

Feeling Effects: Constituting an Ethics of Emotion in the Context of War(s)

Natasha Levinson

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In “License to Feel: Teaching in the Context of War(s),” Megan Boler offers an account of the “emotional numbness” that characterizes her students’ response to the Gulf War. Rather than interpreting this numbness as a lack of response, a passivity in the face of war, Boler argues that this numbness is an active, albeit a problematic response to the material practices that went into the making both of the war and the American response to the war.

Boler's emphasis on “structures of feeling,” and her consequent insistence on locating student response to the war in material practices, which is to say, in specific social structures, subject positionings and institutional formations is the strength of her paper.¹ Her paper implies that as educators, we cannot simply dismiss her students’ lack of feeling toward the war as the “tuning out” of an aberrant few, but must instead see it as a rational response to a pervasive feeling of powerlessness on the part of her students. At the same time as Boler emphasizes the cultivation of numbness as an active strategy, a refusal to be emotionally touched by war, Boler finds this strategy troubling because it is an irresponsible response -- it refuses responsibility. In the same way as Boler simultaneously accounts for and problematizes her students’ response to the Gulf War, so she explores the institutional constraints on her own efforts to jostle students out of their “emotional numbness.”

In the context of much recent literature on agency, Boler's decidedly uncelebratory stance is significant. Her discussion of the media onslaught and of the constraints of the academy, which is for so many reasons ill-equipped to foster a more ethical response to the war, must be seen in this somber light.

Underlying Boler's analysis of the construction of “emotional numbness” as a “structure of feeling” is a view of emotion as an ethical force that warrants further exploration. I agree with Boler that emotions can and do indeed play a constitutive role in ethical self-positioning. But I also want to push her argument about the ethical and political potential of what she calls “critical emotional literacy” a step further than she takes it in this paper. Specifically, I want to propose that her students’ feelings about the war need to be situated in the context of the experiences of those far more vulnerable to the effects of war. Even those students who rightly criticize the anti-war protesters for not recognizing the way in which many urban areas have become de facto war zones ought to be challenged to see the connections between the daily terrors they confront and those confronted by Iraqi, Kuwaiti and Israeli citizens. I suspect that for these students, imagining the terrors will be much easier than for more privileged suburban students, and recognizing the connections will be much easier given the disproportionate numbers of minority and low-income youths in the military. For these students, emotional connections come fairly easily, carried as they are on the bodies of cousins, neighbors, schoolfriends, boyfriends and girlfriends stationed in the Gulf. Less easily forged is the capacity to imagine the pain and suffering that will be carried out at the hands of their friends on the bodies of others.

Nevertheless, I want to suggest that cultivating this capacity for empathetic response to the victims of war is an essential goal of the “critical emotional literacy” Boler speaks of. To this end, I want to

reconfigure Boler's emphasis on what appear to me to be potentially rather self-absorbed fears, vulnerabilities and even anger into a concern for others, specifically, for those unlike themselves. To this end, I will situate Boler's discussion of pastoral power in Foucault's discussion of what it means to reconfigure pastoral power. We will see that what emerges from Foucault's discussion is less a preoccupation with powerlessness, as though relations of power are zero-sum games, and a more vigilant and incessant concern with one's power effects in relation to others.

I will begin with Boler's analysis of the effects of media on student perceptions of the war because her discussion of what she refers to as "the repetitive trauma of media" confronts me with the following quandary: what does it mean for students to "check out" of a war which might not have engaged their attention in the first place? Media coverage of the war, Boler reminds us, consisted of the manufacturing of safe images, "pollyannish cartoon images" which displace the real effects of war -- the vulnerable bodies of soldiers and civilians alike which can be injured, maimed and killed. Instead of images of blood and gore, of pain and suffering, we were entertained by the spectacle of lights as American bombers flew over Baghdad. These bombs, we are told, maneuvered their way into a few unpeopled buildings, carefully and humanely discriminating between civilians and military personnel, before delicately exploding. In the context of these lies and distortions, Boler asks the question how to engage the "distinct fears and terrors" of her diverse students.

I am not convinced that all of her students were afraid, and if they were fearful, what exactly were they fearful of. Or, to put this more pointedly, for whom were they afraid? The reactions Boler describes -- getting gas, going to family for support, fears of being drafted -- are significant to be sure. They show us that Americans are not immune from this war, and this might be a viable starting point for questioning the effectiveness of war as a political strategy. But they are largely self-directed fears, self-absorbed vulnerabilities. I want to suggest that they are not in and of themselves ethical emotions, at least not yet, not without further development. Boler's students are not to be blamed for such a response. Their response simply expresses a culturally pervasive identity politics of the sort usually ignored in discussions of identity politics -- the fact that we tend to look out for ourselves first. In this culture, as no doubt in many others, we tend to think of others, if we do so at all, only if we can put them in some kind of moral proximity with ourselves. Most often, this proximity is based on common identifications and affiliations. We seldom focus specifically on the effects of our practices on others. The relationship based on identity tends to displace relationships based on effect.

