
BOOK REVIEWS

Impossible Bodies, Impossible Selves: exclusions and student subjectivities

DEBORAH YOUDELL, 2006

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Few books are empirically grounded *and* theoretically sophisticated. Even fewer make a genuine advance in helping us to comprehend how, on a day-to-day basis, educational inclusions are made and exclusions can be resisted. *Impossible Bodies, Impossible Selves: exclusions and student subjectivities* is such a book. Deborah Youdell refutes the charge that poststructuralist work cannot adequately deal with inequity and the daily politics of education (e.g. Hill et al, 1999), and, in a sense, this book aims to reclaim and propose a politics of the 'post'.

The book is organised into five sections, with two broad themes. The first theme is concerned with questions of context, theory and method. Youdell repositions notions of social and educational inclusion and exclusion, and asserts that a focus on education as the benign mechanism for inclusion

does not allow for a more fundamental questioning of how the institution of formal education, and school institutions, are themselves implicated in excluding students from the educational endeavour, from schooling, through their own processes and practices. (p. 12)

Youdell argues for educational exclusions to be considered within the often overlooked, the mundane, banal practices that are set aside in the search for the more dramatic and extraordinary. She proposes that there must be an understanding of the co-constitutive relationships between student and school, that

the micro exclusions that take place in the most mundane moments everyday inside schools cannot be understood as simply being experienced by students. Rather these must be understood as constitutive of the student, constitutions whose cumulative effects coagulate to limit 'who' a student can be, or even if s/he can be a student at all. (pp. 12-13)

The basis of this understanding is recognition of how various identity categories can be seen to intersect in, and through, education.

To explore this Youdell proposes three interrelated arguments. First, and complementing other research on 'intersectionality' (e.g. Søndergaard, 2005), is that identity categories – of 'race', ethnicity, disability, class, gender, sexuality – become meaningful through interaction with other categories, and that these 'constellations of categorisations' may be seen as shifting and non-necessary. Second, students are constituted through constellations, particularly through 'dichotomies of *good/bad students* and *acceptable/unacceptable* and even *ideal/impossible learners*' (p. 30, original emphasis). These constitutions link student identities to school practices, to include some young people, to exclude others. Of significance, is the emphasis on how

within these constitutions there appears at times to be an inverse relationship between status in the mainstream student subculture and the organizational discourse of bad students and unacceptable, even impossible, learners. (p. 30).

The third line of argument is closely linked to the second; that it is everyday practices within schools that constitute students as good and bad and produce the conditions of inclusion and exclusion. What Youdell does is make a crucial distinction between the often conflated markers of

student and learner: a student is anyone who attends school, often under compulsory requirements, a learner is made, is constituted.

Underpinning these arguments is a focus on discursive practices and subjectivity, drawing particularly on the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, to argue for how students are constituted, or 'subjectivated', within schools, and also how students may 'be otherwise'. As Youdell states: 'This has massive implications for education because it insists that nobody is necessarily anything and so what it means to be a teacher, a student, a learner might be opened up to radical thinking' (p. 43). It is the everyday of schools, not just the policy-making domain and the predilection towards deficit and intervention, that is the site of struggle over inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, there is possibility for 'insurrectionary practices' (p. 49) as students may resist, and act outside, and within subcultures create some sense of collective action, the possibility of politics.

What I found notable about this book is its commitment to empirically researching issues of subjectivity and discourse, the detail provided about the methodological constraints and possibilities, and the enactment and undertaking of the research method. This book is not just a project about reframing notions of exclusion and inclusion, but concerns 'looking for discourse and their effects' (p. 56). This is undertaken through ethnographic work in schools, two studies of which are included in the book, one from inner London, United Kingdom, and the other from south-western Sydney, Australia. Youdell is most interested in '*whether thinking in terms of discourse and performative constitutions can help us to understand student subjectivities, students and learners, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the interactions across these*' (p. 56, original emphasis). Ethnography is seen as the method by which school and the claims of transformative education can be interrogated through a focus on school practices. This book addresses the significance of theory and ethnography, and Youdell notes that, contrary to the dichotomy of descriptive and theoretical ethnography, that: 'The question becomes, then, not whether ethnography is theoretical, *but how far its theoretical framework is made explicit and worked through research questions, data generation, analysis and writing*' (p. 60, original emphasis). Youdell's subsequent approach is guided by 'considerations of how best to access the discursive practices through which subjects are constituted, sustained, contested and reinscribed' (p. 69).

