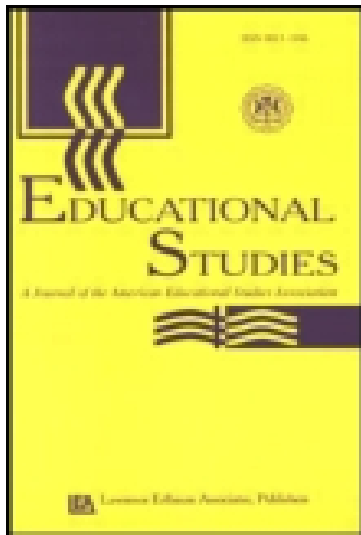


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Retaking the Test

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ARTICLES

Retaking the Test

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Data-driven teaching and learning is common sense in education today, and it is common sense that these data should come from standardized tests. Critics of standardization either make no constructive suggestions for what to use in place of the tests or they call for better, more scientifically rigorous, reliable, and *authentic* forms of testing. This article aims to critique the underlying logic of testing within neoliberal education by a return to the question of the ontology of testing as such. We do this by distinguishing the practices and technologies used in current testing from the fundamentally educational and philosophical aspect of human experience that critical theorist Avital Ronell (2005) calls the “test drive.” Posing the test drive against the current testing regime will allow us to reclaim health, personality, and taste from the high-stakes notion of testing that prevails today.

Data-driven teaching and learning is common sense in education today, and it is common sense that these data should come from standardized tests. Who could doubt the efficacy of testing to right the wrongs of educational inequities, learning deficits, and unequal access? Although there are ardent critics of current high-stakes tests that range from former supporters (Ravitch, 2011) to liberal reformers (Nicols & Berliner, 2007) to leftist intellectuals (Au, 2008; De Lissovoy & McLaren, 2003), the seemingly inherent connections between testing and education are never fully examined. Why test in the first place? Before any productive discussion of alternatives to high-stakes testing can be designed, it seems that this more basic and fundamentally philosophical question should be posed. This article aims to both critique contemporary manifestations of the test and, at the same time, recover what critical theorist Avital Ronell (2005) calls the “test drive.” Starting from an analysis of what the drive to test means in relation to education, we can come to appreciate why testing is a necessary component of education as such, but also why

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high-stakes testing is a fundamental distortion not only of education but what it means to be human?

Unlike other theorists/critics of tests, Ronell (2005) is useful in this context because she returns to the ontological question of tests as such. Rather than an epistemological question (What do tests let us know, diagnose, categorize?), Ronell poses a different question entirely: an ontological one that asks what is the very being of the test. According to Ronell, the test drive (and its various manifestations) opens up a moment when we become the location of experimentation: when we see what we are made of. This drive to test is an essentially educative drive, for we come to know ourselves and the world when we falsify hypotheses and traditional beliefs about reality. The test can, therefore, serve as a kind of emancipation from the known and the familiar. Although the current emphasis on testing would seem to be the apotheosis of Ronell's sentiments, contemporary testing practices monopolize school time, transforming it into a time of multifaceted pressure to master arbitrary content to secure resources. Such tests, we argue, are events of anxiety, conformity, and vindications of neoliberal policy. This test, rather than a drive to self-experiment, is the crux of a *learning-testing regime* put in place by some to achieve political and economic goals that sacrifice the very drive that propels us to test and be tested. We propose that the latter phenomenon of testing (the testing regime) may have originated from the former (the ontology of the test drive), but has veered far from this original inspiration in its current form. Given the ontological drive to test (and thus experiment with what it means to be human or live a life), we argue that the test can, and should, be rehabilitated from its appropriation by the logic of neoliberal learning as an educational, as well as political gesture, against hierarchical classification, conformism, and economic human capital development.

After a brief account of the high-stakes test as a major educational and social event, we use Ronell's (2005) description of testing as a necessary yet inappropriately utilized technology of education. Through Ronell's densely provocative and complex articulation of the enigmatic test drive, we reclaim the educative possibilities of testing as a form of exodus (or radical opting-out) from an overarching learning-testing regime. We assert that testing, when it takes the self as a site of experimentation, can reclaim health, taste, and personality, and we conclude with practical and tactical suggestions for retaking the test. The work on and through the self that is the ultimate location and subject of the test drive can disrupt the fundamental operative logic of the learning-testing regime and in turn open up to a new notion of educational freedom.

TAKING THE TEST: LIFE-LONG LEARNING AS LIFE-LONG TESTING

For Jan Masschelein (2001), the current neoliberal economic and social world cannot be understood unless we equally focus on the dominance of learning in all sectors of life. The laborer is defined by his or her capability or incapability to meet the needs of a flexible market. As such, the laborer becomes a perpetual learner, constantly testing and retesting certain sets of skills to see if they remain competitive. Masschelein's (2001) thesis thus becomes: "The discourse of the learning society is at the same time an effect and an instrument of the victory of *animal laborans*" (p. 2). Learning becomes an organizing principle for socializing students into a particular regime

of efficiency, optimizing labor productivity. Indeed, learning becomes the educational logic of neoliberalism (Lewis, 2013).

