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CAN I GET A WITNESS?  
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDING A WITNESS FOR  
LIBERATORY EDUCATION

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

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2005

Martha J. Ritter

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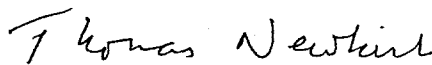
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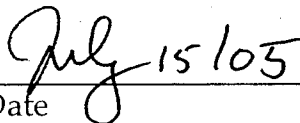
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Date

## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to

Nur Ritter, for his laughter and love

and

Josefina Marca, for her marvelous stories

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to first thank the children and youth that joined the writing groups in Cochabamba, Bolivia. It is the stories they wrote and read to one another that inspired this dissertation. The young writers and the stories they wrote are with me still. From the bottom of my heart, I thank the Proyecto Zoe Group – Lee Cridland, Kathy Meruvia, Janet Wellington, Nur Ritter, and especially Carlos and Anna Aliaga. It was this group of friends who helped me to begin the writing groups.

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## PREFACE

In February 1995, I invited children and youth living in an orphanage in Bolivia to join a writing group. The director gave me her permission with some misgivings about whether anyone would want to write. Twelve children, ranging in age from 7 to 15 years old, chose to join the group. We met in two small rooms off a large playroom in a recreation center on the orphanage grounds. Most days, younger children played in the large room and we shut the door on their busy chatter. Outside, the wind sweeping out of the valley and along the mountainside picked up strength nearly every afternoon. Surrounded by the muted voices of the young children through the door and the wind whistling in the windows we talked and wrote together two afternoons a week for two years. The children and the stories they wrote occupy my thoughts still.

In the writing group, children chose their own topics. Manuel wrote about a snail who only wanted a clean puddle to live in. Natalie wrote about a cat who seemed to know everything and would appear unexpectedly to give people advice or explain why something happened. There were stories about imagined family trips and soccer games with teams in the Bolivian league. I wrote as well. We talked about our writing in easy conversation as we worked, reading informally to one another and commenting on each other's text or illustrations. I occasionally had formal conferences with each child and organized group readings. I typed stories the children chose to publish and bound the illustrated text into individual and group books. Writing was read formally to a larger audience on seven occasions during the two years. The larger audience included various

combinations of peers, housemothers, teachers, the directors of the orphanage, and other guests.

Prior to this group, my experience with writing workshop had been as a teacher in formal school settings. Like the director, I was unsure of how children would respond to my invitation. Unlike school, they were not obliged to attend. I did not even offer snacks to entice them to join the group. That the children enjoyed the writing group is evident in their continuing to come to write for two years. Both Ana's and Eduardo's comments about their writing capture something about what they found meaningful in the work of the writing group. Ana, at twelve years old, wrote a story about a princess that grew up with the animals in the forest, separated from her family. She explained writing the story in these words:

Primeramente pensé algo bonito y me fui imaginado sobre mi pensamiento. Mi parte favorita es cuando este muchacha encontró dentro la selva algo muy asombroso para ella.

First I thought of something beautiful and then went on imagining all that was in my thoughts. My favorite part is when the girl found something in the forest very marvelous for her.

Eduardo, also twelve years old, explained to a group of visitors being shown around the orphanage that "Here is where we write our own stories, we write what is in our thoughts." Enjoyment, on its own, is reason to write; however, I think there is more to say about the needs and purposes of the children and youth who joined the writing group. For my part, enjoyment was one reason that I started the writing group. The brief prospectus I wrote for the Proyecto Zoe Writing Project opened with Lucy Calkins' statement that "As human beings we write to communicate, plan, petition, remember, announce, list, imagine...but above all, we write to hold our lives in our hands and to

make something of them” (1994). I state that the project “grew out of a love of writing and the belief that it is important for children to learn to tell their stories in an authentic voice.” After describing a workshop approach, I close the prospectus

Conceivably, being the author of her or his own stories can influence the child’s sense of power in shaping her or his life. Writing holds the potential to transform the way these young authors look at themselves and their lives. (Ritter, 1995)

As I used this prospectus to start groups in other locations in the city and to talk with educators about the groups, I found myself taking this last passage on and off of the page. It seemed too bold, too presumptuous a claim. Could writing transform the way a child looks at herself and her life, particularly for a child who is on the bottom rung of a class-stratified society? Yet, this is what I hoped for the young writers. Given these hopes, what was my responsibility as a teacher? My usual responses regarding clarity, purpose, and grammar had a place, but felt inadequate to me. And then, of course, what are the needs and purposes of the children and youth? Caroline Heller suggests an answer to these questions in the idea of finding a witness.

In her ethnography of a women’s writing group in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, Heller suggests that the women “came in one way or another to find witnesses as they lay claim for the richness of their complicated experiences” (1997: 18). Being witnesses for one another, as Heller uses the concept, describes something about the writing groups that I had been struggling to put into words. The idea that the young writers attended the group, at least in part, to find witnesses and to be known in a particular way seems right to me. The descriptive quality of Heller’s idea of witness leads me to believe there is something here of crucial value that we do not usually attend

to in educational theory. Thus, at the most general level of description, my dissertation investigates the idea of being witnesses for one another.

## ABSTRACT

CAN I GET A WITNESS?

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDING A WITNESS FOR LIBERATORY EDUCATION

By

Martha J. Ritter

University of New Hampshire, September, 2005

This dissertation is a philosophical inquiry into what it means to be a ‘witness’ and to ‘bear witness’; it is also an investigation into what place witness has in education. I undertake this broad conceptual work to formulate a conception of witness that supports liberatory education – education that aims at freedom from oppression.

The inquiry is rooted in work with writing groups in Bolivia, and the idea that young people may have come to the group to find witnesses. I critically appraise three contemporary proposals that employ the notions of ‘witness’ and ‘bearing witness’ in liberatory education. My critique notes that the conceptions of witness employed are unduly restrictive in that they attend only or primarily to how students should listen to accounts of violence and oppression, and specifically indicate what students should do because of the testimony they have heard. I argue for a broader conception of witness that includes bearing witness to what we most value, as well as to violence, and that takes into account the fact that students themselves may, at times, be looking for witnesses.

From the clear cases analyzed in the dissertation, we can recognize on the part of the person looking for a witness a need to have one’s perceptions acknowledged in the face of incomprehensible refusal or steady indifference. We look for witnesses when

others turn away. To answer this need, the response of a witness is characterized by (a) listening with 'moral humility' and (b) acknowledging the other's testimony. The conception of witness put forward in the dissertation is fundamentally a relational account. The moral and epistemological dimensions of this relation of witness are elaborated drawing on a pragmatist conception of truth and inquiry. Specifically, I argue that the relation of witness can be generative of situated knowledge, and is indeed sometimes required for the generation of situated knowledge.

Returning to the aims of liberatory education, the inquiry concludes that finding a witness fosters the relationships and the generative knowledge that allows the complex understanding of our lives required for liberation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Stated simply, my dissertation is a philosophical inquiry into what it means to be a 'witness' and to 'bear witness' and an investigation into what place witness has in education and in schools. I undertake this broad conceptual work to formulate a conception of witness that supports liberatory education – education that aims at freedom from oppression.

It was through Caroline Heller's work that I initially became intrigued with the stance of a witness in educational contexts. In her ethnography of a women's writing group in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, Heller suggests that the women came to the writing group to find witnesses. Drawn to the work of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, Heller explains "Freire was interested not only in how writing affects thinking, but in how writing might more deeply affect the quality of people's lives, especially their perception of themselves as thinkers and as people who take action" (1997: 10). To borrow Heller's synopsis, Freire put forth a model of critical literacy, often referred to as 'liberation education,' based on people coming together to help each other build the language and the literacy needed to both see and challenge the ideologies that formed the dominant culture surrounding them. Freire looked to the process of 'conscientization' to revolutionize the social order so that the poor would be enfranchised. The premise of his education was resolutely political. The political work of the Tenderloin writing group was not as explicit as Heller expected, but she writes that the longer she was with the

group, the more she “noticed participants in the group critiquing American life and life in their neighborhood, often brilliantly” (17). She continues

But the real work of the group was both more ordinary and, I soon came to realize, more extraordinary than this. Most of the regular participants in the Tenderloin Women Writers Workshop came to the workshop not to change the world or even to complain about it. They came to be reassured that they had lived lives that were of value and that could be—through the precision of their own words—felt, understood, and remembered by others. Most came in one way or another to find witnesses as they made claim for the richness of their complicated experiences. (18)

Further, Heller notes, “it was in the achieving of this, and in the awakening of sensibilities that allowed this achievement, that other, more explicitly social, political, and educational functions were also accomplished” (18). This is a substantial educational claim well worth careful attention.

Heller believed that what took place at the Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center fulfilled the underlying principles of liberation education and critical literacy. And that the dynamics of the workshop offered a glimpse beyond the abstract political conversations that often surround the interpretation of these terms in the United States (as for example, in the work of Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren). Her study, Heller argues, urges us to consider a more complicated and more personal conception of liberation education than we have had until now. I support a more complicated and a more personal conception of liberation education, if by this we mean a conception that more fully takes into account the needs and purposes of those who come together in our classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

Heller suggests that finding witnesses is vital to a new conception of liberatory education.

---

<sup>1</sup> The purposes of the women were seemingly at odds with the stated aims of the center or if not at odds, they are at least different from these stated aims. Nelly Stromquist (1997) notes a similar tension between purposes in her research of critical literacy programs in Brazil.

A witness, in Heller's view, is someone who feels, understands, and remembers the other. Thus, the witness, it seems to me, must be attentive in a particular way. I want a robust conception of witness that is rooted in attentiveness to one another, similar to that which Heller describes, *and* one that can facilitate an understanding of how oppression works in our lives.

Liberatory education has its roots in settings such as Heller describes at the Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center. The resource center works with the residents and homeless of the Tenderloin, a neighborhood that is considered one of the roughest in San Francisco. Housing is predominantly low-cost single rooms, subsidized senior housing, or studio apartments. Families – particularly South East Asian families – crowd into these small units because they are the cheapest housing in the city. Most Tenderloin residents live in the neighborhood because they could not afford to live anywhere else (Heller, 1997: 7). Paulo Freire's own work began with the disenfranchised in Brazil in both rural and urban communities, and centered on groups of people coming together in 'cultural circles.' Referring to the goals of these groups, Paulo Freire writes "Forms of cultural action in such different situations as these have nonetheless the same objective: to clarify to the oppressed the objective situation which binds them to the oppressors, visible or not" (1970: 176).<sup>2</sup> When translated to schools in the United States, and as I have also noticed in Bolivia, critical literacy is most generally practiced as a reading of texts with a particular set of questions, such as: Who's missing from this text? How are people of color, women, men, and working people portrayed? Benjamin Endres claims that the paradigmatic example "for the critical pedagogue is the presentation of a

text from a dominant culture or discourse to a student from a disadvantaged culture or discourse” (2001: 407). The primary aim of critical literacy, as illustrated in this paradigmatic example, has been for the oppressed to become aware of his or her own oppression; to see and challenge ideologies in the dominant culture surrounding them.

Caroline Heller, I believe, advocates a second aim for liberatory education: to have another – a witness – recognize you and what you hold to be of value. In connection with this second aim, and my own sympathies with it as an important part of liberatory education, I direct our attention to the broad problem of not recognizing the other’s account of his or her experience as part of not recognizing the other. In this I want, on the one hand, to mind Lisa Delpit’s caution not to be too quick to ascribe false consciousness. On the other hand, I want us to find a conception of witness that does not commit us to necessarily accepting everything a person says about his or her experiences. In regard to listening across differences, Delpit writes

We must keep the perspective that people are experts on their own lives. There are certainly aspects of the outside world of which they may not be aware, but they can be the only authentic chroniclers of their own experience. We must not be too quick to deny their interpretations, or accuse them of ‘false consciousness.’ We must believe that people are rational beings, and therefore always act rationally. (1995: 47)

Though I agree that we must not be too quick to deny another’s interpretation; it cannot mean that we must accept, always, the other’s interpretation of their experience as true or right for that would be to claim that their understandings of complex social and political phenomena are incorrigible.

---

<sup>2</sup> Paulo Freire calls this the witness of the revolutionary leader, who is the literacy worker or *educadora*.

To investigate the idea of being witnesses for one another, my inquiry begins with the following broad research questions:

- (a) What does it mean to be a “witness” or to “bear witness”?
- (b) What are the moral dimensions of being a witness and bearing witness?
- (c) What are the epistemological dimensions of being a witness and bearing witness?
- (d) What are the implications of witness for liberatory education?

The first three of these questions take on a more specific focus given my interest in the educational context expressed in fourth question.

Before outlining the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I lay out the criteria that I use to evaluate current conceptions of witness employed in education and seek to satisfy in my own conception of witness. Given the aim of articulating a conception of witness that can play a role in liberatory education in public schools within a plural society, I propose the following criteria for an adequate conception of witness:

1. will fit to some degree with ordinary usage;
2. will not be reducible to something else;
3. will privilege face-to-face encounters;
4. will not foreclose on attention to structural oppression, and;
5. testimony will be amenable to rational work

The first two are general criteria that need to be satisfied for any clear articulation of a conception of phenomena we experience in daily life, especially when that conception is meant to clarify some aspect of our ordinary experience or an ordinary notion we employ. If we were to have a conception diverge too much from ordinary usage then, effectively, we would be formulating a stipulative definition. Rather than a stipulative definition, I want a descriptive account of witness that links with the rich traditions associated with meanings of the term, as well as one that can be employed in an educational context with particular aims in mind. The second criterion is a requirement for any term that is to have

a distinctive meaning. With my own conception of witness, as we shall see, satisfaction of this criterion will require that I show how, on my analysis, ‘witness’ is not reducible to ‘caring,’ a notion with which it shares some important features.

I put forth the third criterion – that a conception of witness for liberatory education will privilege face-to-face encounters – for two reasons. The first reason is that the idea of being a witness can nearly always be traced back to a face-to-face encounter, to seeing something for your self. Alternatively, it involves a form of address that logically presupposes another’s presence. There are cases of what we ordinarily call witness that do not entail a face-to-face encounter; however, I believe it would be a serious mistake to ignore the fact that to call for a witness is to call for someone to be present in the fullest sense possible to see, to hear, and to feel what the caller has experienced or is experiencing. Thus, I claim that an adequate conception of witness will privilege face-to-face encounters in the sense that it will recognize that the primary sense of witness entails such encounters, even though we also have robust secondary uses of the term which do not.

The second reason for acknowledging the signal importance of face-to-face encounters is that we are challenged by the actual presence of others in ways that we are not in more distant relationships, as say in the reading of novels. In his conception of ‘witness’ as a form of rational contact between groups, Emmanuel Katongole notes “Significant as it is, fictional contact can never be a surrogate for the hermeneutical necessity of actual contact with real people” (2000: 286). Katongole argues that in actual contact there is a moral and epistemological challenge that is not found through contact with others in books, letters, and films. “[In fictional contact] one is neither able to be

seriously challenged by, nor himself/herself able to help or hinder, benefit or harm, confront or dismay, the other” (286). There is something different when we are actually in front of one another. Heller reports that she turned back out the door at the first meeting of the women’s writing group because she found herself overwhelmed at her unexpected reactions to the actual presence of the women. She left to come back another day better prepared for her own response. Although there is a challenge in accounts we read, it is not the same as being with another person. Nor, as Katongole suggests, can we help or benefit the other in the same way.

The fourth criterion is that an adequate conception of witness for liberatory education must not foreclose on our ability to see structural oppression. This criterion, admittedly, closely follows from my own interests. Heller claims that it was in finding witnesses that other social, political, and educational functions were also accomplished. Employing this criterion permits us to see in what sense Heller’s claim could be true. Further, we do use witness to refer to a stand against oppression or way of addressing oppression and violence. Witness is used in this way in each of the three proposals for witness in educational contexts that I critique in Chapter Three, all of which are broadly situated in liberatory education. For liberatory education, it is critical that a conception of witness not foreclose on our recognition of structural oppression.

To understand the significance of this criterion it is important that we have a sense of structural oppression in contrast to traditional usages of the term ‘oppression.’ In her analysis of structural oppression, Iris Marion Young observes that in “dominant political discourse it is not legitimate to use the term oppression to describe our society, because oppression is the evil perpetrated by the Others” (1990: 41). She notes that in its

traditional usage, oppression means the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group and carries a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination. A paradigmatic example of oppression as tyranny by a ruling group, Young claims, is the situation of the tribe of Israel in Egypt. This traditional usage began to shift in social movements in the 1960s. Young explains “In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society” (41). The new usage includes the tyranny of one group over another, but also refers to the systematic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant. Young claims “oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the results of a few people’s choices or policies” (41). She explains

Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules. It names, as Marilyn Fyre puts it, “an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people” (Fyre, 1983(a): 11). In this extended structural sense oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life. (41)

If we are to address relations of oppression, as liberatory education purports to do, then we must become aware of assumptions and reactions within the normal processes of everyday life that perpetuate oppression.

The fifth and final criterion – that testimony will be amenable to rational work – may be thought to be controversial; however, I think it is in keeping with our ordinary understanding of witnessing that persons who offer testimony want to be believed. As I shall argue later, those who look for witnesses do want us also to pay attention to and



weigh the judgments, assertions, and claims about the significance of their perceptions. Testimony is not incorrigible. For testimony to have an epistemological function, it must be open to assessment. This presupposes that we have ways of assessing it as true or dubious, reliable or false. Beyond the truth of the testimony, there is the further question of its significance. All of this is what I try to capture under the broad heading of “rational work.” By rational work, I mean simply that we offer and assess our reasons or evidence for our beliefs. As believers, we want to have it right or have a reliable account of what happened and what it all means (Misak, 2001). That the testimony is amenable to rational work does not mean that we exclude emotion from the response of a witness, nor that the reasons that we put forward must be devoid of emotion.

This criterion is tricky because we sometimes look to ‘witness’ or ‘testimony’ to challenge the status quo or ‘legitimate knowledge.’ In a manner similar to the women in the writing group, we may respond as a witness to voices that are not heard in official accounts. Further, the testimony may be fragile – by which I mean the person may retract it quickly at any signal of distrust because the testimony challenges or disrupts our understanding of the ways things are and perhaps, the person who is giving the testimony cannot themselves recognize the experience as possible. Nonetheless, the response of the witness, if it is to have an epistemological function, cannot require that the witness accept just any account as the best account of how things are. Just how we take up the rational work is of critical importance: such work must be sensitive to the situation. Questions of when and by whom the rational work is taken up must be addressed.

Before leaving this discussion, I want to note that a final reason for insisting on the criterion that testimony be amenable to rational work is that education itself is a

rational endeavor. In making this assertion, I follow R. S. Peters, who suggests that, ideally, when we speak of educating someone we intend something other than conditioning, indoctrination, or mere socialization. When we educate someone we engage in the practice of giving reasons; that is, we ask students to hold a belief because of the evidence or reasons there are for the belief. It is generally considered a sign of indoctrination if we intend students to hold beliefs regardless of the evidence for those beliefs. I turn now to an account of the subsequent chapters in this dissertation.

My inquiry into what it means to be a ‘witness’ and to ‘bear witness’ begins with a survey of religious usages of the terms. In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I describe conceptions of being a witness and bearing witness from Judaic, Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist faith communities through examples that illustrate different senses in which the terms are used within each tradition. I conduct this survey because religious conceptions of what it means to be a witness are nearly inseparable from how we use the term, aside from a strictly legal sense of an eyewitness in a courtroom hearing. That being a witness involves a stand against oppression is arguably rooted in religious usages of the idea of ‘prophetic witness.’ Common uses of ‘being a witness’ in psychotherapy, advocacy work for various causes, work for peace and reconciliation, as well as in education, are rooted in religious conceptions. As currently used in educational literature, the idea of being a witness most often explicitly draws on religious conceptions of witness. Apart from being nearly inseparable from other usages of ‘witness,’ religious usages are fertile soil in which to root a conception of witness for liberatory aims in education. At the same time, religious conceptions of witness may be said to be at the root of much of the violence and oppression we see or experience in our daily lives. For me, these concerns only serve to

make it imperative that we understand the religious usages of witness. In Chapter 2, I identify a family of usages – in Wittgenstein’s sense of a family – of witness and bearing witness. These usages include being present to the pain and joy of the world, living in keeping with one’s beliefs, promises, or convictions within interpretive communities, and *speaking on behalf of the other against oppression*.

In Chapter 3, I critically appraise three proposals in which the authors suggest that students respond as a witness as a means of addressing violence and oppression. Roger Simon proposes a ‘pedagogy of commemoration’ to challenge students to “rethink the *logos* for making sensible and justifiable practices within which one people establish relations of exploitation, dominion, or indifference in regard to another” (1994: 6). Megan Boler proposes that students engage in a testimonial reading and collective witnessing as part of a ‘pedagogy of discomfort.’ Boler’s aim is to teach critical thinking “that seeks to transform consciousness in such a way that a Holocaust could never happen again” (1999: 157). Sandra Bloom and Michael Reichert argue that it is a moral responsibility of teachers and students to bear witness to the violence around them and, as a witness, to engage in social activism to stop the traumatic reenactment of violence (1998). While I broadly support the aims of these projects to address violence and oppression, my critique focuses on the conception of witness in each proposal and whether it satisfies the criteria I have outlined for an adequate conception of witness for liberatory education.

Both Simon’s and Boler’s proposals are firmly situated in critical literacy or liberatory education. Both address what might be called the opposite side of critical literacy from that which Freire addresses, in that Boler and Simon both aim for students

to become aware of privilege and power in their assumptions about and actions toward others. Bloom and Reichert's educational proposal is part of what the authors call a public health response to violence. This proposal is rooted in trauma theory; however, there are links to critical literacy through the strong foothold in liberation theology. Though each proposal has intriguing pedagogical features, none of the conceptions of witness meet the criteria that I have laid out for an adequate conception of witness for liberatory education.

I propose an alternative conception of witness in Chapter 4. Following Heller, I claim that each of us look for witnesses and thus begin with the assumption that students in our classrooms may, at times, be looking for witnesses. Thinking of particular persons in our classrooms as looking for witnesses is a significantly different perspective from other attempts to analyze the notion of 'witness' in educational literature. I begin with the needs of the person looking for a witness, rather than naming the responsibilities entailed in listening or responding as a witness. From my analysis of what I take to be clear cases in which someone is looking for a witness, I claim that we look for witnesses when it seems that everyone has turned away. We look for witnesses in a climate of indifference or outright refusal to listen to apprehensions that we believe others should attend to. Simply put, we can say that to be a witness is to be someone who does not turn away – who listens and hears what the other has to say. I argue that witness is best conceptualized as a particular sort of relation akin to Nel Noddings' conception of a relation of care. A 'relation of witness' is relational in the strong sense that we can identify a completion when a person looking for a witness does indeed find a witness.

The completion sustains or restores trust and can make it possible for beliefs and experience to be spoken of and thus enter the epistemic community.

In Chapters 5 and 6, respectively, I explicate the moral and epistemological dimensions of my conception of witness as a relation. In Chapter 5, I argue that we must be ready to respond as a witness because of the trust that is at stake in the completion. Conceptualizing witness as a response to a particular person makes my idea of witness susceptible to Alison Jagger's critique of a relation of care, namely that in responding solely to the individual, caring forecloses on attention to structural oppression. I draw on Cheryl Misak's interpretation of Charles S. Peirce's conception of truth and inquiry to elaborate what it means to hear or acknowledge the other's testimony, and make the case that my conception of witness does not foreclose on seeing structural oppression.

In Chapter 6, I argue that the relation of witness has a significant contribution to make to the generation of situated knowledge, by which I mean knowledge that does not in itself perpetuate oppression. Maureen Ford persuasively shows that grounding educational practices in the standard view of knowledge obscures claims about oppression and privilege and inscribes relations of oppression and privilege in knowledge construction practices. Ford suggests that situated knowledges offer more to educators because they are (or at least aim to be) politically sensitive (1995: 183). I outline Donna Haraway's conception of situated knowledge and compare it to Misak's conception of truth and inquiry to argue that pragmatists have long been engaged in the generation of situated knowledge. I argue that inquiry initiated in the relation of witness satisfies the criterion that the testimony be amenable to rational work.

In Chapter 7, the final chapter of the dissertation, I argue that being witnesses for one another and attending to the conditions that support this relation should be part of our work in schools if education is to help us build relations less defined by oppression and violence. I give three examples of students that seem to be looking for a witness to show the significance of the relation of witness for liberatory education.

## CHAPTER 2

### RELIGIOUS CONCEPTIONS OF 'WITNESS'

In this chapter I describe conceptions of being a witness and bearing witness from Judaic, Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist traditions through examples that illustrate different senses in which the terms are used within each tradition. Understandably, I do not provide an exhaustive survey of the usages of 'bearing witness' and 'witness' within these religious traditions. I do cover familiar uses of the terms along with uses that may not be as well known to sketch a family, in Wittgenstein's sense of the term, of religious conceptions of being a witness and bearing witness. We can mean quite different things when we refer to witness and bearing witness within one religion and within different faith communities; however, it is possible to identify a 'family of usages' of the terms 'witness' and 'bearing witness' across different religious practices. In recognizing the ties between traditions, as well as the differences among religious faiths and traditions, I pay particular attention to how views of the responsibilities of a witness differently characterize how we are to approach one another and our relations with one another. For example, there is a strong difference evident in whether we think it our responsibility to convert others to our faith, to serve and act on behalf of the other, or to question our own understanding and thereby become vulnerable to the other.

I begin my analysis of 'witness' with a survey of religious usages because it seems that most conceptions of witness are never far removed from religious usages. This is the case in educational contexts, as well as in psychology, conflict resolution,

environmental conservation, and political activism. Of the proposals for ‘witness’ in educational pedagogy critiqued in the next chapter, two are explicitly rooted in religious conceptions and the third proposal is clearly in keeping with religious conceptions of witness. Further, it is likely that if we advocate ‘witness’ in education, those who adopt the proposal will connect the term to religious usages.

The fact that it is difficult to separate ‘witness’ from religious usages holds both strengths and dangers for any proposal advocating the idea of witness or bearing witness in public schools. In *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Jonathon Glover states succinctly “The evils of religious intolerance, religious persecution and religious wars are well known, but it is striking how many protests against and acts of resistance to atrocity have also come from principled religious commitment” (1999: 405). The strength of religious commitment as a stand against oppression will be clear in the usages that I survey. For my project, religious conceptions of witness hold particular dangers in assumptions of conversion, possibilities of dogmatism, and strict boundaries on communities that foster the uncritically support parochial views or tribal affiliations. With the intent of conversion, one’s encounter with the other is dominated by how to effectively convince him or her of the truth of your position. A sole focus on conversion functions to make the other over in one’s own image, and does not allow a challenge to your own position. Dogmatism is found in narrow interpretations of scripture or teachings that are not held open as fallible. Closely related are questions regarding one’s responsibilities to the stranger -- someone outside of the fold, the enemy perhaps. These are dangers of the terms, whether or not religious usages of the idea of witness are drawn on explicitly. We cannot proceed blind to these dangers. In my survey, I choose



accounts or examples from each religion that, at least in part, answer the dangers and illustrate the fertile soil that we draw on with religious conceptions of ‘witness.’

In selecting accounts for each religion, I have been careful to select those written by people within the tradition. In other words, each reference cited in the section on Judaism is someone who identifies him or her self as a member of the Jewish faith. In his edited collection called *Progressive Muslims*, Omid Safi is clear on how he means to speak of religion.

One level is the normative, theological way, when self-designated (or selected) representatives speak with the weight of authority, and feel perfectly entitled to make statements like “Catholicism states...” “Judaism teaches us that ...,” and of course, “Islam states...” The other way of talking about religion is more historical and descriptive, less theological, and more people centered. The followers of this perspective are likely to say, “This Jewish group practice the following ritual, while other Jewish groups practice otherwise...” “These Muslim groups hold this interpretation of jihad, while their interpretations are opposed by the following groups. (2003: 21)

I work to follow his guidelines because it challenges a tendency to see religious communities as unified and as something fixed, rather than as interpretive communities of people each working out what it means to be a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew, or a Buddhist. I include scripture or teachings from each religion.

