

## **The Other Side of Education: A Lacanian Critique of Neoliberal Education Policy**

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**Abstract** *Written in the context of the global hegemony of neoliberal education policy agendas, with their emphases on standards, accountability and choice, this paper has two related foci. In the first section I explore Lacanian ideas of extimacy, excess and Möbius subjectivity to subvert a simplistic self-other dichotomy and briefly consider some implications of this subversion for neoliberal educational policy. In the second part of the paper, I extend the critique of neoliberal education policy by examining it through the lens of Lacan's four discourses. This involves viewing neoliberal policy agendas in terms of "discourses of mastery," before turning to "discourses of thinking otherwise" as a way of thinking what "the other side of education" might look like.*

**Keywords** Education policy, psychoanalysis, neoliberalism, politics

We need to create more new schools to generate innovation, raise expectations, give parents choice and drive up standards through competition. (Gove, 2012)

The idea that knowledge can, in any way or at any time, even as a hope for the future, form a closed whole – now there's something that didn't have to wait for psychoanalysis for it to appear questionable. (Lacan, 2007, p. 30)

### **Introduction**

At first glance, my two epigraphs above may not appear to have a particular connection, beyond a broad concern with knowledge. For the purposes of this paper, however, they represent two opposing perspectives on education. The first, from a recent speech by UK Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove,

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bullishly recites touchstones of the by now all-too-familiar neoliberal education agenda: accountability, choice, standards and competition. By contrast, Lacan's somewhat elliptical and elusive comment suggests skepticism about – perhaps even subversion of – the comprehensive and confident ambitions of the former. This paper explores the implications of some key Lacanian themes, particularly the notion of the other and its relations to knowledge, truth and subjectivity in his theory of the four discourses, considering what critical insights they might offer in relation to the increasingly hegemonic agendas of neoliberal education policy. In conducting this critique, the paper seeks to explore potential insights and implications that a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of the other and otherness might hold for “the very thought of education.”<sup>1</sup> For, if “aesthetics was born as a discourse of the body” (Eagleton, 1990, p. 3), education – with its structuring tropes of development, progress, and completion, and its normative technologies of calculation and comparison – might be described as a discourse born of “the other.”

### **The Shadow of the Other**

Of course, our inscription by the other precedes our entry into formal education. As Britzman observes, “we are born and enlivened by our first other's readings...telegraphing our needs, demands, and desires,” whilst simultaneously being invested with “hopes for what language, knowledge and the other can bring” (2009, p. 2). Lacanian psychoanalytic theory provides one explanation of this constitutive otherness through the familiar narrative of the mirror stage. Emerging from a undifferentiated state of unity with the (m)other, the developing child's initial engagement with the separateness of its being is the result of an encounter with its reflected image, be this a literal mirror image or one conveyed in communication with others. The contrast between the gestalt of the mirror-image and the child's ongoing bodily experience of disunity and fragmentation ensnares it in a paradoxical space of recognition/misrecognition (Grosz, 1990), initiating a sense of alienation that is redoubled with the child's entry into the symbolic system, whose existence precedes and exceeds its own, and over which it has only limited control. We might thus say that otherness casts a double shadow on the self:

First the self is constituted by the identifications with the other that it deploys in an ongoing way, in particular to deny the loss and uncontrollability that otherness necessarily brings. Second, it is reciprocally constituted in relation to the other, depending on the other's recognition, which it cannot have without being negated, acted on by the other, in a way that changes the self, making it nonidentical. (Benjamin, 1998, p. 79)

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<sup>1</sup> Readers might recognize this as the title of Britzman's 2009 book on psychoanalysis and education.

Given the salience of the constitutive role of the other in the formation of subjects and their desires as a central motif in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (see for example Bracher, 1993; Fink, 1995), and given that the Lacanian subject of knowledge is also the subject of desire – which is always desire of the other (Campbell, 2004, p. 70; Van Haute, 2002, pp. 124-125) – this paper has two related foci. In the first section I explore Lacanian ideas of extimacy, excess and Möbius subjectivity to subvert a simplistic self-other dichotomy and briefly consider some implications of this subversion for neoliberal educational policy. In the second part of the paper, I extend the critique of neoliberal education policy by examining it through the lens of Lacan’s four discourses as a way of thinking what “the other side of education” might look like.