In this sense, Masschelein (2001) is very similar to Foucault (2008), who argued that education is a type of “social orthopedics” that has ceased to punish individuals and, instead focuses on “correcting their potentialities” (p. 57) to maximize competencies and efficiencies. Masschelein and Simons (2008) describe how potentialities within the learning society are connected to self-directed, self-managing behaviors in a form of governmentality of the self. As with Foucault’s description of neoliberalism, Masschelein and Simons describe how life-long learning is part of an attempt to shift responsibility for governance to private individuals, thus transforming economic, political, or educational problems into individual problems to be self-regulated. For Foucault (2008), “educational investments” (p. 229) by the neoliberal state transform us into entrepreneurial individuals who can “test” our own potentials for maximum economic outputs. The battery of tests that the individual undergoes throughout a lifetime help to identify, classify, train, and actualize his or her unrealized potential as student, worker, and citizen. Again, not only is the high-stakes test a vindication of neoliberal policy, but a *naturalization* of a distinctively neoliberal technology of the self. In this sense, to think through the logic and apparatuses of learning is also to think through the function of the test as a privileged mode of evaluation and analysis.

But there is an obverse to the logic of learning and testing as a form of the governmentality of the self that does not optimize potentiality so much as abandon students who cannot make the grade. The bodies that are given educational investment are coupled with bodies that suffer a form of education divestment. One of us (Lewis, 2006, 2013) has previously described how high-stakes testing under No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) has reduced educational life of students to a form of bare life devoid of its educational supplement, therefore replaying a biopolitical drama that only includes life through an exclusion. The resulting institutional abandonment in the form of accelerated push-out rates, expulsions, and suspensions is a form of internal exclusion most negatively affecting poor minority students. These students are included precisely through their exclusion from the active life in schools. Noah De Lissovoy (2011) has also focused on how testing, and in particular the labels applied to students through such testing, causes a form of violation against students of color. For De Lissovoy, violation is an attack on the existential wholeness of the student. But this attack is not a destruction or negation so much as a “prolific assault, invasion, and fragmentation” (p. 465) that results in traumatized individuals. The *at-risk* label, in particular, is a violation against the educational life of minority students that produces the very effects that it is supposed to diagnose. These labels could be thought of a relay links between medical, juridical, and educational apparatuses, existing on the periphery of included exclusions of students, especially students of color.¹

Bluntly stated, the learning society puts certain bodies under heightened risk, and survival becomes the ultimate imperative. Masschelein (2001) writes,

We can say that in the learning society we live in a situation of permanent threat: threatened in our survival (as species, school, university, scientist, teacher, organization, enterprise, citizen, nation and so on), threatened with exclusion, with no possibility of appeal (p. 12)

High-stakes testing takes on a more profound significance in this formulation, for the test—in addition to establishing a public standard to evaluate public spending—also evaluates personal

performance to correct outputs to meet demands. When these outputs do not meet the standard, the student is exposed to a kind of social and economic abandonment. Not only are jobs and subsidies at stake, but also the self. In this sense, the neoliberal learning society is a biopolitical fight over educational life.

In short, high-stakes testing in conjunction with the practice of labeling have come to define the human as the-one-who-must-learn, and, vice versa, learning has transformed the human into the one-who-must-be-tested. For those who refuse to learn or are never given the chance in the first place, the only fate is an invisible one: to be violated through educational abandonment. From this perspective, it is impossible to talk about the testing regime in isolation from the learning regime. The two are codetermining. As a necessary corollary to the neoliberal emphasis on reskilling, flexibility, and life-long learning, there must be perpetual testing (testing to improve outputs, maximize human capital development, and so on) which students learn to administer to themselves over time. The result is a learning-testing regime that captures the self in a perpetual and endless cycle of lifelong learning and lifelong testing. As a self-guided social orthopedic, such tests remind the subject of his or her deficits with the intended purpose of correcting and guiding the subject toward maximal social and economic viability. The obscene obverse of this investment into the life of populations is the underlying existential violation through abandonment by systems defined by efficiency standards.

The paradoxes of the neoliberal learning-testing regime are nowhere more apparent than the New York State Board of Education's recent reform policies. One of them is a revamped standardized curriculum called the Common Core, the assessment for which includes high-stakes tests in reading and math at the third- and eighth-grade levels. Children in primary and middle schools throughout New York State took these tests in the Spring of 2013 and, in the quiet of summer, with little fanfare, the DOE released the results at the beginning of August. The numbers were not good.

31.1 percent of grade 3–8 students across the State met or exceeded the ELA proficiency standard; 31 percent met or exceeded the math proficiency standard.

The ELA proficiency results for race/ethnicity groups across grades 3–8 reveal the persistence of the achievement gap: only 16.1 percent of African-American students and 17.7 percent of Hispanic students met or exceeded the proficiency standard.

3.2 percent of English Language Learners (ELLs) in grades 3-8 met or exceeded the ELA proficiency standard; 9.8 percent of ELLs met or exceeded the math proficiency standard.

5 percent of students with disabilities met or exceeded the ELA proficiency standard; 7 percent of students with disabilities met or exceeded the math proficiency standard. (State Education Department Releases Grades 3-8 Assessment Results, 2013)

These are the statewide numbers. They are low; but it gets worse. The report continues to list the results from New York's urban centers. "Across the Big 5 city school districts," they reported, a smaller percentage of students met or exceeded the ELA and math proficiency standards than in the rest of the state:

In Buffalo, 11.5 percent of students met or exceeded the ELA proficiency standard; 9.6 percent met or exceeded the math proficiency standard.

In Yonkers, 16.4 percent of students met or exceeded the ELA proficiency standard; 14.5 percent met or exceeded the math proficiency standard.

In New York City, 26.4 percent of students met or exceeded the ELA proficiency standard; 29.6 percent met or exceeded the math proficiency standard.

In Rochester, 5.4 percent of students met or exceeded the ELA proficiency standard; 5 percent met or exceeded the math proficiency standard.

In Syracuse, 8.7 percent of students met or exceeded the ELA proficiency standard; 6.9 percent met or exceeded the math proficiency standard. (State Education Department Releases Grades 3-8 Assessment Results, 2013)

We leave the work of fine-grained analysis of these data to others. Our interest is, rather, in the bigger picture: the social and political significance of these results, in particular of the test that yielded these results. We are not interested in student performance on the test so much as the test itself, juxtaposed with this poor performance. Without the test, there is no such thing as the Common Core, no such thing as “meeting” or “exceeding” some “standard.” The test produces a certain set of expectations, reducing the complexity of education to a series of quantities that can be compared, aggregated, disaggregated, and read as symptoms or as successes. The test becomes the crux of a more disperse system that involves economies of efficiency, educational performance, and even juridical intervention (state takeover), all the while producing excesses in student push-out rates and abandonment of educational life (Valenzuela, 2004). Indeed, the very paradigms of efficiency and productivity produce escalating levels of inefficiency and unproductive labor that are then disavowed by the system in the form of blaming students and teachers for their perceived deficits. This overarching logic of the test means that the test is a true *event* in the sense that it has become the fulcrum around which the world of schooling turns. The Common Core makes plain the fundamental logic of the neoliberal learning-testing regime: that the only education worth anything is the education that can be measured and thus managed through a series of standardized reforms. Without measurable improvements, schools will be closed, teachers fired, and students abandoned. Thus, the Common Core produces its own problems, which only more standardization can fix, resulting in an internally self-referential world of learning, testing, retesting, learning, and so forth.

Given this state of affairs, and in particular the power and prevalence of the learning-testing regime within a neoliberal framework of value, it would seem that the very ontological saliency of the test must be questioned. At stake here is not simply this or that kind of test, but the test as such. Is there a way to redeem the test from the learning-testing dialectic of investment and divestment, of optimization and abandonment, of entrepreneurial optimism and violation?

Enter Ronell’s account of the test drive and the juridical appropriation thereof. What Ronell (2005) calls for is a reexamination of the test drive in the learning-testing regime—an unconcealing of its aporias, and its overreaching claims to objectivity. Such deconstruction does not foreclose upon the possibilities of testing. Quite the opposite! Her account undercuts the logic of the learning-testing regime as a be-all and end-all, and opts, instead, for an alternative genealogy of “prototypes” or scientific “non-events” (p. 50) that appear on the margins of the testing regime as discounted or useless. These events, which always appear as nonevents from within the scientific discourses and practices of the learning-testing regime, are nevertheless provocative tools for reclaiming the test drive, and, as we suggest in the next section, retaking the test, this time for health, taste, and personality rather than psychological trauma, economic efficiency, and social conformity.

THE TESTING EVENT

Although not mentioned in the extensive discussions on testing and education (Taubman, 2010, is an exception in this respect), Ronell (2005) is useful in understanding the philosophical and ontological dimensions underlying the particular policy analysis and larger cultural and political logics outlined previously. She begins her examination of the test drive with an analysis of the appropriation of testability. This genealogical analysis of how the test drive has become the learning-testing regime is important because it is diagnostic of the contemporary condition and also returns to the site of testing itself and its fundamental drive as essentially redeemable. Along with enlightenment scepticism, she claims, came a new emphasis on testing truth so that “hypothesis and testing band together to undermine dogma” (p. 25). Indeed, scientificity in both the empirical and philosophical realms raised the test to the highest authority—even higher than the truth itself. Throughout German idealism and into Protestant reformism, the authority of the test made certain that no truth remained unexamined. But what concerns Ronell specifically is the way in which the motif of testability became the cornerstone for modern justice. Citing the work of Bert Black, Ronell argues that the defining feature of jurisprudence in the modern era is precisely the central role of science in determining the truth. Yet—and this is a central theme in her book—this scientificity is, itself, never truly tested. It is merely presupposed as a taken-for-granted backdrop against which claims of justice can and should be measured. The problem here is not so much the epistemological claims being made by science, but rather how justice appropriates the ontology of the testing regime as an absolute without questioning its underlying claims of objectivity. In other words, Ronell is troubled by the scientization of justice, which reduces larger, philosophical concerns for the “good” or “right” to quantifiable measurement, efficiency protocols, and so on. Of course there are uses for scientific tests in the justice system to help determine the truth value of particular cases, testimony, and evidence. But this is strikingly different from the stronger and broader claim that justice itself should be determined by a concept of testing above and outside the very purview of justice itself. The issue here is that, even on its purest level, scientificity is, nevertheless, “rooted in [a] faith and metaphysics” (p. 37) which would never submit to testing nor pass if it did.