The latter part of the book, and the second broad theme, is based around the deployment of the theoretical framework, and here theory and analysis are iterative. The framework so painstakingly proposed is not jettisoned in favour of description, but rather is consistently referred back to – the reader has the opportunity to decide whether the analysis is compelling or otherwise. Youdell makes a compelling case for showing '*how performative constitutions occur in school contexts*' (p. 75, original emphasis), by outlining a series of 'data episodes', posited as small micro-worlds that illustrate and develop the analysis. These episodes also concern the limits of the performative; that certain namings are unintelligible, and that what one calls oneself and what one is called provide both opportunities and closings. It is the seemingly mundane interactions within classrooms, and between students who identify and are identified according to a variety of social categories, that demonstrate the active construction of inclusion and exclusion within school settings.

It is also in these episodes that we learn what might be impossible bodies? Who might be impossible selves? Who might be impossible learners? So, for example, belonging to the 'subcultural cool' can mean being an impossible student as some subjectivities are unintelligible within the constituting practices of school. Conversely, being a good student is unintelligible as part of *some* subcultures. Yet, as Youdell suggests, the notion of, say, being 'subcultural cool' and school excluded is not a fixed position, it may change over time and in different spaces. The book traces out the constitution of possible/impossible students/learners/subjects by students, teachers and institutional discourses. This is a book of constraint and possibility. 'Bad students' and 'unacceptable learners' are not just constituted, do not just take up subject positions, but also 'resist such constitutions and ... deploy discourse to constitute themselves *again differently*. That is, students have been shown to act with discursive agency and deploy performative politics' (p. 173, original emphasis). Youdell demonstrates that performative politics has the potential to 'be engaged and/or deployed at the level of policy making and school practice. Such a take-up of performative politics promises to interrupt educational exclusions and make possible student and learner identities that ... [are] frequently disavowed' (p. 180).

By moving away from questions of intent to discursive effects Youdell provides a micro-analysis that is in no way bounded by the minutia of the empirical 'episodes'. This is finely grained ethnography within a clearly defined theoretical framework. If the analysis ever seems to reach beyond the data it is hauled back by the rigour and visibility of the conceptual tools employed. With this book Youdell provides clear theoretical and methodological ideas to undertake critical work around social and educational inclusion and exclusion, and makes a significant contribution to the construction of a performative politics within educational studies. This is work that offers the possibility for a radical reshaping of policy studies, sociology of education, and the often deficit underpinnings of difference in teacher education.

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In *Theory for Education* (2006, p. 83) Greg Dimitriadis and George Kamberelis, in their entry on Judith Butler, interpret her work in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* as suggesting that:

There is always the possibility of agency, of acting out with the system in ways that are subversive and transformative of it, because there are always aspects of oneself that are 'socially impossible,' that cannot be reduced to the order of things, that exceed any particular identity (such as gender identity and sexual identity) within that order – hence her interest in drag, cross dressing and other 'queer' forms of gender trouble – Butler calls for performances – that is, expressions of identity that exploit those subversive dimensions and thereby produce new possible ways of being in society.

This necessarily brief introduction to Butler in this very useful primer on key theorists for education reiterates the notion that 'queer theory' is intrinsically associated with very 'queer' things (drag, cross dressing, etc.). I perceive this entry on Butler in *Theory for Education* as part of a chain of signification that, probably unintentionally, posits queer theory as most useful for 'queer' people.

In an interview conducted with Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal in 1993 Butler responds to a question regarding her use of drag in *Gender Trouble* as follows:

The problem with drag is that I offered it as an example of performativity, but it has been taken up as the paradigm for performativity. One ought always to be wary of one's examples. What's interesting is that this voluntarist interpretation, this desire for a kind of radical theatrical remaking of the body, is obviously out there in the public sphere. There's a desire for a fully phantasmatic transfiguration of the body. But no, I don't think that drag is a paradigm for the subversion of gender. I don't think that if we were all more dragged out gender life would become more expansive and less restrictive. There are restrictions in drag. In fact, I argued toward the end of the book that drag has its own melancholia. (Butler, 1994)

It seems that post the publication of *Gender Trouble* Butler came to regret her use of drag as an example because for many, within and outside education, Butlerian performativity is irretrievably wedded to drag. To my mind Butler's association with drag has undermined the way her work has been utilized in the field of education because, for some at least, Butler's theorizing of gender seems to have become integrally associated with parody and perversion.

The 'socially impossible' bodies interrogated by Youdell in *Impossible Bodies, Impossible Selves* departs from this paradigmatic reading of Butler's notion of performativity. The principal task of

the book is theoretical and empirical examination of everyday practices within schools. These practices are analysed over time and in depth in order to consider how they are implicated in regulating and deregulating the lives of students, placing them within and outside official and unofficial imaginings of how students, as learners, should behave. The ethnographies upon which the book is based were conducted in secondary schools in Sydney, Australia and London, United Kingdom.

Youdell's text represents an important contribution to scholarly research in the field of inclusive education. It is important both because of its theoretical contribution and because of the extensive data it contains on various aspects of inclusion. The presentation of data is noteworthy; this isn't a book which seeks to narrow its focus on a specific area of inclusion (special education or class or race or gender). Rather, Youdell integrates all these issues into the text, much as they are integrated in the lives of the young people she has encountered in her ethnographic work.

This text also demonstrates how Butlerian notions of performativity might be skilfully applied within educational research contexts. Youdell notes that 'material bodies need meaning to be attached to them in order to be accessible and intelligible – a female body, a Black body, a homosexual body, an impaired body is meaningful as such because it has been signified in these terms, signification that works because it is part of an enduring chain of meaning' (p. 46). Youdell's theorizing of diverse material bodies constitutes an ethnographic work that recognizes possibilities for agency among the researched, as well as deftly detailing how constrained processes of subjectivization can be within school contexts.

In a recent article on the use of Butler's work in educational contexts, Valerie Hey castigates Butler because her work:

is primarily philosophical–political, not a researcher's commitment to a theoretical–empirical practice. She does not trouble herself with fleshy agentive human ethnographic subjects. Fortunately, many feminist-influenced Butlerian-inspired poststructuralists have. They have been moved by the same broad-based deconstructionist imperatives that Butler's work has so importantly illustrated and stimulated. (2006, p. 448)

While castigating the philosopher whose ideas partially inform her approach, Hey goes on to argue that Youdell's ethnographic work is critical in excavating what it is 'about the dynamics of social difference that is so obdurate in the face of equality interventions (Youdell, 2004)' (Hey, 2006, p. 453). For Hey, a fundamental object of research in educational sociology is the dynamics of social difference: the citations, repetitions, disruptions and re-inscriptions of subjectivities daily enacted by students and teachers that are so well captured by Youdell's ethnographic style. I wonder how ethnographic work such as Youdell's might proceed in the absence of such philosophical–political contributions to feminist poststructuralism? Do all philosophers need to be ethnographers? It would appear that Youdell's work suggests the benefits that can be gained by skilfully bringing together theoretical and empirical methodologies in ethnographic work. One of the strengths of Youdell's ethnographic work, I would argue, is its strong theoretical underpinnings and the way they are brought to bear on all aspects of the research process.

One example of the usefulness of Youdell's text relates to her observations at Plains High, in Sydney, Australia and the seemingly predictable exclusion of a student from a classroom. A mundane event to be sure, but Youdell lets us see the classroom practices that constitute Paul as a boy who is "already" special and so his bodily practices are immediately defined in the terms of an Emotional Disorder, Behavioural Disorder discourse' (p. 128). We first meet Paul through the teacher's observation of the class in which he is situated. Youdell notes that the teacher describes these students as "delightful", including "problems from other classes" and using "a lot of language" (p. 126). Via this introduction and Youdell's description of Paul's exclusion, readers are able to see the 'citational chain that constitutes Paul not just an unacceptable learner, but beyond learner altogether' (p. 129). Though, through further observation, we also see that his constitution as an impossible learner is not fixed and that 'perhaps the possibility for him to be a learner of some kind' is not an impossibility (p. 129).

This book is written in an accessible format and it will be a useful resource for students within education, for other educational researchers, and for students studying educational research methods. Youdell clearly relishes the process of ethnography and her affection for the craft and for the teachers and students she encounters is easily conveyed to the reader. The examples Youdell

uses are especially useful in undergraduate teacher education contexts where her combination of 'sociological transcription conventions with the conventions of a dramatic script' (p. 72) helps the fieldnotes to come alive and effectively fulfil her goal of allowing readers 'to access the minutiae and complexity of the apparently mundane and everyday practices of schooling and appreciate the significance of the way that these practices constitute subjects in particular ways' (p. 73). One of the more difficult tasks as a lecturer in educational sociology is helping make connections between the everyday and profound processes of exclusion; ethnographic work such as this makes that important task easier to tackle.

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Haunting the Knowledge Economy

JANE KENWAY, SIMON ROBB,
JOHANNAH FAHEY & ELIZABETH BULLEN, 2006
London: Routledge
148 pp., ISBN 0-4153-7067-7, hardback, £75.00

In *Haunting the Knowledge Economy*, the authors set about the task of critically examining discourses on the knowledge economy. Their message is timely. The problem with the 'knowledge economy' is that alternative knowledge systems are often occluded from discussion. The authors attempt to rectify this by exploring four basic economic systems that 'haunt' the knowledge economy. Beyond capitalist knowledge production they offer ethico-political decision-making, free collaboration, artistic creativity, and indigenous knowledge as modes of knowledge innovation that are inherently incommensurate with capitalist logics. In my view, there are problems with their approach, however. While *Haunting the Knowledge Economy* offers thoughtful critique, it lacks much of the dynamic force necessary to really circumscribe the global contours of the knowledge economy. While the book provides excellent resources for deconstructing 'knowledge capitalism', it lacks a comprehensive model for moving beyond perfunctory discourses on the knowledge economy.

Grounded in Derrida's meditations on 'hauntology', Kenway et al frame their critique around Dickens' narrative, *A Christmas Carol*. Just as the ghosts of past, present and future haunt Scrooge, the authors explore knowledge systems that 'haunt' the hegemonic pretensions of knowledge capitalism. While I applaud the authors for critically examining discourses on the knowledge economy, and more importantly, exploring alternative economic systems, the problem with *Haunting the Knowledge Economy* lies in the book's framing.

Anchored to a neo-Marxist reading of contemporary global capitalism, the authors seem to miss the rather interesting global dimensions of the knowledge economy. This is no minor critique. The fact that China and India are on course to becoming two of the world's largest economies (Prestowitz, 2005; Wilson & Purushothaman, 2003), suggests the need for reconsidering the established frames of reference that underlie so much contemporary scholarly research. The central

problem here is that rather than revealing emergent global dynamics, conventional narrative frames such as *A Christmas Carol*, often simply reinforce Eurocentric analysis.

Certainly Dickens' story goes a long way – the underlying moral tensions of *A Christmas Carol* still resonate. But can Western narrative frames like *A Christmas Carol* be stretched (literally) to global proportions? Put more concretely, is Scrooge a proper metaphor for understanding Chinese, Indian or Brazilian industrialization? Surely we need to begin to move beyond conventional European narrative frames in order to better understand the complexities of the global economy. Consider for example, the broad patterns of migration and cultural hybridity emerging with globalization (Nederveen Pieterse, 2003). What, for example, do emergent Chinese and Indian narratives have to say about the knowledge economy?

Ironically, Marx's quip: a specter is haunting Europe, takes on a very different meaning. Rather than socialism, it would seem that the specter that now haunts Europe is the growing significance of regions outside the 'West' and the steady decline of the Eurocentric worldview. In this sense, it seems highly unlikely that narratives produced in one era can effectively speak to the growing complexities of the contemporary situation.

Having said this, Kenway et al have put together a strong case for reappraising many of the central assumptions undergirding the knowledge economy. The knowledge economy is clearly emerging as a foundation for policy planners and touches on so many academic disciplines that it has become something of a master-narrative. As Peters & Besley (2006) observe:

The knowledge economy is a contemporary and dominant manifestation of capitalism. It is driven by the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge. Knowledge economy policy discourse, with its interlaced ideas about knowledge, information, learning, economy and society, has become so influential it has assumed the status of truth, dominating the policy lexicon and excluding alternative economies (p. 4).