### **Otherness and the Subject of Education: Extimacy, Excess and Möbius Subjectivity**

Contemporary neoliberal education policies embody contradictory notions of the subject of education. On the one hand, discourses of competition and choice rely on the notion of an autonomous rational actor exercising full and free agency as it navigates its chosen educational course in order to maximize its outcomes. On the other hand, discourses of standards, quality, and accountability can be read as the subordination of this same self to the “other,” who determines and dispenses knowledge in the form of mandated curriculum, and who monitors its achievement through tests and targets. In each case, whether we are dealing with undue emphasis on subjectivity *or* objectivity, the result is an inadequate notion of education that fails to do justice to the complexity of our individual and social existence. My first move then is to offer an alternative to this dichotomy drawing on notions of extimate causality and the möbius subject from Molly Anne Rothenberg’s recent (2010) synthesis of psychoanalysis and social theory.

In her discussion of the relationship between individual subject formation and social causality, Rothenberg highlights the problems with, on the one hand, models of external causation in which the separation of causes from effects leads to the positing of a boundary between the two that is at once impermeable and porous, and, on the other hand, models of immanent causality in which “causes and their effects mutually condition one another, making it impossible ultimately to distinguish one from the other” (Rothenberg, 2010, p. 30). Classical Marxism, with its determination of the social and ideological superstructure by the entirely separate realm of the economic base, provides an example of the former, which Rothenberg calls the two-tier model; whilst Foucault’s theory of immanent power relations pervading the entire social body is an example of the latter, which Rothenberg calls the one-tier model. Rothenberg’s Lacanian “solution” to this dilemma draws on topology by way of the analogy of the “unbounded” Möbius band, formed by

twisting a rectangular band of paper and gluing its two ends together. As a result, inside and outside flow seamlessly into one another and any specific point on the surface of the band is “excessive” with respect to its sidedness, neither purely inside nor outside. As Rothenberg argues, “the Möbius band suggests a field in which both the paradoxical boundary of external causation and infinite mutual implication of cause and effect of immanentism cease to be problematic” (Rothenberg, 2010, p. 31). If we take the Möbius band as a model of subjectivity, we have the means to conceive of a subject who subject retains traces of “negativity” as a constitutive condition of its positive contents, who contains unique, intimate (originating inside) alongside universal, “extimate” (originating outside) elements, and who, as a result, is neither purely rational agent nor discursively constructed object.

The Möbius subject provides us with conceptual tools that challenge neoliberal education policy’s reliance on the self-sufficient and self-interested rational subject, whilst also exposing the inadequacy of its focus on externally determined curricula and standards that are developed without reference to the experiences of students or teachers. More specifically, the blurring of internal/external boundaries inherent to the Möbius subject and the notion of an excess attaching to all subjects highlight how the other is constitutive of the self, meaning that there can be no “pure” (e.g. national) educational identities. The educational consequences of this move are profound. In one stroke, a number of neoliberal shibboleths, each of which represses the constitutive otherness at the heart of subjectivity in some way, are subverted. These include the assumptions operating in policies of choice and competition, of a “level” social playing field upon which autonomous rational agents choose and compete on equal terms, or the positing of a notional generic student (or teacher) who serves as the target of standardized national/state curricula and testing regimes. Such assumptions become untenable when we recognize how the other lies at the heart of subjectivity, how the educational subject is always the subject of language and discourse and is therefore always already situated: economically, socially, historically, culturally, sexually and politically. The remainder of the discussion turns to Lacan’s theory of discourse, which offers conceptual tools with which to critique the exclusion of the other in neoliberal education policies, whilst also suggesting ways of reinserting the other into educational policy and practice.

### **Lacan’s Four Discourses**

In *The other side of psychoanalysis*, Lacan (2007) elaborates his theory of four discourses – the discourse of the master, the university, the hysteric and the analyst. Since the names Lacan gives them are not exactly self-explanatory, and are in some cases potentially misleading, I will provide a short description here, as well as a brief discussion of Lacan’s use of the term “discourse” in his theory.

