

Witnessing Across Wounds: Toward a Relational Ethic of Healing

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“My education has beaten and battered me.” So begins a fellowship application essay by a young Latina I came to know during her undergraduate years.¹ “Margarita” reveals the depth of pain shared by many underrepresented students in colleges and universities across the United States. She speaks to our nation’s history, which “has left us with deep relational wounds, separating people who have endured forms of colonial attack ... from European descendant peoples.”² We are a polarized society. To use Mary Louise Pratt’s term, the United States is a “contact zone” — a “[social] space of imperial encounters”³ where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”⁴ As an expression of that society, the contemporary American university is certainly a contact zone between underrepresented students and the dominant academic culture; in it we see the repercussions — and repetition — of colonial wounds.

Margarita continues with the story of a white male student who was so angered by her contributions to a diversity class that he later sent an email asking her not to return: she was not welcome, as far as he was concerned. Such personal conflicts take place within a broader academic milieu saturated with our troubled colonial history. Underrepresented students must endure academic spaces that do not, as a general rule, welcome their perspectives or their bodies. Rather, they are required to negotiate mainstream curricula and bureaucratic processes that deny their ways of knowing and cultural foundations. When African American, Native American, and Latina/o histories and ideas do appear in the curriculum, they are generally seen as “add-on” courses that fulfill diversity requirements, not central to the dominant academic enterprise.⁵ Indeed, Sylvia Hurtado maintains that university faculty often act as “academic colonizers.”⁶ Her claim resonates with Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s description of coloniality, which “refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, ... intersubjective relations, and knowledge production.... It is maintained alive in books [and] in the criteria for academic performance ...”⁷ Coloniality often manifests in an imperial attitude⁸ that European-descended settler peoples and academics of any background must guard against. In the classroom where Margarita finally saw herself in the curriculum, her views were denied and she became — once more — the object of (academic) colonial attack.

An ethical question lies at the heart of efforts to diversify the university, to include those who have been historically excluded and are thus relative newcomers to the academy: How do we welcome that which is different? How do we greet the arrival of the outsider, the stranger, the foreigner?⁹ Students like Margarita are

frequently made to feel that they are outsiders who are unwelcome “guests in someone else’s house.”¹⁰ When they share their experiences with me through written or verbal testimony, they call me to bear witness to their pain. The ethical pedagogical response must acknowledge our relational wounds and seek to mend them.

WRITING IN THE CONTACT ZONE

Consider the teaching of writing — an endeavor with deeply ingrained Eurocentric practices and expectations. According to Nancy Grimm, the writing center is a contact zone, a place “where [nondominant] students struggle to connect their public and private lives, and where they learn that success in the academy depends on uncovering and understanding tacit differences in value systems and expectations.”¹¹ Writing projects can become sites of struggle when underrepresented students are confronted with curriculum and writing practices that exclude them or deny their experiences. Students whose private and public lives intersect in assignments such as Margarita’s essay make themselves vulnerable, and faculty must tread carefully as they engage with them. Yet, if a student is to be successful in the academy, there are field-specific norms and expectations she must learn, as well as standards of academic rigor she must attain.

Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski offer insights into this conundrum. These writing center theorists are critical of its traditional practices, and wish to make explicit that “learning to write better” has ambiguous consequences. Privileged discourses and writing strategies reproduce the social and political conventions of the university and perpetuate colonial hierarchies; they are gatekeepers that exclude students who cannot master them. Bawarshi and Pelkowski assert that academic discourses force diverse students to adopt “habits of mind”¹² that acculturate them into the university. When a student positioned as an outsider learns how to write more “successfully” in the writing center, her mastery of new practices and discourses results in a change in style. But there is a hidden outcome: stylistic change calls for a new point of view — a new academic, subject position — which is “a particular, politically embedded, and discursive way of experiencing and articulating knowledge and reality.”¹³ This will in turn affect how a student perceives and relates to the world, and may change a student’s relationship to her home culture. Bawarshi and Pelkowski suggest that we help students “become aware of how and why academic discourses situate them within certain power relationships and require of them particular subject positions.... [They would] teach students how self-consciously to use and be used by [academic discourse] — how rhetorically and critically to choose and construct their subject positions within it.”¹⁴ One way of doing so is to encourage students’ awareness of how mastering academic language and style might affect their home discourses.¹⁵ This strategy creates intersubjective openings in which faculty can acknowledge and respond to students’ sometimes painful experiences. When Margarita consulted me about her fellowship application, it was just this approach that I endeavored to bring to our encounter.

Clearly, relations across differences of race, class, gender, ethnicity, ability, and sexuality can be complex, but I would argue that difficulties can also arise in

professor/student relations when the faculty member's social background is similar to the student's: it is no protection against the perils of one's own academic socialization and potential assimilation into Eurocentric norms imbued with coloniality. However, every student is ultimately an unknowable and mysterious Other,¹⁶ and students' radical alterity calls me to seek a new way of conceiving my relations with them. How do faculty overcome imperial modes of relationality that may trouble their work with students? How does one encourage open, responsive pedagogical relations? How might faculty nurture underrepresented students' ideas and support them to speak and write in their own culturally grounded academic voices? Jacques Derrida's boundless ethic of hospitality offers one approach to welcoming the stranger/outsider into the academy, but I will propose that Kelly Oliver's concept of witnessing¹⁷ offers a way to conceive of pedagogical relations that is better suited to the realities of the contact zone.

HOSPITALITY

Derrida's call to hospitality is indebted to Emmanuel Lévinas' understanding of subjectivity: it arises in the moment of responding to an unknowable other who brings me "more than I contain."¹⁸ To become a subject requires me to be susceptible to — and to welcome — the alterity of the other, and then to respond to her. As Sharon Todd writes, Lévinas's idea of welcoming, at its root, "constitutes me as an ethical subject"¹⁹ because, in the welcoming encounter with the other, "otherness takes primacy"²⁰ and I am constituted as a subject only in response to the imperative of the other's singularity. Similarly, for Derrida "absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner ... but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity ... or even their names."²¹ Derrida's hospitality, then, is a near relation to Lévinas's welcoming; it "welcomes the other in all her singularity — it is a radically particular welcoming of the other into my home, into my territory — without expecting anything in return. It is a generosity that ... exceeds expectations, a giving or offering attentive to the uniqueness of the subject, unsullied by neither wanting something from her in exchange nor demanding that she become someone different."²² Such hospitality is, however, an impossibility: we necessarily act upon Derrida's universal law of absolute hospitality within concrete social and political spheres. He recognized this *aporia*. The foreigner must "ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, ... the authorities.... This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that's the first act of violence."²³ Likewise, in the university, an absolute welcome of the outsider is impossible. As we saw in the teaching of writing, students *are* expected speak the language that is imposed on them. They *are* expected to give something in return; they *are* expected to change. To be considered welcome, that is to say successful, they must change by assimilating into the academy to a certain extent. They must learn the writing protocols of their discipline, and they must accept the subject position this requires. Put another way, Derrida's university without condition does not exist for students any more than it does for faculty; they do not have "an unconditional freedom to question and

to assert ... the right to say publicly all that is required by research, knowledge and thought concerning the truth.”²⁴ Underrepresented students keenly feel this limitation.

At its heart, the language of hospitality connotes a space that is owned by a host. And even if, following Derrida, the host is “interrupted” by the guest to the extent that the host becomes a guest in her own home,²⁵ the relationship is initiated when the outsider/guest enters the host’s home or territory. The university is the home of Eurocentric knowledge, so faculty, students, and staff from dominant groups fit in with relative ease: it is their intellectual territory. However, academic curriculum and practices echo our deeply rooted colonial past, and history insinuates itself into pedagogical relationships, especially those across differences in social position. When I encounter the idea of hospitality, I view it through the context of my work and relations with vulnerable students who live every day with open wounds caused by colonialism and who consider themselves academic foreigners. Given that the academy is a contact zone rife with violent academic and social interactions, I propose that faculty and staff are in no position to see themselves as welcoming hosts — no matter how decentered the notion of hospitality — when working with students from previously colonized groups. I am troubled by the metaphor of hospitality as a guiding principle in pedagogical relationships, and I argue that Derrida’s radical hospitality fails to disrupt the violence inherent in academic relations with students who have been constructed as outsiders to Eurocentric academic discourse communities. Thus, when problems arise, Derridian hospitality does not provide enough traction to move us over rough relational terrain shaped by colonial hierarchies. We need another approach if we strive to transform the university from a space of imperial encounters into one the formerly colonized can also regard as “home.” It is here that I turn to Kelly Oliver’s witnessing.

WITNESSING

Oliver’s concept of witnessing is a significant help as I try to envision pedagogical relationships that are less susceptible to the academic culture of power²⁶ and the vicissitudes of complicated relations with students in the contact zone of the university. Witnessing contextualizes relationships; acknowledging history and social positions, it takes into account contested academic and social terrain and does not reinforce the colonial legacy of hierarchical relations. Oliver seeks to open up the “possibility of a more humane and ethical future beyond violence,”²⁷ and grounds her idea of witnessing in a political call to move beyond domination. She strives to create egalitarian, nonviolent relationships within asymmetrical power contexts. Thus, she speaks to problems that may arise as professors work with underrepresented students who have quite likely experienced academic and social violence.

Asserting that how we conceive of ourselves will in turn indicate how we regard and relate to others, Oliver discusses the nature of subjectivity (*WBR*, 18). In harmony with Lévinas and Derrida, she eschews fixed notions of the self, independent from and constructed in opposition to others, in which, she writes, “we come

to recognize ourselves as subjects or active agents through recognition from others; ... [and] a positive sense of self is dependent on positive recognition from others” (*WBR*, 4). We are not recognizable, independent selves before we relate to one another, but rather, it is in the event of relating that we become subjects; subjectivity arises in responding to the other, who is ultimately an unknowable mystery. For Oliver, subjectivity is “the result of the process of witnessing,” (*WBR*, 7) which is “the ability to respond to, and address, others” (*WBR*, 15). She carefully distinguishes subjectivity from our subject positions, which

are our relations to the finite world of human history and relations — what we might call politics. Subjectivity, on the other hand, is experienced as the sense of agency and response-ability that are constituted in the infinite encounter with otherness, which is fundamentally ethical. And although subjectivity is logically prior to any possible subject position, in our experience both are always profoundly interconnected. This is why our experience of our own subjectivity is the result of the productive tension between finite subject position and infinite response-ability of witnessing. (*WBR*, 17)

Significantly, “witness” evokes multiple meanings as both noun and verb: one can be a witness, which involves seeing an event, or one can witness in the sense of giving testimony. The word also emphasizes the moral dimension of subjectivity. “It is important to note that witnessing has both juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, in other words, bearing witness” to what is beyond recognition. For Oliver, the double meanings of the word witnessing lie at “the heart of subjectivity,” and they also make “witnessing ... a powerful alternative to recognition in reconceiving subjectivity and therefore ethical relations” (*WBR*, 16).

Oliver’s debt to Lévinas is clear: the ethical encounter with the other is at the heart of witnessing. And thus far there is a certain resonance with Derrida’s hospitality. But witnessing is more than the ability to respond to and address the other, and it is more than giving a place for the other to take. Rather, “[w]e have an obligation not only to respond but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others” (*WBR*, 18). Like Derrida, Oliver radically decenters the subject/host, and offers a profound openness to the other, but witnessing is enhanced by her concern for the other’s subjectivity. Some might regard this as a subtle elaboration of Derrida’s hospitality, or perhaps not different at all. But for Oliver, we clearly become accountable: We may *think* we leave a place for the coming of the ungraspable other, but does she feel she has entered a relationship that allows her to address me in return? Do my actions and words allow the other to respond to and address *me*? When I sit with Margarita to work on her essay, can we move forward together in a dance of mutual subjectivity? Rather than an asymmetrical interruption of the self who relinquishes sovereignty to the guest, becoming her hostage,²⁸ witnessing is symmetrical: if we accept Oliver’s obligation, it constitutes subjectivity for those in dominant as well as those in marginalized positions — for both professor and student. In practice, when a professor responds to and addresses a student, she must do so in a way that allows and encourages the student’s response in return. She must be address-able. This, according to Oliver, is the infinite responsibility of Lévinas. Pedagogically speaking, witnessing promotes

student learning because it is explicitly concerned with creating conditions that allow students to address faculty.

Another distinctive feature of witnessing is that history is always present in Oliver's work. She understands that subject positions are embedded within sociohistoric power differentials, and that these trouble efforts to create peaceful and democratic relationships across difference. Importantly, bearing witness to what is beyond recognition also calls faculty to acknowledge history and relations of power as they respond to students; this enhances the possibility of having more egalitarian relationships. Our subject positions are determined by history, but our sense of ourselves as agents who act in the world is the result of witnessing relationships. This is a significant point. If it is the event of witnessing that constitutes our subjectivity, then who the teacher is in each moment is inextricably linked to, and called forth through, an ethical response to her student. And her response must nurture the student's subjectivity while remembering that the witnessing event takes place in a contact zone. Witnessing is therefore a valuable concept for university faculty, because it promotes open and responsive relationships, even if students enter them tentatively, wary of power differences. The witnessing professor depends upon her student for her own subjectivity; the teacher's very self arises as a result of her "address-ability and response-ability" (*WBR*, 19).

TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF WITNESSING

Truly responding to the other in a way that encourages her response is predicated upon educators' ability to be vigilant — alert to discourses and institutional systems that might have conditioned an unskillful response to the student. Although there will never be a clear set of rules for faculty to follow, Oliver would have them begin by admitting what they have at stake in an academic system that perpetrates violence upon marginalized students.

Only by acknowledging and interpreting our investments [in it] ... can we begin to "work through" rather than repeat violence. "Working-through" is a profoundly ethical operation.... [I]t forces us not only to acknowledge our relations and obligations to others ... but also thereby to transform those relations into more ethical relations.... By acknowledging power relations and our investments in them, we can change the structure of those relations. (*WBR*, 68–69)

In the academy, professors are caught in a web of power relations — disciplinary norms, departmental and university protocols all exert pressure on their relationships with students. But if they can hold in mind the sociohistorical and power differentials that lie between them and their students, they can better apprehend the meaning of body language and silences, behaviors they may call out of underrepresented students merely because of their positions in authority or the color of their skin. Recognizing the power relations inherent to the teacher/student relationship will also, perhaps, help faculty see and confront imperial tendencies in their attitudes toward students.

Importantly, responsiveness in witnessing must rise from a sense of the limits of our understanding — that we apprehend there are things beyond our recognition, what (following Lévinas) I would call the mystery of the student. Moving beyond recognition is to know the other "brings more than I contain" — once glimpsed, the

other's experience ultimately remains unknowable. We can acknowledge it, but not recognize it. To make her points, Oliver uses the ultimate cases of the Holocaust and slavery; certainly, those of us who have not experienced these traumas cannot fully comprehend them when we hear victims' testimonies. If educators are to find their own subjectivity in the process and event of witnessing, the first step is to honor students' experiences and testimonies. This borders on recognition, but witnessing connotes that more than recognition is required of those who wish to truly respond to students. Indeed, to think we recognize them is rather patronizing; it separates and distances us from them. It is preferable to strive for appreciation rather than recognition.

When that which is beyond recognition informs educators' responses to students, they are witnessing, and their own subjectivity embraces its ethical dimensions. Remaining attuned to the mystery of the student while they attend to stories of academic exclusion and social violence, professors take in the facts that underrepresented students relate, but stay alert to the idea they cannot share or completely understand the experiences. They must take care not to objectify students, knowing that even as they recognize the truth of students' experiences, it is necessary to listen for the silences²⁹ and mystery that lie beyond recognition. Such sensitive listening is a skill that must precede responsiveness. And, to begin changing the relations of power, professors' responses can bear witness to the exclusionary history of the academy. Faculty can signal to students that they know things students may not expect them to know about history or culture, or that they hold opinions that go against the flow of dominant, mainstream society. They can cultivate informal relationships outside the classroom that will enhance the possibilities for egalitarian relations in more formal settings. Even as instructors teach the dominant curriculum and methods of inquiry, they can engage students as Bawarshi and Pelkowski suggest, critically analyzing how they are situated by academic practices. And faculty can encourage students to use the skills they gain to challenge Eurocentrism — to disrupt the bonds of power that grow from our colonial history.

Although witnessing offers an approach to subjectivity based on mutuality, it is crucial to note that students need not join teachers in this view. Indeed, in Lévinasian ethics, one cannot tell others what to do; such ethical claims are coercive, and violate his asymmetrical commitment to the other. Similar to Frank Margonis's description of a "one-way ethic of solidarity,"³⁰ educators who witness nurture a "commitment to drawing out the distinctive perspectives of individual students, despite the operations of hierarchical power relationships."³¹ If a student has been othered (in the sense that she has been objectified by her historical position), and if the teacher is in a more dominant position (and all are, if only because they are in a position of authority), it is particularly important for the teacher to take a witnessing approach to the relationship. Educators may find guidance in the ethic of witnessing without asking or assuming that students share their motivation — a paradoxically asymmetrical commitment to a symmetrical relationship.

Educators who cultivate responsive witnessing connections with students open the possibility for those who have been wounded in the course of their educational

journeys to become, as Frantz Fanon and bell hooks would say, “the source of [their] own meaning making” (*WBR*, 29) — a far richer endeavor than merely seeking recognition from dominant faculty by assimilating into the culture of academic power. To return to the metaphor of host and guest, making one’s own meaning involves not just taking a place offered by the host, but responding to the academic culture of power in ways that might challenge it or open new intellectual avenues. Students who attempt to create their own meaning within an alienating institution deserve and need the support that faculty can provide through witnessing. And, when witnessing relationships replace the asymmetrical power relationships inherent to the university, educators might disrupt the academic context that circumscribes their relationships and actions. They enter a space of possibility where they are challenged to rethink teaching practices as they and their students constitute one another through witnessing.

In witnessing, we attempt to respond — and give place to — the other in such a way that she will accept what we offer, and respond to us in turn. But how can a teacher know if she is bearing witness to a student’s experience, and that the other will find her addressable? Shilpi Sinha writes of being moved by the “felt weight”³² of the other — the pull we feel toward the other, the visceral imperative that we listen and respond to the other. Although it does not offer any guarantee that the student will find us addressable, perhaps a susceptibility to her felt weight indicates that we are truly open to her, that we are prepared to be addressed by her in spite of any risks this might incur. Gert Biesta reminds us that “one does not make the other come. One lets it come by preparing for its coming. Education, in short, must . . . prepare for the incalculable.”³³ As we witness, apprehending what is beyond recognition and feeling the weight of the other’s words and experience, we open to the incalculable, to mystery, to what Kelly Oliver calls “the adventure of otherness.”

1. The student and the statement are real; her name has been changed for privacy.

2. Frank Margonis, “In Pursuit of Respectful Teaching and Intellectually-Dynamic Social Fields,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30, no. 5 (2011): 433–439.

3. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 8.

4. Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* 91 (1991): 34.

5. Caroline Sotello Viernes Turner, “Guests in Someone Else’s House: Students of Color,” *Review of Higher Education* 17, no. 4 (1994): 355–370.

6. Sylvia Hurtado, “The Campus Racial Climate: Contexts of Conflict,” *Journal of Higher Education* 63, no. 5 (1992): 539–569.

7. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2/3 (2007): 243.

8. *Ibid.*, 245.

9. Eduardo Duarte, “Unity/ Difference and the Stranger” (recorded lecture, fifth in the course Foundational Perspectives in Multicultural Education, Hofstra University).

10. Turner, “Guests in Someone Else’s House.”

11. Nancy Grimm, “Contesting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center’: The Politics of Writing Center Research,” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 17, no. 1 (1992): 5.

12. Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski, "Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center," in *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 79–95.
13. *Ibid.*, 87.
14. *Ibid.*, 83.
15. *Ibid.*, 90.
16. Emmanuel Lévinas, "Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority," in *Duquesne Studies, Philosophical Series*, vol. 24 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
17. It is beyond this essay's scope to situate Oliver's theory of witnessing in relation to other work on the topic; see, for example, Michalinos Zembylas, "Witnessing in the Classroom," *Educational Theory* 56, no. 3 (2006): 305–324.
18. Lévinas, "Totality and Infinity," 51.
19. Sharon Todd, "Welcoming and Difficult Learning: Reading Lévinas with Education," in *Lévinas and Education: At the Intersection of Faith and Reason*, ed. Denise Egéa-Kuehne (New York: Routledge, 2008), 176.
20. *Ibid.*, 174.
21. Jacques Derrida, "Foreigner Question: Coming from Abroad/from the Foreigner," in *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 25.
22. Sharon Todd, *Toward an Imperfect Education: Facing Humanity, Rethinking Cosmopolitanism* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 44.
23. Derrida, "Foreigner Question," 15.
24. Jacques Derrida, "The University Without Condition," in *Without Alibi* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202.
25. Mark Westmoreland, "Interruptions: Derrida and Hospitality," *Kritike*, 2, no. 1 (2008): 6.
26. Lisa D. Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: New Press, 2006).
27. Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 18. This work will be cited in the text as *WBR* for all subsequent references.
28. Westmoreland, "Interruptions."
29. Katherine Schultz, *Listening: A Framework for Teaching across Differences* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).
30. Frank Margonis, "A Relational Ethic of Solidarity?," in *Philosophy of Education 2007*, ed. Barbara S. Stengel (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2008), 68.
31. *Ibid.*, 67.
32. Shilpi Sinha, "Dialogue as a Site of Transformative Possibility," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 5 (2010): 459–475.
33. Gert Biesta, "Deconstruction, Justice and the Vocation of Education," in *Derrida, Deconstruction, and the Politics of Pedagogy*, ed. Michael Peters (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).