### **Remembrance in Judaism**

In the tradition of Judaism, what it means to be a ‘witness’ is rooted in the deliverance of the tribe of Israel from Egypt and the covenant made with God in the wilderness of Sinai. In the history recounted in Exodus, Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, when he saw a flame of fire out of a bush. The bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Moses stepped closer to see what was happening and

heard God call to him out of the bush. God said to Moses

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt. (Exodus 3:7-10)

Moses argued with God, but in the end agreed to lead the tribe. Pharaoh refused Moses' request to let the tribe of Israel free, and there followed ten plagues—each brought on, it is said, by Pharaoh's continued refusal to let the Israelites go. At the tenth plague many of the tribe of Israel fled from Egypt. The clearest moment of triumph is when God parted the waters of the Red Sea and Moses led the people of Israel on to dry ground as the Pharaoh's army floundered in the sea behind them. After the crossing, the prophet Miriam took a tambourine in her hand and all the women followed her dancing with tambourines. Miriam sang to them "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Exodus: 15:21).

On the third new moon after the Israelites escaped from Egypt they came to the wilderness of Sinai. Moses went up to the mountain and God spoke to Moses again, telling him

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites. (Exodus 19:4-6)

God also told Moses that he wanted to speak directly to the people of Israel so that they would trust Moses. In the midst of thunder, fire, smoke, and the sound of trumpets, God

descended to the mountain and spoke to the people, giving them the Ten Commandments or what are referred to in Hebrew as the ten *d'varim*, the ten sayings. The tribe of Israel were witnesses of God's address. The memory of deliverance from Egypt and the covenant with God is passed from generation to generation. In retelling the memory, it is as if subsequent generations were also witnesses as if they too were present to hear God's command.

One way the memory of deliverance from Egypt is passed on to children is in the celebration of Passover or *Pesach*. At the Passover Seder, the youngest child at the table recites the first question "What makes this night different than any other night?" The journey is recounted over the course of the meal in answer to the child's first question and the questions that follow in the prayer book or *Haggadah*.<sup>3</sup> While all *Haggadah* follow a similar format of questions and answers, there are many different versions of the prayer book. The version I want to draw attention to was read in Berlin at one of several Passover Seders for the *She'erith Hapletah* or 'the few who escaped' soon after liberation of the camps. In *A Survivor's Haggadah*, Yosef Dov Sheinson's Yiddish text and Ben Benyamin's woodcuts of life in the camps are interwoven with the traditional Passover liturgy to tell the story of deliverance from Pharaoh in Egypt parallel to the story of the few who escaped from Hitler. Both men are survivors of the camps. In the prayer book, the Yiddish words "We were slaves to Hitler in Germany" echo the biblical text "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt." The Hebrew injunction "In every generation one should regard oneself as though he had come out of Egypt" is followed by the Yiddish commentary "From parents to children, from generation to generation, the story of the

Exodus from Egypt is passed on as a personal memory; it never pales or loses its luster.

In each and every generation one should regard oneself as though he had come out of

Egypt” (Touster, 2000: 49). Sheinson continues in Yiddish

Can anything be greater than the wisdom of the ancient commandment? Is there anything in the wisdom literature that better teaches us to hate and despise slavery and to love freedom, than the story of the bondage and exodus from Egypt? Does there exist any ancient memory that could serve as symbol for the present and future [better than this]. It is this promise that has helped our fathers and us. It is not just one alone who has risen up to destroy us; for they have risen up to destroy us in each and every generation. Still the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand. (51)

In the border of this page are the Hebrew words “This is our faith.”

The argument is often made that the obligation to remember the Holocaust is equal to the obligation to remember the journey from Egypt. In other words, just as in every generation one should regard oneself as though he [she] has come out of Egypt, so should each and every generation regard themselves as survivors of Auschwitz. In “Bearing Witness: Theological Implications Of Second-Generation Literature In America,” Alan Berger notes that the distinction between a witnessing generation and those who come after but are commanded to witness is firmly rooted in Jewish history and liturgy (1998: 252). Berger argues that this means we think not only of literal survivors of the camps as witnesses, but also their children, their friends and families, and members of the House of Israel. So for the children of survivors, Berger claims, witnessing becomes a moral and theological imperative. It follows that “Second generation writing [the writing of children of survivors] constitutes secular *midrashim*, whose effect is to comment, even if obliquely, on the status of the covenant after

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<sup>3</sup> *Haggadah* literally means narrative or retelling and, by extension, is used to refer to the prayer book in which the journey from Egypt is retold.

Auschwitz” (254). *Midrashim* are interpretations or commentaries on Biblical text, clarifying or expounding a point of law or elaborating a moral principle. We can think of *midrashim* as interpretations of what it means to live by the covenant. If *midrashim* are the response of a witness to God’s address, then we can say that second-generation writing is the response of a witness to the address of a survivor. In both cases, the commentaries are part of an interpretive practice through which the community works out the status of the covenant and what it means to live by the promise of the covenant. Second-generation writing can be thought of as commentary on the covenant and on the address of survivors and those who died in the camps. Like the memory of deliverance from Egypt, the memory of the Holocaust might be passed from generation to generation through particular practices of remembrance that rest on an interpretive discourse.

Emmanuel Levinas’ religious life as an Orthodox Jew, his work as a philosopher, and his contributions to the repair or restoration of Jewish life in Europe and Israel after the Holocaust all hold central the idea of being a witness. In identifying what he takes to be the uniquely Jewish elements of Levinas’ moral theory, philosopher Hilary Putnam explains that Moses’ numinous experience at Sinai is not taken as a model for the religious experience of the traditional Jew. Rather “the position of the traditional Jew is one of feeling a profound experience of being commanded by a God she has not had a numinous experience of. The ‘trace’ of God’s presence is the tradition which testifies to the commandment and the interpretive community which continues to work out what it means” (2002: 47). Putnam argues that Levinas universalizes certain Jewish themes in his moral theory, but he doesn’t attempt to convert gentiles to Judaism. Levinas – as Putnam reads his work – does not want the ‘universal’ audience to adopt the detailed

*mitzvot*, which would be entailed in conversion to Judaism, but does universalize the commandment to ‘love mankind’ (47). Levinas calls the response to this command ‘witness;’ it is a version of what can be called ‘prophetic witness.’ I give three accounts of prophetic witness, beginning with Levinas’ account.

### Prophetic Witness

For Levinas, prophetic witness is a response to the ‘face of the other.’ In his book, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility After the Irreparable*, James Hatley notes “In [Levinas’] version of prophetic witness, G-d is revealed in the others one confronts, particularly those who are in need” (2000: 118). The witness is called into an immediate relation with the other’s vulnerability. Hatley notes that for Levinas it is not the authority of the prophet or of G-d that commands one, but the proximity of the other’s susceptibility. “The command “sounds in one’s mouth as Isaiah’s “*hineni*,” a response to G-d’s address that could be translated as “here I am, already at your disposal. In the wake of exposure to the other, one “becomes a heart, a sensibility, and hands which give” (CP, 168)” (Hatley, 2000: 120). Open in this way, one cannot be indifferent to the presence of the other.

Prophetic witness includes deliberative witness, indeed deliberative witness or speaking on behalf of the other is presupposed in sincere openness to the other. Speaking on behalf of the other follows the model of the prophet’s address. The prophet’s address, Hatley explains, expresses G-d’s outrage over the treatment of the poor and needy. As an example, Hatley cites the prophet Ezekiel’s address to the crowd. “The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the

strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Ezekiel 45: 4). Hatley notes that it is the condition of the heart that obsesses the prophet’s address. “The indifferent crowd listen to Ezekiel’s words but “their heart is set on gain” (Ezekiel 33: 31)” (118). Hatley elaborates

The hardness of his audience’s hearts, their indifference to being moved by the suffering of others, is what the prophet seeks to resist. In Levinasian terms, “the words of the Lord” would have the prophet call his audience back to the face-to-face encounter with the other in which the susceptibility of the other to violation commands one not only not to harm her or him but also to take the bread from out of one’s mouth for the sake of the other (*OB*, 15). (118)

“The prophet addressed his audience in order to bring them to a consideration not only of the face-to-face encounter but also of their judgments and actions in the wake of this encounter” (121). Hatley explains that the prophet could not simply be sincere but must also have articulated a vision, a figure, of justice. Sincerity – melting of one’s heart – is the motivation to speak on the other’s behalf, but paradoxically, at the same time, there is a judgement and a vision of justice that is articulated. Let me give two more usages of the idea of ‘prophetic witness.’ Both address the violence in Israel and Palestine to name a perceived wrong in the treatment of the Palestinian people in the state of Israel.

Marc Ellis, who identifies himself as an American Jew, holds that American Jews uncritical support of Israel has undermined prophetic witness. He argues

Jews’ relationship to Israel has displaced their relationship with God, and the vicarious identification of most American Jews with the state of Israel has eclipsed their recognition of their identity and vocation as the *people* of Israel who are bound by an ancient covenant to the God of all nations. This vocation entails the obligation to criticize, with the unflinching insistence of the Biblical prophets, the community of Israel when it acts in violation of God’s will—of universal norms of justice. (Farber, 2003: 125-126)

Commenting on the status of the covenant, Ellis writes “[T]he covenant remains today in a struggle for the life in the heart of every Jew, religious and non-religious alike. It is murdered or given life as the other, the Palestinian, is banished or embraced by the Jewish community” (1999: 91). Ellis asserts the heritage of the Jews is ethics – not statehood. The single link that binds Jews, in Ellis’ view, is the legacy of Moses and the prophets. That legacy is the ethical imperative to stand against oppression. Ellis argues that the “only way to fulfill the covenant” in this era of Jewish empowerment (and the abuse of that power) is to “remember the victims of Jewish power” and “to embrace the Palestinian people as intimate to the covenant itself” (1999: 59).

Using the term ‘prophetic witness’ in a similar way, Rabbi Michael Lerner published a statement titled “Prophetic Witness” in *Tikkun*. Lerner writes “The TIKKUN Community offers a voice of sanity and reason which recognizes that Israeli self-interest (as well as Jewish morality) requires that Israel have a full reconciliation with the Palestinian people” (2002: 8). Lerner continues

We insist that Palestinians and Israelis are equally precious in God’s eyes and that the loss of life on both sides is equally tragic and unnecessary. [...] In doing so, we approach both sides in a spirit of compassion for the terrible pain that both have suffered, and a passionate commitment to alleviate that suffering. Yet compassion requires speaking with honesty and integrity, even when that forces us to confront difficult truths. This is what we mean by Prophetic Witness. (8)

Following a succinct summary of the establishment of the state of Israel, Lerner asserts “Every act of violence by Palestinians since then has been interpreted by us not as an act of desperation by a displaced people, but as part of a scenario to wipe us out just like the Nazis” (9). Lerner also believes that there has been a lack of understanding on part of Palestinians toward the experience of Jews coming to the newly formed state of Israel.



Lerner makes concrete recommendations toward resolution of the conflict and ends with a call for hope.

So many people have reverted to a deep depression of about the possibility of anything but endless war. Yet, it is that belief which is the most dangerous element of the picture and likely to be self-fulfilling. Our task is to proclaim another possibility and a call to honor the humanity – This is our Prophetic Witness. (11)

Lerner emphasizes the hope in prophetic witness for restoration.

Ellis' and Lerner's prophetic witness have in common a critique of society; each names what he sees to be a wrong done to others. Ellis claims that prophetic witness as a vocation of the people of Israel who are bound in covenant to the God of all nations. For Ellis, this vocation entails the obligation to criticize the community of Israel when it acts in violation of God's will – of universal norms of justice. Lerner's prophetic witness is rooted in a spirit of compassion and the idea that we are all equally precious in the eyes of God. In Lerner's view, such compassion entails the obligation to speak with honesty and integrity even when that forces us to confront difficult truths. Both speak to challenge the status quo and to move others, much in the same way that Ezekiel's address called attention to suffering that had caused by one's own hand and was treated with indifference.

In sum, the idea of 'witness' in Judaic traditions is linked to remembrance of being delivered from oppression and entering into a covenant with God. The witness – a member of the House of Israel who came out of Egypt – has made a promise in response to God's address from the Mount Sinai. Keeping the covenant entails an ongoing interpretive discourse within a community. The three views of prophetic witness have in common naming a wrong and moving others to action. Each debates to whom one's

responsibilities extend – who counts as a neighbor – and what these responsibilities entail. For Levinas and Lerner, prophetic witness is rooted in keeping the commandment to love one another. The family of usages includes: remembering as if one was present and therefore living in a particular way; a response to suffering and oppression rooted in the commandment to love one another; and, addressing others, moving them to action.

### **Christian Witness**

Standing against the smooth marble facade of a clothing store on an elite shopping arcade in Glasgow, a man in a red plaid flannel shirt called out his witness in a hoarse voice. There was no one stopped to listen to him. I paused only a moment in front of him and a little longer by the store window to listen. The man told of how he had been lost, but now had a friend in Jesus. He spoke to convince us, those passing him on the street, that we too had a friend in Jesus. We had only to ask Jesus into our hearts. The man's speaking on the street corner to whomever would listen is an example of witnessing for Christ. In a similar vein, we can think of Billy Graham's "massive global witnessing project." The "Global Mission" was expected to reach 175 countries in 100 languages, reaching a potential nightly congregation of 8 million for three nights through satellite coverage to more than 2,200 sites. One million volunteers were trained for the campaign. The number of volunteers, the news release states, is in keeping with the intent of the mission: one-to-one evangelism (Lee, 1995: 57). This kind of evangelism is one sense of the Christian conception of witness. It is rooted in Jesus' commission to his disciples "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything

that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28: 19-20). These verses are referred to as the ‘Great Commission’ and are often understood as a mandate to convert all others to Christianity. Being a witness and bearing witness – in word and deed – often has the intention of conversion, of bringing others to Jesus. For many Christians, persuading others that Jesus is the way to salvation is understood as a sacred obligation that defines what it means to be a Christian.

However, within Christianity, witness or witnessing is not only used in reference to converting others to Christianity. Broadly, witness is understood as living in keeping with your beliefs about what it means to be a disciple of Christ, to live by the gospels.

I look to three Christian traditions to illustrate different usages of ‘witness’ – a Quaker ethic, the prophetic tradition in African American churches, and Liberation Theology in Latin American Catholic churches. I choose these three traditions to illustrate senses of witness that emphasize a broad interpretation of prophetic witness as a challenge to convention or broadly accepted views of the way things are.

### Quaker Witness

George Fox, one of the first leaders of the Society of Friends, refused to “doff his hat or give titles of respect” as he went around England in the mid-1600s (James, 1936: 320). Fox’s refusal to take off his hat is an act of witness. The Quakers, among other separatist sects such as the Ranters and the Levelers, emerged during England’s Civil War period, 1640 to 1680. These groups called for radical changes in society motivated their reading of the Gospels. For Quakers, this meant expressing their beliefs through acts of nonviolent civil disobedience that often landed them in jail. George Fox’s refusal to

“doff his hat” is one example. A second example from the early Quakers is Margaret Fell’s insistence on speaking in public forums at a time when only women in the Royal family were allowed to speak. Phyllis Mack writes

A primary tenet of early Quakerism was that the hierarchical character of gender relationships, indeed of all social relationships, was a product of human sinfulness, an outcome of the original Fall from Grace. That Fall had shattered humanity into fragments, and the placement of those fragments, far from reflecting the moral and aesthetic unity of a universal chain of being, were unnatural and imperfect forms of expression and oppression, social hierarchies that were to be overcome through the painful annihilation of the outward self. (In Brown and Stuard, 1989: 39)

The belief that the hierarchical character of social relationships are a product of sin, underlies Margaret Fell’s challenging the Restoration monarchy’s policies, even though she spent long periods in prison for it. This belief also underlies George Fox’s refusal to remove his hat; the action would acknowledge a social hierarchy he believed was false. William James explains Fox’s action “It was laid on George Fox that these conventional customs were a lie and a sham, and the whole body of his followers there upon renounced them, as a sacrifice to truth, and so that their acts and the spirit they professed might be more in accord” (1936: 320). “That their acts and the spirit they professed might be more in accord” is a key feature of Quaker witness. The steadfast insistence that one’s actions be evidence of one’s beliefs has, without question, contributed to the ability of Quakers to challenge social norms.

A second defining feature of Quaker witness is that each person forms her or his own witness. Witness or bearing witness is an act of conscience. Quakers understand conscience to be a shard of universal truth, God’s voice imbedded in the self, which is called ‘the light’ or ‘the seed’ (Mack in Brown and Stuard, 1989: 37). In current day meetings, Quakers speak of two kinds of light that might be experienced in “centering

down,” the first of five stages in what Gray Cox calls the Quaker ethic. The first kind of light is a warm engrossing light and the second is experienced as the light of a beacon that beckons one on. Cox explains that “In meeting, people called on by this second sort of light tend to grimace, change the ways their legs are crossed and occasionally feel their pulse accelerate as they find themselves about to speak” (1985: 9). This is the experiential basis for ‘prophetic’ Christianity. This light leads to an experience of disturbed care—a feeling of addressing a concern and being addressed by it, at the same time. The concern is often called a ‘leading.’ One ‘gathers consensus’ and ‘finds clearness’ regarding this leading. The fifth stage of the ethic is bearing witness. Gray Cox explains that bearing witness is “not best understood as ‘action’ in the traditional sense of the term, that is, the adoption of some means to achieve a goal” (14). The motivation is not achieving some end such as peace, but it is, primarily, the conviction that they must bear witness to the truth.

Among early Quakers, Quaker women, as well as men, commonly traveled to other Quaker communities to enlist others in a particular cause.<sup>4</sup> Susan Mosher Stuard notes that

While women might join a cause suggested by other Quakers, such as the abolition of slavery advocated by the witnessing of a traveling minister, Quaker women were free to set their own priorities. Furthermore, they were enjoined to aid a member of their meeting to formulate her witness even if they could not in conscience share it. (Brown and Stuard, 1989: 17)

This last part is especially important. It does happen that a person’s witness may put them at odds with their congregation. Stuard notes that “Like mindedness was never a

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<sup>4</sup> My grandmother’s grandmother, Martha Bates, traveled widely in Oklahoma and Kansas, before a split in the Quaker church largely curtailed this practice for women on the more conservative side of the split.

necessary result of thinking prayerfully together about problems” (17). Bearing witness is seen as an act of conscience that in the end can lead a woman out of meeting. Stuard reports “The dictates of conscience were too individual and disturbing to the norms of society for Quaker women to avoid separation from their communities at all times. Persevering in the face of isolation has often proved to be the most challenging trial in a Quaker woman’s life course” (21). There is a complex blend of individual and community in the Quaker ethic. It is vital to ‘sound’ your thinking against others, and yet there is something very individual in following the dictates of your conscience. Like-mindedness is not required, although one is expected to listen to argument and different points of view.

I have named three elements or responsibilities of witness in Quaker practice: insistence that one’s actions be evidence of one’s beliefs; forming your own witness; bearing witness in response to a leading of conscience, understood as a shard of universal truth. We also see a call to conscience in the African-American church.

#### African-American Prophetic Tradition

Speaking to a university student body on the occasion of Martin Luther King’s birthday, Rev. Eugene Rivers referred to the “life and witness of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”<sup>5</sup> Rivers wanted the primarily White student body in the gymnasium to recognize that it is a challenge to comprehend the meaning and significance of Martin Luther King’s life. We most often consider his message in sound bites, perhaps no more than a phrase put at the bottom of a poster published by McDonalds. But our celebration, Rivers

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<sup>5</sup> Rev. Eugene Rivers spoke at the University of New Hampshire in January 1999.

claimed, would be a meaningless gesture unless we commemorated the significance of King's message by telling uncomfortable truths. Rev. Rivers noted that King's witness was a prophetic voice and we need prophets. In a style unfamiliar to most of the audience, Rivers moved in and out of the cadence of a charismatic preacher and at one point commented "I know you're white, but if someone could just shout 'I hear you' now and then, I'll know you're out there." Rivers called us to remember that King spoke of freedom, liberation, and opportunity for all people. King spoke to transform society, not to sell a hamburger.

Martin Luther King Jr. provides a clear example of the prophetic tradition in African American churches. As Rivers notes, it is the whole of King's life that gives witness. Dr. King stood on principles rooted in his Christian faith. When King spoke of equality, he meant universal equality based in the conviction that we are all equal in the eyes of God – a "beloved community"—not only equality for blacks. June Jordan reflects in an essay on Martin Luther King, Jr. that "it took [her] a long time to understand that "Beloved Community" means everybody is sacred. Nobody is excluded from that deliberate embrace" (Jordan, 1998: 256). King defended the civil rights movement on moral and religious grounds. His terms of transformation were clear. In 1967 in Atlanta, King spoke of love "If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love. And the beautiful thing is that we aren't moving wrong when we do it, because John was right, God is love" (2001: 192).<sup>6</sup> And in the next breath, he addressed the economic structures that perpetuate injustice.

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<sup>6</sup> The excerpts here are taken from Martin Luther King Jr.'s address "Where Do We Go From Here?" delivered at the Eleventh Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta, Georgia on August 16, 1967.

I want to say to you as I move to my conclusion, as we talk about “Where do we go from here?” that we must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, “Why are there forty million poor people in America? And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about the broader distribution of wealth. [...] And I’m simply saying that more and more, we’ve got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. (193)

Rev. King reminds the listeners that we are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life’s marketplace, but we must also come to see that the edifice that produces beggars must be restructured (193). King ends with the hope that we will be able to transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.<sup>7</sup> We can find similar commitments to siding with the oppressed, recognizing structures that produce oppression, and hope in liberation theology as it emerged in Latin America.

### Liberation Theology

A clear example of conversion as domination of others is the conquest of the New World. The history of the church in Latin America, as in so many places, has been to maintain the status quo and to teach submission with the promise of a reward in Heaven. This conquest was not unilaterally supported in Spain. Bartolome de Las Casas, for one, wrote to the King of Spain in 1550 to argue that for the sake of his own salvation he must stop the domination of people in his name. Christian theologian, Frederick Herzog, believes that Las Casas’ challenge is to rethink Christology (the nature of Christ) in the light of Matthew 25:31-36, Ephesians 4:15, and the knowledge of what actually took

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<sup>7</sup> Hope is the fourth element that Cornel West identifies in his conception of ‘prophetic thought.’ Elements also include discernment, connection, and tracking hypocrisy. West’s usage of ‘prophetic thought’ draws on liberation theology in African American Christian traditions.



place on these shores (1994). These are the verses Herzog draws to our attention:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I needed clothes and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The king will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25: 35-36)

By speaking the truth in love, we must grow up into him who is the head, into Christ. (Ephesians 4:15)

On this account, then, witness is serving the least among us and speaking the truth in love. Service to the poor and needy is given precedence over conversion to Christianity.

In the seminal text, *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez notes that Matthew's text is very demanding – "Anything you did not do for one of these, however humble, you did not do for me." Gutierrez argues that this means "to abstain from serving is to refuse to love; to fail to act for another is as culpable as expressly refusing to do it" (1971: 198). The text, Gutierrez reasons, demands a new ethic arising from the universal principle of love – a charity that exists "only in concrete actions (feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, etc.); it occurs of necessity in the fabric of relationships among men" (199). We are responsible for the suffering of others. We are not only responsible for causing harm, but for failing to serve, to act for another.

Gutierrez continues

Charity, the love of God for men, is found incarnated in human love—of parents, spouses, children, friends—and leads to fullness. The Samaritan approached the injured man on the side of the road not because of some cold religious obligation, but because his "heart was melting" (this is literally what the verb *splankhnizein* means in Luke 10: 33), because his love for that man was made flesh in him. (199)

The witness, then, is called to serve and act for another, to live by this ethic of universal love.

Liberation theology in Latin America was formalized in the 1968 assembly of the Latin American church in Medellin, Columbia. The four central ideas of the movement are

- (a) A preferential option for the poor. The church must align itself with poor people as they demand justice.
- (b) Institutional violence. Liberation sees a hidden violence in social arrangements that create hunger and poverty.
- (c) Structural sin. Liberation theologians argued that there is a social dimension that is more than the sum of individual acts. Neocolonialism is one example. By extension, the redemption from sin won by Christ must be more than the redemption of individual souls. It must redeem, transform the social realities of human life.
- (d) Orthopraxis. The term is meant as a counterpoint to the insistence on orthodoxy, meaning correct belief. Liberation theologians argue that what is most fundamental is correct action—that is, effort leading to human liberation. (Allen, 2000).

These central ideas are strongly influenced by a Marxist analysis of class struggle. The Vatican has since taken a strong stance against liberation theology, largely because the ‘base communities’ existed independent of clerical oversight and seemed to represent a model of “church from below” (Allen, 2000). As in the African-American prophetic traditions, the reading of the Bible does not focus on submission, but rather on freedom from oppression. Notice a focus on the structures of oppression as Martin Luther King Jr. had begun to move to in the year before he was assassinated.

In sum, prophetic witness is a critique of society. Fox’s refusal to take off his hat is an act of witness, understood in a Quaker ethic as an act of conscience. This act is evidence of the belief that all people are equal in the eyes of God. Notably, for the Quakers, this equality did include women. We can say that the whole of Martin Luther

King Jr's life gave witness to his conviction that all men are equal in God's eyes. Within the prophetic wing of Black church, witness is speaking out against oppression in a way that one claims one's humanity or equality with all others in what King called the 'beloved community.' For King, among others, speaking out against oppression includes helping the poor who are discouraged, but also questioning the structures of society that produce poverty. Liberation theology, as it emerged in Latin America, proposes an understanding of the nature of Christ that calls Christians to respond to the suffering of others and accept responsibility not only for causing harm, but also for failing to act. The witness is called to serve and act for the other. We can see a similar emphasis on the structures of society in all three examples of prophetic witness. A family of usages of witness from Christian traditions includes: bearing witness focused on conversion; acting in keeping with your beliefs, your reading of the Bible; a critique of society that includes working for justice, and; accepting responsibility for those in need by serving and acting on their behalf.

### **Bearing Witness in Islam**

There are five pillars of faith in Islam. The first pillar or practice of faith is *shahādah*, which is translated as bearing witness or testimony. Daily prayers, or *salat*, form the second pillar of Islam. Making the *Hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca, fasting during *Ramadan*, and alms-giving are the third, fourth, and fifth practices or pillars of Islam. Of the five pillars, I focus only on the *shahādahs*. The two testimonies are said first in a profession of faith in converting to Islam and are repeated in prayers said five times each day facing the direction of Mecca. The first *shahādah* is the phrase “*Lā ilāha illa’ Llāh,*”

which is usually translated as “There is no god but God.” And the second testimony is “*Muhammadun rasūl Allāh*” or “Muhammad is the messenger of God.” The *shahādahs* proclaim the unity of God and Muhammad as a prophet of God. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, explains that at the heart of Islam stands the reality of the oneness of God, “the One Who is at once transcendent and immanent, greater than all we can conceive or imagine, yet, as the Quran [...] attests, closer to us than our jugular vein” (2002: 3). Attestation to the oneness of God – called *tawhīd* – is the axis around which all that is Islamic revolves (3).

Nasr writes of the relationship between witness, martyr, and the supreme testification or *shahādah* to the oneness of God. He notes that etymologically martyr and witness are related in Arabic, as they are in Greek. The term ‘martyr’ in Arabic is *shahīd*, while the word for ‘witness’ is *shāhid*. Both words are related to the term for the supreme testification, *shahādah*.<sup>8</sup> Nasr continues

In the truly spiritual sense, the *shahīd* is the person who has born witness with his or her whole being to Divine Oneness. He or she has made the supreme sacrifice of his or her own life for the sake of God, a sacrifice that has been truly for God and not for any worldly cause. Such people go to paradise because they have given their life in all sincerity to God. (270)

In reference to the *shahīd*, or martyr, Nasr asks the reader to recall the *hadīth* of the Prophet, “The ink of the scholar is more precious than the blood of the martyr.” Nasr understands the *hadīth* to mean “that although martyrdom is such an exalted state, the inner *jihād* leading to knowledge of God and His revelation (hence the ink of the scholar) is of even higher value” (270). Both are senses of ‘witness.’ I will take up the inner

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<sup>8</sup> The English term ‘martyr’ is derived from the Greek word *martos*, which also means witness. Nasr makes the point that in both Christianity and Islam “martyr” has the same root meaning, and furthermore in both traditions the same symbols are used to describe the martyr.

devotion and the effort to extend a moral or just society in turn; however, I will not emphasize the term *jihād*. For non-Muslims the idea of a *jihād* brings to mind only terrorism and violent action, a ‘holy war.’ As the roots of *jihād* speak primarily to the question of true intention or devotion, the term can be translated as effort or striving in the path of God. I will use devotion rather than the term *jihād*.<sup>9</sup>

### Remembrance of God – Inner Devotion

In Islamic traditions, Nasr explains, man (or person) is not seen primarily as a sinful being to whom the message of Heaven is sent to heal the wound of original sin, but rather as a being who still carries his primordial nature within himself, under layers of negligence (6). Nasr elaborates

The message of Islam is addressed to that primordial nature. It is a call for recollection, for the remembrance of a knowledge kneaded into the very substance of our being even before our coming into this world. In a famous verse that defines the relationship between human beings and God, the Quran, in referring to the precosmic existence of man, states “‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said: ‘Yes, we bear witness’” (7:172). The “they” refers to all the children of Adam, male and female, and the “yes” confirms the affirmation of God’s oneness by us in our pre-eternal ontological reality. (7)

God is understood to be both transcendent and immanent; or both beyond human experience and within one’s experience, present to us always. Nasr explains “The heart of Islam is also the Islam of the heart, which is that spiritual value, or *ihsan*, that enables us “to see God everywhere” and to be His “eyes, ears, and hands” in this world” (314).

This idea is expressed in the Quran *sura* “Whithersoever ye turn, there is the Face of

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<sup>9</sup> Jihad is the effort to live a devout life – The performance of all acts of worship involve jihad – one cannot pray five times each day without effort. Jihad is required in acts of worship, in our relation with God, but our relations to humans should also be carried out ethically and justly – this requires effort, jihad. (Nasr, 2002)

God.” (2:115). Shams of Tabriz, a Sufi, expresses the same idea “The Kaaba is in the middle of the world. All faces turn toward it. Take it away, See! Each is worshipping the soul of each.” In Sufism, or what is referred to as the mystical path within Islam, repeating the *shahādahs* with sincere intention is one way of coming to experience firsthand the unity of God, to experience God everywhere.

### Justice and the Moral Society – Devotion Turned to Others

In the same vein as the prophetic tradition of Judaism and Christianity, Muhammad calls his followers to work against oppression.

The prophet Muhammad advised Muslims, ‘Help your brother [the Muslim] whether he is the oppressor or the oppressed.’ When the Prophet was asked how to help him if he is the oppressor, he replied: ‘Hold his hand from oppression’ (Al-Juzuyyah, 1993). The *Hadith* points out: ‘Every one of you is a shepherd and each one of you is responsible for his flock’ (Nagati, 1993). (In Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000: 293)

This effort to help your brother is made because you are a witness.

In *Progressive Muslims on Justice, Gender, and Equality*, editor Omid Safi asserts “A progressive Muslim agenda is concerned with the ramifications of the premise that all members of humanity have this same intrinsic worth because, as the Qur’an reminds us, each of us has the breath of God breathed into our being” (2003: 3). Safi challenges the interpretation of jihad as “holy war” against Westerns and the Muslim apologist interpretation of jihad as a purely inner struggle against our selfish tendencies. In Safi’s view, neither “interpretation takes into consideration the possibility of engaging and transforming the social order and the environment in a just and pluralistic fashion that affirms the humanity of us all” (8). Justice lies at the heart of Islamic social ethics. “Time and again the Qur’an talks about providing for the marginalized members of

society: the poor, the orphan, the downtrodden, the wayfarer, the hungry, etc.” (9). In the Sunni tradition, Safi states, “there is the vibrant memory of the Prophet repeatedly talking about how a real believer is one whose neighbor does not go to bed hungry” (9). Safi holds that we should think of all humanity as our neighbor. “The time has come for us to be responsible for the well-being and dignity of all human beings if we wish to be counted as real believers” (9). This claim is remarkable similar to Michael Lerner’s and to Mark Ellis’ prophetic witness in Jewish faith, and to the Christology that Herzog proposes is at the heart of liberation theology in Christian faith.

The guidance for efforts for justice should be based in a ‘generous reading’ of the Quran and Prophetic example, argues Rabia Terri Harris. In *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, Harris emphasizes that “Islam is surrender. It means learning to cede control” (2000: 185). But, in her view, this trust is not passive or lazy. She writes “We know that *jihad*, effort, is necessary to our well-being. Human beings are created to act: without action there can be no divine service” (186). Harris argues that “Social action (*al-jihad al-asghar*, the lesser struggle) is directed toward alleviating forced passivity” (186). Passivity imposed is oppression. To know in what ways we should make our efforts for justice, against oppression, Muslims are “left the Prophetic example and *al-Qur’an al-Karim*, the Generous Reading, for guidance” (190). The reading of the Quran, Harris argues, should not be left in the hands of a few clerics. She argues that the interpretation of what God has said and done should be open.

Surely those who must be guided, to whom the message was sent, are the ones who are intended to absorb it. And surely Allah is capable of speaking to the people we are, to *all* of the people we are, just as we are capable of speaking to each other. Allah has designed us for hearing from the beginning. (190)

Harris argues that the narrowness and rigidity exemplified in narrow literal readings of the Quran is a direct consequence of not wanting to listen, of unwillingness to take responsibility for listening. For Muslims, Harris argues,

our appointed object is more and more dependably to come to embrace the truth: to be *faithful* to it. This goal requires a vigorous and unrelenting examination of ourselves, our world, and our guidance. And it is here that the social project of sincerity runs into its greatest difficulty, for such examination requires a degree of energy that many people are unwilling or unable to devote. (191)

In the struggle for justice, Harris believes, Muslims must all look truthfully and with devotion to follow the signs Allah has laid out for those who will listen.

Safi broadens Harris' generous reading of the signs further to an openness to engage in sources of compassion and wisdom, no matter where they originate. Such engagement is the sign of pluralism, the strength of pluralism, in Safi's view. Safi notes that studying Christian liberation theology, for example, might ultimately help us recover voices that speak out on behalf of the oppressed in Islam. Safi is clear that "Islam" as such teaches us nothing. "The prophet Muhammad does. Interpretive communities do. I would argue that God does, through the text of the Qur'an. But in the case of texts, there are human beings who read them, interpret them, and expound their meanings. Even our encounter with the Prophet is driven by different (and competing) textual presentations of his life, teachings, and legacy. In all cases, the dissemination of Divine teachings is achieved through human agency. Religion is always mediated" (22). We cannot afford to close discussions.

In sum, bearing witness as a statement of faith is the first pillar of Islam. It is understood as an attestation to the oneness of God; saying the *shahādahs* confirms God's oneness and for the Sufis, is an experience of God's oneness. Being a witness means



devotion. This devotion may be focused inward in prayer and practices of remembrance. And although spoken of as inward devotion, it is expressed outwardly in hospitality or welcoming the stranger. Being a witness also entails a commitment to extend a just and moral society. Devotion is based on the example of the prophets and on scripture. The interpretive community – who is allowed to read the signs – is debated. Harris argues that it should extend to all Muslims, not just clerics.

### **Buddhism**

In an interview about his novel, *Anil's Ghost*, Michael Ondaatje said that he felt a kind of responsibility to write the book set in Sri Lanka's civil war.<sup>10</sup> Ondaatje, who himself emigrated to Canada from Sri Lanka, says that in researching the book he listened to people as a witness. As he listened to people tell him of their experience of the war, he said that he did not judge, but rather tried to understand what it would be like to live with the fear caused by the war. In the novel, Anil Tissera returns to her native Sri Lanka as a forensic anthropologist with an international human rights organization after an absence of more than fifteen years. There is frequent violence in the streets. Men and women have disappeared. In their investigation, Anil and Sarath, her colleague, enlist the help of Ananda to reconstruct the face of the victim from a skeleton. Before the war, Ananda had been someone who was to paint eyes on the Buddha image in a ceremony called *Nētra Mangala*. The ceremony is explained to Anil: "*Nētra* means "eye." It is a ritual of the eyes. A special artist is needed to paint eyes on a holy figure. It is always

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<sup>10</sup> Ondaatje notes "from the mid-1980's to the early 1990's, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups, the government, the antigovernment insurgents

the last thing done. It is what gives the image life. Like a fuse. The eyes are a fuse. It has to happen before a statue or a painting in a *vihara* can become a holy thing” (2000: 97). Ondaatje elaborates “The eyes must be painted in the morning, at five. The hour the Buddha attained enlightenment. ... Without the eyes there is no existence. The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence” (99). At the end of the novel, Ananda performs *Nētra Mangala*, painting the eyes on a new statue of Buddha. Ondaatje writes “This is what he felt. As an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, spectres of retaliation” (304). I recount this passage because of the central idea of ‘sight’ in Buddhist traditions. The term ‘witness’ seems to be quite recently adopted in Buddhist traditions in response to violence. We find witness in practices of ‘Engaged Buddhism.’

In an interview American Buddhist, Gary Snyder was asked if there were ways that Buddhism might benefit from Christian or Occidental religious traditions. Gary Snyder answered that practitioners from Western culture and being probably from Christian or Jewish backgrounds, are already bringing those things into Buddhism, by virtue of their personalities and their background. Snyder continues

My own view is that Buddhists can profit from, but wouldn't necessarily want to emulate, an understanding of the Christian concern for history, and the historical fact of the Christian concern for personality, as a kind of leavening in the evolution in Buddhist thought. I think that the Buddhist sects also have to admire the commitment of certain Christian sects, such as the Quakers, to peace, and the Christian idea of witness and bearing witness as a matter of conscience. It has pitfalls from a Buddhist standpoint, pitfalls of ego-stimulation. But that side of Christian engagement is admirable. It certainly can be learned from. Buddhists can learn from, or at least take note

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in the south, and the separatists guerillas in the north. [...] Today the war in Sri Lanka continues in a different form” (Author's Note, cover page).

of, the section of the Church that is doing liberation theology. Buddhism has been quiescent, socially, for much of its history, and what and how it becomes more active in the social sphere is going to be very interesting. I'm sure it will, because in the West everybody gets more social. And also the power makes a difference: political action, political involvement, makes a difference in a pluralistic democracy, whereas in a traditional Asian culture there's very little direct political action possible. (Ingram, *et al*, 1988: 25)

Snyder describes a change in social involvement in Buddhist practice, a change that may have been influenced by other religious traditions, but is not limited to Buddhism in the West. Here I consider three examples of witness in Buddhist practice – Thich Nhat Hanh and the Tiep Hien Order, Bernard Glassman and the Peacemaker Order, and the Think Sangha.

### Engaged Buddhism

Thich Nhat Hanh was exiled from his country in 1966 because of his work for peace. In a journal entry written on July 12, 1965, Hahn states “Engaged Buddhism in Vietnam teaches that good works do not need to be reserved for the pagoda, but can be extended to towns and villages” (1966: 196).<sup>11</sup> Thu, a young man working at the monastery in Saigon, replied to a question about his work “People are suffering so much that even the Buddha no longer sits in the temple all the time” (196). Hanh explains

It does not make sense for students of the Buddha to isolate themselves inside a temple, or they are not his true students. Buddhas are to be found in places of suffering. Thu said it perfectly. We do not need to borrow the words of Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Barth, or Martin Buber to tell us what to do. We are already, in our own way, bringing about a revolution in Buddhist teaching. Young people like Thu are leading the way into new streams of Buddhist thought and action. They are giving birth to an engaged Buddhism. (197)

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<sup>11</sup> The journals, titled *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, were kept during the years 1962-1964. The journals were published in English translation in 1998.

Here we can see a change in Buddhist practice in response to the suffering of people, particularly the suffering brought on by the war. Hanh says that the only reason Buddha was in the temple was because people put him there. The founding of the Tiep Hien Order in the middle of the Vietnam War was a break with the 2500 year tradition of apoliticism (Knabb, 2002).

Hanh speaks directly of being a witness in his poems on the war in Vietnam. One such poem is titled “The Witness Remains.”

Flarebombs bloom on the dark sky.  
A child claps his hands and laughs.  
I hear the sound of guns,  
and the laughter dies.

But the witness  
remains.

Thich Nhat Hanh comments on this poem that flarebombs are to detect the presence of enemies. He writes “When you are dominated by fear, anyone can be seen as an enemy, even a little child. The witness is you. And me” (1993: 26). We are the ones who see in a way dominated by fear and also the ones who can hear the child’s laughter die. In his teaching, Thich Nhat Hanh stresses that in Buddhism the most important precept of all is to live in awareness, to know what is going on. To live in awareness entails recognizing our responsibility to one another, seeing our selves as co-responsible. As I understand it, as witnesses, we are co-responsible for the bombs and the child’s laughter dying.

We can also see the idea of witness in Hanh’s work in reconciliation. He explains “Reconciliation is to understand both sides, to go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by the other side, and then to go to the other side and describe the suffering that is endured by the first side. Doing only that will be a great help for peace.”

(1987:70). Here we see an emphasis on compassion and understanding of both sides similar to Michael Lerner's statement of prophetic witness that involved an understanding of both sides in the Israeli and Palestinian conflict.

### Zen Peace-Making Order

The Zen Peacemaker Order founded by Roshi Bernie Glassman in 1994. In the prologue to his book *Bearing Witness*, Glassman recounts that he wanted a place to explore questions such as: "What keeps us feeling separate from each other? What keeps us thinking we know the right way? What keeps us from seeing our unity, from appreciating everything as it is? And what are the peacemaking forms that will help all beings experience their interdependence? From this exploration three tenets have emerged: not-knowing, bearing witness, and healing. In Glassman's terms, the first tenet, 'not knowing,' demands separation from the familiar, conditioned world of knowing and thus, allows the opening of a beginner's mind. The second tenet, 'bearing witness,' emphasizes being fully present to the suffering and joy in oneself and in the world. And the third tenet is 'healing oneself and others' through returning to the world with the aspiration of liberating oneself and others from suffering.

Glassman writes about these tenets in connection with the regular retreats the Order holds in Auschwitz. "At Auschwitz it is not hard to let go of fixed ideas. The place itself, with its endless gray skies overlooking miles of barbed wire and crumbling extermination compounds, is so terrifying that no matter how much we prepare for the visit, no matter how much we've read about it or pondered, it overwhelms us" (1996). The group reads the names of people who were killed in the gas chambers. Glassman

explains

For telling names is like telling stories. When we recite the name out loud, dead bones come to life, the bones of men, women, and children from all over Europe. They lived, some grew up, some married, some had children, and all died. Their names become our names, their stories, our stories. That is what happens when we bear witness.

In bearing witness to a situation, Glassman holds, we become each and every aspect of that situation. Thus, when we bear witness to Auschwitz, at that moment there is no separation between us and the people who died. Further, Glassman points out, there is also no separation between us and the people who killed. “We ourselves, as individuals, with our identities and ego structure, disappear, and we become the terrified people getting off the trains, the indifferent or brutal guards, the snarling dogs, the doctor who points right or left, the smoke and ash belching from the chimneys. When we bear witness to Auschwitz, we are nothing but all the elements of Auschwitz.” Glassman continues “If I really bear witness, if I become all the voices of Auschwitz, then it is myself that I am forgiving, no one else. [...] When we're bearing witness to Auschwitz, we're doing nothing other than bearing witness to aspects of ourselves. Only when we see that all these demons are nothing other than us, can we actually take action.” Joan Halifax, a teacher in the Peacemaking Order, puts it this way “We are the story as we bear witness; we become one with the story” (1999: 178).

### Think Sangha

Think-Sangha is a diverse group of Buddhists from different parts of the world which has focused on producing Buddhists critiques of social structures and alternative social models, and providing materials and resource people for trainings, conferences, and research on social issues and grassroots activism. I relate the work of the group at a

meeting in Thailand with the theme “Buddhist Responses to Modern Violence.”

Jonathon Watts explains that the participants were asked to talk about how their Buddhist identity influenced, either as a support or as a hindrance, their social activism. The group was introduced to Johan Galtung’s work concerning direct, structural, and cultural violence. Galtung posits three different faces of violence:

1. Direct violence, which is the act of actual harming.
2. Structural violence which is the systems, institutions, and structures that may lead to direct violence, yet which also embody a whole process of violence.
3. Cultural violence, which is the symbols, images, and customs that legitimize structural and direct violence. (Watts, 2003: 24)

The relation between the three can be understood with the image of an iceberg – direct violence is the apex of the iceberg poking out of the water, structural and cultural violence form its base. The latter two may be hidden from sight depending on the perceiver’s social awareness. Watts adopts a use of bearing witness to mean breaking the silence.

Ouyporn Khuankaew, who works in the Buddhist women’s activist network called the International Women’s Partnership (IWP), runs workshops across southeast and south Asia on women’s leadership, empowerment, and nonviolence. She began the session following the outline of structural violence with four women telling their stories. These accounts of experience, Khuankaew explains, point to the need for a radical reinterpretation of the central concepts, such as the idea of ‘karma.’ Khuankaew used the idea of ‘structural karma’ to refer to the way the teaching of karma in Buddhism has come to devalue women and create a structure (and a culture) of patriarchy into which both women and men are inculcated (25). She argued that intention must be taken into account in the teaching of karma. In their work, the women’s activist network enlarged

the perspective of karma from the popular interpretation –“what you did” to include the issue of complicity –“what you didn’t do”—and finally to one also imbued with intention—“what you can do” (25). Khuankaew notes that women need to move beyond seeing their suffering as a result of individual karma for which they are to blame – to identifying violence, understanding root causes, looking for solutions, then working for change (26). Karma can be understood as intentional, moral action and not passive acceptance of the results of past acts.

Watts concludes

Over these days we developed an experiential process which began with storytelling and the sharing of personal experiences, and then moved into deeper structural analysis of the issues that emerged from these stories. Along the way, we found ourselves deeply engaged in “ethical praxis,” that is, working as a dialogical community to explore and negotiate acts of personal-social transformation. (29)

The act of storytelling, in Watts’ view, does not only expose injustice, but acts therapeutically. For the speaker, it serves as an act of bearing witness and gaining recognition after a long period of existing in silence and marginalization. For the listener, it can awaken feelings of remorse and compassion in being witness to the real pain of others (29). The storytelling establishes trust. If this trust is not established in the first act of storytelling, then structural analysis will not be embedded in an ethical praxis of dialogical communication. Watts uses the term ‘bearing witness’ to refer to telling an experience of violence, breaking the silence. Watts holds that this Buddhist model of ethical praxis goes beyond theorizing about dialogical community by some western thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas. The difference that Watts sees is that it integrates the nonargumentative but completely essential act of storytelling and second, it integrates the act of inner transformation as an essential foundation to ethical praxis. The women’s



work in the *International Women's Partnership* provides a framework for profound interpretations of accepted doctrine through bearing witness and responding as a witness.

I have given three examples of 'witness' and 'bearing witness' in what might be called engaged Buddhism. The term 'witness,' if understood to have to do with social justice and a struggle against oppression, represents a fairly recent change in Buddhist practice. The family of usages of the term 'witness' is more limited in Buddhist practice, because the term does seem to be largely adopted. However, as Thich Nhat Hanh points out, the roots of social involvement can be traced in Buddhist thought. These roots include compassion, sight, and a sense of 'oneness.' Bernie Glassman defined bearing witness as being fully present to the suffering and joy in oneself and in the world. We are the elements of Auschwitz, all the voices of Auschwitz. We are the story as we bear witness – it is thoroughly experiential. The women's work as portrayed in the meeting of the Think Sangha is a clear example of interpretive communities within Buddhist practice.

### **Conclusion**

The three Abrahamic traditions have much in common in the way that witness is used. In each faith, we can find the idea of witness as a stand against oppression. A family of usages includes: speaking on behalf of the other against oppression; being present to the pain and joy of world; and living in keeping with one's beliefs, promises, or convictions within ongoing interpretive communities. The same can be said of Buddhist traditions. The accounts I have selected illustrate the fertile soil that we draw on when we speak of religious conceptions of witness. I named three dangers in the

introduction to this chapter: the assumption of conversion; dogmatism; and closed boundaries on the community and on who is allowed to interpret scripture. The examples support the position that the dangers can be addressed within faith communities.

Writing on the relation between religion and ethics, Emmanuel Katongole states “In the absence of a “story of stories,” rational contact between traditions takes the form of witness” (172). In his view, “witness, as a form of contact between historically constituted traditions, affirms the realization that no one tradition is in possession of the truth. If that were the case, then contact between historical constituted traditions would take the preferred form of imposition or enforcement. Instead, the historical nature of truth makes contact between groups as necessarily hermeneutical” (172). Katongole sees witness as a kind of confrontation between historically constituted forms of truths, an interpretive dialogue which is capable of generating critical attentiveness by which truth is dialectically recognized, revised, or extended (172). We’ve seen this kind of witness at work within the interpretive practice I have described in this chapter. Such a conception of witness does not exclude, and indeed, supports, the connection between witness and oppression, interpretive practice, and living in keeping with your beliefs.

## CHAPTER 3

### 'WITNESS' IN EDUCATIONAL LITERATURE

In this chapter, I critically appraise three contemporary proposals that employ the notions of 'witness' and 'bearing witness' in education. In the first proposal, a "pedagogy of commemoration," Roger Simon argues that students should take on the obligations of a witness to remember particular events of what he calls 'historical trauma' in a way that does not reproduce relations of hate. In the second proposal I examine, a "pedagogy of discomfort," Megan Boler advocates a testimonial reading practice in which students engage in 'collective witnessing' to trace how our emotions may be informed by dominant discourses in ways that result in learned patterns of inattention. In the third proposal, Sandra Bloom and Michael Reichert assert that a "collective responsibility to bear witness" is vital to control ever-widening cycles of violence engulfing society. Students and teachers are asked to respond as witnesses to the violence that they see around them. In each of these different proposals, being a witness or witnessing is a particular kind of response that works to eliminate relations of violence and oppression. Two conceptions of witness, that of Simon and that of Bloom and Reichert, explicitly draw on religious usages of witness as a stand against violence. Boler's conception of witness is in keeping with these usages, even though she does not explicitly draw on them.

Both Simon's and Boler's pedagogy are firmly rooted in liberatory pedagogy. As noted in Chapter 1, in the paradigmatic example in liberatory education a teacher presents

a text from a dominant discourse to students from a disadvantaged group with the aim of empowering those students to see and challenge ideologies in the dominant culture surrounding them (Endres, 2001: 407). In Simon's and Boler's pedagogy students examine texts; however, both seem to assume that the texts are presented to a privileged group with the aim of becoming aware of privilege. Bloom and Reichert draw their conception of witness from actions that are rooted in the commitments expressed in liberation theology; they call us all to bear witness to the violence so that we can liberate ourselves from "the traumatic re-enactment of violence" (1998: xiii). However, the pedagogy itself is only briefly outlined and does not refer liberatory education, nor cover any of the expected territory of a critical read of a text. Bloom and Reichert's proposal is less traditionally rooted in liberatory education.

I appraise the conception of witness in each of the three proposals utilizing the criteria for an adequate conception of witness laid out in Chapter 1. These criteria, as I have articulated them, are as follows.

An adequate conception of witness:

- 1) will fit to some degree with ordinary usage;
- 2) will not be reducible to something else;
- 3) will privilege face-to-face encounters;
- 4) will not foreclose on attention to structural oppression, and;
- 5) the testimony will be amenable to rational work.

I begin the review with Roger Simon's conception of witness within a 'pedagogy of commemoration.'

### A Pedagogy of Commemoration

In an article entitled “The Pedagogy of Commemoration and the Formation of Collective Memory,” Roger Simon introduces his project by reciting the Jewish proverb “Forgetting leads to exile; remembering leads to redemption” (1994: 5). Left unqualified, Simon asserts this proverb may be a delusion. As an example, Simon points to Bosnia where the legacy of memory is “the reproduction of an enmity in which one’s identity is enhanced by the removal and annihilation of another” and that “within this legacy, hate is engendered by memory and returns recursively to simplify memory” (5). Linking memory to justice, Simon asks “Given the possibility that the antonym of “forgetting” is not “remembering” but justice, I am commanded to see, hear, and remember. But then, how should I do so? What forms of memory can give just recollection to this violence without reproducing relations of hate?” (6). Simon suggests that to find redemption we must attend to how we remember and to how we ask students to remember particular events. He is concerned with the commemoration of four historical events in particular: the conquest of the ‘New World’; the Middle Passage; the Holocaust; and the 1981 massacre of women at the *Ecole Polytechnique* in Montreal. These events of ‘historical trauma’ are selected because each “incorporates, as one aspect of its specificity, violence perpetrated on persons because of their membership in a larger group conceived of in terms of particular common characteristics” (6). Simon states that he sees a “just recollection of violence” as a component of a larger agenda to re-examine “the place and function of difference in the North American cultures that have been strongly influenced by 1500 years of Christian European epistemologies” (6). Although he does not elaborate this larger agenda, Simon’s immediate aim is to formulate a pedagogy which

allows students to “rethink the *logos* for making sensible and justifiable practices within which one people establish relations of exploitation, dominion, or indifference in regard to another” (6). At the center of Simon’s proposed pedagogy is the idea of the student as witness.

A commemorative pedagogy is defined as “when we as educators intentionally try to provoke remembrance through an engagement with some text, image, or person-to-person encounter” (10). We engage students in these images and narratives, Simon asserts, with the intention of “provok[ing] structures of meaning and feeling which could be drawn upon in the determination of one’s present actions and future possibilities” (10).

Simon lists four common attitudes of listening to narrative accounts or viewing artwork:

- (a) Relative indifference characterized by the question “What does this have to do with me?”
- (b) Defensive skepticism, where one listens for historical inaccuracies that might justify a narrative’s dismissal.
- (c) Ethnographic curiosity which confers on the story and the storyteller the status of ‘objects’ whose meaning must be rendered familiar to the listener on the listener’s own terms.
- (d) Intense self-identification with the persona of the story. (12-13)

Simon argues that none of these positions are adequate because “What can be heard from these positions presents little basis for producing living memories that might impact on one’s actions and the moral character of non-indigenous cultural identities” (13). A key concept we see invoked in this quotation is that of a ‘living memory.’ From Simon’s statement we can understand living memory as a memory that informs our decisions and the kind of relations that we have with others. A living memory has an impact on who we see ourselves to be and, potentially, Simon suggests, “the moral character of one’s cultural identity.” In his account, witness is proposed as a position or attitude of listening that can produce living memory.

Roger Simon draws his conception of a witness “metaphorically from a depiction of the primal Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt” (20). Simon writes

During this Exodus, which culminated in the revelations at Sinai, the Jewish people were called to “be present” to a showing and telling that had the power to alter basic conceptions of how people thought about the interrelated moments of the past, present, and future. Additionally, this witnessing experience enabled and obligated those who saw and heard to, in turn, tell or show to others [in this case, to later generations] what they had seen, heard, felt—not just as individuals but as a people connected to others within a set of determinate networks defined within an historical conjuncture. (20)

‘Being present’ as a witness changes who we take ourselves to be as individuals and as a people in relation to others and obligates us to remember this in what we say and do.

Simon proposes that an act of witnessing should be comprised of the following elements:

- (a) A witness embodies a position in which she or he can be addressed simultaneously as an individual and as a member of one or more communities.
- (b) In the very organization of the act of witnessing, a witness is called upon to participate in a practice of commemoration and thereby is recursively constructed as a member of a public network that supports and sustains such a commemoration.
- (c) A witness is required by the very process of undergoing an act of witnessing to do the work of comprehending the alterations in subjectivity initiated by what one has heard, seen, or felt.
- (d) A witness takes on the obligation to tell others who participate in social networks with the witness what one has seen, heard and felt and to begin to act toward others in a way informed by the experience of witnessing. (20)

In drawing on the Exodus from Egypt, Simon secularizes the theological imperative in the Jewish faith to pass the memory of the flight from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai from generation to generation. The student is put in the position of a witness who is addressed by an image or narrative and takes on an obligation to remember, as the tribe of Israel was addressed by God and promised to remember.

The teacher's responsibility is to engage students in experiences that demand (or command) them to be present as a witness. Indeed, Simon recommends that teaching practices be evaluated on the basis of how strongly the selected testimony addresses students as a potential witness. Simon elaborates:

Whether visiting a museum or memorial; or engaging in historical texts, survivor testimony, literature, poetry, drama or visual art; or participating in vigils, rituals, or re-stagings, this notion of witnessing may be useful as one normative point of reference for interrogating the practices of commemorative pedagogy. Thus, one might ask of commemorative pedagogy: how does it address a potential witness, how does it "call" that person to participate in a network of other people committed to witnessing, how does a practice attempt to make its representations personal to potential witnesses so that these representations may be inscribed in living memory, and how does it attempt to initiate actions which might accrue from the experience of witnessing? (20-21)

In large part, it is the strength of the particular narrative or image that creates the conditions for "witnessing" the historical event, thereby producing a 'living memory.' Simon gives an example of what this pedagogy might have looked like in relation to commemorative events of the Quincentenary of Columbus's arrival in the New World. The pedagogy he has in mind would entail "finding a way for non-natives—as individuals who draw meaning from their own cultural identities—to directly engage in the history of European-initiated genocide and colonialism without distancing themselves from this history" (21). To engage students in this history, Simon suggests that rather than focus on Columbus as a man, we should have asked "By what right had the crown of Castile occupied and enslaved the inhabitants of territories to which it could make no prior claims based on history?" Pursuing an answer to this question would open a path to this same debate in 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain, a debate in which Bartolome de la Casas was a prominent speaker, thus allowing students to "disremember a mono-dimensional



Occidentalism” (22). Such research allows non-natives to claim a complex legacy. This more complex legacy, in turn, becomes part of a living memory that impacts who students see themselves to be in relation to one another as individuals and as members of groups.

Simon acknowledges that the obligations a student must take on as a witness are demanding. The selection of powerful testimony is one way motivation is addressed. Simon further addresses the question of motivation when he suggests that “any commemorative pedagogy must pay attention to the organization of a particular *kavannah* or **embodied cognizance** that enables and encourages a person to engage with the substance and structures of witnessing” (21, bold in Simon’s text). In another article, Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert suggest that a willingness to accept the obligations of witnessing must be nurtured in what becomes a ‘community of memory.’ In such a community, “practices of remembrance are contested, shaped, and deepened by consideration of the shared significance of what has been heard, seen, or read” and the “obligations of bearing witness or re-testifying can be worked out” (1997: 187). In my reading ‘*kavannah*’ usually refers to sincerity in prayer – he who has “directed his heart.” Rabbi Velvel Spiegler translates *kavannah* as attention, awareness, mindfulness, or being present. One way to cultivate attentiveness, Spiegler suggests, is by “listening carefully to what others are saying without busily constructing thoughts in response.” Simon takes up the idea of *kavannah* as attentiveness explicitly in an article titled “Innocence Without Naivete, Uprightness Without Stupidity: The Pedagogical *Kavannah* of Emmanuel Levinas” (2003). Writing about response to the testimony of a Holocaust survivor, Simon describes *kavannah* as an upright attentiveness toward the other, a sense of being

moved or astonished by the other. A pedagogy and classroom culture that values this kind of attentiveness, as I understand it, supports and motivates students to take up the obligations of witnessing.

To recount, according to Simon, the practice of remembrance has the potential to challenge “the *logos* which makes justifiable the practices by which one people establish relations of exploitation, dominion, and indifference in regard to another” in that accepting the obligations of a witness generates ‘living memory’ (1994: 6). Simon lists common ways of listening to or reading testimony that lack the potential for such change because, in his view, what is heard from these positions provides little basis for living memories that impact one’s moral character and actions. By definition, accepting the obligations of a witness produces living memory— a complex memory that impacts our actions toward others. Cultivating *kavannah*, understood as a sincere attentiveness to the other, supports carrying through the obligations of a witness.<sup>12</sup> In practice, the commemoration of historical trauma is intentionally provoked by narrative accounts or artwork selected by the teacher on the basis of its power to address students as witnesses. I turn now to an examination of how Simon’s conception of witness satisfies the criteria for what I have called a conception of witness adequate for use in liberatory education.

Simon explicitly ties his conception of witness to the primal Exodus from Egypt. The four elements that comprise the obligations of a witness follow from the theological imperative for the House of Israel to remember the flight from Egypt and the covenant with God. Simon draws on the normative sense of memory in Judaic conceptions of

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<sup>12</sup> Note that for Simon this attentiveness is not included as an obligation that one assumes in witnessing. This is in contrast to Levinas’ conception of witness.

witness, a memory that defines what it means to be a member of the House of Israel. In the conception of witness Simon outlines, the significance of an event of historical trauma is worked through in a community of memory, as the significance of the Exodus and the covenant, including what it means to live by the covenant, is worked out in Jewish communities. Simon's conception is in keeping with usages of the term 'witness' as carrying a memory within Jewish religious traditions. Prophetic witness, as such, is not referred to in Simon's conception of witness. By prophetic witness, I mean an account such as Michael Lerner's statement published in *Tikkun* in which he responds to the violence in Israel and the occupied territories. However, in that students bear witness or re-testify by telling others what they have heard, seen, and felt as one of the obligations of witnessing in Simon's conception, such re-testifying could be 'prophetic witness' if what is said entails a critique of society. This critique is expected because of the normative value attributed to the response of a witness; the response should lead to relations that are less dominated by violence. The connection of 'witness' to being a witness against oppression, though arguably rooted in the religious traditions of Abraham, is used broadly in relation to the idea of 'witness.' As for example, journalists who see it as their obligation to let the world know what is happening so that the account can be set straight and with the hope that others knowing will bring change.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ann Cooper, of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reports that eight journalists were killed in Sierra Leone in a matter of weeks, but with a new peace agreement, some reporters returned. One Sierra Leonean journalist explains "It is not easy for someone in my capacity to stay away from the country." Cooper continues "He had an obligation, he said, to help report on what was going on. In other words, he had to be there to witness, and report on the news" (1999:11).

More generally, outside of religious usages, we connect the idea of witness to accounts of events – traumatic or otherwise. We understand that the witness is someone who was there in person to see what happened and to hear what was said. But it is important to note that in the normative sense that Simon draws on, memory is passed down *as if* one were also present in the Sinai. This means that ‘witness’ does not only refer to someone who was there in person, but also to someone who carries the memory. Thus, a witness need not have been actually being present in person to an event or to the address of another to re-testify or bear witness. The witness can be once removed or many more times more distant from actually being present in person to an event or the address of another. Although the usages are complex, Simon’s conception of witness meets the first criterion in that it is in keeping with ordinary usages of the term.

Simon’s conception of witness does not meet the second criterion in that ‘witness’ is reducible to seeing violence. Witness is reduced to seeing and carrying a memory of violence of historical trauma in order to enter into relations that are less violent. Simon prescribes what students are to see and what counts as testimony, while at the same time not giving enough guidance in regard to how students might recognize testimony outside of school contexts.

At first glance, Simon’s conception of witness does not seem to privilege face-to-face encounters in that there is no mention of students or the teacher listening to one another in a way that fulfills the obligations of witness or witnessing. Simon and Eppert are concerned with remembering particular events of historical trauma and so it is these distant addresses that are privileged. But I believe it is a mistake to conclude that Simon’s conception of witness does not privilege face-to-face encounters. In the Judaic

conception of witnessing as remembrance, we can trace the memory back to a face-to-face encounter: being present to God's address in the Sinai. Many argue that a similar face-to-face encounter with those who were imprisoned and those who died in the death camps of the Third Reich must be remembered. In both, the witness carries the memory *as if* he or she was present to the address of the other.<sup>14</sup> In the fact that one carries the memory as if she or he were present, face-to-face encounters are privileged in Simon's conception of witness. But this is a confusing sort of privilege when taken out of the context of religious usages. In terms of pedagogy, hearing an address as if one were present is not the same as being actually present. As Katongole notes, there is a moral and epistemological challenge in face-to-face encounters that cannot be duplicated in imaginative encounters.

As a particular way of listening, the obligations of a witness that Simon outlines can be met in face-to-face encounters.<sup>15</sup> It seems to me that meeting these obligations in face-to-face encounters would, at a minimum, support Simon's aim of challenging students to "rethink the logos for making sensible and justifiable practices within which one people establish relations of exploitation, dominion, or indifference in regard to another" (1994: 6). Also, working with Simon and Eppert, Sharon Rosenberg focuses on historical event of violence against women and, in particular, the shooting of fourteen women in classrooms at a University in Montreal in 1989. Rosenberg argues that "the significance of bearing witness to violence lies not only with how it may call a witness into an ethical relation with, in the instance of the massacre, the fourteen murdered

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<sup>14</sup> The 'Other' here may be God's address, the address of the Häftling in the camps, or the address of the survivor of the camps.

women, but also how it may open spaces for those already subjected to (gendered) violences to remember differently those legacies and how they may weigh now” (1997:

5). She queries

How might students and teachers take account of the traumas differently brought into school lives? What would it mean to create conditions upon which these traumas might be witnessed as part of the daily, on-going work of feminist pedagogy? (129)

In order to take account of the traumas brought into school lives or the potential address of those present, a pedagogy of commemoration would seem to require or call for listening as a witness to one another in the classroom.

The fourth criterion is that a conception of witness cannot foreclose on attention to structural oppression. The obligations require that witnesses see themselves as members of groups and thus there is a structural component built into the conception. But whether or not we can see structural oppression is tied to rational work. If we accept the account as true, it seems that we will often foreclose on the kind of questions that would include an examination of structural oppression. Simon and Eppert address the concern that we must accept the testimony as true; however, we need to say more about the way that claims are examined. The normalized rules may foreclose on seeing or hearing claims of oppression.

Simon’s close adherence to the Exodus from Egypt and the Judaic conception of witness is problematic in regard to the criterion that the testimony be amenable to rational work. One problem is the presumed relation between change and inquiry in that Simon presupposes that change precedes inquiry. A second problem is the inheritance of a first

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<sup>15</sup> Simon first writes of the responsibilities in terms of a practice of listening, but the examples that he gives is of viewing art work and secondly of reading text.

person account – as if you were there – being transferred to any first person account. I explain each concern in turn. In naming the obligations or elements of witness, Simon states that “a witness is required by the very process of undergoing an act of witnessing to do the work of comprehending the alterations in subjectivity initiated by what one has heard, seen, or felt” (1994: 20). He does not elaborate on how he uses subjectivity, but briefly stated, I take subjectivity to be the experience of ‘what its like to be’ a certain conscious being. That the act of witnessing does indeed make such alterations in subjectivity is a normative point on which Simon evaluates the effectiveness of the pedagogy and the testimony selected by the teacher. The assumption of a change or alteration in subjectivity is inherent in and inherited from the metaphor of the primal Exodus. God spoke in lightening and thunder to the tribe of Israel and thus there was little choice but to be changed. On Simon’s account, students – as witnesses – are present to a particularly powerful telling. Students are changed by this telling and then take account of the change. This assumed relation between change and inquiry is problematic in that it does not take into account how hard we sometimes have to work at making changes and in that we do want to have a way of guarding against being changed by misleading or false accounts. This leads to the next point.

On the second problem, memory is handed down as the memory of journey is handed down in the celebration of Passover celebration and as Alan Berger argues, along with many others, that the memory of the Holocaust should be passed through the generations. Utilized in Simon’s conception of witness for a pedagogy of commemoration, this means that students accept the account as true and begin figuring out what it means – “a consideration of the shared significance of what was heard, seen,

or read” (1997: 187). In Simon’s account, the students work out the change in themselves and the shared significance for how we live together. The problem is that students do not question the veracity of the testimony. Does it matter to this discussion, for example, that in Rigoberta Menchu’s account of the civil war in Guatemala, not all of the events portrayed as her experience actually happened to her and her family?<sup>16</sup> Simon does seem to recognize the lack of questioning the testimony as a problem. In a later article the question of judging the accuracy of the text, as well as the significance of testimony is taken up. He and Claudia Eppert suggest that the witness must listen with a double attentiveness, of which the first form is to judge the accuracy and historical significance of testimony and the second form is a consignment of oneself as an apprentice to the provision of the testimony (1997: 178-179). To judge the accuracy of testimony, the authors advocate using what is already there—the normalized rules for making valid assertions. This is rational work and so Simon’s conception of witness does meet this criterion. However, in their answer, Simon and Eppert do not acknowledge that we may need to challenge to the normalized rules.

In sum, Simon’s conception of witness meets the first criterion for conceptual clarity in that the conception is in keeping with ordinary usages of ‘witness.’ That witnessing has to do with a particular kind of seeing and hearing to address relations of violence and oppression is in keeping with normative uses of what we might call ‘prophetic witness.’ However, Simon’s conception of witness reduces the response of a witness to a response to historical trauma. In that the conception of witness can be traced

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<sup>16</sup> Rigoberta Menchu’s book *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984) has been at the center of an extended controversy over the truth of her account.



back to a direct encounter with the other, we can say that the conception of witness does privilege face-to-face encounters, even though Simon does not take this up. The testimony is amenable to rational work, but more needs to be said about how the testimony is challenged to say that the conception does not foreclose on attention to structural oppression.

### **A Pedagogy of Discomfort**

In *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, Megan Boler traces a history of discourses of emotion in education. She states “the first premise of *Feeling Power* is that within education, as in the wider culture, emotions are a site of social control” (1999: xvii). Boler makes the case that “students and teachers have been controlled and shaped by dominant discourses of emotion, which [she] identifies as the moral/religious, scientific/medical, and rational discourses of emotion” (xvii). Arguing that emotions can be developed as sites of resistance to dominant discourses, Boler proposes a “pedagogy of discomfort” as one way of inviting emotions into critical and ethical inquiry. Central to Boler’s proposed pedagogy is the practice of ‘collective witnessing’ and ‘testimonial reading.’ Boler links witnessing to genealogy, claiming that “the direction for a pedagogy of emotions is genealogy: not confession, not therapy or spectating and voyeurism, but witnessing” (18). Drawing on poststructural concepts, Boler argues that “emotions are not simply located in an individual or a personality, but in a subject who is shaped by dominant discourses and ideologies and who also resists these ideologies

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Some of this controversy, to give just one example, is analyzed in Dorothy Smith’s article “Rigoberta Menchu and David Stoll: Contending Stories” (2003).

through emotional knowledge and critical inquiry” (20). Summarizing Foucault’s concepts of archeology and genealogy, Boler writes:

*Archaeology* describes a way to analyze the discourses that subject individuals to the internalization of capitalist and patriarchal power, values, and ideologies (Foucault, 1980:85). *Genealogy* describes how we can glimpse resistances to this subjectification: At the same time as discourses of discipline and control emerge, the subjects of power also are able to develop “subjugated knowledges” and thus resist and transform power. Power is not monolithic, but is a dynamic flux that thrives within social relations. (20)

Boler goes on to say that “What we least understand is how these lived relations of power manifest in terms of emotions and structures of feeling” (20). She makes the strong claim that understanding the relation of emotions and power is required if we want to act to shift power relations. Boler’s aim is an acknowledged shift in power relations. She wants action, a measurable change in her students and society. Like Roger Simon, Boler looks to witness to support or bring a transformation of consciousness. Boler sees education “as a means to challenge rigid patterns of thinking that perpetuate injustice and instead encourage flexible analytic skills, which include the ability to self-reflectively evaluate the complex relations of power and emotion” (157). She writes “As an educator I understand my role to be not merely to teach critical thinking, but to teach a critical thinking that seeks to transform consciousness in such a way that a Holocaust could never happen again” (157). In this section, I describe the practices of testimonial reading, collective witnessing, and bearing witness that Boler offers as a means of effecting this powerful transformation of consciousness.

Boler explicates the practice of a testimonial reading by contrasting it to reading which ends in empathy. Both Dewey and Rosenblatt, Boler notes, wrote “optimistically of their faith in the ‘social imagination’ developed in part through literature which allows

the reader the possibility of identifying with the “other” and thereby developing modes of moral understanding thought to build democracy” (155). Boler urges us to ask who and what benefits from the production of empathy and suggests that this model may be doing our social vision more harm than good (156). Like Simon, Boler cautions against over-identification as it forecloses on our ability to see difference, and thus forecloses on our ability to take responsibility for our position.<sup>17</sup> Boler does not believe that empathy has the potential to lead us to anything close to justice; indeed, she writes “passive empathy produces no action towards justice but situates the powerful Western eye/I as the judging subject, never called upon to gaze at her own reflection” (161). This concern leads to the question “How might we read, not through an ethics of universal reversibility? What would a reading practice look like, if not founded on the consumptive binary self/other which threatens annihilation of the other’s difference?” (165). In answer, Boler proposes the practice of testimonial reading.

In a testimonial reading, by definition, the reader must take responsibility for her assumptions and actions. Boler elaborates:

The primary difference between passive empathy and testimonial reading is the responsibility borne by the reader. Instead of a consumptive focus on the other, the reader accepts a commitment to rethink her own assumptions, and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as one’s views are challenged. (164)

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<sup>17</sup> The problem is that we are likely to feel ourselves as oppressed, when indeed we may be the oppressors. In the case of the Holocaust, in feeling empathy Christians might identify with the suffering of Jews, but to position such suffering as universal misses that it was violence of one group against another. James Moore argues that seeing Auschwitz as a symbol of inhumanity against all humans ignores the particularity of Auschwitz, “the bald fact that this was a killing place where the victims were primarily Jews and the perpetrators were primarily, if only nominally, Christians” (2001: 438).

Boler does not abandon empathy, indeed, she holds that “empathy offers a connection and communication we don’t want to lose” (165). She writes “What is at stake is not only the ability to empathize with the very distant other, but to recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront” (166). A testimonial reading, Boler proposes, is an active reading practice that involves the reader challenging her own assumptions and world views” (166). Boler relates this task to Shoshana Felman’s and Dori Laub’s description of a “crisis of truth” in the face of trauma. The reader has a responsibility as a “co-producer of truth”; a responsibility which “requires a committed interrogation of the reader’s response as she faces the other’s experience” (166). In this interrogation, the reader “can identify the taken-for-granted social structures of [her] own historical moment which mirror those encountered by the protagonist” (170). Boler writes that a “testimonial reading pushes us to recognize that a novel or biography reflects not merely a distant other, but analogous social relations in our own environment, in which our economic and social positions are implicated” (170). To restate, in a testimonial reading the reader has a responsibility to:

- (a) Rethink her assumptions and worldviews.
- (b) Confront the internal obstacles she encounters as her views are challenged.
- (c) Identify taken for granted social structures of her own historical moment.
- (d) Recognize herself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must face in analogous social relations.

It is taking up these responsibilities that distinguishes a testimonial reading from passive empathy. Each responsibility requires the reader to look to herself, rather than put herself in the other’s shoes.

To meet these responsibilities, Boler proposes the practice of ‘collective witnessing’ as opposed to individual self-reflection. Individual self-reflection, in Boler’s

view, will not allow the reader to meet these responsibilities because we cannot, on our own, become aware of our ‘inscribed habits of inattention.’ Socially determined inscribed habits of inattention refer to what we learn to pay attention to or, in other words, to see and not to see. Boler defines witnessing as an “entree into a collectivized engagement in learning to see differently” (176). It is not quite clear what Boler means by a collectivized engagement. The responsibilities of the witness that Simon names require that we see ourselves as members of groups, of collectivities. Recognizing analogous situations would seem to require identification with a group or groups. And Boler, like Simon, does see us related to one another in cultural histories. However, because collectivized engagement is opposed to individual self-reflection, it thus seems best understood as group discussion within the classroom.

Boler conceptualizes collective witnessing as both inquiry and a call to action. As inquiry, witnessing is linked to genealogy—to a tracing of our emotions within a social context to learn to see what we are in the habit of not seeing or what Boler calls our ‘inscribed habits of inattention.’ A pedagogy of discomfort, Boler explains, is an invitation for

educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others. Within this culture of inquiry and flexibility, a central focus is to recognize how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see. (176-177)

Boler elaborates that “in contrast to the admonition to “know thyself,” collective witnessing is always understood in relation to others, and in relation to personal and cultural histories and material conditions. To honor these complexities requires learning to develop genealogies of one’s positionalities and emotional resistances” (178). The

pedagogy aims “to invite students and educators to examine how our modes of seeing have been shaped specifically by the dominant culture of the historical moment” (179). The call to action takes up the question: What now, now that we see differently?

Boler also uses bearing witness or witnessing, interchangeably, to refer to a ‘medium of perception.’ She explains that in learning to recognize these patterns of emotional selectivity, one also learns to recognize when one spectates versus when one witnesses. Spectating does not involve a critical analysis of the images, but rather “we permit ourselves easy identification with dominant representations of good and evil” (184). Witnessing involves this critical analysis. Boler notes that recognizing discomfort usually brings a sense of either guilt or innocence. This is a trap to be avoided, in Boler’s view. “Through learning to see how and when one spectates or bears witness it becomes possible, as least provisionally, to inhabit a more ambiguous sense of self not reduced to either guilt or innocence. In this process one acknowledges profound interconnections with others, and how emotions, beliefs, and actions are collaboratively co-implicated” (187). Seeing how we are co-implicated, students and educators may experience their identity as threatened. Witnessing—this critical analysis—“involves recognizing moral relations not simply as a “perspectival” difference—“we all see things differently”—but rather, that how we see or choose not to see has ethical implications and may even cause others to suffer” (195). Both bearing witness and collective witnessing support the testimonial reading that Boler hopes will result in action that actually shifts power relations.

The effort of a testimonial reading is undertaken as an act of love. One of Boler’s university students states in conclusion to a response to *MAUS* that “The collective guilt

which overpowers many of us should not be the reason for examining the Holocaust. We need to explore the origin of the cruelty of it” (172). Boler writes

To explore the origins of this cruelty requires not only multifaceted historical studies, but testimonial reading. Neither empathy nor historical knowledge alone suffices to shoulder the responsibilities of this task. To excavate the structures of feeling that mediate testimonial reading is, in a sense, a labor of love. (172)

I understand Boler to mean that the reason we take on the difficult task of a testimonial reading, and the collective witnessing it entails, is a sense of love or connection to others.

In sum, for Boler, the responsibility assumed by the reader is the defining factor of a testimonial reading. This responsibility is not so much to the author of the text, the persona in the text, or to the events reported or portrayed in the text, but to others in analogous social relations. The reader meets this responsibility by engaging in collective witnessing, which is defined as both inquiry and a call to action. The inquiry involves collective engagement in becoming aware of one’s ‘inscribed habits of inattention,’ and thus involves learning to see differently. We learn to see differently through tracing the history of our emotions, including how they are shaped by dominant discourses and where we resist dominant discourses. The reader sees herself in relationship to others and acknowledges “how emotions, beliefs, and actions are collaboratively co-implicated.” Witnessing requires us to accept that there are ethical implications of what we see or chose to not see. This leads us back to the call to action. As a result of seeing differently, witnessing instead of spectating, we are called to act so that there is a shift in power relations.

That witnessing that has to do with seeing is in keeping an ordinary sense of the term. Boler defines witnessing as an “entree into a collectivized engagement in learning

to see differently” (176). Boler is interested in a particular kind of seeing, a seeing that leads to action and to an actual change in the conditions of society. In collective witnessing, students become aware of and learn to see beyond what Boler calls ‘inscribed habits of inattention.’ This awareness is gained through conversation with others in the classroom, as I understand Boler’s proposal. In collective witnessing, students learn to see injustice and are moved to action, to take a stand against oppression. This stand against oppression is in keeping with broad usages of witness.

Although there is not an explicit connection to a religious usage of ‘witnessing,’ Boler’s conception is in keeping with a prophetic idea of witness. In fact, Boler’s conception is a good example of how the term ‘witness’ often merges with and draws on religious usages implicitly. Let me show the similarity in aims and in language with Cornel West’s conception of prophetic thought. West names four basic components of prophetic thought:

- (a) Discernment – which leads to a deep and broad analytical grasp of the present in light of the past.
- (b) Connection – One must value and feel empathy for fellow human beings. This means not treating them as stereotypical images, but as fellow beings worthy of respect.
- (c) Tracking hypocrisy – in a self-critical manner, rather than a self-righteous manner – this demands that we retain our own humility. We must be open to opinions different than our own.
- (d) And lastly hope. (Reed and Johnson, 2000: 173)

West explains that “It is the love ethic of Christian faith—the most absurd and alluring mode of being in the world—that enables me to live a life of hope against hope without succumbing to a warranted yet paralyzing pessimism or to an understandable yet miserable misanthropy” (1993: xi). Here we see much of the same language and similar aims to Boler’s conception of witnessing. Love need not be rooted in a Christian ethic.



Emmanuel Levinas roots love in God's covenant with the people of Israel. Love or respect may also be rooted in ethics (and is perhaps best rooted here). Boler's conception of witness is normative in the same sense as 'prophetic witness' in that she advocates a critique of society.

Boler's conception of witness seems to meet the first criterion in that witnessing is in keeping with the ordinary usage of being someone who sees what has happened or is happening and acts against violence and injustice. However, the way that Boler uses the specific terms 'testimonial reading' and 'collective witnessing' are unique to her project. So it is only in a broad sense that we can say Boler's conception of witness is in keeping with ordinary usages of what it means to be a witness. Perhaps because she veers into a stipulated usage of witnessing, Boler's conception of witness also fails to meet the second criteria of not being reduced to something else. Boler proposes the practice of collective witnessing to allow us to see our 'inscribed habits of inattention' or unquestioned assumptions that blind us to our implication in the experience of others. Witnessing is reduced to seeing how our emotions are shaped by dominant discourses and how we are part of the climate of obstacles that the other faces.

Turning to the third criterion, it would seem that because Boler advocates a 'testimonial reading' of any text, students could listen to or read each other's texts and the teacher might give a testimonial reading to student writing and engage in collective witnessing. But as was the case with a 'pedagogy of commemoration' in the previous section, Boler does not provide examples of witnessing in response to a person who is physically present in the classroom. We can say that the responsibilities of the reader in a testimonial reading could be met in a face-to-face encounter. This is not to say, however,

that such encounters are privileged or its primary significance recognized. I argued that a face-to-face encounter was privileged in the conception of witness that Roger Simon put forward because the conception can be traced back to such a face-to-face encounter. However, Boler's conception of witness cannot be traced back to a particular kind of address. Boler holds we can engage in a testimonial reading of any text and so the address is wholly general. Boler does argue that our responsibility is to others in analogous situations, thus we might trace the address forward to analogous situations and these may sometimes be in a face-to-face encounter. But again, there is nothing to indicate that she privileges such an encounter. Further, Boler does not explain how we might determine analogous situations. I believe we should be cautious about transferring our understanding of the past to what we assume to be analogous situations, particularly when making unilateral decisions that the situation is indeed analogous. This caution is in keeping with Boler's position, which I accept, that we should not assume a reversibility of positions in moral reasoning.

Tracing our emotional responses can direct our attention to structural oppression. We are not usually aware of our emotional responses as being cultural shaped, and indeed, more often we experience our emotions as true, i.e. an honest response to the situation or person, 'just the way I feel.' Boler's use of witnessing – following Foucault – brings the "truth" of these emotions into question. Foucault queries the fact that these are my feelings versus responses I have been socialized or conditioned to have. Through collective witnessing we become aware of our internal obstacles to seeing how emotional responses may be shaped by dominant discourses of emotion. Boler's account of witnessing thus seems to easily meet this criterion in that we become aware of how our

emotions are shaped by dominant discourses, and we know that dominant discourses can be oppressive when they inscribe relations of privilege and oppression. But there is a catch. The catch is that she prescribes only one response: to see how we are part of the climate of obstacles that the other faces. However, it is possible that we may not be a part of that climate of obstacles. As Rosenberg points out, we may become aware of our own oppression and gain new perspective on our own experience. Or we may gain new insight into obstacles that we are all up against in a sense, as is often the case in how oppression works within the good intentions of a liberal society. The responsibilities that Boler outlines limit our thinking on our possible relations to oppression and to discourse of dominant ideologies. Further, as with Simon's account of witness, to ascertain whether or not Boler's conception of witness forecloses on structural analysis requires an examination of the epistemology that is assumed in the rational work.

Boler outlines a strong version of critical inquiry that takes into account how our emotions can prevent us from seeing. But in collective witnessing we look to our own assumptions, and it is these assumptions that are tested through rational work. Boler does not refer to challenging the assumptions in the text. So despite the fact that there is a strong focus on inquiry, the testimony itself does not seem to be amenable to rational work. However, before we too quickly dismiss Boler's conception of witness, I want to emphasize what I take to be one of the strengths of Boler's position. Boler writes that "at the same time as discourses of discipline and control emerge, the subjects of power also are able to develop "subjugated knowledges" and thus resist and transform power" (1999: 20). Boler does not elaborate on subjugated knowledges, but collective witnessing is aimed at the development of such knowledges. If we turn to Sandra Harding, we see that

subjugated knowledge refers to the view of how the power relations work by those who wield little power. One critique of subjugated knowledge is that the position of oppressed is taken to be true, beyond question. Boler seems to make a similar kind of assumption, even though it is not clear that it is the position of the oppressed that is necessarily privileged, because on her account the text to which we give a testimonial reading may be written by anyone. In Boler's account in collective witnessing we are not given any help in figuring out what one does in conflicting situations and how to decide on a reliable testimony. Boler's conception of witness does not meet the criterion that the testimony be amenable to rational work in the sense that those engaging in collective witnessing are not presumed to question the assumptions in the testimony.

To summarize, Boler's conception of witness is broadly in keeping with ordinary usages of witness as someone who sees and who acts against oppression. However, the conception she employs is reductive in that she directs attention only to the conditions needed for people in privileged positions to see and act to eliminate oppression. Her conception of witness does not privilege face-to-face encounters, although the responsibilities could be met in face-to-face encounters. In the emphasis her work places on how dominant ideologies shape our emotions, we can say that the conception does not foreclose on attention to structural oppression; however, much more needs to be said about the epistemology assumed in the inquiry she describes. Boler ascribes to a strong version of critical thinking as the reader is expected to interrogate her or his response to the text; however, the assumptions in the testimony or text are not questioned. Thus, Boler's conception of witness fails to meet the fifth criterion.

## Bearing Witness to Violence

In *Bearing Witness: Violence and Collective Responsibility*, Sandra L. Bloom and Michael Reichert describe what they call an epidemic of violence in our culture; an epidemic, they argue, which invades all of our relationships. The authors hope to convey the essential message

that it is a fundamental and absolute moral responsibility that we each find a way to bear witness to the pain and suffering that is all around us, and that starting from the position of this testimony we must join together to liberate the human body, mind, and soul from the rack of traumatic re-enactment that is stretching our social body to the limit of endurance. (1998, xiii)

Bloom and Reichert assert that we all are affected as witnesses because all those who minister to victims of violence are likely to experience secondary trauma. On their account, the only viable response to being witnesses is social activism. The alternative to social activism, in Bloom and Reichert's view, is to be a helpless bystander, watching the parade of violent perpetuation, unable or unwilling to do anything about it (xii). The authors make the case that society can be healed from trauma in much the same way that individuals can be healed. Without this healing, we are all caught in widening cycles of violence. Healing is integration, by which Bloom and Reichert mean the ability of any system to function harmoniously as a whole without attempting to destroy any parts of the whole (167). The authors see integration as the vital goal of remembering the past, both for individuals and society as a whole. Bloom and Reichert urge us to bear witness to the violence that we see around us so that we can heal our social body and change our trauma-organized society. Like Simon and Boler, Bloom and Reichert's proposal addresses relations of violence and ground our response in a responsibility to the other.

Bloom and Reichert's proposal for schools is firmly rooted in trauma theory. Trauma theory challenges an individualistic philosophy based on the assumption that each person is accountable for his or her failures and shortcomings. Bloom and Reichert assert "We know now that our unitary and individualistic sense of self is a socially and cognitively structured illusion. We do not have any control over our lives as long as we are tied to the unmetabolized events of a personal and transgenerational past" (156). The deviant person has had to accept the full weight of responsibility for his or her problems. Trauma theory challenges this assumption and provides us with a model in which we must share the burden for another's problems or deviant behavior (156). As Bloom and Reichert see it, the implication of trauma theory is that we must rethink our responsibility to one another. The argument is framed as a rhetorical question:

We know that in any interaction with another person we have the potential to heal or to harm, and that our intervention or lack thereof, may be a major determinant of the other person's behavior. Given this, what is our responsibility? Is it as wrong to fail to protect, to fail to act to help as it is to actively hurt? If so, then we are all victims AND we are all perpetrators, and another deep structure crumbles under our feet. (156)

Bloom and Reichert advocate sharing the burden of both the perpetrator and victim to heal the trauma of individuals and society in order to break the cycle of violence. We are all responsible for the violence in our society; in a real sense, we are our 'brother's keeper.'

We have a mutual responsibility to each other, Bloom and Reichert argue, that extends to a global level now that we have "entered an age of such intense global interdependency" (1998: 91). The authors write

The fundamental question is whether witnesses to the mistreatment of other people have an obligation to act. What is our moral responsibility to each other? Are we in fact "our brother's keeper?" (91)

The authors clearly take the answer to be yes, we do have an obligation to act – to help the other, our brother/sister, and to respond to the violence that we see. Bloom and Reichert relate their conception of bearing witness to “the concept of testimony that came out of Chile in the 1970's, when psychologists, priests, nuns, and other caregivers put their own lives on the line by collecting testimonies from former political prisoners who had been tortured” (278). Bloom and Reichert call on us to speak up about the violence around us, like the priests, nuns, therapists, and caregivers in Chile. We can contain the forces that produce violence “only if bystanders choose to become witnesses and rescuers, instead of silently colluding with the perpetrators” (91). We become witnesses by speaking up, by bearing witness.

Bloom and Reichert believe it is particularly important for health care workers and others who spend a lifetime in the trenches to speak up, to bear witness against the violence they see in their client's lives (278). Teachers, Bloom and Reichert assert, have the responsibility to bear witness by speaking and acting against the violence they see in students lives by (a) creating a safe environment in schools, and (b) teaching children to be rescuers, rather than bystanders. I outline each responsibility in turn.

According to Bloom and Reichert, teachers, as witnesses to violence, should engage in social activism by working to change the structure of schools to provide an environment that is “therapeutic and preventative” (219). Schools must play a major rehabilitative role for children. In “Creating Sanctuary in Schools,” Bloom writes “Ideally, each classroom would be run as a therapeutic community, a safe place within which the children could experience emotional modulation on a constant basis” (1995: 422). She elaborates on what this would look like

The best metaphors for creating sanctuary are found in theater and the concert hall. In discussing what we are trying to accomplish, the stage metaphor is useful because we are trying to redirect the traumatic reenactment scenario. We want to provide environments within which the individual's particular complex of trauma-organized and self-destructive habits can be understood and then redirected, much like a play director directs the actors of a stage. [...] Our job is to participate in their personal drama enough to understand the lines and the expected outcome, but to then change the direction of the play, redirect the traumatic scenario so that trauma is not repeated. (1995: 429)

Bloom emphasizes that classroom and school communities can function in this way, so that the group becomes the agent of change for the individual. But that this can only happen in a context of safety and trust. Bloom and Reichert elaborate on psychological, social, and moral safety.

We can feel psychological safe when our selfhood is respected and when we are in environments in which our own separate identity is affirmed and reinforced. We can feel socially safe when we are in environments with other people, all of who agree on basic rules of how to behave with each other and who are willing and able to contain and help modulate each other's overwhelming emotional experiences. We are in an environment of moral safety when there is an agreed upon, compassionate way of making sense of the world, a process for working through hypocrisy, and a shared vision of future possibilities. (1997: 68)

Working to create such an environment is the kind of social activism Bloom and Reichert have in mind.

Bloom and Reichert advocate that we teach children to be rescuers or helpers, witnesses rather than bystanders. They believe that there is much to be learned from looking at bystanders who do help, because they define a different reality. Bloom and Reichert do not elaborate on how such study might be part of the curriculum. The study would seem to include those in Europe who hid others during the Holocaust or people who provided safe hiding places as part of the Underground Railroad. The authors also



mean taking care of one another in the classroom and school—helping rather than excluding those who are alienated and act violently toward others. Bloom notes

At present, the attitude of “I am my brother’s keeper” is not a value to which children have any consistent exposure, and yet it is the only attitude that can get us out of the deteriorating spiral of alienation within which our culture is presently gripped. If we cannot do anything to change the homes that these children live in, then we must expand their options. Let us provide them with an alternative reality. (1995: 422)

The authors suggest school-based programs that teach conflict, problem solving, and anger-management skills to children and programs to counter traditional gender role stereotypes and expectations should be in place in all schools.

In sum, Bloom and Reichert draw on trauma theory to make the case that the only hope we have of healing our society from an epidemic of violence depends upon our meeting a collective responsibility to bear witness. Healing is defined as integration, which in its strongest sense means to help break the cycles of violence in the lives of those who have been harmed and those who have harmed.<sup>18</sup> The authors argue that we can heal society in the same way that we can help individuals to heal. The term ‘witness’ is used in two ways. In one sense, we are all witnesses to violence in that we are affected by the violence in the lives of others, if not directly in our own life. To be a witness is simply to be someone who is in an environment where violence occurs to someone, not necessarily one’s self. In a second sense, witness refers to someone who engages in social activism by bearing witness and stepping forward to help others, to rescue another. Bloom and Reichert do not to propose a pedagogy in the way that Simon and Boler do;

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<sup>18</sup> The authors are inconsistent on this point. There is a strong emphasis on the victim and very little said about the perpetrator of violence in *Bearing Witness*; however, in *Violence* (2000), Bloom focuses on prisons and the criminal justice system in the United States.

bearing witness and stepping forward as a witness is part of a broader response to violence framed as a public health response to an epidemic of violence.

Bloom and Reichert directly refer to a conception of witnessing from liberation theology as it emerged in Latin American churches. As noted in the previous chapter, liberation theology advocates solidarity with the poor as they demand justice. During the repressive regime of General Pinochet in Chile, testimony regarding those who had disappeared or had been tortured was collected by priests, nuns, and others to provide an accurate record of what happened – an account that challenged the public record. For Bloom and Reichert bearing witness or speaking on behalf of another, is a moral obligation. The commitment to liberation from violence is clear, as is a commitment to social activism; however, there is not an analysis or an informed critique of society. Those collecting testimony in Chile, as in other Latin American countries such as El Salvador and Nicaragua, were deeply involved in movements for political change informed by a Marxist analysis of class struggle. But Bloom and Reichert do not analyze oppression as a source of violence or a form of violence. Indeed, there is no mention of oppression. In this omission, they miss much of the power of the conception of witness within liberation theology. So while Bloom and Reichert do draw on the stand against oppression in prophetic witness, it is in a limited sense as compared, for example, to what happened in Chile.

More generally, Bloom and Reichert use the term witness to refer to someone who sees, but in contrast to the bystander who simply watches, the witness steps forward to do something to stop the violence. Bloom and Reichert's conception of witness is in keeping with ordinary usages of witness as someone who sees, who is present, and speaks

about what they have seen and heard. However their account is problematic in that they give no indication they are aware of the difficulties of seeing what is happening around us. To elaborate, I draw on Richard Quinney, a criminologist, whose book *Bearing Witness to Crime and Social Justice* is what he calls a personal journey of witnessing.

Quinney argues that the primary object of attention of criminologists ought to be suffering, not crime. It would seem that attention to suffering would be unavoidable because prisons are full of suffering, but. Surprisingly, attention to suffering cannot be assumed. Quinney argues that criminologists, prison guards, and police officers are in many ways trained to not see or attend to the suffering, or at least not the suffering of the prisoner sentenced for a crime. Quinney writes

We are all witnesses to the life of our times. We are witnesses in one way or another to the joys and the sorrows of being human in a particular time and place. We are witnesses to the sufferings around us and within us. And at times we are moved by conscience to observe and report these sufferings. "This thing I am telling you about, I saw with my own eyes," reports a woman who witnessed a mass killing a century ago. Such witnessing comes out of awareness, and is an act of conscience. If actions more physical in nature follow, they do so because there has been awareness and there has been witnessing. (2000: ix)

The idea that witnessing follows awareness might seem like an odd distinction, but we are often unaware of much that surrounds us. Quinney points to the need for awareness, before we are able to see and to be witnesses. Quinney, like Megan Boler, recognizes that there is much that prevents us from being aware and thus from seeing. Quinney gives an example of how those in law enforcement are trained not to see the suffering of those charged with a crime. This kind of training that blinds us to certain people's suffering parallels, I believe, Boler's culturally inscribed habits of inattention that function largely through our emotions. Bloom and Reichert's conception of witness is in

keeping with ordinary usages of witness as someone who sees; however, their assumption that we are aware of the violence in our lives and the lives of others is somewhat naive. In short, although they expect their notion of witness to cover a wide ground, the absence of any discussion of the difficulties in actually witnessing violence entails a rather limited usage. Bloom and Reichert's conception of witness is collapsed to a response to violence.

With regard to the third criterion, that of requiring a privileging of face-to-face encounters, we can say that Bloom and Reichert's account fully satisfies it. They make much of the fact that witnessing requires that we look around at others and step forward to do something. Face-to-face encounters are privileged, but it is not quite clear how our stepping up to social activism is informed. In the end, being a witness on Bloom and Reichert's account doesn't have to do with understanding the other or our selves in light of their testimony in order to change the conditions of society.

We can note that Bloom and Reichert's conception of witness very nearly forecloses on attention to structural oppression. Without inquiry, something like the collective witnessing that Boler describes and the community of memory that Simon and Eppert refer to, the only possibility of our seeing structures of oppression is if they are featured in the testimony. Ironically, this is in strong contrast to the commitment of liberation theology, which includes the idea of institutional violence. And lastly, turning to the question of whether the testimony is amenable to rational work, we see that it is not. Bloom and Reichert provide a chapter featuring the figures on violence in families, and the figures are staggering. However, in contrast to Simon and Boler, there is no mention of an interpretive community connected with witnessing to help us to understand

our own experience or that of others. Their conception of witness does not include inquiry into our own normative assumptions or the person's own perceptions of their situation.

In sum, we can note that Bloom and Reichert's conception of witness meets the first criterion of fitting with ordinary usage in that it too draws on the normative sense of witness as a stand against violence. That the witness is someone who steps forward to tell what they have seen and heard is in keeping with common usages. However, I've argued that on both counts, on the seeing and the stepping forward, the conception offered is thin. Bearing witness and being a witness are reduced to a response to violence, without a interpretive community to understand the violence. On the third criterion, face-to-face encounters are privileged, but there is not the emphasis on understanding the other's testimony or one's own implication in the violence the other faces. The testimony is not amenable to rational work, and the conception of witness forecloses on attention to structural oppression in that inquiry is not emphasized.

### Conclusion

The authors we considered in this chapter – Simon, Boler, Bloom, and Reichert -- all write of bearing witness to violence. I conclude that while all three accounts are intriguing both for the educational aims they pursue and the pedagogy they employ, they fail to offer us an adequate account of bearing witness for liberatory education.

Each of the conceptions is in keeping with ordinary uses of the witness. The connection to oppression, though arguably rooted in religion, is used broadly outside of religious traditions. The witness is present to an event or to a person's telling of an event.

In each, the witness is someone who sees and takes responsibility to do something about what they have seen. The responsibility that the witness takes to liberate them, to liberate us all connects these two ideas of witness. The witness sees or hears and then does something toward liberation, toward justice. In each proposal the conception of witness entails certain responsibilities to the other. Simon lists four obligations that follow from a Judaic conception of what it means to answer God's address in the Sinai. Keeping these obligations, by definition, forms a living memory – a memory that impacts one's moral character and one's actions. For Boler, the responsibility to others is met by becoming aware of our inscribed habits of inattention and resisting them. Collective witnessing is connected to awareness: coming to see those whom we do not see and the ways that we may be part of the obstacles that the other faces. For Bloom and Reichert, we have a responsibility to bear witness – to speak of what we see in order to stop the cycles of violence. Bloom and Reichert take their conception of witness, at least in part, from liberation theology as it emerged in Latin America. The witness is committed to social activism. The witness sees and takes action on the behalf of others – to make society less violent, to liberate us. So in each conception of witness, there is a focus on liberation from violence and oppression. The normative value is clear. The witness sees and steps forward to take action – to liberate us all from violence and oppression. In each case, witness is reduced to seeing or acting against violence or trauma. There is a broader meaning of witness in religious usages and in broader ordinary usages.

Bloom and Reichert's conception seems to privilege face-to-face relations. Simon's conception of witness can be traced back to a face-to-face relation. Boler's conception of witness does not meet the criteria that a conception of witness privilege

face-to-face encounters. Simon and Boler conceptualize witness as an answer to an address, but do not consider the address of others in the room. None privilege the challenge that Katongole notes and none help with Heller's sense that we look for witnesses.

Bloom and Reichert's conception of witness – as they elaborate it – very nearly forecloses on seeing structural oppression. Simon and Boler do not foreclose and indeed the responsibilities they articulate as part of witnessing tend to draw our attention to structural oppression. But to be clear – more needs to be said about the epistemological project. None adequately address structural oppression and our complex relations to oppression or violence represented in a text. On the question of rational work only the conception of witness that Simon and Eppert put forward is one in which the testimony is amenable to rational work. Simon, Eppert, and Boler put forward conceptions of witness in which our response to the testimony is amenable to rational work. In Bloom and Reichert's conception of witness – neither our response nor the testimony seem to be amenable to rational work. Thus, in the end, none meet the criteria laid out for an adequate conception of witness for educational contexts.

I propose that witness-bearing is not only a practice of listening, but moves between speaking of our experience, the memories that work to define who we see ourselves to be, and listening to both those present in the room with us and to distant others. This opens the space, I believe, for attentiveness to be practiced between persons within the classroom, as well as toward distant others. A conception of witness that includes both speaking of and listening to accounts of freedom and oppression supports the intention of responding to the suffering of others and transforming our relations to

them more fully than does conceptualizing witness solely as a practice of listening. My goal is to conceptualize witness in such a way that it supports the recognition of complex relations of oppression and leads to some way of testing the veracity of the claims made in the address, as well as our response. What is just under the surface, not explicitly stated in any accounts that we've considered thus far, is the relational nature of the address. In my own account of witness, in the next chapter, we will come closer, I believe, to a conception of witness that can support Heller's call for a more personal and complex critical pedagogy.



## CHAPTER 4

### CAN I FIND A WITNESS?

In her ethnography of a women's writing group in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, Caroline Heller suggests that the women "came in one way or another to find witnesses as they lay claim for the richness of their complicated experiences" (1997:18). My efforts to develop a conception of witness begin here, with the idea that we do sometimes look for witnesses and students in our classrooms may, at times, be looking for witnesses. Thinking of particular persons in our classrooms as looking for witnesses is a significantly different perspective from other attempts to analyze the notion of 'witness' in educational literature. Simon, Boler, Bloom, and Reichert attend to how we should listen or respond as witnesses and what we should do because of the testimony that we have heard. It is my view that not fully considering why particular persons look for witnesses has limited the understandings of what it means to respond as a witness that we have discussed thus far.

Because the idea that we look for witnesses, and indeed, sometimes beseech others to respond as a witness is central to the conception that I put forward, my analysis rests on clear cases in which a demand for a witness is explicitly and powerfully stated. I develop a conception of witness as a relation between two persons by examining, in turn, why we look for witnesses and what it means to respond as a witness. Specifically, I describe how looking for a witness and responding as a witness are experienced in relations between particular persons, in a way similar to Nel Noddings' description of

caring relations. Noddings holds that only a face-to-face encounter can be called a caring relation, because only in this situation can the person caring be sure that her care is received as care. In Noddings' terms, letting the one caring know in some way that one feels cared-for 'completes' the encounter or relation. In the third section of this chapter, I argue, similarly, that there is a completion for a relation of witness in the strong sense of the sort that Noddings stipulates for a caring encounter. It is this feature, especially, that distinguishes my account from the conceptions of witness presented in the previous chapter.

The footing is always tricky in writing about witness because the terms 'witness' and 'bearing witness' constantly slip and change position. I keep the terms in place for conceptual clarity. I consistently use 'bearing witness' to refer to a person speaking or giving testimony, as for example, a woman in the Tenderloin writing group might bear witness in reading her work. I name bearing witness or giving testimony as one side of the relation. I use the terms bearing witness and testimony interchangeably. On the second side of the relation is a person who responds as a witness. My use of 'witness' refers to a particular kind of response on the part of the person who listens. It is possible that I could reverse the terms and refer to a person speaking as a 'witness' and a person listening as 'bearing witness.' This would also be in keeping with common usages of the terms. I make the choice to use 'witness' to refer to the response because it is in keeping with Heller's suggestion that the women in the writing group looked for witnesses. Responding as a witness is also in keeping with Roger Simon's, Megan Boler's, and Sandra Bloom and Michael Reichert's conceptions of witness presented in the previous chapter. I use the term 'bearing witness' to refer to a person speaking or giving

testimony and ‘witness’ as a response, a particular way of attending to the other’s testimony within what I call a ‘relation of witness.’<sup>19</sup>

### Looking for a Witness

In this section, I present clear cases of looking for a witness and cases in which we can infer from the situation that a person is looking for a witness. I examine when and why we look for witnesses to describe what can be said to characterize the consciousness of a person looking for a witness. In this description, I follow the lead of Nel Noddings in her investigation of how caring is experienced to describe ‘what we are like’ when we engage in caring encounters (2002: 13).<sup>20</sup>

June Jordan explicitly calls for a witness in the title to her essay on Anita Hill and the Senate hearings regarding Clarence Thomas’ appointment to the Supreme Court. In “Can I Get a Witness?” Jordan writes

Clarence Thomas was supposed to be on trial but he was not [...]

And so, at the last, it was she, Anita Hill, who stood alone, trying to tell the truth in an arena of snakes and hyenas and dinosaurs and power-mad dogs. And with this televised victimization of Anita Hill, the American war of violence against women moved from the streets, moved from hip-hop, moved from multimillion-dollar movies into the highest chambers of the U.S. government.

And what is anybody going to do about it? (1992: 218)

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<sup>19</sup> Although I use the terms consistently in elaborating my conception of witness, I cite literature in which the terms are not used consistently in the same way. Thus, the terms continue to slip.

<sup>20</sup> By focusing on how caring is experienced, Noddings does not say what either person—the one-caring or the one cared-for—will or should do, except in the most general sense. And she notes that caring does not entail any particular actions.

She says that she will write a letter to Anita Hill and “tell her that, thank God, she is a black woman who is somebody and something beautiful and precious and exquisitely compelling” (219). Jordan calls for action, saying in her letter “if this government will not protect and defend her [Hill], and all black women, and all women, period, in this savage country—if this government will not protect and defend us from poverty and violence and contempt—then we will change the government” (219). And for “those brothers who disappeared when a black woman rose up to tell the truth, listen [...] I have been speaking on behalf of a good black woman. Can you hear me? Can I get a witness?” (219). Jordan calls for a witness with force and elegance. Her outrage is clear. The questions call for a response, an answer.

A similar demand for a witness can be found in Thich Nhat Hanh’s poems written during the long years of war in Vietnam. A Zen Buddhist monk, himself from Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh practices what he calls ‘engaged Buddhism,’ which means that he actively and directly works for social change and for peace. In a poem titled *Condemnation*, Hanh speaks to the reader directly and urgently. The poem begins with a demand to listen.

Listen to this:  
yesterday six Vietcong came through my village,  
and because of this, the village was bombed.  
Every soul was killed.

In the next lines, Hanh describes the destruction of the bombs and gives the reader a sense of the missing life—the life that should be there in the village and was there just the day before. Echoing the first demand that we listen, Hanh asks that the listener be a witness.

Whoever is listening, be my witness.

I cannot accept this war.  
I never could, I never will.  
I must say this a thousand times before I am killed.

He closes the poem “Humans are not our enemies—even those called the “Vietcong.” If we kill our brothers and sisters, what will we have left? With whom shall we live?” Hanh uses the imperative “be my witness” to leave no doubt that he is addressing us—those who read the poem.

Thich Nhat Hanh, along with other monks and lay members, worked to help rebuild villages destroyed in bombing raids. He writes that many of them died doing this work because people suspected them of being on the other side. Hanh maintains they were not on either side, but sought to understand both sides. He explains

We tried to tell people our perception of the situation: that we wanted to stop the fighting, but the bombs were so loud. Sometimes we had to burn ourselves alive to get the message across, but even then the world could not hear us. They thought we were supporting a kind of political act. They didn't know that it was a purely human action to be heard, to be understood. (1987: 69)

Looking for a witness, too, I believe, is this purely human action of looking to be heard and understood. But this is not yet specific enough, because we almost always want to be heard and understood. From the explicit demands for a witness voiced by Jordan and Hanh, it seems that we look for witnesses in the face of an incomprehensible refusal on the part of others to acknowledge perceptions we believe should be acknowledged. But the refusal to acknowledge another's perceptions may not always be as explicit as in these examples. This refusal may show up as indifference or general disbelief. Veterans of the war in Vietnam often faced all three of these responses when giving accounts of their experience in the war or, to use the terms that I employ, bearing witness to the war.

In August of 1967, journalist Jonathon Schell asked a GI in Vietnam what he was going to tell people when he returned to the United States. The man responded “Maybe when I go home I’ll just crawl back inside myself, and not say a word. Things are so violent nobody would believe it. And I don’t want to die of frustration trying to convince them” (Anderson, 1998: 15). Schell heard the remark—“they wouldn’t believe it back home”—many times in Quang Ngai Province. But what the veterans found on their return was more complex than disbelief. Most veterans were met with a refusal to ask about or to listen to, much less to consider their perceptions of their experience in the war. Thich Nhat Hanh has organized meetings and retreats with United States veterans of the Vietnam War and notes that many of the veterans said the retreats were the first time they had been able to speak candidly of their experience.

Wayne Karlin, a Vietnam veteran who writes on his experience of the war and on violence and its effects, recalls

I think we felt—and still do in many ways—that we came back from the war to an atmosphere that prevented our experience from coming out. It was as if our own experience—the thing that had changed us from what we were into people who looked at the world with completely different eyes—meant that we could no longer look at ourselves, our country, and all of the beliefs that we had grown up with with the same eyes. It was an atmosphere that negated all that and said it isn’t true. It said: “No, you shouldn’t look at it this way. Here are the models that already exist; you should look at what you did and what happened through these lenses.” We knew this wasn’t true. (Anderson, 1998: 83)

Karlin believes writers have the ability to avoid that kind of convenient wishful thinking and to find stories that would allow readers to see the truth (83). Karlin’s stories challenge the way veterans, and indeed, all of us, were told to look at the war. Karlin wants to name the wrong and is prevented from doing so by the lens prescribed to him. Prescribing a lens to interpret or make sense of another’s experience when it is forced on

the person bearing witness can be a form of refusal to acknowledge another's perceptions.

Staying with the example of the Vietnam War, we can see that a premature focus on healing without sufficient regard to what has happened can also function as a refusal to acknowledge the other's perceptions. In response to those who insist on a focus on healing, Karlin writes about the massacre at My Lai

I'm not sure what "healing" means. Because we are writers, language is important to us; the definition of words is very important to us. [...] Good writing has to say: "Here is the truth. Here is the horror. Here are the real victims. Here are the real victims of My Lai. [...] To define healing, we need to look at what this was and ask what do we do with it now. (Anderson, 1998: 83-84)

Karlin examines his experience in Vietnam—speaks or bears witness—with the intent of facing what happened and asking what we do with it now. He looks for a precise definition of healing that does not allow healing to become a kind of denial in itself. What we do now, he says, depends on truthfully naming the wrong. Karlin pushes us, as he struggles himself, to get it right. We can infer that Karlin does look for a witness, because he speaks and writes about the war in an atmosphere where he consciously knows others do not want to listen. Despite our indifference and haste to move on, Karlin urges us to weigh what he says. He is not concerned that we draw the same conclusions about the war as he does, but Karlin wants his perceptions to be acknowledged.

To see how widespread and even common it is to look for witnesses, let me return to Heller's account of the Tenderloin Women's Writing Group and her suggestion that the women there came to find witnesses. As noted in Chapter 1, Heller began to attend the meetings with an interest in the political functions of the group. She writes that the longer she attended the workshop the more she "noticed participants in the group

critiquing American life and life in their neighborhood, often brilliantly” (1997: 17). She continues:

But the real work of the group was both more ordinary and, I soon came to realize, more extraordinary than this. Most of the regular participants in the Tenderloin Women Writers Workshop came to the workshop not to change the world or even to complain about it. They came to be reassured that they had lived lives that were of value and that could be—through the precision of their own words—felt, understood, and remembered by others. Most came in one way or another to find witnesses as they made claim for the richness of their complicated experiences. (18)

Heller draws on Barbara Meyerhoff’s observation to describe the need for witnesses:

This thirst for self-recovery, including the need for others to witness one’s most acute and pressing perceptions, has a life in the margins of the mainstream in ways that those who live amid more secure surroundings may not experience quite so urgently—unless the sources of their sense of self, the different facets of what they believe to be their identities, are imperiled or lost. (Meyerhoff, 1992 in Heller, 1997: 41)

In broadly linking finding a witness to self-recovery, Meyerhoff describes a need to tell others something of our lives, both what we have lived through and what gives our lives value. We look for witnesses when this need is not satisfied. For example, one woman in the writing group struggled to get her thoughts down on paper as she and her daughter moved from shelter to shelter. Yet she came to read her writing to others. In her writing, she was able to give her own account of her life and claim her love for her daughter. The woman looked for witnesses in the face of an indifference and open scorn.

Mary TallMountain’s reading from a novel she was writing further illustrates what laying claim for our experience, including what we most value, can look like. TallMountain was born into an Athabaskan family in Alaska; she was adopted as a young child and lived most of her life far from the Yukon. In her writing, TallMountain describes “pictures that are in her mind always”—“moccasins falling soundless on the



boards, of spruce gum that mended the fish wheel, of Papa's boson's cap, and of holy salmon on the holy ancient land" (Heller, 1997: 132). Her writing is rich in description of both persons and the land. Following the reading, Heller recounts

Mary is silent for several moments, as is the group

*Salima:* You bowed your head when you read that.

*Maria:* Yes, you did. It makes me feel very calm.

*Mary:* It does me, too. It makes me feel calm today. I am glad you said that.

*Maria:* That was your family?

*Mary:* This was me. My family, and the village. (128)

Heller describes the reading as an invitation to feel and understand Mary TallMountain's perception of her family and herself. Heller relates "For months after this meeting of the workshop, memories from it would return to me at unexpected moments, and I'd suddenly feel transported as I'd felt sitting in the group that day, when it felt as though a door was being opened by [...] Mary, and all of us not only wanted to walk through it; we were, it seemed, filled with gratitude that we were being invited to" (129). It is significant that TallMountain looked to people present in the room with her to find witnesses. Experience was claimed in intimate conversation, as we can see represented in TallMountain's statement "This was me. My family, and the village." It is also significant that TallMountain spoke of what she most loved. The women in the writing group often sought to have acknowledged what they most loved and valued. We can say that TallMountain looked for witnesses to acknowledge who she sees herself to be and what she sees to have overriding value, as it is these perceptions of hers that are most often met with indifference or disbelief.

From these cases, we can see that we look for witnesses when others turn away.

If we think in terms of what characterizes the consciousness of a person looking for a

witness, we can recognize a need or a desire to have one's perceptions acknowledged in the face of incomprehensible refusal or steady indifference. June Jordan explicitly calls for a witness in a situation of what she clearly conveys is to her an incomprehensible refusal to acknowledge the wrong in the conduct of the Senate hearings. Thich Nhat Hanh beseeches us to look at the suffering caused by the war, a suffering so obvious and yet apparently so unheeded. He reminds us of the monks who took the most extreme measures to have their apprehensions acknowledged. Wayne Karlin encodes his apprehensions in stories that allow readers to see the truth of his experience, and the experience of other veterans. He is not concerned that we draw the same conclusions about the war as he does, but he wants us to know his perceptions and consider them. Mary TallMountain wants others to see her and what has value in her life as she expresses it. She wants to be recognized as a particular person. In these latter two cases, the need to be heard and understood becomes more urgent because of a context of indifference.

In sum, we look for a witness to acknowledge our perceptions in situations when it seems that everyone has turned away. June Jordan and Thich Nhat Hanh directly call for a witness. The eloquence of their testimony creates a space for us to respond as witnesses, to answer "Yes, I hear you, I will be your witness." Wayne Karlin speaks in an atmosphere where few, if any, want to hear his perceptions of his experience in the Vietnam War. Karlin also relies on the eloquence of writing to push others to consider the truth of what happened in the war. In her reading of her work, Mary TallMountain trusts the women in the writing group to be witnesses. It is their response that will

acknowledge her perceptions of who she is and what she values. In each case, the person bears witness by voicing perceptions he or she wants others to take into account.

### **Responding as a Witness**

I shift now to the second side of the relation of witness to focus on the person who responds as a witness. Given our understanding of why we look for witnesses, it follows that we want the person who responds as a witness to be present to us – to listen to and acknowledge our perceptions. In this section, I describe what characterizes the consciousness of a person who responds as a witness by elaborating what's involved in not turning away from the other, or stated differently, in being present to the other.

Caroline Heller nearly missed being present to respond to Mary TallMountain as a witness. Entering the room for the first meeting, Heller writes that she was surprised by her own unexpected judgments. She relates “The room smelled stale and sweaty. Street noises overwhelmed my attention. I imagined those in the room to be damaged and unstable, and in their presence, I felt my own sturdiness to be less durable, too” (1997: 11). Heller explains that her emotions were so strong she turned back out of the door and left to return the next week better prepared for her responses. Heller continues “... it seems most important to say that neither my romanticization nor my fears did justice to either the vibrant life and creative explorations or the horrid realities of Tenderloin life as I began to witness them through the workshop participants” (13-14). Thus Heller reminds us of what we cannot know except by being with and listening to others. Heller physically turned around at the door, but there are many ways of turning away. For example, as noted in my discussion of Wayne Karlin’s position, we can turn away from

acknowledging the apprehensions of veterans by adopting a premature focus on healing, by prescribing lenses through which to view the experience, and by refusing to listen. We must not turn away if we are to respond as witnesses.

The idea that the person who responds as a witness can not turn away can be found in each of the conceptions of witness in the previous chapter. As we saw, Roger Simon names four ways of listening that contrast to listening as a witness: listening with relative indifference, defensive skepticism, ethnographic curiosity or intense self-identification. These four attitudes can be said to be ways we turn away from another's testimony. Megan Boler's conception of witness addresses how our emotions prevent us from seeing or listening to the other, thus we can say that our emotions as shaped unreflectively by dominant ideologies can function to turn us away. In Sandra Bloom and Michael Reichert's usage of witness it is our belief that the other's problem does not concern us or is not our responsibility in any way that turns us away from the other. Not turning away is essentially a way of meeting the other; however, this still does not say what does characterize the consciousness of someone who is present as a witness. The chief features of the consciousness of the person who responds as a witness are (a) an attentiveness characterized by 'moral humility' and (b) a willingness to acknowledge the other's testimony. I elaborate each of these features in turn.

### Attentiveness

A certain kind of attentiveness is required to listen to another's perceptions when many others have refused to listen or in a general atmosphere of indifference. Nel Noddings notes that "perhaps the first thing we discover about ourselves as carers in

caring encounters is that we are receptive; we are attentive in a special way” (2002: 13).<sup>21</sup> Noddings is clear that this attention is not empathy. Empathy is defined as a projection or intellectual identification with another. Noddings characterizes the attentiveness of care as more receptive than projective, and as not primarily intellectual. Drawing on Simone Weil’s account of attention, Noddings writes

Reception, not projection, marks the attention described by Weil. The reception is not totally passive. A soul (or self) empties itself, asks a question, or signals a readiness to receive, but the state that develops is thoroughly relational. When I attend in this way I become, in an important sense, a duality. I see through two pairs of eyes, hear with two sets of ears, feel the pain of the other self in addition to my own. My initial self is vulnerable and will be changed by this encounter. (15)

Noddings holds that the self is relational in that it is shaped by encounters with other human beings, objects, ideas, and other nonhuman beings. We are changed by every encounter. I understand this may entail a range of changes between a barely perceptible change and a radical change that has far ranging influence on our lives. In listening with the kind of attentiveness that Simone Weil describes, we open ourselves to the other in a way that we become more vulnerable than we might otherwise be in the encounter. This same idea of attentiveness characterizes the consciousness of the person who responds as a witness.

In characterizing their own way of meeting the other, both Nel Noddings and Megan Boler raise concerns about empathy. Noddings rejects empathy because of the intellectual identification and projection of one’s self onto the other that empathy entails. Boler rejects empathy on the basis of the lack of responsibility one assumes in empathy. In Boler’s view, empathy is largely passive because one imagines one’s self as the other

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<sup>21</sup> Noddings also uses the term ‘engrossment’ to describe this attentiveness (1984).

and thus fails to recognize one's self in relation to the other or to someone in an analogous situation. Both critiques reject the reversibility of positions assumed in empathy. I want to be clear that the attentiveness that characterizes the consciousness of a witness does not rest on the assumption that we can imaginatively understand the other's position; indeed, we are attentive precisely because we cannot understand the other's position except by listening. Iris Marion Young's work in communicative ethics further elaborates why the response of a witness cannot rest on an assumption of moral reciprocity.

Young argues that it is ontologically impossible to imaginatively put one's self in another's position. She proposes a concept of "asymmetrical reciprocity" as an alternative to 'symmetrical reciprocity' in moral deliberation. In Young's view

A communicative ethics should develop an account of the nonsubstitutable relation of moral subjects. Each participant in a communication situation is distinguished by a particular history and social position that makes their relation asymmetrical. [...] A communicative theory of moral respect should distinguish between taking the perspective of other people into account, on the one hand, and imaginatively taking their position, on the other hand. (1997: 39)

Young argues that moral reciprocity conceived as reversing standpoints is politically suspect, as well as ontologically impossible. Moral respect between people, Young claims, entails reciprocity between them in the sense that each acknowledges and takes account of the other. Young advocates an openness to others that is rooted in the assumption that you cannot fully know the position of the other. She explains

It is more appropriate to approach a situation of communicative interaction for the purpose of arriving at a moral or political judgment with a stance of moral humility. In moral humility one starts with the assumption that one cannot see things from the other person's perspective and waits to learn by listening to the other person to what extent they have had similar experiences. (49)

Young is interested in the times that we “get out of ourselves” and learn something new. She argues that if we always look to find a common experience and to fit what we hear into our experience, we will not or cannot transcend our own experience. For Young, moral humility is due in any situation of communicative interaction. Young notes that her conception of ‘moral humility’ is similar to Laurence Thomas’ notion of ‘moral deference.’ Thomas suggests that people in relatively socially privileged positions owe moral deference to those in “diminished social categories.’ The difference, Young clarifies, is that in moral humility, I only admit that I lack knowledge of the other; in moral deference, I recognize that the other has the knowledge that I lack (168). I describe moral deference here because Thomas describes in much more detail how we listen to the other.

Laurence Thomas proposes the attitude of ‘moral deference’ as a required part of “the appropriate moral posture toward those who have been oppressed” (1993: 248).<sup>22</sup>

Thomas explains

The idea of moral deference is true to the moral reality that the mark of an immoral society is the erection of emotional walls between persons. It is true to the reality that social immorality cannot be eliminated in the absence of a firm grasp of how it has affected its victims. (245)

Listening with an attitude of moral deference is meant to help us gain this firm grasp.

Thomas sees moral deference as a mode of learning through which one acquires a sensibility to the way in which a self-respecting oppressed person lives in the world. He writes

Moral deference [...] is not an activity for the faint of heart. For it is a matter

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas does not explicate what else he sees to be a part of an appropriate moral posture to those who have been oppressed.

of rendering oneself open to another's concern, and letting another's pain reconstitute one so much that one comes to have a new set of sensibilities—a new set of moral lenses, if you will. (247)

In opening one's self to another's concern, we work to understand another's experience in terms of what is salient for her in the way it is salient. Like Young's conception of 'moral humility,' moral deference rests on the assumption that we cannot imaginatively put ourselves in the position of another, as Heller could not understand the lives of the women in the Tenderloin group except by being present to listen openly to them.

Attentiveness characterized by an attitude of moral humility is the first feature of the response of a witness, but listening does not in itself answer the address of the person bearing witness. The second feature I propose is that the witness must acknowledge the other's testimony. Acknowledgement, as I elaborate it, does not entail agreement with all that the other says.

### Acknowledgment

In a caring encounter, as Noddings describes it, the person caring first receives the other and then responds in some way. In responding to the other, the consciousness of the person caring is characterized by what Noddings calls 'motivational displacement.' She explains "A's [the person caring] motive energy begins to flow toward B [the cared for] and his projects" (2002: 17). The person caring helps the cared-for on in his or her project. Here witness and caring encounters diverge. In responding as a witness, acknowledgment follows listening to the other with an attitude of moral humility. We look for witnesses to have others acknowledge perceptions that we feel should be acknowledged. Acknowledgement is experienced as taking the testimony into account.



This does not mean that one need agree that the testimony is true and that it is significant in the way that the person bearing witness holds it to be significant. The account given in bearing witness is not incorrigible; the testimony is amenable to rational work. Even as this point is made, however, the qualification must also be stated: When and by whom the rational work is carried out is not always the same and must be considered when opening the testimony to critique.

If we characterize attentiveness as *listening* to the other, we might characterize acknowledgement as *hearing* the other. Lisa Delpit, for one, makes a distinction between listening and hearing. In *Other People's Children*, she quotes a black woman teacher who says "They won't listen; white folks are going to do what they want to do *anyway*. It's really hard. They just don't listen well. No, they listen, but they don't *hear*—you know how your mama used to say you listen to the radio, but you *hear* your mother? Well, they don't *hear* me" (1995: 21). It is not clear to me just what Delpit means. Does *hearing* your mother mean that you jump up and do what she asks you to do? Or is it more that what your mother says to you carries a certain weight? In either case, *hearing* assumes a responsibility to the person who speaks and to what is said. In the conception of witness I put forward, acknowledgement fits with the sense that one recognizes the weight of the testimony. Acknowledgement is characterized by a willingness to carefully consider the other and what is said. We might think of acknowledgment as letting the other's testimony sink in. Although, acknowledgement does not entail agreement, our awareness of the other and his or her testimony can be the beginning of an inquiry that extends far beyond our encounter with a particular person.

Mary Solberg, in writing of her experience of living and working in El Salvador during that country's civil war in the 1980s, provides an example of what I mean by inquiry begun in the acknowledgement of another's testimony. She writes of how listening to people speak of their experience affected her.

... living there, going to sleep and waking up there, breathing air and smelling that dust, listening to people speak, bore down on me in my own flesh (in Spanish, *en carne propia*), and I began to apprehend how things were in a way I had not been able—or perhaps willing—to acknowledge before. I could no longer turn away and willfully or unwittingly plead ignorance. (1997: ix)

She writes about her urge to try to “fix” what was wrong and reflects that such works “betrayed [her] incapacity or refusal to apprehend the depth and breadth and intensity of what was wrong and of the reach of its consequences” (x). Sometimes, as in this case, immediately trying to fix what is wrong can parallel a premature focus on healing as a way of turning away. Her challenge, Solberg writes, was *how to live*, knowing of such suffering and of her implication in it (x). Solberg's response is that of a witness. Like Heller's account of the women's writing group, Solberg's account emphasizes how different it was to be there – listening to others speak of their lives and seeing the situation in person. She understood herself to be accountable to the those who had shared their lives with her, writing “To live as if they were no longer present, to erase them from my consciousness, would have been immoral and crazy-making” (xii). For Solberg, acknowledgement was the beginning of the inquiry of how to live that extended beyond her years in El Salvador. That inquiry of some sort will result from acknowledging the other's testimony is likely.

In summary, listening with moral humility is a kind of receptive attention to another person in which we work to understand how the other sees the situation. We

listen, at least in part, because we cannot understand another's position imaginatively. Acknowledgment is a taking in of the weight or significance for both the other and for ourselves of what we have heard and, often times, beginning inquiry or joining in inquiry. It is, at least in part, the fact that many are indifferent to or outright refuse to hear particular groups of people or particular accounts that leads a person to look for a witness. In the next section, I consider what can happen when a person who looks for a witness finds someone who does not turn away to make the case that witness can be conceptualized as relational in a strong sense.

### **Witness as a Relation**

My conception of witness is relational in that it examines what it is to find a witness from the side of the person bearing witness and from the side of the person who responds as a witness. In a stronger sense, it is relational in that I argue for a conception of witness that requires a kind of completion in the form of a communication between the person who looks for a witness and the person who responds. This conception is in keeping with some usages of witness and thus, is not a purely stipulative or programmatic definition.

I propose a primary or strong sense of a 'relation of witness' as follows, with *A* referring to the person who speaks or bears witness and *B* referring to the person who listens or responds as a witness:

- a) *B* is attentive to *A* and listens to *A*'s testimony with moral humility.
- b) *B* acknowledges what *A* has said.
- c) *A* signals to *B* that she feels *B* has acknowledged the testimony.  
If put into words, *A* would say that *B* has met her trust.

The completion rests with the person who gives testimony – *A* signals to *B* that she feels the other has heard her.<sup>23</sup> We experience finding a witness as finding someone we can trust. Annette Baier’s conceptualization of trust as a three-part predicate – “*A* trusts *B* with valued thing *C*” – is helpful in elaborating this felt sense of trust (1996: 101). We who might respond as witnesses are trusted to listen to and acknowledge the other’s testimony, which means we are entrusted with the other’s most pressing perceptions.

I do not claim that face-to-face encounters are required for the strong relational sense of witness, one in which there is a completion. In other words, the relation can be completed at a distance, as say in a letter such as June Jordan sent to Anita Hill. This does not mean that my conception does not privilege or give precedence to face-to-face encounters. As vital as Jordan’s letter might be to Anita Hill, we should recall Jordan’s reprimand of the brothers in the room who turned away. Only Senator Kennedy stood to protest how the hearings were being conducted. Hill needed a witness then, even though the belated response is still vital to Hill’s trust that she will be heard and that her claims will be taken up by a larger community. Therefore, there is a completion. If Hill had not found a witness, we would still say that she bore witness in stepping forward to speak to

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<sup>23</sup> This completion closely follows Nel Noddings’ conceptualization of a relation of care. For Noddings, a caring relation is a face-to-face encounter between two persons, one caring and one cared-for. She specifies that

- (A, B) is a caring relation (or encounter) if and only if
- i) A cares for B—that is, A’s consciousness is characterized by attention and motivational displacement—and
  - ii) A performs some act in accordance with i), and
  - iii) B recognizes that A cares for B. (2002: 19)

The third requirement completes the encounter. The carer (A) looks to see that her care is received – that the cared-for (B) does feel that he or she is cared-for. Without the completion, Noddings is clear, the encounter or relation cannot be called a caring one.

the press and eventually in the Senate hearings.<sup>24</sup> I call this a secondary sense of witness, in contrast to a primary sense in which the person looking for a witness does indeed find a witness.

June Jordan, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Wayne Karlin bear witness in their writing. Jordan and Hanh create a rhetorical space for us to feel the urgency of responding as a witness. The eloquence of their testimony creates a space for us to respond as witnesses, to answer “Yes, I hear you, I will be your witness.” Karlin also relies on the eloquence of writing to push others to consider the truth of what happened in the war. And we can respond to their testimony. I do not want to discount the role that this response has in our lives, in creating a world or relations less dominated by axis of oppression. And yet, the response is still different than being there in person. We can feel the difference if we consider the retreats that Thich Nhat Hanh organized for Vietnam Veterans when they had returned from the war. Many of the veterans recounted that the retreats were the first time that they had spoken candidly of their experience. The presence of another who was willing to listen and who they sensed was willing to take up what they had to say seems required for speech in this situation. Even though I grant that the completion can happen at a distance, it does not hold the same potential for both people in the relation that a face-to-face encounter holds.

I draw on Laurence Thomas’, Dori Laub’s, and Patricia Hill Collins’ conceptions of ‘witness’ to show that we can sometimes need the presence of an addressable other to narrate our experience and to illustrate how we can be both challenged and nourished in

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<sup>24</sup> June Jordan was one among many who wrote to Anita Hill. Another response to Hill’s testimony is found in C. Morris’ book *Bearing Witness: Sexual Harassment And Beyond-Everywoman's Story* (1994).

face-to-face encounters. The idea of trust or a trust alliance between the person speaking and the person listening as a witness is central in each conception.

Laurence Thomas reminds us of the trust inherent in bearing witness and responding as a witness and of the nature of the work sometimes required to build that trust. In Thomas' view, moral deference is required in order to make moral decisions that do not perpetuate oppression because it allows one to acquire insight into the particular ways that social immorality harms. Thomas argues

We can best get at what moral deference involves, and its importance, by thinking of what it means to bear witness to another's moral pain with that person's authorization. To bear witness to the moral pain of another, say, Leslie, with Leslie's authorization, is to have won her confidence that one can speak informedly and with conviction on her behalf to another about the moral pain she has endured. It is to have won her confidence that one will tell her story with her voice, and not with one's own voice. Hence, it is to have won her trust that one will render salient what was salient for her in the way that it was salient for her; one will represent her struggle to cope in the ways that she has been getting on with her life; that one will convey desperation where desperation was felt, and hurt where hurt was felt. And so on. (245)

Thomas uses bearing witness to mean the act of speaking on the behalf of another.

Through listening with an attitude of moral deference, one understands the other's experience and, importantly, earns the trust of someone who is weary of trusting.

Thomas emphasizes that this trust is not to be taken lightly; earning the trust of another is a great moral responsibility. One should not then abuse the trust or merely withdraw from the person (247). Thomas says just what we must do: understand the other's point of view so thoroughly that we could tell the story in her or his voice.<sup>25</sup> The trust he describes as integral to and aimed at with moral deference is central here to our

discussion of witness as a relation. For Thomas, a face-to-face encounter is necessary to restore trust, because trust has been so damaged or betrayed. One must seek out the other. Dori Laub also speaks of seeking out another in order to hear an account of another's experience.

Dori Laub's work illustrates just how fundamentally a person bearing witness needs to presuppose that there is another, an addressable other. His work lends weight to the strong sense of witness that requires a completion. That there must be, as part of the logic of bearing witness, an addressable other, seems to indicate how powerfully the sense of a response is part of witnessing. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Laub describes the particular circumstances of the Holocaust as preventing the possibility of witnesses both outside and inside the event. Laub writes "As the event of the Jewish genocide unfolded, however, most actual or potential witnesses failed one-by-one to occupy their position as a witness, and at a certain point it seemed as if there was no one left to witness what was taking place" (1992: 81). Witnesses on the outside failed to say anything against what was taking place. This failure of witnesses on the outside affected the prisoners' ability to be witnesses for them selves. Laub explains

To understand it [witness from inside] one has to conceive of the world of the Holocaust as a world in which the very imagination of the *Other* was no longer possible. There was no longer an other to which one could say "Thou" in the hope of being heard, of being recognized as a subject, of being answered. The historical reality of the Holocaust became, thus, a reality which extinguished philosophically the very possibility of address, the possibility of appealing, or of turning to, another. But when one cannot turn to a "you" one cannot say "thou" even to oneself. The Holocaust created in

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<sup>25</sup> Note that this does not mean that we necessarily will tell the other's story in his or her voice, the point is more that we understand it well enough that we could bear witness or speak on their behalf.

this way a world in which one *could not bear witness to oneself*. (82, emphasis in Laub)

Laub refers to Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship in which other human beings are seen as a person or a subject and not addressed as an "it" or an object. The Nazi system worked to convince the victims of their inhumanity (82). Without witnesses on the outside, in Laub's view, the prisoners were unable to narrate their experience even to themselves because they came to question their own humanity. There were some attempts at bearing witness, Laub notes, in that there were some who chronicled events, diaries were written and buried, pictures taken in secret, and messengers and escapees tried to inform and warn the world of what was taking place (84). These were doomed to fail however, in Laub's view, because the event was "beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine" (83). Laub holds that the act of bearing witness to the Holocaust still can and should take place belatedly. As one example of such bearing witness, Laub points to the Fortunoff Video Archive project designed to enable survivors to bear witness.<sup>26</sup>

The archive project allowed survivors to tell their experience by providing the witness that was missing earlier. Laub asserts that "the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story" (1992: 68). The survivor requires a listener to bear witness or to tell of her experience. The addressable other becomes a witness before whom the story can be recounted. Laub states

Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the

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<sup>26</sup> The archive project was founded in 1979 by a New Haven grassroots organization and adopted by Yale University in 1981.



intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time. (70-71)

The survivor may not understand or consciously remember the events until spoken in the presence of a witness. Laub argues that in this situation, the listener and survivor share the responsibility for recounting experience in the camps because it is the presence of another that allows the event to be told. In this process of witnessing, facts are established and there is a historical recovery of the event. But what ultimately matters for the survivor, Laub asserts, is “not simply the information, but the experience itself of *“living through testimony, of giving testimony”* (85). Giving testimony is “the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as witness: reconstitutes the internal “*thou,*” and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself” (85).

Laub describes a situation in which bearing witness or telling one’s story can only take place in “the intimate and total presence of an other” (70). This telling may be the first time that a survivor has spoken of his or her experience and thus, the telling may involve remembering events that the speaker has not articulated even to her or his self. In articulating his or her experience, in Laub’s view, the survivor is able to reclaim what Laub refers to as an internal witness, an internal Thou. In this situation, the person giving testimony does more than claim her experience, she also claims that she is a person. The presence of another, a sympathetic listener, is vital in cases where a person is not able to narrate an event even to his self. In Laub’s view, without the presence of an addressable other, the account would be lost. We can say that two things happen when a person looking for a witness finds someone she or he can trust. First, he or she is able to narrate their experience, thus claiming an internal witness and second, an account of

experience in the camps is articulated, thus allowing others to consider what has happened – to consider the other’s experience. Both are dependent on the trust between the person giving testimony and the person listening who did not turn away.

Laub describes how we can sometimes need the presence of an addressable other to speak; however, this was the not case for all survivors. Some survivors were able to bear witness. Giorgio Agamben writes “In the camp, one of the reasons that can drive a prisoner to survive is the idea of becoming a witness” (1999: 16).<sup>27</sup> This was Primo Levi’s conviction as a survivor of Auschwitz. When he returned home, Levi recounted his experience to everyone. Levi compares himself to Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner who forces the wedding guests to listen to his tale because, Levi relates, “Well, when I first returned from the concentration camp I did just that. I felt an unrestrainable need to tell my story to anyone and everyone!” (Agamben, 1999: 16). I believe that Laub glosses too quickly over the attempts to bear witness through smuggled letters and photographs. Even in extreme circumstances, people are sometimes able to narrate their experience. We can say that Levi is bearing witness. In both situations – where the presence of an addressable other is required to give an account and where the account is shouted out to anyone passing by – finding a witness supports a sense of trust that another has heard one’s account and will acknowledge what has been said.