Each discourse reflects a different possibility for the structuring of social relations in society. The master's discourse relates to mastering or the establishment of a hegemony; the university discourse refers to educating or interpellating; the hysteric's discourse concerns protesting or resisting; while the analyst's discourse relates to revolutionizing or bringing about change (Bracher, 1994, p. 107; Brown, Atkinson, & England, 2006, p. 128). Overall, Lacan's theory can be considered a "later Lacanian epistemology" (Campbell, 2004, p. 53) but it is not one that defines the propositional content of knowledge; rather it "provides an account of the intersubjective production of knowledge, and of knowing as a socially mediated act" (Campbell, 2004, p. 57). It thus offers a dynamic perspective on the relationship between discourse, subjectivity and social practice. More specifically, each of the four discourses describes the schematic positioning of four elements. These include the knowing subject ( $S$ ), which is located in relation to its knowledge ( $S_2$ ), its master signifiers ( $S_1$ ), and that which its knowledge excludes ( $a$ ).

Each of the four discourses involves these four elements rotating through four positions. These four positions, or roles, include: 1) the place of agency or dominance from which the discourse emanates; 2) the addressee, the other to whom discourse is addressed; 3) the place of production, representing the by-product, or loss, resulting from this interchange; and 4) the place of truth, representing the factors underpinning, yet repressed by, the agency or dominance in 1). These positions or roles are arranged in each of the four discourses in terms of a schema as follows:

1) the place of agency	2) the other
4) the underlying truth	3) the by-product/loss

The positions within the schema are significant: the left hand side of the schema designates the productive factors in the discourse while the right hand side designates the receptive factors. On the other hand, the top position on each side represents the conscious or explicit factors while the bottom positions represent the unconscious or implicit factors.

A number of significant enigmas and omissions surround the four discourses, for instance, why four (and only four) and why *these* four (Campbell, 2004, p. 57)? Despite their origins in the psychoanalytic clinic, Lacan clearly related these discourses to political patterns, both historical and contemporary, linking, for example, the university discourse to Stalinism (Lacan, 2007, p. 206), a potential that Žižek (e.g. 1996), in particular, has built on and extended. Thus, my reason for using Lacan's theory is not because it can claim any status as a meta-theory in relation to other theories of discourse, "but because it allows us to understand the functioning of different discourses in a unique way" (Fink, 1995, p.129). In

particular, it provides unique insights into the interrelationships between knowledge, truth, subjectivity and otherness, and how particular configurations among these elements are produced by different discourses. In the context of the predominant discourse in contemporary education policy i.e. neoliberalism, Lacan's discourse theory helps us in grasping – and hence potentially resisting – the nature and dynamics of its hegemonic influence.

### **Neoliberal Education Policy: Discourses of Mastery**

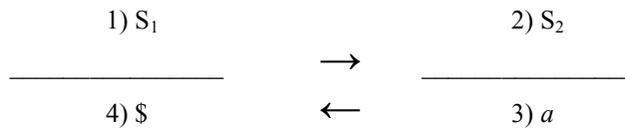
Whilst recognizing that, as Stephen Ball puts it, neoliberalism “is one of those terms that is used so widely and so loosely that it is in danger of becoming meaningless” (2012, p. 3), I would argue that it is nonetheless a key term insofar as it references the colonisation of social and material life by particular politico-economic ideologies. Indeed, neoliberalism might well be defined as economic fundamentalism. As Jodi Dean puts it, “redefining social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria and expectations, neoliberalism holds that human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets” (2009, p. 51).

Such economic fundamentalism has achieved ascendancy across a range of international contexts and a range of fields, including education, leading commentators to talk of a globalised neoliberal policy space in education. As Rizvi and Lingard argue, “just as a social imaginary of neoliberal globalization has been a central component in the creation of the global market, so it has been within the global field of education policy. A global field of education policy is now established” (2010, p. 67). Signature traits of this global “policy convergence” in education include a number of key overarching policy themes – accountability, competition, and privatization (Ranci re, 2010, p. 19) – that are manifested in a number of intersecting educational policies typically pursued by neoliberal governments.

These policies include the imposition of standardised curricula on schools, teachers and students, monitored by high-stakes testing regimes for students and performativity-oriented evaluation and accountability measures for schools and teachers. They also include the encouragement of more diverse forms of school provision in order to, to cite Michael Gove again (2012), “generate innovation, raise expectations, give parents choice and drive up standards through competition,” alongside managerialist-inspired policies, such as the devolution of budgetary responsibilities to principals.

As suggested already, Lacanian discourse theory, and the two discourses of mastery, those of the master and the university in particular, provide powerful insights into contemporary globalized neoliberal policy discourses in education. The master's discourse is associated with self-identity, self-assurance and control of others. The political analogy would be the absolute monarch who, like the domineering parent or teacher, must be obeyed because of who they are, not

because their pronouncements are underpinned by valid knowledge (Sharpe & Boucher, 2010; Žižek, 2008). The master's discourse is represented schematically as follows:



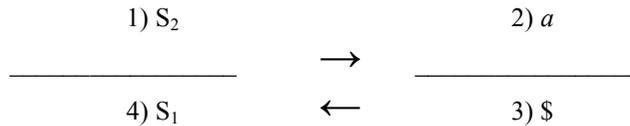
In the master's discourse, hegemonic and univocal master signifiers,  $S_1$ , address and organize the field of discourse,  $S_2$ . Yet this purported mastery relies on the concealment and repression of subjective division,  $\$$ , whilst generating the by-product,  $a$ , the object of desire that is lost to the subject (Boucher, 2006).

Lacan believed that modernity involved the displacement of the master's discourse by the university discourse (Boucher, 2006), though the master's discourse remains central insofar as it dominates the other three discourses (Clemens & Grigg, 2006). Critically, the displacement of the master's discourse by that of the university should not lead us into thinking that power has been replaced by reason, as suggested in dominant liberal narratives:

What Lacan recognizes in the university discourse is a new and reformed discourse of the master. In its elementary form, it is a discourse that is pronounced from the place of supposedly neutral knowledge, the truth of which (hidden below the bar) is Power, that is, the master signifier. The constitutive lie of this discourse is that it disavows its performative dimension; it always presents, for example, that which leads to a political decision, founded on power, as a simple insight into the state of things (or public polls, objective reports, and so on). (Zupančič, 2006, p. 168)

A similar point is made by sociologist and political theorist, Colin Crouch, who highlights the technocratic aspirations of third-way politicians as they "try to put issues beyond the range of conflict and debate, and beyond the reach of difficult ethical choices" by substituting "rational," "scientific" neoliberal economic theory for contingent and contestable political decision making. Such depoliticization has also been a marked feature of neoliberal education policies, underpinned by a discursive duopoly of instrumental and consensual discourses (Clarke, 2012). Yet as Crouch goes on to note, "these attempts must always fail, as it is not possible to put human life on a technocratic automatic pilot" (Crouch, 2011, pp. 91-92).

The failure of such attempts is central to the university discourse, which is represented schematically as follows:

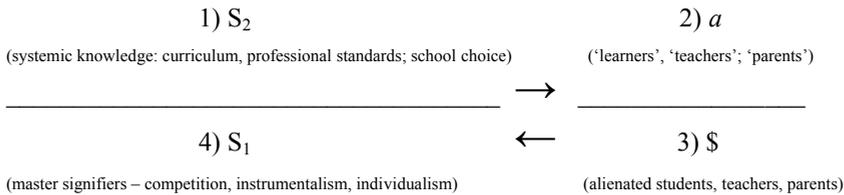


It is important to note that the university discourse is not tied to the institution we know as the university. Thus, commentators have also linked it to Stalin’s political regime – with its domination by expert knowledge embodied in official public discourses, addressing subjects as totalized, “authentic” revolutionary objects, whilst producing terrorized subjects as its by-product – as well as to the dominance of bureaucracy and consumerism in the contemporary world (Boucher, 2006; Dean, 2006; Sharpe & Boucher, 2010; Žižek, 2006, 2008). In each case, expert knowledge, disavowing its reliance on power, addresses the excluded remainder, attempting to incorporate it – and thus to enact and reproduce the knowledge system of  $S_2$  – within a completely sutured symbolic identity: the fully satisfied consumer; the fully integrated worker of the knowledge economy; the totally mobilized member of the socialist collective; the effective teacher. Yet ironically, this address can also be read as directed towards the subject solely in terms of its object-like qualities, or what Agamben refers to as “bare life” (1998), with no recognition of its orientation to any higher goals or purposes (Dean, 2006, p. 83). The hollowness of this attempt produces the repressed split subject, whilst simultaneously prompting the restless revolutionizing and ceaseless change that we see manifested in various forms, including capitalism’s excesses and crises, the ever-shifting bureaucratic performativity requirements of contemporary accountability regimes, and the lifelong learning demanded of today’s always unready educational subjects.