The skill with which Kenway et al dissect the many intricate discourses that make up the knowledge economy gives this book a sharp scholarly tone. Perhaps the authors' strongest analysis is found in their review of the 'Gift Economy'. As they observe, a gift economy is an economic system that depends upon circulations of political or cultural prestige, rather than capital or commodities. While I disagree that 'gift giving' is the appropriate way to frame the free collaboration that has evolved alongside knowledge capitalism, I share the authors' concern with policy goals that seek to marry knowledge production to the market. As Kenway et al observe, the central problem with the 'economics of knowledge' is the question of stimulus:

The 'secure' foundations of the knowledge economy rest on the idea that commodity exchange, and its associated idea of self-interest, suffice as an explanation and as a motivation for the exchange and circulation of knowledge (p. 54).

As the authors point out, policy attempts to stimulate knowledge innovation through market competition are likely misguided. Since scarcity is a precondition for the economics of supply and demand, knowledge production does not properly suit the logic of the market. Knowledge is not necessarily a scarce resource because it lacks the materiality to be properly defined as a rival good (Romer 1990). As a symbolic good, any number of people can construct, consume and use knowledge without necessarily depleting its' value.

As the authors suggest, rather than 'open competition' policy planners should look more closely at 'open collaboration' as a key driver of knowledge innovation. *Wikipedia*, for example, offers a strong illustration of the value of collaboration to knowledge innovation. Moving beyond the broadcast model characteristic of industrial manufacturing, peer-to-peer (P2P) projects like *Wikipedia* demonstrate the power of collaborative production. What makes P2P projects like *Wikipedia* so interesting is their inherent capacity for efficient innovation despite their lack of financial incentives or fixed hierarchical organization.

My central concern with *Haunting the Knowledge Economy*, however, is its' lack of organic cohesion. As I read through the book, each component argument appears disconnected from the others. Rather than building an integrated response to the knowledge economy as discourse, Kenway et al have simply assembled a series of intriguing though largely disconnected alternatives to knowledge capitalism. In my estimation, the growing strength of the knowledge economy discourse is precisely its coherent rhetoric. In this sense, the lack of any 'family' resemblance

between the risk, gift, libidinal and survival economies undermines the book's capacity to effectively respond to the discourse of the knowledge economy.

Taken individually, however, each alternative economy introduced by the authors offers a strong case against the problems and limitations of the knowledge economy. In explorations of indigenous science for example, Kenway et al provide significant insight into the need for an ecologically sustainable worldview that moves us beyond the contentious patent issues that arise when nature is viewed as biotechnology. As they observe:

Survival economies have science and technology systems and views of ownership that set them apart from the market economy and its more recent incarnation, the knowledge economy. Throughout this chapter we have made the argument that natural and cultural diversity and common ownership are the subordinated differences that arise to haunt the knowledge economy. These differences are the conditions of possibility for changing the present relationship between economics and ecology (p. 119).

Indeed. Moving beyond a market-driven exploitation of nature is central to the many challenges we face. Linking this insight with others in the book (i.e., ethico-political decision making, the institutionalization of collaboration, and the liberation of the imagination) could go a long way towards providing us with the means to move beyond knowledge capitalism.

As Kenway, Bullen, Fahey & Robb make clear in their book, the major problem with the knowledge economy is that alternative knowledge systems are occluded from discussion. Beyond the conventional rhetoric that seeks to frame the economics of knowledge in terms of capitalist production, Kenway et al offer significant insight into the various modes of knowledge innovation that are inherently incommensurate with capitalist logics. In my view, *Haunting the Knowledge Economy* offers a great deal of thoughtful analysis towards an informed discussion of the many contested dimensions of the knowledge economy. At the same time, the book lacks much of the dynamic force necessary to really circumscribe the global contours of capitalist knowledge production. Put simply, while *Haunting the Knowledge Economy* provides excellent resources for deconstructing 'knowledge capitalism', it fails to provide a comprehensive model for a systemic shift beyond capitalist knowledge production.

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