya social organization based on reciprocity, communal (instead of individual) values, the value of wisdom rather than epistemology, and so forth.”26 It is Mignolo’s suggestion that perspectives of the Zapatistas ought to be given greater authority in a dialogue with the Mexican government concerning the meaning of democracy. Similarly, European conceptions of rationality would be reconsidered in light of the often-older worldviews developed by Mayan, Persian, and Malian peoples.

The passing era of master narratives has set in motion a new sense of contingency and a proliferation of possible language games [BMP, 120]. A potential “opening” for groups long silenced is at hand. Yet, Gur-Ze’ev warned that we must not be too hasty in embracing the liberating promise of “postcolonialism.” On the one hand, we should not approach postcolonialism as if it were a “Western decontamination or redemption” [BMP, 316]. For Gur-Ze’ev such an approach in itself is a “homecoming” move that interrupts the kind of encounter and improvisation that he considered necessary to free us from our dependence on narratives of progress. On the other hand, in its “passionate, quasi-religious search for something genuine, radically, spiritually, and existentially new,” postcolonialism succumbs to its own redemptive will to “purification” [BMP, 315 and 316]. Gur-Ze’ev told us that the discourses of postcolonialism cannot go far enough. His apophatic rigor surfaces yet again: postcolonialism “cannot offer an emancipatory re-education” because it does not “refuse the promise of power, the promise of victory and the hope of an unhindered control of the ‘home’” [BMPS, 316]. This is not to say that Gur-Ze’ev would dismiss Mignolo’s border thinking, although he might propose that Mignolo’s ongoing dialogic inclusion of subaltern wisdom[s] be continually made susceptible to a negative theological critique of the inevitable slippages of reason toward normalization and the recalcitrance of ethnocentric motives.

Mignolo might count Gur-Ze’ev as a worthy ally. For Gur-Ze’ev found it “ironic” that some try to elevate the voices of the marginalized based on the philosophies of Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida, for in their attack on the arrogance and violence of the Enlightenment’s project and its Kantian moral philosophy, there is an implicit equation of all cultures and knowledges over the common denominator of “power.” For Gur-Ze’ev, from this valorizing of “power,” there derives a “moral impotency” that he suspected serves the vitally important production and defense of the relational terrain that was the initial impetus for the colonialist violence in the first place [BMP, 316]. Along these lines, one can imagine victimizations and re-victimizations as representations continue to reconstruct the old phrases of dispute. Thus, for Gur-Ze’ev, Mignolo’s border thinking would be best practiced in a way that followed the trajectory of Diasporic existence and was committed, first and foremost, to understanding the not yet.

Educational Recommendations for an Individualized, Imperfect, Normalized World

The respective degrees of disenchantment found in the works of Olssen, Todd, and Gur-Ze’ev find expression in each theorist’s suggestions for education, and this is one domain in which we find ourselves in qualified agreement with all three authors — that is, each author offers valuable insights that address the issues of our region as well as the issues of their regions.

Olssen’s effort to envision a non-normalizing social democracy fits nicely with his call for collectivist educational aims designed to secure people’s material needs while protecting individual freedom of expression. Olssen employs his “life continuance” philosophy in an effort to argue on behalf of a group of educational aims: freedom, integral respect, security, equality, and inclusion” (LNS, 157). These are values that, in Olssen’s mind, provide for life’s continuation “in a crowded world” (LNS, 157). The individual freedom so central to the liberal tradition is reconceived in a way that makes it more easily reconciled with community negotiation and community interests.

Olssen contrasts his group of life-continuance goals with the most traditional of liberal educational aims: education for autonomy. According to Olssen, education for autonomy employs the illusion that individuals are more independent than they actually are (LNS, 161), and, in practice, carves out too much independence for individuals; for instance, autonomy has connotations that secure the entrepreneur’s independence and militate against governmental authority and taxation, making the reconciliation of individual and community interests too difficult to navigate (LNS, 157–158). In his most critical moments, Olssen suggests that the pursuit of autonomy is a means by which privileged groups socialize youth to accept “middle-class” values and reproduce their privilege:

The very use of such a concept resonates the arrogance and self-deceiving nature of western phallocentricism, ethnocentrism and class-centrism. It helps create and perpetuate the illusion that we are more self-reliant than we are, that we are [solely/largely] responsible for our own achievements, and that we are the “self-originating sources” of our values and goals. (LNS, 162)

We are in fundamental agreement with Olssen that overly individualistic ethics lead privileged people in the society to misunderstand their own dependence upon people around them, to dissociate themselves from others who are less fortunate, and to ignore what are profound social responsibilities to their fellow humans. Educational aims designed to help us see ourselves in relation to others are a basic need in contemporary societies.

Although Todd does not tell us whether she shares Olssen’s fear of the sort of selfish individualism fostered by capitalist society, her pedagogical recommendations are likewise focused upon building a relational commitment to protect others. Todd recasts the pursuit of justice as a relational quest by a society’s members to protect others in their society. Following Levinas, Todd argues that pursuing justice is my obligation to the other, and thus Todd would have students come to understand those lists of human rights that figure prominently in much cosmopolitan education not as already decided upon principles, but as
“a potentiality, a promise one makes to an other that must be striven for beyond the letter of the law” \( [TIE, 62] \). Recognizing that students will not learn obligation to the other as a bit of knowledge, Todd asks educators to create pedagogies “whereby we are continually vigilant in attending to the needs of others in a way that takes responsibility for our own responses” \( [TIE, 77] \).

Todd advises that we focus on our relational commitment to secure the other’s justice, partly because she finds the machinery of government frustrating and contradictory. She points out that rights themselves are designed partly to protect people from the state, yet they are paradoxically enforced by the state. Rights purport to protect people’s individual concerns, yet they are established on a logic of sameness \( [TIE, 60–61] \). Todd’s educational prescriptions are influenced not merely by the “imperfect” character of the government, but by her sense that a democratic world is a world of “dissensus,” of agonistic democracy. Recall that on Todd’s view, a good many disagreements never enter public forums because the public spaces of contemporary societies and the procedures used to make decisions already exclude a good many people and perspectives. She asks that we seek ways of dealing with a much broader range of disagreement in society, and her suggestions for political education likewise are intended to prepare students to engage in a world where they learn both to entertain a broad range of political positions and to feel obliged to voice marginal perspectives when this is required in order to fulfill their obligation to others. Todd suggests that students should be asked to make difficult, ambiguous judgments amid contentious debates and social conflict. For in actuality, rights are won by people and protected in adversarial contexts, where members of society take contested stands on behalf of marginalized peoples \( [TIE, 76] \).

Todd’s recommendations have much to offer us in the contemporary Southwest, for we would very much like to see public forums take up the responsibility of U.S. “citizens” to undocumented workers. In contrast to highly publicized discourses, which objectify immigrant workers as “illegal aliens,” teachers might ask public school students to consider their responsibility to people who work in the community, contribute to the health of the society, send their children to school, and are under constant threat of deportation. Following Todd’s recommendations, we might search for pedagogies that ask students to address their obligations to undocumented workers and to consider the sorts of policies that might secure immigrant rights. It would be refreshing for this discussion to include the complexities of the historical circumstance, of the ways in which the United States has compromised the economic viability of Latin American economies and displaced Latina/o laborers. However, given the ways in which contemporary objectifications of “illegal aliens” operate to preempt any feeling of obligation “citizens” might have to undocumented workers, educators seeking to enact Todd’s recommendations would face a difficult challenge with many groups of students.

We agree with Gur-Ze’ev that it is extremely difficult to imagine how we can enact educational interventions within the contemporary context — shaped
by what he would call normalized discourses — that would enable privileged group members to feel their obligation to immigrants broadly and Latinas/os more specifically. Gur-Ze’ev’s educational recommendations can, at best, seek to prepare the ground for the emergence of a new language that includes an appreciation of undocumented workers and a shared pursuit of transcendent understanding.

In contrast to many scholars who have addressed his work, we view Gur-Ze’ev’s philosophy and counter-education as deconstructive and improvisational, and thus as designed to tear down destructive discourses and create new openings for inquiry and insight. In the pages of Educational Theory, while addressing an earlier version of an essay that was republished in Beyond the Modern-Postmodern Struggle in Education, Patti Lather called Gur-Ze’ev to task for what she saw as his “mystical vanguardism” while at the same time finding some value in his strong distrust and demystification of “discourses of deliverance” that have privileged redemptive narratives in critical pedagogy. In the pages of Educational Theory, while addressing an earlier version of an essay that was republished in Beyond the Modern-Postmodern Struggle in Education, Patti Lather called Gur-Ze’ev to task for what she saw as his “mystical vanguardism” while at the same time finding some value in his strong distrust and demystification of “discourses of deliverance” that have privileged redemptive narratives in critical pedagogy.27 Lather’s task at that time (1998) was to critique Gur-Ze’ev’s penchant for abstraction and universalizing discourse. She was critical of Gur-Ze’ev’s negative dialectical turn that she felt bolstered his endorsement of “an alternative spirituality” and a “messianic revolutionary transcendence,” both of which she saw as ultimately propping up pretensions of a Hegelian universalism and a quest for ultimate meaning. Her critique has its merits with respect to the individual essay, yet in the fuller body of work included in the collection under review, one gets a more accurate sense that Gur-Ze’ev’s critical interventions are meted out in very specific contexts and are animated by very specific circumstances. Read as a whole, we are inclined to see less of the “grand theorizer” in Gur-Ze’ev and more of the improvising agent of disruption. As we said earlier, we find value in educational philosophies that theorize outward from regionally specific starting points. In this way, Gur-Ze’ev’s development of “counter-education” is apprehended most accurately if we keep in mind the proper “scale” of its proposed interventions. In many ways Lather’s ultimate endorsement of “a praxis of undecidability” — the only move she finds available in the messy “promise of practice on a shifting ground” — would accurately characterize Gur-Ze’ev’s more recent trajectory and development of the concept of “counter-education.”

Beginning in the tension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the impossibility of reconciling the conflicting memories of “homeland” that both sides roll into their educational discourses, “counter-education” finds itself in direct opposition to “normalizing education,” which fabricates the Israeli and Palestinian “I” respectively as “productive fiction” (BMP, 150). For Gur-Ze’ev it is precisely this sense of the “I” and its respective political projections in the history of the region that are at the heart of the educative practices now extant. Gur-Ze’ev wrote that normalizing education “guarantees efficient orientation in the given order of things, perfects competence in its classification and representation, and

allows communication and functional behavior, success, security, pleasure, and social progress’’ \( [BMP, 135] \). Elsewhere, Gur-Ze’ev asserted that “Normalizing education is committed to lead humans to abandon the quest for the totally other for surrendering themselves to the governing facts of the day.”\(^{28}\) Counter-education for Gur-Ze’ev, on the other hand, seeks to unburden us from the real gravity, the inescapable pull of these educational trajectories. These trajectories are often “effective enough to secure the invisibility of their manipulations” \( [BMP, 261] \). When Gur-Ze’ev spoke of “counter-education,” he was calling forth a vantage point from which to begin the arduous and messy process of making the invisible visible. It is an imperfect move to the productive margins of normalizing education’s “manifestations of the creative power of metaphysical violence” \( [BMP, 135] \). In making this bid, and opening to the other, counter-education should not abandon any critical pedagogical strategy outright; rather, Gur-Ze’ev maintained, counter-education can find “relevance in current postcolonial, cultural studies, postmodern feminism and multi-cultural discourses.”\(^{29}\)

Gur-Ze’ev’s hope to deconstruct homeland discourses by means of a counter-education resonates with our concerns in the Southwest. We similarly protest the homecoming project pursued by so-called “white” people. Relatively recent immigrants, suffering forms of social amnesia, claim the southwestern United States as a homeland and thus seek to displace the most recent immigrants and Native peoples whose own claims to this homeland are much older. Gur-Ze’ev’s insights help focus our attention upon deconstructing the homecoming project itself and upon the objectifications settlers use to distance themselves from their immigrant neighbors. Counter-education would thus be improvisational, and suited to particular individuals, but it might aim to recast the role of settlers themselves, perhaps preparing them to see themselves as migrants and hybrids, as Guillermo Gómez-Peña seeks to do through his work.\(^{30}\) Counter-education might also seek to create openings for meaningful understandings among immigrants and settlers, both by deconstructing the objectified images created of “illegal aliens” and by creating cross-group opportunities for substantive interaction and the joint pursuit of truth.

“Counter-education,” Gur-Ze’ev wrote, “is worthy of its name when and if, when addressing the various levels and networks, their synchronization and their crisscrossing, it acknowledges that they also contain important new possibilities for reflection, transcendence, resistance, and change.”\(^{31}\) Gur-Ze’ev asked that we engage the openings afforded us as educators, no matter how fleeting or bereft of grand possibility, and engage the world as experienced, encountered, and enacted \( [BMP, 103] \). Thus, Gur-Ze’ev’s call for a “new language in education” is perhaps a

\(^{28}\) Ilan Gur-Ze’ev, *Destroying the Other’s Collective Memory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 1.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 15.


\(^{31}\) Gur-Ze’ev, *Destroying the Other’s Collective Memory*, 15.
bit less totalistic than it seems, for new languages are not born whole. Languages are arduously negotiated relational constructions. Any approach within counter-education will necessarily call students back to the mess of current usage, a given order of things, a current way of being. New educational Diasporas, if they are to begin at all, will necessarily have originated from the current terrain of self-evidence that overwhelms us at the moment. Curricula, by their very nature, construct both collectives and individuals and, in the process, map this terrain, yet they do not do so comprehensively. Gur-Ze’ev’s educational philosophy incites the question, should any terrain be for us the site of a “worthy” home?