We gain significant insights into neoliberal education policy discourses when they are read in terms of Lacan’s discourse of the university, particularly when we recall its links to the dominance of bureaucracy and consumerism in the twenty-first century. Specifically, such policies can be understood as dominated by, on the one hand, bureaucratic attempts to comprehensively outline knowledge through national or state curricula and evaluate it through high-stakes testing regimes, as well as to ensure professional compliance with this project via accountability policies; and on the other hand, consumerist notions of choice that hold out the promise of complete satisfaction of educational desires through the mechanisms of marketization and “choice,” whilst interpellating an impoverished rational-individualist vision of the subject.

Let’s unpack these ideas in more detail in relation to the schema of the university discourse:

*The Other Side of Education*



Beginning in the upper-left quadrant, the position of agency is occupied by systemic knowledge,  $S_2$ , represented by the comprehensive mapping of knowledge embodied in national/state curricula and in teacher professional standards. This systemic knowledge addresses idealized and objectified subjects in the form of the successful learner (who strives her/his best to master the curriculum and do well in examinations), the good teacher (who evinces dedication to her/his students' learning and strives to embody the characteristics of good teaching outlined in professional standards documents) or the responsible parent (who is willing to make sacrifices to pay for her/his children's education). In so doing, systemic knowledge projects and addresses an idealised vision of the complete, fully realised neoliberal subject. But as we have seen, such attempts at discursive colonization, involving a characteristic mixture of coercion and seduction (Bracher, 2006, p. 93), inevitably fail, with  $a$  representing the unassimilable remainder of the Lacanian real, the other, which resists co-option into the symbolic system. The resulting by-product is the alienated and split-subject,  $\$$ : the disengaged student, the disaffected teacher, or the guilt-ridden parent.

As with technocratic attempts at managing other aspects of public life, such attempts at comprehensive mapping inevitably fail because they strive to capture and contain that which resists such capture. Another way to think about this and the problems resulting from the dominance of the university discourse in education is in terms of Elster's notion of states that are essentially by-products (Elster, 1983; Salacl, 1994). The idea here is that certain states of being can only be achieved indirectly and that when we attempt to attain them by making them the direct goal of our activity, we inevitably miss. Examples of such states include love, admiration, and happiness, in that we only achieve these things indirectly when we pursue other goals (Kay, 2011). I would argue that education is another example of a state that is essentially a by-product, in that education comes about indirectly as a result of engagement, inquiry and dialogue in relation to matters that are of significance and interest to its participants (Wells, 1999). Without doubt, neoliberalism's efforts to define and manage education through performative technologies such as standards, frameworks, targets and outcomes have literally missed the point, in the process undermining and diminishing the very thing which these efforts purport to value (Biesta, 2010; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Taubman, 2009). As Rancière notes, "schooling as we know it is dependent upon a calculable

if unnoticed absence of true education just as politics as we know it is most often dependent upon a similar absence of true politics” (Rancière, 2010, p. 23). But what are the alternatives? How can we put the object *a*, the other, back into the speaking position, the position of agency, rather the repression or colonization it suffers in the discourses of the master and the university, respectively?

### **The Other Side of Education: Discourses of Thinking Otherwise**

The discourse of the master and the university are what we might describe as authoritarian discourses of mastery, insofar as both are dominated by master signifiers – whether in the place of agency, as in the discourse of the master, or in the place of truth, as in the discourse of the university. These discourses are dominated by technocratic and reductive fantasies of the instrumental, competitive, accountable and self-responsibilising educational subject. Such reductive visions offer pale imitations of the creative and critical, if unruly and imperfect (Todd, 2009), potential of the Möbius subject of education, whose liminal and paradoxical nature cannot be contained within neoliberalism’s prosaic prescriptions.

In thinking about the challenges of creating an educational discourse that does not reproduce the dominance of neoliberalism’s economic and managerialist master signifiers and imagining alternatives to today’s technocratic vision of education, I want to turn to the other two of Lacan’s four discourses, which we might describe as discourses of thinking or knowing otherwise (Campbell, 2004, p. 76), as signposts to the other side of education. These are the discourse of the hysteric, associated with resistance and protest, and the discourse of the analyst, associated with analysis and critique.

The discourse of the hysteric represents a half-turn, or 180-degree revolution, from the discourse of the university characterizing much of contemporary education policy discourse and is depicted in the following schema:



Here the alienated split subject, \$, that was suppressed in the discourses of the master and the university, gains expression and assumes the place of agency, addressing and confronting the master signifier,  $S_1$ , in protest at the latter’s lack of certainty, harmony and wholeness. Yet the split subject remains in solidarity with the master signifier, reflected in their common location in the top half of the schema, even as it protests against and resists its particular form of domination. As Zupančič notes in relation to hysterical discourse, “the truth of her or his basic complaint about the master is usually that the master is not master enough” (2006,

p. 165). For this reason, and because the subject is still underpinned by an unacknowledged and repressed other, *a*, the tendency in this discourse is for the subject to seek a new master, new sources of certainty, whilst demonizing the old.

To the extent that it offers a challenge to established and authoritative systems of knowledge in education and their associated dominant master signifiers, while promoting acceptance of hitherto excluded knowledge and identities, the discourse of the hysteric represents a positive alternative to the two discourses of mastery. Indeed, it can be the source of empowerment, both for minority students whose knowledge and identities are validated, and for majority students whose resources for identification are expanded (Bracher, 2006, p. 96). However, because it is still reliant on the dominance of some (other) master, such empowerment is accompanied by the potential risks of a tokenism that in reality changes nothing, or of the installation of a new inverted hierarchy of dominance and subordination grounded in the familiar binaries of good/bad, victims/oppressors, and heroes/villains.

It is only in the discourse of the analyst that the totality and tyranny of the master signifiers is at least partially broken – partially that is because the analyst’s discourse still involves the operation of master signifiers, but with the critical difference that these are more flexible and tentative, being products of the subject of knowledge rather than being imposed upon it (Bracher, 1994, p. 124). The discourse of the analyst, which stands in opposition and counterpoint to the closure and rigidity of the master’s discourse, is represented schematically below:



In the discourse of the analyst, surplus desire, *a*, the other – which was repressed in the master’s discourse and colonized in the university discourse – addresses the divided subject,  $\$$ . In part because it is underpinned by knowledge,  $S_2$ , occupying the place of truth, recognizes how the latter’s subjection to the signifier produces the split between conscious symbolic knowledge and unconscious desire.

Meanwhile, the reinscription of the *a*, that was excluded in the master’s discourse and colonized in the university discourse, into the place of agency enables the subject to produce new master signifiers,  $S_1$ , and hence to disrupt and challenge the dominance of the master’s discourse:

The analytic discourse, that is, makes it possible to produce a master signifier that is a little less oppressive...less absolute, exclusive and rigid in its establishment of the subject’s identity, and more open,

fluid, processual – constituted, in a word, by relativity and textuality.  
(Bracher, 1994, p. 124)

In educational policy terms, this means rethinking the purposes of education in ways that more open and exploratory and less closed and certain, more expressive and intrinsic and less instrumental and extrinsic; it means thinking how educational relationships might become more democratic and egalitarian in orientation and less managerial and hierarchical (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 68). It means thinking how education can be rethought more in terms of a collaborative adventure and less as a competitive race. It means placing more emphasis on the virtues of interconnections and less on the tyranny of choice.

In pedagogic practice terms, this means not requiring students to conform to some pre-established body of knowledge, whether traditional, progressive, or critical. Rather, it entails assisting students to recognize the nature and origins of their existing knowledge and identities (including imagistic-perceptual and affective-physiological, not just linguistic-discursive registers), to build new knowledge and identities in proximal or potential zones of development, and to understand the implications and consequences of particular knowledge and identities for themselves and for others (Bracher, 2006, pp. 103-105). Such an approach, combining constructive and deconstructive approaches, echoes Biesta's argument "that education, as distinguished from socialization, that is, from the insertion of newcomers into an existing order, entails a responsibility for the coming into the world of unique, singular beings" (Biesta, 2006, p. 115).

Returning to our earlier discussion, such an approach is appropriate to the nature of the Möbius subject, who is at once individual *and* social, whose extimate origins are both external *and* immanent, whose excessive constitution retains an unassimilable kernel of the unknowable real, the other, alongside its more visible imaginary and symbolic dimensions. This Möbius educational subject's simultaneous and paradoxical embodiment of singularity, plurality, and difference exposes the inadequacies of an education grounded in discourses of mastery and instead demands engagement with the other side of education.

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