There are surprising parallels here between the scientization of justice and the scientization of education via high-stakes testing. In both cases, the event of testing overtakes and dominates important domains of human concern to the point where the very logic of testing can no longer be questioned without referring to the logic of testing that is the issue. Although Ronell (2005) only mentions educational testing in passing, her work has great value for understanding how the testing regime is always already a learning regime interested in promoting and maintaining constant training and reskilling according to a certain neoliberal logic of performance and human capital extraction (Pierce, 2013).

Indeed, the connections between neoliberal economics, federal law, and education in New York City’s Common Core serve to highlight the integration of distinct regimes of truth through a network of tests, quantifiable data, and efficiency measurements all in the name of capital advancement. The test is a state test, mandated by the government, although it was composed, distributed, evaluated, and analyzed by a multibillion dollar British corporation, Pearson. This relationship between large corporations and public education intensified in 2002 when NCLB (2001) prioritized the concept of “accountability” in public education, and the state began to offer large contracts to corporations that might facilitate that accountability. Thus the

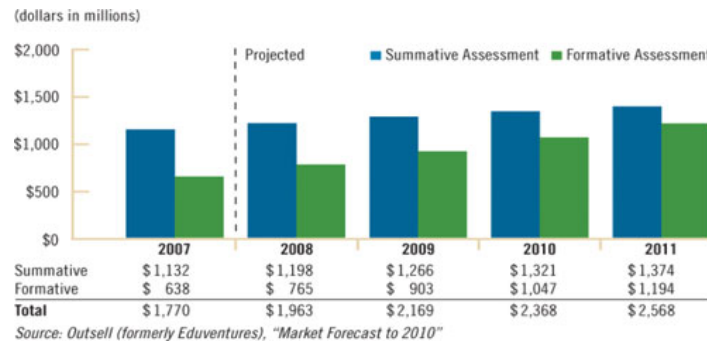


FIGURE 1 K–12 educational testing: Projected market growth (dollars in millions).

high-stakes testing event originates from a complex relationship between government, science, and for-profit institutions. In other words, high-stakes testing is, in its most recent history, a juridical appropriation of scientific objectivity that in turn generates profit for transnational corporations. The NCLB's stated purpose is to "ensure that children . . . reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02>, Sec.1001, "Statement of Purpose"). Students' performance on these assessments would determine objectively whether public spending on schooling achieves its other stated purpose, which we cite from that same sentence in Section 1001 of the law: "that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education."

With NCLB, the state claims to have instrumentation that will demonstrate truths regarding the quality of education occurring in its schools. In the case of New York State at least, corporations compose, distribute, and analyze those instruments for the state. Therein lies the juridical appropriation of scientific objectivity: the *high-stakes* quality of the test derives in part from the state's initial legal presumption that, when administered, the test shows us a form of objective truth. To some degree, the truth with respect to the quality of schooling is at stake in these tests—which is quite a lofty thing.

Indeed, NCLB has intensified the privatization of a public good (Hursh, 2007; Saltman, 2010, 2012). Public schooling is the state's responsibility to provide, yet private companies have been involved in their creation, distribution, and analysis. Under NCLB, the instruments that were used to determine the efficacy of schools increased in frequency and were made available to large corporations. The public good of education, specifically the determination of its quality, thus became increasingly vulnerable to large-scale privatization. For example, the testing corporation McGraw-Hill cites the graph in Figure 1, composed by Outsell, on their corporate media page, entitled "Transforming the Learning Continuum" (n.d.).

With this chart, the corporation makes clear to potential investors that there will be a growing market in educational testing, increasing by more than double between 2007 and 2011. These projections have proved propitious. For example, Texas awarded Pearson PLC \$468 million to provide testing services, and New York State awarded the same company \$32 million ("Pearson Responds to Research. . .," 2012).

Furthermore, drawing from Luc Boltanski (2011), there is another sense in which the legal origin of high-stakes testing is connected to neoliberal politics and economics. In a neoliberal

arrangement, individuals are faced with constraints and responsibilities typically assigned to the collective (whether state or otherwise). We see shifting responsibility in NCLB's approach to testing. Rather than progressively providing further funding and resources to schools that do not perform well, the law stipulates a series of phases that increasingly place more responsibility on individuals in the schools (including parents, teachers, and administrators) to improve those schools' performance on the tests ("Definitions," n.d.)—a kind of educational entrepreneurship where the individual must find solutions or pay the consequences. When a school has not met adequate yearly progress on the tests after 2 years, parents are given the choice to send their children to other schools. After 4 years, the state may "replace school staff; implement new curriculum; decrease the authority of school-level administration" (NCLB, 2001). After 5 years, there must be a "restructuring" of the school, either to "reopen the school as a public charter school; replace all or most of the school staff, including the principal; enter into a contract to have an outside entity operate the school; arrange for the state to take over operation of the school" (NCLB, 2001). Thus, by mandate of the collective, a responsibility of the collective falls to individuals. This amounts to "blaming the victim," according to Boltanski (2011, p. 127) or, for David Hursh (2007), removing government from "responsibility for social welfare" (p. 494). If NCLB were not a neoliberal policy, in other words, the series of phases mentioned would show a progressive increase of resources and support for failing schools so as to guarantee their better functioning. Rather, parents are encouraged to send their children to other schools, administrators face replacement, and the school itself may be turned into a charter school if students do not meet the scientifically-determined standards. Hursh (2007) summarizes the way in which neoliberalism has influenced educational policy, particularly the high-stakes tests of NCLB. Such policies, on the neoliberal view,

increase educational efficiency within a world in which goods, services, and jobs easily cross borders. Increased efficiency can only be attained, argue neoliberals, if individuals are able to make choices within a market system in which schools compete rather than the current system in which individuals are captive to educational decisions made by educators and government officials. Furthermore, if individuals are to make decisions, they must have access to quantitative information, such as standardized test scores, that presumably indicate the quality of the education provided. Neoliberals believe competition leads to better schools, and hence better education for all students. (p. 498)

The high-stakes test is an event that occasions each of these neoliberal arguments: increased efficiency, market-based choices for parent-consumers (rather than assessments decided upon by educators and officials), and copious amounts of quantitative data that indicate the quality of education. Thus the high-stakes test event, as it emerged from NCLB, is a juridical event because it was (and is) conceived as an objective, scientific measurement mandated by policy. This juridical event is also a vindication of neoliberalism because the policy from which it originates privatizes a public good and shifts collective responsibilities to individuals, thus providing a startling case study demonstrating Ronell's (2005) general thesis. Testing is an event that networks together law, education, science, and economy, creating an overarching regime wherein the guise of *science* justifies a depletion of the educative resources it is meant to enhance.

FROM THE TESTING EVENT TO THE PROTO-TYPE OF THE TEST DRIVE

As opposed to the event of testing, Ronell's (2005) text is interrupted by a series of vignettes or scientific nonevents she referred to as *prototypes*. Through the prototype, scientific protocols become freed from their factual uses and opened up for heretical, barbaric uses of literary theory and deconstruction. Rather than offer types (ideal or otherwise), Ronell's multiple prototypes offer nothing more than a series of incomplete sketches that delay the arrival of a conclusion or of the tallying up of critical "findings." As such, the prototype would be considered a kind of inoperative test according to the neoliberal emphasis on efficiency, productivity, and measurability.

As an incomplete or unfinished test, the prototype always remains open to be tinkered with further. If it presses toward the development of scientific knowledge production or the collection of evidence, in Ronell's (2005) hands, the prototype remains suspended, severing its relationship to any notion of completing the experiment, clarifying a philosophical problem, or producing verifiable knowledge. Thus, she leads the reader through a series of surprising prototypes including: psychoanalytic tests, the story "The Test" by Kafka, an historical overview of *basanos* (which links testing to slavery) in ancient Athens, Boyle's theory of the experimental essay, Lyotard's theory of a wrong, and Zen *kōans*. In each case, Ronell's list of prototypes presents a fragmented (sometimes blatantly cursory) report of an (abandoned) trial run that, cumulatively, render inoperative the systematic nature of testing in science and philosophical speculation. Likewise, the prototype interrupts all forms of learning that demand the measurement of outcomes to increase social and economic efficacy and conformity.

Rather than produce a well adjusted, socially productive, economically useful subject through the learning-testing regime (learning as socialization into a particular order), the radical power of the prototype—as test drive manifest—is to produce a series of desubjectifications (that lack any clear identity within an order of things), thus interrupting the logic binding economic utility to learning and testing—a logic that defines subjects in relation to their utility. Stated simply, the prototype renders the subject of the test inexplicable or unrecognizable to the operative logic of learning (to be this or that kind of worker/citizen) and testing (which measures potentialities in order to produce increased outputs).

A dramatic example of this process of desubjectification occurs in Part 5 of Ronell's (2005) book titled "Trial balloon: Husserl to front weatherman #414." In this section, Ronell projects herself into the mind and attitude of Edmund Husserl to write a series of memoirs about his various relationships to science, phenomenology, and his student Martin H. A deeply problematic if not scholarly improper gesture (what right does she have to appropriate Husserl's voice?), Ronell nevertheless takes Husserl for a test drive, displacing her own authorial voice through a complex act of mimicry.

This section not only enacts a subjective displacement but also a radical temporal displacement as well. At one point Ronell, as Husserl, talks back to Ronell the author, stating:

This is what I add to Avital's theory. I worry that her ardent skepticism has introduced an excessive negativistic force to the field. I do not as such quarrel with what she's doing. It's a matter of timing; I don't think that the destructive edge of skepticism should be introduced prematurely. In fact, even though she doesn't come out with it, at least not sufficiently for my tastes, I feel that she owes me a lot. (Ronell, 2005, p. 260)

Here, the very solidity of Ronell's authority is put into question by the role that she is playing. And yet, this is exactly the nature of the test drive: It is the potentiality of testing that is at stake here, the testability of testing as such. Thus, what might at first appear to be a deferral through endless wandering, curious distractions, and various improper (dare we say rude and even annoying) linguistic acts is not a deferral at all but rather a making present of that which is absent: the test drive as such.