In this regard, we need to ensure that the emphasis on student and teacher survival strategies in the face of war, desires for support and emphases on students' vulnerabilities and fears does not lead to a displacement of what so often is most at issue in American involvement (or, in the case of Bosnia, lack of involvement) in war. This is the fact that *we* (and here I mean those of us currently located in the U.S.) are not the most vulnerable; that our survival is almost guaranteed; that we remain relatively comfortable and safe on this continent. In light of this, our primary preoccupation should not be with ourselves but rather, those who are most in danger. At issue for "us" (and Boler has been attentive to the things that divide us one from another) is not only the threat of war and the question of our own survival -- for those of us who are meant to survive life in the U.S. will do so whether or not there is a war beyond American borders. At issue for us is what it means to be responsible to others even in the midst of the feelings of powerlessness Boler rightfully pinpoints as constitutive of the contemporary human condition.

To reconfigure students' "emotional numbness" into "more productive emotions and critiques," we must stretch our imaginative and empathetic capacities beyond our search for emotional support, the self-sustaining strategies Boler is in search of. These strategies will help us forge links with one another here, but they will not, in and of themselves, reconfigure our emotional needs in an ethical way. They will not necessarily expand the boundaries of self.

I am proposing more than an ethic of emotion that is attentive to "difference." In such a posture, one risks being unable to make judgments about better or worse kinds of political solidarities. I am

proposing instead that, following Foucault, we attend to the power effects of our actions even amidst the seeming and felt powerlessness that characterizes contemporary political life. Action here must be seen to include inaction, for, as Arendt reminds us, never are we more active than when we do nothing.²

Foucault's discussion of the imbrication of power and freedom is useful here, for it points to the way in which relations of power might be reconfigured in such a way that subjects take responsibility for their power effects even and indeed especially in the context of pastoral power. To talk of pastoral power as "powerlessness" misses the strategic significance of Foucault's seemingly paradoxical formulation that relations of power are bound up in freedom. To talk of freedom in this way is to draw attention to the way in which freedom is not antithetical to power, for there is no freedom from power in a Foucauldian framework. Rather, relations of power are exercised "only over free subjects and only insofar as they are free."³ It is important to point out that Foucault distinguishes between power as domination, a relation which completely constrains the actions of others, and relations of power which have the more open-ended effect of "[structuring] the possible field of action of others."⁴ While relations of domination must be abolished, these other relations of power can only be transformed.⁵ This transformation takes the form of the "permanent provocation" Foucault speaks of.⁶ Foucault's shift in emphasis from the workings of power to relations of power profoundly reconfigures the view of human agency that was submerged in his earlier work. To focus on one's power effects means that one cannot extricate oneself from responsibility toward others.

On such a view, what it means to adequately respond to crises implies more than the expression of emotional outrage, fears and concerns although all of these are valid starting points; it involves recognizing the effects of these expressions on others -- their capacity to silence and their capacity to expand the field of communication. Beyond feeling, or rather, alongside feeling, it involves formulating practices that assume responsibility for atrocities carried out in our name. Publically articulating dissent and outrage is one such strategy. More pointedly, an ethical emotional response involves structuring our daily practices in such a way that we open rather than close the field of possible responses on the part of others to our activities. While we cannot extricate ourselves from power relations as long as we are acting subjects, we can structure the ways we act so as to maximize the possibilities for others to do the same.

I will end on a difficult point, one I cannot think my way out of, but which perhaps we can discuss shortly. This is the question of what is gained and lost by conceiving of ourselves and our students as powerless? On the flip side of this question is another: What is gained by acknowledging that while we cannot single-handedly alter the course of human affairs, we bear the effects of power with each step and each breath? While I cannot answer these questions here today, they are questions worth bringing to the attention of our students. As Boler's paper shows, these are feeling questions as well as thought questions. They force us to confront our fears, to express our frustrations. To move from this initial expression of emotion to the ethical reconfiguration of emotion, however, means that we must not lose sight of the imperative of making connections between our own fears and those of others, of recognizing how our survival strategies affect and structure the lives of others.

1. Raymond Williams *Marxism and Literature* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

2. Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958): 325.

3. Michel Foucault quoted in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, "The Subject and Power" in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 221.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 223.

6. Ibid., 222.

©1996-2004 PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED