

Self-formation in a creative third space

A response to Professor Stone

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What a surprising honor to read Professor Stone's provocative review of my book! I am especially grateful to the care she took to write this review after penning an endorsement for the book. While deeply indebted to her, it is also enlightening to know how a well-renowned scholar reads the book, as it sheds light on my own success and failure in depicting an ever-changing third space in response to a complicated multicultural, international world. Honoring both Professor Stone's appreciative comments and her critiques, I would like to clarify some of my central arguments in the book for the purpose of deepening dialogue and conversation. We agree more than we differ, as Professor Stone points out; for this essay, what interests me is where we differ, just as what interests me in the notion of a third space is what we can make out of differences.

A central challenge Professor Stone poses is whether the notion of the third is needed, especially in Michel Foucault's and Julia Kristeva's works. I want to clarify first that I did not intend to locate the notion of the third in Foucault's—or Confucius'—writings; my formulation of a third space is a result of conceptual and cultural interplay between Foucault and Confucius. And this intercultural third becomes gendered through Kristeva's discourses. In other words, what I propose regarding a third space emerges through a multilayered conversation I initiate among these three thinkers, but *not* necessarily within each thinker.

With this clarification, let me detour through the notion of a third space before returning to Foucault and Kristeva for more discussion. Professor Stone seems to perceive the third as a point of self-fulfillment and completion, even though she also acknowledges that I conceptualize it as dynamic and fluid. In this sense of completion, the “self-seeking subject” which Professor Stone regards as the theme for my book, is not what I intend to pursue. A third space is ever-changing, open-ended, and unpredictable, playing with the unknown—psychic, social, and cosmic—but never able to contain the unknown. The opening to creativity through interaction between conflicting doubles in a third space,

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rather than any sense of “teleological seeking,” is what captures my imagination. “Self-seeking” implies that there is something essential to realize, which would freeze a third space rather than letting it flow.

The third space is a post-colonial and post-structural notion, which I also support toward the end of the book through the Taoist creative third. Taking the notion from David Geoffrey Smith and tracing it back to Homi Bhabha, I only read Michel Serres’ poetic rendering of the third place after I had almost finished writing the book. Interestingly, I read Ted T. Aoki’s (2005) works only after my book was published, and I admire how his brilliant articulation of the in-between, third space echoes throughout this collection of his lifetime writings. To a certain degree, the notion of a third space reflects my struggle for a word of my own to convey the complexity of intercultural understanding, a notion which I now continually find resonance from others’ writings. Such an intercultural dynamic also moves through gendered identity. The conflicting double between two dramatically different cultures and between opposing gendered aspects makes me search for a third space in which multiplicity, relationality, and creativity are in motion to regenerate one another. What is central to the notion of the third is its potential to enable differences to mutually transform each other without reaching any final fusion. I deliberately use the term “a third space” instead of “the third space” to indicate the openness and multiplicity of the third. This third does not reach consensus or synthesis but moves *between*, *beyond*, and *with* the dual forces simultaneously. It indicates the continual birth of a certain newness along the way in a never-ending process which is circular rather than linear. Therefore, my conception of a third space does not seek a metaphysical sense of “beyond” but a “beyond” immanent to the web of interconnections in order to keep opening up new landscapes—temporal, spatial, and psychic landscapes.

I cannot emphasize enough that a third space is unsettling and never settles down. The third is not another version of the unified one but holds both unity and multiplicity. My efforts to produce a poetic prose to “speak the unspeakable” of a third space (pp. 146–151) are due to the limitations of analytical writing to describe such a moving and fluid process. A third space refuses to be fixed upon any point. This refusal can be discerned from its conceptual origin in post-colonial and post-structural discourses. Professor Stone’s concerns with the notion of the third space seem to be related to the worry that the positing of the third indicates the desire for closure, and she locates such a desire in my interpretations of Foucault and Kristeva.

My reading of both Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva has not located any wish for final closure, nor was Confucius interested in the pursuit of the essential self. While the focus of my book does not allow a more thorough discussion of either Foucault or Kristeva—which I do not attempt in this response, either—the highlighting of their discourses related to my central theme is done within the context of their overall works. Still in such a highlighting I may not do justice to their theoretical depth and complexity that offer, through a kaleidoscopic lens, multiple and ever-shifting viewpoints, and I appreciate Professor Stone’s different readings.

My choice of Foucault and Confucius stems from their contrasts and differences, so that I can propose a third space between Chinese and Western cultures, as problematic as that can be. My motive is to let Foucault’s creativity and Confucius’ relationality inform each other. The notion of the third comes from the need for building some sort of bridge—not a bridge in a solid, fixed sense but “a bridging of two worlds by a bridge, which is not a bridge” (Aoki 2005, p. 228)—between these two thinkers across time and space who form a conflicting double for me. As Aoki phrases it well, the tensionality of an in-between space enables an ever-shifting movement in which neither party can stay “at home” but

both make new meanings in moving to what is different. In making such a contrast, I may have changed the philosophies of both Foucault and Confucius a bit. But such a transmutation is almost always inevitable in any reading and writing since, as Professor Stone acknowledges well, we don't read and write from nowhere.

Professor Stone's insight that the subject does not refer to the individual is important; I wish I had made this point more explicitly in my book. I intentionally use the phrase "personal cultivation" for the Confucian self to indicate an organic notion of personhood, lacking the edge of separation between subject and object in the Western tradition. I also use the word, "self," when discussing Confucianism and the word, "subject," when discussing Foucault's and Kristeva's theories to indicate the difference. But such a difference does not lead me to claim one concept over the other. Rather, what is more appealing to me is the movement enabled by such a difference.

Professor Stone argues that "the self 'does not really exist' for Foucault but is a particular subject form." A range of scholarship supports this claim, so I don't necessarily want to dispute it. I argue, though, that the Western modern subject/object split has intensified the distinction between the subject and the self and that such intensification itself is problematic. Foucault works through the pre-modern Greco-Roman self-cultivation, critiques the modern subject, and envisions new forms of subjectivities in the post-modern world but refuses to provide any model. Foucault argues that the present—in which the modern subject inheres—can become different by re-thinking the self-cultivation tradition of the past; what seems to me to be more interesting to ask is what self means to him rather than whether or not it exists. Certainly he does not see the self as an isolated entity with an essential truth to be discovered; he is more concerned with the process of self-formation, which is historical, cultural, and subjective. It is this creative process of self-formation that interests me.

Foucault (1980/2000) did modify what he meant by "the death of man" in one of his interviews in 1980. While we can never discover man, "men have never ceased to construct themselves, that is, to continually displace their subjectivity, to constitute themselves in an infinite, multiple series of different subjectivities that will never have an end and never bring us in the presence of something that would be 'man'" (p. 276). It is clear that what he rejects is a humanist, universal conception of man but not all modes of subjectivity, nor all forms of self-formation. The Foucaultian subject, as I read through the blinds that separate his earlier and his later works, is both constituted and constituting historically, with a different focus in different historical periods of his writings. Foucault's concern with creativity and the self is clearly present in his later works. He points out: "From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" (Foucault 1983/1997, p. 262). Professor Stone sees me as "positing a particular form of self-created and self-transformed subject that is realized in a third space," which I would not want to claim. What I argue for Foucault's subject is that it is neither totally passive nor completely active but moves in a process of "discontinuous becoming."

I agree with Professor Stone that Foucault intends to deconstruct all dualisms and I make it clear in the book that Foucault's turn to the Greco-Roman tradition is not to provide any formula for the present but to think about the present differently. What makes me pause, though, is that he did not directly question the Greco-Roman duality of self-mastery in his later books on the history of sexuality. I understand that his works already serve as a critique of such a duality. But I also posit that in an intercultural third space, the Confucian self needs a certain sense of duality, a healthy sense of the separation

between self and world, so I do not reject the significance of duality per se, but attempt to see the limits of each culture and push each towards another horizon.

My reading of Kristeva is a bit different: I did not intend to read the notion of the third into Foucault's discourse but it does appear in Kristeva's writings. As Jeffrey C. Miller (2004) points out, the third is "a universal psychological construct" (p. 98), serving as a mediator between different psychic states. As a psychoanalyst, Kristeva also uses the third to indicate the need to separate from the semiotic, maternal wrapping in order to initiate independence. Following and contrasting to the classical psychoanalytic tradition, Kristeva's (2000) "primary thirdness" (p. 54), although located in the symbolic function of separating, is a loving third which incorporates both the paternal and maternal functions. She argues that the imaginary father—"father of pre-history"—holds the function of love while proposing that the maternal function initiates knowing. My interest in the psychic third is in its role as a mediator between the semiotic/unconscious and the symbolic/conscious to deepen and expand the psychic life. Therefore I reappropriate her notion of the symbolic third through love into a loving third for gendered and pedagogical implications. (A note of caution needs to be added here. Gender is related to but not the same as the psychic feminine aspect. I draw the gendered implications from Kristeva's explicit discussions of woman's peculiar status regarding her relationship with the semiotic and the role of motherhood.) Certainly, the notion of the third is much more central to my own thought than it is for Kristeva.

I agree that the semiotic and the symbolic are not separate entities waiting to be connected; however, the creative combination of the Kristevian heterogeneous semiotic and symbolic in its mutual contradiction does not happen automatically. The psychoanalytic project of becoming conscious of the unconscious implies a dynamic middle layer which serves the function of expanding subjectivity in depth, similar to the intercultural third which widens self-formation in scope. Such a dynamic between the unconscious and the conscious can never fully capture the psychic unknown but efforts need to be made to negotiate between different states—pedagogy is one such enterprise. Here lies the role of the third, not for any final analytic cure, nor for uniting the semiotic and the symbolic into one, nor for a metaphysical truth beyond, but for destabilizing the combination to reach more deeply beneath the surface as opposite forces transform each other. Split as it is, the Kristevian subject nevertheless meanders through psychic dualities to reach new ground, not once and for all, but in an endlessly generating process. My positing of the third indicates the need to work with dualities but not in any attempt to eliminate conflicting doubles.

It is also important to point out that here the "conflicting double" is multiple, so a third space is simultaneously cross-cultural and gendered. The horizontal, polyphonic, intercultural movement and the vertical, dissonant, psychic dynamics intersect each other to carve out a third space. My intercultural, philosophical readings of Foucault and Confucius are also gendered and my gendered, psychoanalytic reading of Kristeva is also intercultural. None of these steps are additive but constitute an organic effort to make the philosophical self meet the psychic transformation in an intercultural gendered inquiry. I claim that this book is not particularly written for foreigners nor does it provide a model for cross-cultural identity formation, but it is an invitation for all who struggle with negotiating with the multiple to compose their own living and pedagogical melody. It only intends to speak to those who find a third space useful in their own meaning-making process.

Professor Stone sees in my text a "desire [for] completion in a beyond." I hope by now it is clear that my sense of a beyond is not a beyond towards absolute, universal, metaphysical truth, but a beyond inspired by a sense of moreness—there is always something

more to experience, to understand, and to live. Such a sense of beyond not only resists closure but is also intercultural in my formulation since it is used for critiquing the Chinese tradition of “with.” So my “beyond” exists only in a third space where East and West are open to each other.

Perhaps the seeking of the self transpires more from my own autobiographical narratives than academic writings, as Professor Stone finds it in my “personal quest.” Such a quest, however, is not a search for a unified self—if such was ever the intention, it has become an open-ended journey in which home does not pre-exist but is mobile in a process of creation. Such a quest does not have a definite ending, nor follow a definite pathway. When I use terms such as “stranger,” “journey,” “home,” and “a third space,” especially in putting them together, I deliberately transform every term toward a new direction that their traditional meanings cannot contain. As the call from the stranger on a journey home rings and echoes in a third space, the boundary of home is destabilized, the alienation of the stranger is sublimated, the paternal calling for journey now has the smiling face of mother. Through such a transformation, a third space becomes creative. If we understand the ever-changing nature of a third space, then the final fulfillment of the self becomes impossible, and it is precisely the notion of the third that sets the self in motion.

One purpose for my juxtaposing the autobiographical voice and the theoretical voice is to let them challenge each other, not necessarily confirm each other, so that conflict and difference can be shown in a visual way to disturb our logocentric eyes. Even though Professor Stone challenges the central notion of the self, so perhaps there is no point in contrasting self-seeking and self-creating, I would still claim self-creating rather than self-seeking to describe my project. However, if my theoretical musings aim at creativity while my narrative voice may hint at the motif of seeking, I am ready to embrace both. There is no need to treat self-realization and self-creation as antithetical; even if they are, a third space enjoys its couplings.

While I refuted “self-seeking” in the beginning of this response and prefer self-creating, I wish not to set up a dichotomy between them in the ending. After all, self-creating does not start from nowhere. I embrace both, dwelling in the tension between the two, in order to keep an ongoing journey alive. And I embrace Professor Stone’s “politics of warning” and its educational significance in which openness always remains. I thank her for challenging me to confront my own words again, to ponder them yet another time, and to look back on previous paths, so that I can move on with firmer steps. Circling back and moving forward, the journey continues, along the watercourse...

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