The test drive is therefore occasioned by nonevents, because it is untethered to specific outcomes predetermined by a dominant scientific method. These nonevents are the events that are not deemed worthy of being recorded in the history of science or justice (or education for that matter). They are the events written out, made invisible, marginalized. Ronell's (2005) book illustrates this. Yet, for Ronell, it is precisely the liminal condition of these nonevents that holds open the hope for a kind of interruption from the margins, allowing space and time for a test to emerge that does not simply repeat the larger dialectic of investment and divestment found in the learning-testing regime. Her book, as a whole, does not so much provide definitions of testing or of the drive so much as produce a liberating effect that throws off predetermined notions of testing by opting for a constellation of prototypes.

In her own words, the test drive is "circumscribed by an endless erasure of what is" (Ronell, 2005, p. 10). Stated differently, the test drive is nothing more than a potentiality that always withdraws the closer one comes to defining it, taming it, policing it, learning from it. Yet this is not simply postmodern window shopping where the subject is lost in an infinity of choices. The wanderer is not lost. Rather, she is called by nothing—by the silent call of potentiality, or, what Ronell would refer to as the enigma of the void at the heart of the test drive that disperses the self across the various moments when the self is tested. Thus, the self is destabilized by a void which is not simply a lack but a power to invent new valences of self.

To make the point more concrete, we offer the following list of activities and tactics. The reader might use one or a group of them tomorrow, either in class or individually, to *retake a test* in accordance with the test drive. Each test uses language from Ronell's (2005) arguments early in the *Test Drive* and is named for the philosopher whose work she reads to make those arguments.

- **Levinas's test:** "Make yourself the scene of the idea of life" (p. 63).
- **Kafka's test:** Pick a test that you'll have to take, though you might not want to. Refuse to take this test, then tell the story of your refusal (p. 72).
- **Boyle's test:** Seek a situation where you confront one of your own limitations. Admit when you have reached it (p. 100).
- **Lyotard's test:** Feel something unsayable. Phrase it (p. 109).
- **Zen test test:** Have a thought that, with(out) doubt, belongs "to the region of nonnegative negations" (p. 123).

We offer these as tests that defy measurement and labeling, and thus refuse to abide by the learning-testing regime and its dialectic. The point of such tests is not to rank and classify students, but rather to declassify students, enabling them to experiment with their lives in ways that remain unrecognizable to the performance quotas of high-stakes testing.² In any case, we claim that such tests restore testing to the potentiality of the test drive and thereby open up new modes of being and new experimental relations with the self. And if these tests seem overly postmodern or playful

to be of any use in upsetting the paradigm of neoliberal learning and testing, then consider the following. Educators in the Zapatista movement have come to similar conclusions concerning the test drive. In a recent report about the opening of their School of Liberty, we read that “as for final evaluations, the school won’t, unsurprisingly, have an exam, a thesis, or a multiple-choice test.” Rather, the school “will make its own reality,” and the results will be “a mirror” (Molina, 2013). Instead of a test that measures outputs to conform to social standards of excellence and productivity, and instead of a test that produces effects of violation through abandonment, this testing is a kind of prototype of life itself wherein the very existence of the students is put into play. The result is a test that does not confirm reality but rather “makes its own reality.” Such a reality might very well refuse to play by the rules of neoliberal learning and testing, and indeed, the subjects of such testing might very well be misrecognized by paradigmatic forms of evaluation and assessment. Yet there is a sense of constituting power in the test drive, which the Zapatista educators recognize, that cannot be foreclosed upon. Such a power is unmeasurable within any matrices offered up by the learning-testing regime. Indeed, the void at the heart of the test is not simply a lack, but a potentiality for new forms of life, new modes of existence that are always already in surplus of the order of things.

But what, in the end, is the biopolitics of the test drive? What does it make possible as a form of educational life antithetical to the violated and/or optimized bodies of the learning-testing regime? We end with a consideration of a new sense of the care for the self that emerges when one experiments with the test drive. This new notion of care ruptures the logic of individualism found in neoliberal theories of the self by redeeming health, taste, and personality.

THE BIOPOLITICAL ETHICS OF THE TEST DRIVE

Ronell’s (2005) concluding chapter turns toward Nietzsche and his theory of the “wanderer” (p. 314)—a figure, writes Ronell, who submits the self to the ultimate test. The hardest test of all is to test one’s radical freedom by betraying conventions of self. For Ronell, the wanderer is connected to the idea of the “noble traitor” who has a “highly developed sensibility for betrayal” (p. 314). Ronell here cites Shakespeare’s and Nietzsche’s identification with Brutus as an inquiry into the highest form of testing: betrayal. This means that curiosity does not simply leap from one thing to the next, but ultimately leads to the untethering of the self from the self, an abandonment of the self to its pure test drive. Yet we must be cautious here. As Ronell points out, Nietzsche’s famous betrayal of his former idol, Wagner, was not a betrayal of the man as such, but of the Wagnerian ideology that had swept Germany and thus subsumed the man. For us, betrayal is not a rejection of all social relations, but rather an exodus from definable subject positions as worker, citizen, or student under the learning-testing regime. To be a wanderer is, in this sense, once again to reconnect with meaningful modes of human flourishing that are otherwise submitted to the logic of neoliberal utility, productivity, and so forth.

To betray such conventions—what binds one to a recognizable form—is to be healthy. “Great health embraces the crash, plunges into the undertow if it means to rise up again as a sign of itself, becoming what it is: healthful” (Ronell, 2005, p. 290). Breaking up through betrayal is not only a sign of health but it is also a responsibility, hence Nietzsche’s fascination with Brutus. As a true embodiment of the hardest test of betrayal, Brutus, Nietzsche writes, is a clarion call of the “Independence of soul!” (Ronell, 2005, p. 309). The test drive here drives us to new

heights of freedom and self-constitution. This is healthy because the gentrification of the test drive in the contemporary moment only concerns administration, management, and containment of such radical experimentation, thus estranging us from freedom. To be healthy means to bear the responsibility of betrayal with a clear conscience, and thus be willing to experience it over and over again in the eternal return as an expression of one's freedom without regret or sadness.

The emphasis on health stands in stark contrast to the unhealthy anxiety and stress of high-stakes testing. Segool et al. (2013) reports that

state testing programs have resulted in increased student anxiety, increased stress, lowered motivation, increased focus on test preparation, and increased job stress and lowered job satisfaction for teachers. (p. 490)

The authors conclude that “students reported significantly more test anxiety in relation to the high-stakes NCLB assessment than to classroom tests” (p. 498). In this case, sickness must be endured for the vague correlation between “increased test scores” and human capital viability; for Ronell (2005), sickness is to be overcome precisely by a betrayal of that which violates the integrity of the subject. Fidelity to the practice of the self in the name of self-overcoming transgresses the injunction to manage the self according to standardized measures that rank, quantify, and label students according to the needs of the neoliberal market.

Such health is accompanied by expanded and developed taste. As Ronell (2005) argues,

Nietzsche turns every test into something of a taste test. The relation to taste is crucial. In a sense, this relation keeps the senses busy, involving instincts that otherwise might be dulled or deadened. Keeping the body intact and thinking tactile, Nietzsche develops an experimental ethos, a modified judgment of taste. (p. 175)

Indeed, without aesthetic taste, “science would kill us” (Ronell, 2005, p. 212). Thus, art in many ways prepares the wanderer for radical experimentation on the self, for a transformation of the self by the self through the test drive. The taste acquired here is a taste for risk, for the freedom offered by betrayal. Of course, there is risk within high-stakes testing. Indeed, the risk for the student of not passing the New York State Common Core is that he or she will be held back, and the risk for the teacher subjected to the test is that he or she might be fired if adequate yearly progress is not met. Yet these risks remain recognizable risks within the logic of the learning-testing regime. The first risk is defined only in relation to efficiency and the second only in terms of economic utility. The test drive and its various proto-types open the subject to a more determinant risk: the risk of betraying that which defines the order of things and their operation. This is a risk to become otherwise than neoliberalism demands. It is a risk that violates the violation of the subject.

Taste, in this sense, is more than a private faculty, skill, or credential that separates the cultured or educated from the ignorant masses, giving certain privileges to the entrepreneurial, self-made individual. As Vivasvan Soni (2006) argues, taste is never the result of a special education, cultural capital, or aesthetic training but is rather the spontaneous accord between the faculties of the subject and the object that cannot become the private jurisdiction of the few over and against the many. As such, there is no prerequisite for making a judgment of taste and the aesthetic community is radically open to all participants. Stated differently, taste always exceeds any attempt to police or restrict its domain to specific individuals, subject matter, or conventions.

Indeed, the radical political possibility of aesthetic judgment is verified through the overthrowing of hierarchies between those who have and those who do not have taste. If neoliberalism is predicated on continual labeling to determine who to train and who to abandon, the shift to taste is a kind of exodus that puts such labels and evaluative claims in jeopardy. This is a taste for a monstrous excess that has no place within the smooth circulation of quantifiable value, learning outputs, or economic utility scales of neoliberalism (Lewis & Khan, 2010).

In addition to health and taste, liberating the test drive from the learning-testing regime promotes personality. “Perhaps somewhat surprisingly for us moderns today,” speculates Ronell, “who associate experiment with some degree of desubjectivation, the experimental imagination, as Nietzsche calls it as one point, implies a strong personality” (Ronell, 2005, p. 177). As opposed to the cold, detached, distanced, analytical approach to problem solving supported by the learning-testing regime, Ronell (2005), via Nietzsche calls for an impassioned, intimate, involved, and political relationship with the problems at hand. Personality, as we read it here, does not indicate the flowering of our *authentic* or *natural* selves, but rather a passionate and powerful involvement with experimentation through the test drive, and thus a certain pushing through and beyond limitations of a rather anemic sense of self within neoliberal society.

Within the learning-testing regime, the subject is reduced to an abstract quantity that can be aggregated and disaggregated. The subject is captured as a resource for the world; his or her choices become nothing more than reflexes of the needs of the neoliberal world to replicate itself in a quantifiable form of human capital. As Agamben (2009) writes,

What defines the apparatuses that we have to deal with in the current phase of capitalism [what we are referring to as a learning-testing regime and its various juridical, medical, and educational manifestations] is that they no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the processes of what can be called desubjectification. (p. 21)

Within the learning-testing regime, desubjectification reduces students to nothing but impersonal data points to be aggregated and disaggregated according to standardized matrixes of measure. The result is an “identity without an identity” (Agamben, 2011, p. 52) or a desubjectification of the student as an irreducibly unique singularity to a statistical fact, an abstract quantity of human capital, or a generic skill set of an entrepreneurial self. The statistical obsession with numbers within the learning-testing regime illustrated by the example of the New York Common Core outlined herein is a case in point. The qualitative dimension of education is replaced by sets of numbers used to predict success and failure.

This desubjectification is qualitatively different from the one described by Ronell (2005). For her, desubjectification is an active, productive care of the self that betrays the identification of subjectivity with the production of measurable data streams. Only through a radical desubjectification (as an exodus from the labels imposed by the learning-testing regime) can personality thrive. Here we return to Ronell’s example of desubjectification. When she becomes Husserl, she undergoes a displacement of the self in relation to otherness. Whereas the neoliberal, entrepreneurial self is predicated on autonomy, security, and certainty, the personality that Ronell experiments with is permeated with the other and thus has *insecure* boundaries that can—and should—be crossed. In this sense, the desubjectification process results in a kind of personality that betrays the very essence of the neoliberal, entrepreneurial self: immunization of property. For Roberto Esposito (2008), the internal contradictions of immunization are founded in liberal notions of property. If

property is meant to immunize the individual against the commons (otherness), then ultimately the attempt to preserve the subject via external property results in a diminishing of the self. In Esposito's (2008) reading of Locke, the personification of the thing in property is equally accompanied by "the reification of the person, disembodied of its subjective substance" (p. 69). Combining preservation and property, liberty becomes a quintessential form of immunization, resulting in an autoimmune disease that eats the subject away from the inside of its secured core. The modern immunizing of liberty begins with an emphasis on security and insurance that act as controls blocking the contingency of life. Yet these various controls produce a crisis in a subject now sealed off from the commons which, ironically enough, was the very source of property in the first place. In this sense, Ronell's test drive opens up the neoliberal self to the contamination of otherness denied by the underlying notion of property and its immunizing contradictions. This is a self whose health no longer rests on immunization, and whose desubjectification process does not result in mere destitution but rather the construction of new valences of what it means to be a subject. In other words, instead of an entrepreneurial self that is secure in what it owns and how it statistically conforms, Ronell's radical sense of self is always an insecure experiment in becoming otherwise than. The self itself is therefore reconceptualized as a proto-type.

In the learning-testing regime, the freedom to test for health, taste, and personality becomes the command to test or be abandoned by a system that only responds to data supporting asset management. Health interrupts the logic of immunization; taste interrupts the logic of evaluation and hierarchical distribution; and personality interrupts the reduction of the subject to mere quantifiable unites of measure. Without these three operative logics, the management of the entrepreneurial self is suspended, and the imperative to "test, or else!" is rendered mute. To submit to the neoliberal learning-testing regime is a kind of submission to the logic of immunization, evaluative hierarchization, and abstraction. But to return to the constituting powers of the test drive opens up new avenues for reclaiming health, taste, and personality. In short, the test drive is, to paraphrase Nietzsche, a transvaluation of all values—a betrayal of the self as it exists within the parameters of neoliberal testing and learning. But this betrayal is more than simply a negative rejection of this or that; it is also a positive creation in its own right, expressing a profound love for an educational life beyond the parameters of neoliberal biopower.

In conclusion, we assert that the test drive must not be abandoned, and that we must return to the ontology of the test in order to reclaim its constituting powers against the learning-testing regime. Siding with Masschelein and Simons (2013), we support the test as a fundamental technology of education that cannot easily be dismissed by critics of contemporary high-stakes testing. But furthering their analysis, we emphasize that what is really at stake here is not the test as such, but rather the ontology of the test drive. Indeed, the Zapatista educators cited herein seem to tap into this reserve drive, emphasizing that it must be struggled over, not simply on an individual level, but on a collective level as well. To foreclose on health, taste, and personality means that the ontology of the drive is itself forgotten, and thus the potential to be otherwise than the command set forth by neoliberal biopower. "The purpose of the exam," write Masschelein and Simons (2013), "is not to drive young people to despair . . . [but to] provide the pressure necessary to study and practice" (p. 56). Against the pressure to *measure up*, *rank*, and *quantify* the student (and increasingly the teacher and administrator), the test should be taken to fundamentally form a new sense of self, mark a starting point/point of departure, and finally to draw attention to unexplored potentialities of the world. This re-taking of the test will, in turn demand its own

biopolitical practice of test taking and test making which, ironically enough, involves the risk of betrayal—betrayal of what is and what can be according to the logic of the neoliberal learning-testing regime. Such betrayal opens the possibility that we, as educators, can turn our backs on testing as it exists in its standardized form without in turn abandoning the test drive altogether. The result is a new notion of education beyond the cooptation of learning and testing within the neoliberal dialectic of investment and divestment. Tests should resemble prototypes, seizing on what we may typically think of as *nonevents* but in fact constitute significant moments of self-experimentation. Such tests return testing to the test drive, betraying the testing regime in order to increase health, taste, and personality in the name of educational freedom.

NOTES

1. For a more extensive history of labeling and medical, juridical, and educational intersections, see Lewis (2009).
2. We recognize that there is a rich history of alternative assessments to high-stakes standardized testing, such as presentations, portfolios, and projects. Rather than review this literature, we simply hope to provide an ontological examination of the test drive and in turn how this ontology produces its own criteria for measuring how a variety of tests promote health, taste, and personality (even at the expense of risking unrecognizability by the current learning-testing regime).

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