I draw on Patricia Hill Collins to support my claim about the significance of privileging face-to-face encounters because the examples she gives illustrate how finding witnesses works in ordinary mundane activities that make up our lives: talking around a kitchen table, within a church community. I introduce her work also to show the

epistemological risks and dangers associated with witnessing and the need for the fourth criterion – that testimony be amendable to rational work – for any conception of witness that is to be used in education. Collins conceptualizes the testimony of African-American women as a profound act of resistance to oppression. She traces the tradition of testimonials within the African-American community to church settings, explaining that

Within a narrow use of the testimonial, individuals testify within a community of believers such that each testimonial spurs others on to greater faith. However, a broader use of the testimonial involves testifying the truth to cynics and nonbelievers. Within a more generalized testimonial tradition, breaking silence, speaking out, and talking back in academic settings constitute public testimonials. (1998: 237)

In *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion and Civil Rights*, Rosetta Ross helps to understand just what Collins means in church settings. She writes

Testimonies require the presence of witnesses, person who have also seen or experienced God's work and who are able to certify or attest to the truth of it in the testimonies they hear. [...] In testimony, people are believed to have spoken truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for the edification of all. (2003: 13)

We can note two kinds of testimonials here, one to a community of believers and a second to cynics and non-believers, even oppressors. The distinction between these two communities and between private and public knowledge are key in understanding how Collins uses the term 'testimonial.' Private knowledge, Collins explains, is "the collective secret knowledge generated by groups on either side of power that are shared in private when the other side's surveillance seems absent" (49). In Collins' view, such knowledge is generated in the kind of discourse or conversation women might have around the kitchen table. Collins notes "Drawing on traditional African-American

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<sup>27</sup> Agamben uses witness to refer to a person who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it.

cultures of resistance, conversations around the kitchen table become classrooms of learning how to cope with oppression” (49). In such conversations, women speak about their lived experience in ways that challenge the prevailing interpretations of Black women’s experience in public discourses. Her description brings to mind an intimate relation among friends in which one’s perceptions are affirmed.

Collins describes the sustenance we can gain from conversation that resembles a conversation with friends around a kitchen table. The nods of agreement, shouts of response, and encouraging presence of others moved by what you say does make speech possible – we find ourselves able to say things that we would not otherwise. Such conversation can support speech. Novelist, Edwidge Danticat, says that she “was always intrigued by the bond between older women who gathered together and the things they told each other.” In an interview, she explains that a lot of the “stories [she has] written, including the story of *The Farming of Bones*, came out of listening to those female family conversations, which Paule Marshall so wisely calls ‘kitchen poetry.’” As nourishing as this can be, it is problematic if the speaker is not thanked for her message.

Looking to church settings, it is sometimes the case that the speaker will be silenced or ostracized from the community when a testimonial veers from an established pattern and challenges norms or accepted interpretations within the private community. This relation conceals a pressure for conformity. I am sure this conformity is not what Collins has in mind, and yet it is a danger in her description of a testimonial to a community of believers. Anita Hill’s experience illustrates this pressure to conform. Reflecting on the Congressional hearings, Hill writes that many saw her testifying against Clarence Thomas as a sin that would condemn her to “burn in hell” (1997: 257). Hill

broke with strong norms in the African-American community in that she, a black woman, bore witness against a black man, rather than put the good of the community first. The turning away of many within the African-American community is what June Jordan speaks to in her essay "Can I Get a Witness?" Anita Hill did find witnesses in a community of women after the hearings; however, she found little support at the time. Anita Hill worked at every turn to have her experience heard, by which I mean taken into account, but there were no witnesses inside the chambers. As June Jordan notes, only Senator Kennedy came close.

Collins takes Sojourner Truth as a paradigmatic example of bearing witness as resistance stated in public. Collins notes "Truth recognized that the power relations that the context of her time, Truth was an object to be named at will by masters" (1998: 237). Sojourner Truth rejected her slave name Isabella Baumfree, in her words, so as not to keep anything of Egypt on her. Collins explains

Although Sojourner Truth certainly could have named herself in isolation, proclaiming the truth required a community of listeners. It mattered neither that many of the listeners in her day cared little for what she had to say nor that they were more powerful. In a sense, her boldness foreshadows the civil rights, Black Power, and other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that effectively used the media to proclaim new truths. (238)

Sojourner Truth spoke to an audience that had long refused to listen to her. But surely Truth hopes that there will be some listeners who do not turn away, and who use the name she calls herself. June Jordan's questions "Can anyone hear me? Can I get a witness?" could be Sojourner Truth's questions as she proclaimed her new name. There is no assurance that one will be heard, but speech is sustained by the hope that it will reach someone. Sojourner Truth bears witness to proclaim the truth that she is somebody

who can name herself. Her testimony illustrates just how vital a secondary sense can be; nevertheless, there is the hope of an answer, someone to say “Yes, I hear you.”

In this chapter I have elaborated a conception of witness that begins with the idea that we do sometimes look for witnesses. I examined what I hold to be four clear cases of looking for a witness and asserted that we look for a witness when it seems that everyone has turned away. The response of witness, as I have outlined it, is to listen with moral humility and to acknowledge what is said. The primary sense of the relation has a completion that ensures trust is answered.

## CHAPTER 5

### MORAL DIMENSIONS OF THE RELATION OF WITNESS

In *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Jonathon Glover claims that any adequate moral theory must address violence; indeed, he makes it a criterion of an adequate moral theory. He writes “With disasters on the scale of some in the twentieth century, any ethical theory which either justifies them or can give no help in avoiding them is inadequate. The thought at Auschwitz and at other places, ‘never again,’ is more compelling than any abstract ethical principle” (1999: 406). Glover holds that it is a false dichotomy to say that either we must have an external foundation to morality, such as a religious foundation or a foundation in human intellect, or we are left with Nietzschean amorality. An alternative, Glover argues, is to keep ethics afloat without external support by rooting it in human needs and values. He explains

Morality interpreted this way becomes tentative, exploratory and partly empirical. It is exploratory on the model of Socrates. Our deepest values are not just obvious. They are not all on the surface. Questioning and arguing are needed to discover some of them. But ethics is also exploratory in a different, more empirical, way. It includes seeing the consequences of living by a code or set of values. (406)

Like the caring encounter that Noddings describes, my account of a relation of witness is rooted in human needs and values. The relation of witness, as I have characterized it, is rooted in the need to speak our most pressing perceptions and have another person answer our address. While not by any means a complete ethical theory, the relation of witness has the potential to assist ethical theories in avoiding violence in that the relation

helps us to speak and to be heard. I have argued that we look for a witness in a climate of indifference or in the face of an outright refusal to listen. Finding a witness supports speech and can sometimes be required for a person to speak of his or her experience and beliefs. The relation supports speech in that the person looking for a witness feels that they have found someone who is genuinely open to hearing what he has to say. The person who responds as a witness is willing to listen with moral humility and to acknowledge what the other has to say, even though the testimony may challenge his understanding of the world and who he is in relation to the other. Thus, the relation of witness can contribute to the tentative, exploratory, and partly empirical model of morality that Glover proposes. The relation of witness, as I have described it, contributes to communicative ethics projects such as those elaborated by Jurgen Habermas, Seyla Benhabib, Iris Marion Young, and most centrally in this analysis, Cheryl Misak.

If we construe morality, as it is sometimes broadened, as concerned primarily with the question of how I am to meet the other, then the relation of witness is obviously a moral relation. In connection with witness being a moral relation, two questions arise. First, when must I respond as a witness? I argue that we must always be ready to respond as a witness, given how we rely on one another. Second, does witness conceptualized as a response to a particular person foreclose on our ability to see the structures of oppression? This second question is critical because the purpose of those who bear witness is often to challenge oppression, thus an adequate conception of bearing witness can not by definition render a challenge to oppression ineffective. Characterizing the response of a witness as a response to a particular person appears to present a conundrum in that it would seem to direct our attention solely to the individual and away from



structural oppression. I answer this conundrum by focusing on the inquiry involved in acknowledgement drawing on Cheryl Misak's interpretation of Charles S. Pierce's conception of truth and inquiry.

### **When Must a Person Respond as a Witness?**

I claim that we must always be willing to respond as a witness, to listen and to hear what the other has to say. Not only must we be willing to respond as a witness to those who we happen to meet; we must also sometimes seek out situations in which we may be asked to respond as a witness. I have argued that finding a witness restores or sustains trust. Stated in broad terms, the relation of witness is rooted in our need to be seen and heard by others, to have our perceptions taken into account. This need, in turn, is rooted in the fact that we are ontologically in relation to one another. We are always persons in relation, co-constructed as persons in a myriad of ways. We are, in part, constituted by the response of others. The fact of our interdependency has ethical significance. We see this in a fundamental way in Laub's analysis of what it means to be a witness: if we cannot find an addressable other, then we can lose the ability to narrate our experience. In a sense, we cease to be someone. We rely on the response of others to be a person. Laub calls this response, the response of a witness – and it is required for the internal witness. In Collins' account we saw how the response of a witness can nourish and sustain us, as for example in sitting with friends at the kitchen table. We are co-constructed or constituted, at least in part, by the response of others.

I turn to Laurence Thomas' idea of moral deference to elaborate how we are constituted by the response of other. Thomas describes a face-to-face encounter between

someone who is ‘privileged’ and someone who belongs to what he calls a ‘socially diminished category’ with the intent of understanding the harm caused by racial oppression. For Thomas, moral deference is

...a mode of moral learning which those who have been oppressed are owed in the name of eliminating the very state of their oppression. In the absence of such learning, oppression cannot but continue to be a part of the fabric of moral life. Indeed, the absence of such learning, the studied refusal to engage in such learning, is one of the very ways in which oppression manifests itself. (247)

Thomas argues that “moral deference is owed to persons of good will when they speak in an informed way regarding experiences specific to their diminished social category from the standpoint of an emotional category configuration to which others do not have access” (244). We need to understand what Thomas means by ‘diminished social category’ and ‘emotional category configuration’ to unpack this claim. Following David Hume, Thomas understands we humans to be socially constituted. He explains

We are constituted through others, by which I mean that the way in which we conceive of ourselves is, at least in part, owing to how others conceive of us, and necessarily so. The way in which we think of ourselves is inextricably tied to the way in which others think of us. In a fully just world, all would be constituted through others so as to be full and equal members of society. That is, each member would be constituted so as to see her or himself in this way. By contrast, in an oppressive society, the victims of oppression—diminished social category persons, I mean—are constituted, in both masterfully subtle ways and in ever so explicit ways, so as not to see themselves as full and equal members of society. (238)

Characterizing the oppressed as belonging to a diminished social category recognizes the ways in which persons—as members of groups—are differently socially constituted in an unjust society. As Thomas describes it, one consequence of oppression is that those belonging to a diminished social category do not see themselves to be full and equal members of society and thus, feel a sense of vulnerability. It is this vulnerability that

defines what Thomas calls an emotional category configuration. The vulnerability one feels as a member of a diminished social category means that an innocent black man attacked by white men and an innocent white man attacked by black men will experience their pain in a radically different manner. Thus, only by listening with an attitude of moral deference, Thomas claims, can a person who does not belong to the same category begin to understand how oppression causes harm to a particular person. The social categories that Thomas identifies are descriptive of how we are differently socially constituted and the sense of vulnerability that results from these categories.

For Thomas, moral deference can help to address the emotional walls that develop between people in an immoral society. He proposes that we listen with moral deference to “persons of good will when they speak in an informed way regarding experiences specific to their diminished social category from the standpoint of an emotional category configuration to which others do not have access” (244). We listen with moral deference in a very particular situation – a person who is not a member of downwardly socially constituted group listens in order to learn how oppression works in the life of someone who is a member of downwardly socially constructed group. The educational proposals critiqued in Chapter 3 also prescribe particular situations in which students are asked to listen or respond as a witness. Roger Simon asks that students respond as a witness to texts that the teacher selects in relation to events of historical trauma. Megan Boler suggests that students engage in a testimonial reading of any text; however, the student is asked to attend to where she or he feels discomfort or is resistant to the text. The class engages in ‘collective witnessing’ to examine their discomfort in conversation with one another. Sandra Bloom and Michael Reichert ask that students and teachers respond as a

witness to violence – their list of violence is long and inclusive. Taken together, Simon, Boler, Bloom and Reichert claim that one should respond as a witness to historical trauma, to any text that causes discomfort, and to all known cases of violence or reenactments of trauma. In my view, these prescriptions, as varied as they are, reduce witness to seeing violence and in this, do not recognize the myriad of ways that we are constituted by the response of others.

In the relation of witness, as I conceptualize it, testimony is not marked by a particular content, but rather we look for witnesses in situations where many have turned away. Looking for a witness is marked by a need to be seen and heard – to have one's perceptions acknowledged. The person who responds as a witness listens to the perceptions that the other feels he or she should attend to. That we must always be ready to respond as a witness is a significant difference from the conceptions of witness critiqued in the educational proposals in Chapter 3. One, it means that we may be asked to respond as a witness to a person who perpetrates violence. Two, it means that, as in the case of Mary TallMountain, we may be asked to respond as a witness to an account of what is most valued.

#### Listening to Accounts of Violence

Wayne Karlin's essay on his experience in the Vietnam War is in a collection of talks given at a conference commemorating the My Lai massacre of March 16, 1968. In the opening address of the conference, held in 1994, Robert Jay Lifton invited those in attendance to listen and to learn from each other about My Lai, the Vietnam War, atrocity, modern warfare, and themselves. In Lifton's view, we must bear witness to this

history to learn more about the forces that can push toward atrocity and the possibility of resisting atrocity producing situations (Anderson, 1998: 22). Anderson notes that one of the most contentious questions has been whether My Lai was an aberration or a normal operation and whether the moral burden falls on a few individuals, on the military and civilian chain of command, or on the entire American way of war. For Anderson, how one answers these questions about the past determines how one lives with the traumatic memories in the present and guards against such disasters in the future (6). He argues that because “no one can be certain that his or her explanation is definitively right, everyone must listen to the other voices” and that the process does not end with listening (16). We must carefully collect evidence, analyze it, and construct logical arguments. Or in the terms that I’ve employed, to submit the testimony to rational work, both in terms of what is said and in terms of our own responses. The conference, like accounts and studies of the Holocaust, illustrates why it is important to respond as a witness, to listen to testimony in a way that allows claims to be put on the table.

The participants at the conference had all been directly involved in the Vietnam War. Anderson reports that they “told their stories that weekend [at the conference] and we did our best to hear what they said” (6). Randy Fertal, one of the organizers, asserts that “in truth, we in America have never really listened to what the Vietnam veterans experienced in Vietnam. What kept us then and keeps us now from listening? Perhaps the most formidable obstacle to true listening is ideology” (195). Fertal tells about arguing with his father about whether he would serve in Vietnam if called “All we were talking about, all we were expressing, were our ideologies. We did not bother—nor could we then have found the skill or the sangfroid—to examine the premises of those

ideologies. And yet only by such examination can we hope ever to hear one another, can we hope ever to empathize with another's point of view" (196). I included a Vietnam Veteran among the clear cases of looking for a witness because it illustrates the complexity of responding as a witness. The conference illustrates the significance of claims being put on the table for determining what happened and examining the significance of what happened. In terms of witness as a response to a particular person we can think of the retreats where Thich Nhat Hanh listened to the experience of veterans and Robert Jay Lifton's 'rap sessions' with veterans where he listened openly in the hope of helping an individual voice his experience. Both listened to accounts given by those who committed atrocities. This can be vital for the very life of the person bearing witness or speaking of their experience and for their ability to fully enter back into a larger community or feel welcomed home.<sup>28</sup> In responding as a witness, we must also be willing to hear these accounts, to consider how we meet those who have caused harm and recognize our own potential to cause such harm.

#### Listening to Accounts of What is Most Valued

As Mary TallMountain's account exemplifies, we may look for witnesses to have others feel what we take to be of significance, to have value in our lives. Mary TallMountain's reading in the writing group is one clear example. Let me give another

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<sup>28</sup> In "Speaking of Courage," Tim O'Brien tells of a veteran, Norman Bowker, who drives his father's Chevy around and around a lake in his hometown thinking of what he wanted to say to his father and to Sally Kramer, who he would have liked to marry if she had not already married someone else. He wants to tell them or anyone, it seems, about the night Kiowa died in Vietnam. O'Brien writes "In a soft voice, without flourishes, he would have told the exact truth" (1990:148). Bowker does not tell the story. He kills himself in a YMCA locker room.

example. A scene in Charles Frazier's novel, *Cold Mountain*, captures the desire to feel our life reverberate. Inman, a man deserting the Confederate Army in the U.S. Civil War, spends a night at Sara's house, during his travel home to the south. Sara's husband, John, the father of her infant child, had been killed in the war. Frazier writes:

There was nothing about her story remarkable other than that it was her life. She told the manner in which she and John had met and fallen in love. The building of this cabin and her working like a man beside him, felling the trees and raising the dressed logs and chinking the gaps. The happy life they had planned in this lost place which to Inman seemed so unlikely of sustenance. The hardness of the past four years, John's death, the shortness of food. The only bright spot was John's brief furlough, a time of great happiness which produced the baby sleeping by the fire. Without her, Sara said, there'd be nothing holding me to earth. (1997: 244)

Each time that Inman tried to speak, Sara hushed him. "She required of Inman only that he bear witness [listen] to her tale" (244). For Inman, Frazier continues, "He figured she had found some calm just in telling to another person what a lonely thin edge of life she occupied, where one hog could act as a stopple to a demijohn of woes" (245). Sara wanted Inman to know the significance the log cabin and cleared land held for her. She spoke not so much of the pain, but of the joy in that time and in the child sleeping by the fire. Sara did not want to be soothed or comforted. She did not look to Inman to take her with him, to save her. Sara only asked him to listen to her story and to help her butcher the last hog. In describing her experience, Sara explains the sustenance that she has found in a place where Inman could see none. Sara's intent seems to have been to hear her life reverberate, and perhaps this is part of what it means to be felt, understood and remembered by others.

Writing on a relation of care, Ann Diller notes that "When we ask Simone Weil's question "What are you going through?" we tend to hear about suffering, sorrows, grief,

or pain. All of which constitute an integral part of our lives. But only a part” (1992: 209). William James suggests another integral part of our lives in his essay “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” James draws on Robert Lewis Stevenson’s “The Lantern Bearers” in which Stevenson describes the details, and the essential glory, of those nights when children with a tin bull’s-eye lantern under their top-coat “asked for nothing more” (Diller, 1992: 210). Diller continues “Here we have, as James the Pluralist well knew, the clue for a crucial refinement on our claims about knowledge of the particular, namely which particulars it is that give us the fullest, the most essential, knowledge of someone: “to miss the joy is to miss all” (210). Listening to accounts of what is most valued, what gives us joy can help to build bridges, to understand others, and is also vital to our lives together. It is this joy that we can sometimes refuse to see or are indifferent to. That we are witnesses to the joys and suffering of our lives is in keeping with ordinary usages of witness. That this is so, also works to make responding as a witness a less arduous responsibility. As Heller noted, we may sometimes be invited into a room where the light is very good. Responding as a witness to what another most values recognizes the complex ways that we are constituted by others and can also support some of the more difficult work of responding to violence.

### Turning Away

Are there any times when we might turn away, when we need not respond as a witness? We must take care here because we may not know if many others have turned away before us. All the same there are times, I believe, when we may refuse to be a witness.



- (a) When we know that we cannot accept what we are entrusted with – from exhaustion or we are already questioning some of our central understandings and cannot take on more of the inquiry entailed in acknowledgment.
- (b) When our own pain is too raw to allow us to listen now to the other's account because of our own experience. But we may still aim to listen at some point.
- (c) Insincerity on the part of the person speaking. We must interrogate our assumptions here and yet we do make judgments regarding sincerity.<sup>29</sup>

In the conception of witness that I lay out, we must always be ready to respond as a witness because of the fact of our interdependency. We can see this interdependency in that we need others to be a person, to have our trust in others met. We see this in situations of violence, such as Laub describes, where we require the presence of an addressable other to speak of our experience. This is the case in many situations where there is little or no trust, such as in racial oppression in the United States. Second, we see the interdependency in the sustenance we get from others listening and willing to believe us, as in Collins' conversation around the kitchen table and in TallMountain's reading to the women in the writing group. Third, we can see our interdependency in how we respond to those we do not want to listen to because their experience challenges our view of the world, such as in the case of Veterans when they returned from Vietnam. We can need witnesses in conditions of trauma and also in the everyday sort of occurrences in our lives. It becomes pressing when it seems that everyone has turned away.

### **Bearing Witness to Oppression**

As a response to a particular person, my conception of witness is similar to Noddings' account of a caring encounter and is thus open to a particular critique,

especially in regard to addressing oppression. Alison Jagger argues that as a mode of moral reasoning, the perspective of care is not adequate for feminist projects because attention to a particular person obscures our attention to structures of oppression that make male-dominance seem normal, justifiable, a description of just the way the world is. She argues that “care’s emphasis on responding to immediate needs simultaneously takes those needs as givens, failing to question their source or why they are presently unfulfilled” (1995: 194). Jagger continues

Moral thinking that focuses on the specificities of particular situations is likely to see the source of problems as lying in the personal attitudes of individual men, whites or heterosexuals who benefit, sometimes unwittingly or unwillingly, from sexism, racism, and heterosexism, rather than in those larger institutions that give some individuals power and privilege over others. Similarly, attending to an individual’s immediate needs for food, shelter, comfort, or companionship is likely to distract from moral scrutiny of the social structures that create those needs or leave them unfulfilled. (195)

The reality of social structures means that our individual efforts to meet individual needs may be virtually impossible. Jagger asserts

Significantly improving the lives of the world’s women certainly requires the empathy, imagination, and responsiveness that distinguish care thinking; but it also requires a kind of moral thinking that focuses not only on meeting immediate needs but on problematizing the structures that create those needs or keeps them unfulfilled. (197)

Jagger does not conclude that justice thinking is better suited to feminist projects. This is the conundrum—neither mode of reasoning works on its own. Jagger argues

Neither care nor justice reasoning, as ordinarily construed, constitutes the kind of hermeneutical moral thinking capable of questioning conventional definitions of assault as well as of exploring the complex assumptions about sexuality, aggression, and gender that make rape not only thinkable but predictable and even normal. The feminists of the late 1960’s called this kind of thinking consciousness-raising. (198)

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<sup>29</sup> This requirement is in keeping with Thomas’ own qualification that we must listen to persons of “good will.”

In insisting that witness is a response to a particular person, my analysis risks foreclosing on the recognition of injustice in just the way Jagger describes, *i.e.* the ability to see the structures of oppression.

In the next section, I will argue that the relation of witness as I have conceptualized it, does not foreclose on a shift to the frame, to structural oppression. Acknowledgment entails inquiry. If this inquiry is to sustain and, at a minimum, not foreclose on attention to structural oppression, then it must be an open sort of inquiry. The inquiry that best meets the criteria, I hold, is a pragmatist conception of inquiry and truth. I look to Cheryl Misak's elaboration of Charles S. Pierce's work to answer the conundrum Jagger poses and to give shape to the inquiry entailed in acknowledgment. First, let me return briefly to what is meant by structural oppression.

### Structural Oppression

In her analysis of structural oppression, Iris Marion Young asserts that the new usage of oppression includes the tyranny of one group over another, but also refers to the systematic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant. Young holds "oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the results of a few people's choices or policies" (41). As noted in Chapter 1, the causes of structural oppression are "embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (41). The systemic character of oppression means that there may not be a group that oppresses; however for every oppressed group there is a privileged group.

Young defines a social group as “a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life” (43). She holds that groups are an expression of social relations; a group exists only in relation to at least one other group. Unlike an aggregate or an association, a group constitutes individuals. Young explains “A person’s particular sense of history, affinity, and separateness, even the person’s mode of reasoning, evaluating, and expressing feeling, are constituted partly by her or his group affinities” (45). This ontology is in contrast to a theory of justice that presumes “the individual is ontologically prior to the social – the authentic self is autonomous, unified, free, and self-made, standing apart from history and affiliations, choosing its life plan entirely for itself” (45). Emphasizing and supporting Young’s analysis, is Thomas’ point that the way in which we conceive of ourselves is, at least in part, owing to how others conceive of us. Thomas notes that victims of oppression are constituted, “in both masterfully subtle ways and in ever so explicit ways, so as not to see themselves as full and equal members of society” (1992: 238). We are constituted within groups by how another group perceives us as well as by the history, traditions, and discourse patterns of our group affinities. Young is clear that we should not deny the reality of groups—that it is foolish to do so. Social justice, Young argues, “requires not the melting away of differences, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression” (47). Group differentiation is not in itself oppressive.

One way we can see structural oppression is by examining privilege. In his book, *Slaves in the Family*, Edward Ball explores the legacy of oppression and privilege in his own family. A descendent of slave-owners, Edward Ball recounts “From time to time in

his stories, Dad mentioned the people our family used to own. They were usually just “the slaves,” sometimes “the Ball slaves,” a puff of black smoke on the wrinkled horizon of the past” (1998: 8). Ball reflects that despite having left the South, the plantation past seemed etched in his unconscious. The plantation lived on in a sense. Ball writes

If we did not inherit money, or land, we received a great fund of cultural capital, including prestige, a chance at education, self-esteem, a sense of place, mobility, even (in some cases) a flair for giving orders. And it was not only “us,” the families of former slave owners, who carried the baggage of the plantations. By skewing things so violently in the past, we had made sure that our cultural riches would benefit all white Americans. (14)

In this Ball names the privilege he, and all white Americans, inherit from this violent past.

For an example of a legacy of oppression embedded in the structures of society, we need only look to our public school system. At an elementary school I visit each week, it is common to see only African-American boys on the bench outside the principal’s office. This is true in spite of the fact that the school population is less than twenty percent African-American.<sup>30</sup> Ann Arnett Ferguson records this pattern in her book, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (2001). The boys have more than likely acted in a way that their teachers feel justified in sending them from the classroom. And yet, there is something deeply wrong when week after week it is African-American boys who are excluded or exclude themselves from class. This example illustrates how we can see oppression working in everyday practices by examining comparisons between groups and the consequences of assumptions, attitudes,

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<sup>30</sup> The demographics of this elementary school of 450 students are 18% African American, 7 % Asian, 52% Hispanic, 1% Native American, 1% Pacific Islander, 21 % White. Ninety-four percent of the students participate in the free or reduced lunch program.

and institutional policies. Structural oppression is not apparent in the intentions of individuals. By listening to a child or teacher's account of what has happened, we would not see the structures of oppression that we can see in looking at the patterns of who sits on the bench day after day.

Jagger argues that it is not enough to respond to the individual, but that we must also problematize attitudes that work to normalize oppression. Responding to the immediate needs of individual makes the needs seem normal, simply something that is; we are not pushed to question why the needs are unfulfilled. I show first that the relation of witness does not foreclose on seeing the structures of oppression. And further, that is it likely, though not guaranteed, that our inquiry will bring us to consideration of the structural oppression. Thus inquiry as to what the other's testimony means to us must be characterized by an open kind of inquiry. If inquiry is to have the potential to move us from the individual to the frame, it will need to be the kind of inquiry that Misak has in mind. I begin to answer the conundrum Jagger poses with an overview of Misak's project. Witness is not the same relation as care. The second move of the response of a witness is characterized by acknowledging the other's testimony. Acknowledgement can require that we engage in inquiry by turning toward ourselves with a particular posture of mind or willingness to question everything; however, no way of listening is a guarantee that we will see the wrong.

### Truth and Inquiry

To elaborate Charles Sanders Pierce's notion of inquiry aimed at truth, Cheryl Misak begins with the phenomena of our beliefs. On the pragmatist view of truth, as

Misak explains it, when we aim at empirical adequacy, predictive power, understanding the way things work, understanding ourselves, and the like, we aim at truth (2000: 1).

Pierce held that a true belief is one that would be agreed upon at the hypothetical or ideal end of inquiry. Building on Pierce's conception, Misak claims "A true belief is one upon which inquiry could not improve—belief which would fit with experience and argument and which would satisfy the aims of inquiry, no matter how much the issue was subject to experiment, evaluation, and debate" (1). I will take up this conception of truth more fully in the next chapter, for now it will suffice to say that on this account, the aim of inquiry and true belief cannot be separated. When we engage in inquiry, we aim at getting the best beliefs we can.

Misak argues that we can see moral deliberation and deliberation about how best to live our lives as being "truth apt." She roots her argument that moral claims are truth-apt in the phenomenology of beliefs. She explains

For it seems that when we make moral judgments and when we act in the ways which we think are morally right, we take ourselves to be aiming at something objective – at the truth or at getting things right, where 'right' does not mean merely 'right by the lights of my group.' [...] We want not the illusion that our projects, plans, ambitions, and relationships are worthwhile—we want good reason to think that they are worthwhile. (3)

We want our beliefs to be right as evidenced in how we are prepared to question our judgment. Because we want to get things right, Misak argues we must accept certain commitments to hold our beliefs open and to engage in inquiry. Misak holds that "Inquiry begins with the irritation of doubt and ends with a stable, doubt-resistant belief. But we can't know when this is – and so should focus on inquiry and getting the best answers that we can" (53).

Inquiry is defined broadly. Misak explains that seeing moral inquiry as being truth-apt or aiming at truth does not force us to think of moral inquiry as the active testing of hypothesis. The inquiry is not so organized, nor the questions always clear. The process of inquiry “can take all kind of forms, not all of them resembling self-conscious, organized, and systematic investigation” (108). Inquiry can begin in any number of ways. Misak elaborates

Challenges can come from within, when my own judgments and principles conflict and I feel a pull toward revising them. Or they can come from without, when I see that the judgments and principles of others, from within my circle or from afar, conflict with my own judgments and I feel a pull towards reconsidering them. (53)

In Misak’s view, a minimal characteristic of good inquiry is that which takes experience seriously. And so, in this view, if we fail to take the experience of others seriously, then we fail to have beliefs that are genuinely aimed toward truth. In a relation of witness, I do not only mean that we must take the experience of others seriously. I want to be clear that it is their account of their experience that we must take seriously to meet the minimal characteristic of inquiry.

In moral deliberation in particular, Misak holds that “we must not underestimate the value of listening to ordinary people’s own stories -- their accounts of how injustice, for instance, has played a part in their lives” (96).

Moral deliberation displays a kind of epistemological democracy. We are all involved in moral discussion and in experiments in living, to borrow a phrase from Mill. Moral judgement is inextricably bound up with our relations to theirs and anyone who stands in such relationships has plenty of engagement in moral deliberation. Truth requires us to listen to others, and anyone might be an expert. (96)

There is an expectation of convergence – but it is a normative presupposition of inquiry, differing in strength as our needs for convergence differ” (99). Misak holds that



engaging in genuine moral inquiry—searching for principles and for particular judgments which will not be susceptible to recalcitrant experience and argument—requires that we take our beliefs to be responsive to new arguments and sensibilities about what is good, cruel, kind, oppressive, worthwhile, or just. Those who neglect or denigrate the experiences of others because of their gender, skin color, or sexual orientation are adopting a very bad means for arriving at true and rational beliefs. They can be criticized as failing to aim at truth properly. (104)

And so as inquirers, people who want to get it right – to have true beliefs – we must listen to the experience and reasons others put forward.

In responding as a witness, as I've characterized it, we may be drawn into the inquiry of the person bearing witness or begin a related inquiry. For example, if we think of Mary Solberg in El Salvador, in acknowledging the testimony of those she lived and worked beside there, her inquiry may be broadly described as directed by the question "Knowing what I know now, how should I live?" Wayne Karlin is engaged in a sort of inquiry to understand his experience in Vietnam. Those who refuse to listen to his testimony or that of other Veterans cease to have rational beliefs regarding the Vietnam War, or perhaps any war, and in a sense, block inquiry into the significance of the Vietnam War.

We can expect Misak's conception of inquiry to direct our attention to the structures of oppression because of the openness of the inquiry – the requirement that we listen to experience and reason. We may not attend to the structures of oppression in every case. In some cases it may not be that salient.

## CHAPTER 6

### EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE RELATION OF WITNESS

In the same way that we must ensure that our conception of a relation of witness does not foreclose on our ability to see the structures of oppression, we must take care that the relation does not rest on an epistemology that in its self perpetuates oppression. This latter charge is made against many ‘standard knowledge’ or ‘traditional epistemology’ projects. I argue that the relation of witness can make a significant contribution to the generation of ‘situated knowledge’ and therefore is not susceptible to this charge. In this chapter, I explicate the contribution the relation of witness makes to the generation of situated knowledge. I begin with a contrast of ‘standard’ and ‘situated’ knowledge, and argue that pragmatists have long been engaged in the generation of situated knowledge. I then turn back to the relation of witness to elaborate the commitments of each side that work to support the epistemological functions of the relation.

#### **Impact of Epistemology as Usual**

One traditional epistemological project centers on Descartes’ notion of a universal “subject” who variously recalls, receives, or creates knowledge. Within this project, one view of knowledge that has guided epistemology for centuries can be summarized as follows:

We can say that S knows p when

1. S believes that p.
2. P is true.
3. S is justified in (has good reasons for) believing that p. (Noddings, 1995: 100)

Much contemporary debate in epistemology has to do with the nature of the subject and whether we can presume there is a universal subject who recalls, receives or creates knowledge. Another key topic of debate is what counts as objectivity.

On the positivist view, objectivity is defined as the scientific inquiry's independence from the "subjective" values, interests, and emotions of those who engage in scientific inquiry or who deal with its results. Alison Jagger notes that in this view "good scientists are detached observers and manipulators of nature who follow strict methodological rules, which enable them to separate themselves from the special values, interests or emotions generated by their class, race, sex, or unique situation" (Jagger, 1983: 356). The good scientist of positivism resembles the abstract individual of liberal political theory who is "able to detach herself or himself from such "contingent" properties as race, class or sex" (357). This view of objectivity is challenged on the grounds that we cannot make a sharp distinction between fact and value, nor is there any such standpoint as that of a neutral observer.

What Jagger calls a 'traditional Marxist' conception of knowledge challenges two basic assumptions of this liberal epistemology. Jagger names these as follows

First, since praxis is necessarily a social activity, it challenges the view that knowledge can be the achievement of a single isolated individual. Instead, Marxism views knowledge as socially constructed and the expansion of knowledge as a social project. Secondly, since knowledge is one aspect of human productive activity and since this activity is necessarily purposive, the basic categories of knowledge will always be shaped by human purposes and the values on which they are based. (358)

Traditional Marxist thought recognizes that there is no Archimedean point outside the world where we may stand to gain a perspective on reality that is neutral between the interests and values of existing social groups, and thus no knowledge can be objective in the liberal or positivist sense (362). The ways in which we conceptualize the world are always shaped by our interactions with the world (362). A limitation of structuralist Marxism is that the only two standpoints acknowledged are determined on the basis of one's relation to the means of production: ruling class and proletariat. On this view, taken to the extreme, the abolishment of capitalism will abolish women's oppression. This view is challenged on the basis that it is not a complex enough account of relations of dominance and oppression.

The positivist view poses a universal subject who is in fact not universal, but assumes a specific kind of experience and worldview. The impact of the positivist view is that we lose sight of the particular people who make knowledge claims utilizing certain evidence to meet certain purposes. The traditional Marxist view recognizes that knowledge is necessarily shaped by human purposes and values, but acknowledges only two standpoints. Jagger argues that neither is adequate to feminist projects; I would add that neither is adequate to projects in schools that seek to address oppression.

Jagger looks to standpoint theory as represented by radical feminism and socialist feminism as promising directions in feminist epistemology. One strength of socialist feminism over radical feminism is that the standpoint of women is not considered an innocent position, rather it is understood that all standpoints are shaped, at least in part, by dominant ideologies or modes of thought. Donna Haraway's conception of situated knowledge fits within what Jagger calls socialist feminism. Like Jagger, I accept that

knowledge is a social product shaped by and for human purposes; however, Jagger does not consider a pragmatist conception of truth. I do. Indeed, I argue that Pierce's pragmatist conception of truth supports situated knowledge. Let me outline what Haraway means by objectivity and the subject in her conception of situated knowledge.

### **Situated Knowledge**

Donna Haraway argues that in objectivity we do not need transcendence—immortality and omnipotence—but we do need some enforceable, reliable accounts of things not reducible to power moves and agonistic, high status games of rhetoric or to scientific, positivist arrogance (1991: 188). Haraway proposes that we look to the metaphor of vision for a usable account of objectivity. We can look to 'embodied vision' as opposed to the vision where we leap out of our bodies and into a conquering gaze from nowhere (188). In what Haraway calls a doctrine of embodied objectivity, feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledge. Borrowing the term from Kuhn, Haraway advocates a 'passionate detachment' that requires more than acknowledged and self-critical partiality. "We are also bound to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, which promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination" (192). Haraway argues for "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are the claims on people's lives; the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (195). Haraway describes

the subject in the complex terms of a cyborg – a cybernetic organism that is a hybrid of machine and organism (149). The cyborg is problematic in that it's difficult to say just what it is. For the purposes of my project, I stay with particular flesh and blood persons with 'passionate attachments' engaged in relations with one another.

To describe who engages in situated knowledges, Donna Haraway draws on "the complex history of "witnessing" and being a "witness" within the stories of science studies in relation to Robert Boyle's development of the experimental method in the seventeenth century" (1997:158). Boyle's modest witness is invisible, that is, "he is an inhabitant of the potent unmarked category, which is constructed by the extraordinary conventions of self-invisibility" (23). Haraway argues that this self-invisibility is the specifically modern, European, masculine, scientific form of the virtue of modesty that pays off its practitioners in the coin of epistemological and social power (23-24). The experimental way of life, Haraway notes, was supposed to be in a public space; however, the public space was rigorously defined, not everyone could come in, and not everyone could testify credibly (25). For example, Margaret Cavendish was allowed into the Royal Society laboratory as a part of the 'witnessing community' in 1667 and a woman was not allowed again until in 1945 when the society was advised by lawyers that it could no longer continue to exclude women (32). In this interim of nearly 300 years, women were sometimes allowed to watch a demonstration or experiment, but they were not allowed the status of a witness who could reliably report on their observations. Thus, women were effectively excluded from the epistemic community capable of generating "knowledge." Hobbes repudiated the experimental way of life precisely because its knowledge was dependent on a practice of witnessing by a special community, like that

of clerics and lawyers. “Hobbes saw the experimentalists as part of a private, or even secret, and not civil, public space” (25). Similar to Hobbes, Haraway’s intent is to open the witnessing community. To do this, she refigures Boyle’s ‘modest witness’ into the ‘mutated modest witness.’

Haraway’s mutated modest witness is about “telling the truth, giving reliable testimony, guaranteeing important things, providing good enough grounding—while eschewing the additive narcotic of transcendental foundations—to enable compelling belief and collective action” (1997: 22). Haraway argues for a strong objectivity that “insists that both the objects and the subjects of knowledge-making practices must be located” (37). Locating, in Haraway’s view, is not a listing of adjectives or assigning of labels such as race, sex, and class. Haraway asserts that “Location is not the concrete to the abstract of decontextualization. Location is always partial, always finite, always fraught play of foreground and background, text and context, that constitutes critical inquiry” (37). Boyle’s modest witness understands rational knowledge to be disengaged, “to be from everywhere and nowhere, to be free from interpretation, from being represented, to be fully self-contained or fully formalizable” (196). Haraway’s mutated modest witness understands rational knowledge to be a “process of ongoing critical interpretation among ‘fields’ of interpreters and decoders” (196).

I do have in mind concrete persons who can be located in actual places. By this I do not mean a list of adjectives and labels such as race, sex, and class. I agree with Haraway that this list is only sometimes descriptive of a location, and never fully descriptive. Neither will a list of adjectives and commas tell us where we might be surprised by that which will give us knowledge to create worlds less dominated by axis of

oppression. I do not want the “addictive narcotic of transcendental foundation.” But I do not adopt Haraway’s ‘mutated modest witness.’ I look to Cheryl Misak’s interpretation of Charles Pierce’s conception of truth and inquiry introduced in the previous chapter.

### **Truth, Inquiry, and Situated Knowledge**

Cheryl Misak holds that the best kind of pragmatist replaces the old dichotomy between neutral standards and no-standards-at-all with a substantive, low profile, conception of truth and objectivity, a conception which nonetheless can guide us in inquiry (14). Notice this is the same problem that Haraway addresses in her conception of ‘embodied objectivity.’ Misak links truth, objectivity, and inquiry. Truth is a property of belief – a belief is a product of our deliberation and investigation (50). I outline Misak’s conception of ‘truth’ and ‘inquiry,’ followed by the requirements of objectivity. I then turn back to ‘situated knowledge.’

In Misak’s view “Inquiry begins with the irritation of doubt and ends with a stable, doubt-resistant belief. But we can’t know when this is – and so should focus on inquiry and getting the best answers that we can” (53). Truth is a normative assumption of inquiry and serves as a regulative ideal. The idea of truth guides inquiry but, as Misak interprets Pierce’s position, we never really reach the end of inquiry. Misak writes “Pierce insisted that we need a conception of truth which ‘can and ought to be used as a guide for conduct’ (MS 684: 11). We need a conception of truth which can guide inquiry and deliberation” (56). For Pierce, truth is not some transcendental, mystical thing that we aim at for its own sake (54). Truth guides inquiry with the idea of a rational belief. The conception of a ‘rational belief’ closes the gap between truth and inquiry and in



Misak's terms "explains why some of our current beliefs are considered rational, or more likely to be true, than other beliefs, even if we cannot know that they are true" (57).

If truth is the belief that would best fit with the evidence, were we to have so much by way of good evidence that no further evidence would overturn the belief, than a rational belief is the belief which best fits with the evidence that we currently have. If truth is what would be justified by the principles of inquiry were inquiry to be pursued as far as it could fruitfully go, then a rational belief is one which is justified by the current principles of inquiry. There is no gap between what we take, after careful consideration to be rational and what is rational. Although we are never in a position to judge whether a belief is true or not, we will often be in a position to judge whether it is the best belief given the current state of inquiry. (57)

Truth is connected to inquiry with a subjunctive conditional – "a true belief is one which *would* fit with the evidence and which *would* measure up to the standards of inquiry *were* inquiry to be pursued so far that no recalcitrant experience and no revisions of inquiry would be called for" (68, emphasis in Misak). Pierce claims that bivalence, the idea that a belief is either true or false, is a regulative assumption of inquiry (68). We assume that there would be an upshot to our investigations, that it would emerge that either p is true or that it is false. This assumption explains why we inquire into the issue.

Rational beliefs are the best we have. We can say that rational beliefs are knowledge. This fits with John Dewey's sense that truth is a subset of knowledge, rather than knowledge understood as a subset of truth. Noddings writes "The more that p has been tested and used successfully, Dewey said, the greater the warrant for asserting it. Notice that Dewey's is a form of forward looking epistemology; it emphasizes verification in use rather than justification through reasons referring to antecedent conditions" (1995: 107). Truth is verifiable. The emphasis is not on justification.

Misak holds that moral beliefs hold the mark of objectivity in that we understand them to be sensitive to reasons. We change our mind. Misak continues "One additional

mark of objectivity is that the practice of moral deliberation is responsive to experience, reason, argument, and thought experiments where we, for instance, place ourselves in another's shoes. Such responsiveness is part of what it is to make a moral decision and part of what it is to try to live a moral life" (52). This responsiveness meets the requirement of objectivity – "an objective area of inquiry must be such that its beliefs are sensitive to something that can speak for or against them" (52). I do not accept thought experiments as sufficient for moral deliberation for the reason that we cannot know what the other experiences by putting our self in his or her shoes. We must take into account the testimony of concrete others.

Misak's notion of inquiry supports situated knowledge, if we understand situated knowledge to be an ongoing interpretive practice of coming to rational beliefs. This requires that we speak our beliefs and listen to the experience and reason of others. I turn now to an elaboration of the epistemological tasks for both the person bearing witness and for the person who responds to the testimony in what I call a relation of witness. I elaborate the epistemological tasks for each side of the relation utilizing Cheryl Misak's pragmatist conception of inquiry aimed at 'truth.'

### **Bearing Witness**

I have been concerned with cases in which a person has to look for a witness. In these cases, a person bears witness in a context of indifference or in the face of an outright refusal to listen. Such testimony is not marked by a particular content, but by the context or situation in which it is given. The testimony is often a challenge to what is generally accepted to be true. In this section, I outline the responsibilities of the person

who bears witness if the testimonies are to make a strong challenge to what counts as 'legitimated' knowledge.

Patricia Hill Collins notes that "Like Black women's giving testimonials that often disrupt public truths about them, when Black women valorize their own concrete experiences, they claim the authority of experience" (48). Collins continues

By invoking the authority of lived experience, African-American women confronted seemingly universal scientific truths by citing examples from their own lived experiences. The purpose was not simply to insert the missing experiences into prevailing wisdom. Instead, when effectively done, claiming the authority of concrete experiences used wisdom to challenge legitimated knowledge. Thus, breaking silence by claiming the authority of individual lived Black female experience offered an effective challenge to elite discourses claiming the authority of science. (48-49)

In Collins' view, it is the authority of individual lived experience that offers a challenge to legitimated knowledge. Some examples of such testimony are collected in a book called *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance*. Author Beverly Bell writes "through the decades I have been consistently struck by the dissonance between how Haitian women experience and understand their lives, and how those lives are presented and perceived in the larger world" (2001: 2). Bell believes that in voicing their experiences and what they make of their lives, the women are "challenging control of the production of information and knowledge. Like Anacaona, all are freedom fighters in one way or another. Some do not read or write. Few have had the opportunity to influence the public record" (3). Bell speaks on the women's behalf, and carries their testimony to a broader audience. As does Lelenne Gilles, a journalist in Haiti whose testimony is included in the collection. Gilles writes of her conviction to speak: "If I didn't have a radio to speak in, I'd stand under a tree to speak out. If I didn't have a microphone to speak into, I'd stand in the middle of the street. The people would

pass me by and I'd tell them, "Ladies and gentlemen, here's what's going on. In this rural area they just fired fifty workers for their union activities" (72). Gilles says that she speaks so people have space to breathe. The testimony is meant as a challenge to 'legitimated knowledge' and it is hoped that the challenge will work to transform the situation of the women and perhaps our own lives, those of use who read the collection.

We also see that in each of the clear cases in Chapter Four, the testimony challenges the status quo. June Jordan states what she saw happen in the Senate hearings—Anita Hill tried to tell the truth amid "jackals and mad dogs." In claiming that the hearings were representative of a larger picture of violence against women, Jordan voices her understanding of the significance of the hearings. Thich Nhat Hanh tells us what he saw—"The village was bombed, every soul was killed." And he writes on the significance "Let me raise my voice to denounce this dreadful war, this murder of brother by brother." In bearing witness, each recounts an event and expresses her or his belief regarding the significance of the event. But we must address under what conditions such testimony represents a viable epistemological challenge.

Misak argues that "Once it is acknowledged that we have beliefs, then we can say that *qua* believers, we must abide by certain principles" (46, emphasis in Misak). In Misak's terms, a knowledge claim or belief must be held open to reason and to the experience of others if it aims at truth. To assert p, is to assert that p is true. In making an assertion, in Misak's view, a person commits herself

- (a) To defend p by arguing that she is, and others are, warranted in asserting and believing it.
- (b) To giving up the belief in the face of sustained evidence and argument against it.
- (c) To saying what could speak against the belief. (73-74)

By definition, genuine beliefs are responsive to experience and reason. It is only when both sides of the relation hold what Misak calls 'genuine beliefs' that the relation can function to challenge knowledge. In the paragraphs that follow and in the next section, I critique the commitments that Misak lays out above for the person making an assertion and turn again to consider the response of a witness.

In bearing witness, a person makes an assertion in a climate of indifference or an outright refusal to listen. The testimony may be an account of a person's lived experience or the person bearing witness may be speaking on behalf of another. An account of experience necessarily includes some kind of judgment regarding the significance of this experience. I'll take this point up shortly. The testimony is both an assertion and a belief in Misak's terms. Misak's first requirement is that in making an assertion the speaker must defend *p* by arguing that she is and others are warranted in asserting and believing it. If I give testimony regarding an injustice I have experienced, I must be willing to argue that others are warranted and justified in seeing it as an injustice. I do not want others to appropriate my experience in easy understanding – the passive empathy that Boler speaks against. At a minimum, I expect that others will consider whether what I have named is an injustice. This consideration is what is demanded in acknowledgement. There need not be agreement on the significance of the testimony for the witness relation to be completed. The commitment to defend *p* by arguing that she is, and others are, warranted in asserting and believing it is tempered by Misak's claim that because we experience something as injustice does not mean that it is injustice.

To move to Misak's second condition for making an assertion, if the person bearing witness speaks in a climate of indifference, disbelief, or the face of an outright

refusal to listen, then what speaks against the belief may be being said loud and clear. That this is so does not mean that what is said offers good reasons against the belief. The experience of Vietnam veterans who were unable to find anyone to listen to their account of their experience provides an example of my concern here. Experience and evidence may be lost, given up, in the face of sustained inability or refusal to question a particular ideology or way of looking at the world. The second requirement for making assertions is difficult to meet by someone giving testimony if one's experience has not been taken into account in larger epistemic community or has been routinely dismissed. However, difficulties in finding uptake – in finding a witness in my terms – does not refute Misak's point. The person bearing witness must hold his or her belief open. So, while it is the case that with testimony that is counter to what is generally believed, the person bearing witness often faces resistance to her testimony, if her or his testimony is to count as a genuine claim to knowledge the person giving testimony must be prepared to give it up in the face of sustained evidence and (good) argument against it.

The third requirement Misak identifies, that the person must say what could speak against the belief, fits with Pierce's insistence that a belief must be responsive to something that we can experience, must turn on something. If it does not, it is a spurious belief. In Misak's terms "A belief, hypothesis, or theory which pretends to be above experience, which thinks so well of itself that it pretends to be immune from recalcitrant experience, is spurious" (51).

Assertion and belief must be grounded in experience. Misak notes that our senses do not provide us with information about how the unconceptualized world is – what we have are 'perceptual judgements.' Perceptual judgments, Misak holds, are "descriptions

or interpretations (of whatever hold a person had on what actually impinged on her) which can be true or false and subject to error” (79). All experience entails perceptual judgements, thus experiencing something as x is not an infallible judgement. For Pierce, the authority of sensory perceptions is rooted in the fact that we have no choice but to take seriously the force of the experience. Pierce writes

Any judgement that is compelling, surprising, brute, unchosen, or impinging is an experience, regardless of what causes us to feel compelled and regardless of whether we can identify the source of compulsion. All ‘compulsions of thought’ count as experience (CP 8.101). (Misak, 2000: 80)

Misak elaborates “The key feature of perception, observation, or experience is its insistence. And that it is fully general. Experience is not tied to what our ears, eyes, nose, and skin report” (80).

Misak argues that Pierce’s notion of experience extends into the moral realm because we do find ourselves compelled in moral matters. This compulsion takes two forms. One is something like what gets called ‘intuition’ or ‘felt response.’ In this case moral perception is kin to direct perception, as for example, where we see that an act is generous without much reflection (90). The second form of experience “is that we find some reasons, arguments, imagined situations, and thought experiments compelling and may, in light of them, revise our moral judgements” (90). Misak does not privilege the second kind of experience where it seems that we test our intuitions. In both cases, our perceptions are fallible. We begin inquiry with our experience or ‘perceptual judgements’ because “we happen to be compelled to face experience and our method of inquiry should acknowledge this compulsion” (81). We cannot avoid starting here – it is the only place available. Misak argues “All we have to go on in our deliberations about what is valuable is our experience—what we see as valuable and our refinements of those

thoughts, in light of the arguments of others and in light of reflection” (81). These deliberations are vital, because finding something so does not mean it is so. The person bearing witness is engaged in inquiry, although it may not be the formal sort of inquiry of testing a hypothesis. Testimony is an assertion that arises from this inquiry.

In sum, if testimony is to be able to offer a strong challenge to ‘legitimate knowledge’ as Collins refers to it, then the person who bears witness or gives testimony must hold a genuine belief in Misak’s terms. The epistemological tasks of the person bearing witness are to speak with sincerity and to hold a ‘genuine belief.’ This entails being prepared to give up a belief in the face of sustained evidence and (good) argument.

Testimony makes the strongest challenge to what counts as ‘legitimated knowledge’ when the person bearing witness meets all three of the commitments that Misak identifies for a ‘genuine belief.’ However, not all of these commitments will be met in every case. That a person bearing witness can not meet all of the commitments of a ‘genuine belief’ at the time of giving testimony does not mean that the relation fails to have an epistemological function in terms of the generation of situated knowledge, but only that this function will come later.

### **Response of a Witness**

The response of a witness, as I’ve claimed, entails listening with an attentiveness characterized by moral humility and acknowledging what is said. In listening with moral humility, one takes on the task of understanding the experience of the other. In acknowledgment, we engage in the open sort of inquiry that Misak describes. Our



inquiry involves interrogating who we are and what we understand to be true on the basis of the other's testimony. This inquiry need not be conducted within the confines of the encounter for the relation to be completed in the strong sense.

In listening with moral humility we strive to understand the other's experience as she or he does. Thus, there is an epistemological task at the heart of our attentiveness to the other. This kind of listening can be a requirement for some experiences to be spoken. Acknowledgment entails looking to our selves. The person who responds as a witness to the other's testimony must hold his or her beliefs open in the same way as the person bearing witness.<sup>31</sup> We must listen to the experience of others if our own beliefs are to aim at truth. But if witness is to be a relation that can foster knowledge, then it also has to be the case that the one listening may refute, or can in principle refute, what the other says. Just when this is done and by whom is dependent on the particular situation and must be sensitive to the trust that is formed in the relation. This point is clear in considering listening to survivors who speak of their experience for the first time.

Geoffrey Hartman, who was involved in filming the testimony of survivors, believes that the best interviews resulted from the testimonial alliance or trust-relation that Dori Laub formed with the interviewee because in these interviews the search for facts did not displace everything else. This alliance was part of what Hartman calls the communal frame of the project. He explains

When I talk of the project's communal frame, a return of trust, a wounded trust, is involved. The interviewers—indeed, all persons associated with the project—form a provisional community and become, for the survivor-witness, representative of a potentially larger community, one that does not turn away

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<sup>31</sup> Disrobe – in Dewey's terms – look at one layer of our thought back and forth – through and through – from as close as we can come to another's point of view.

from but recognizes the historical catastrophe and the personal trauma endured. (2000: 10)

Hartman notes that the idea of the archive project was “to put people with direct knowledge of those grim events before the camera and let them speak with the least possible intervention” (7). In listening as witnesses, standing in for the community who turned away, the testimony of the survivors was not questioned. And indeed, it would seem wrong to interrogate the testimony when it may be being spoken for the first time.

In listening to the experience of the other in an open way we allow beliefs to be put on the table. The importance of allowing beliefs to be put on the table cannot be overstated. We cannot trust our own accounts of our experience – because we see through an inherited and constructed place, we have a partial standpoint and we may be mistaken. To perceive something as so, does not make it so. The response of a witness does not require that we accept as ‘true’ what the other has said. Responding as a witness requires that we do not immediately disregard or refute the other’s account, though there must be room for argument if the relation is to have an epistemological function.

The pragmatist takes correct judgement to be a matter for the community of inquirers, even though it is the individual who does the judging. “Individuals are the possessors of belief, but whether or not a person’s belief is correct is a matter of what the community would determine. What fits with my experience is not of paramount importance as far as truth is concerned. What is important is what fits with all the experience that would be available, what the community of inquirers would converge upon” (95). But we will not always converge to one set of beliefs. Misak sees just one epistemic community. However, although we belong to one epistemic community, this does not mean that we must converge to one set of beliefs. There will always be some

under determination in rational beliefs or knowledge, particularly moral knowledge. But it is the case that, in Misak's terms "we will often improve our views by taking into account what other people find compelling" (95). The point is for the beliefs to hold up to inquiry – to the experience and reason of others.

Let me give you an extended example that I take to be a clear case of acknowledgment without agreement. In an article titled "Talking With the Enemy" published in the Boston Globe on January 28, 2001, leaders on both sides of the abortion debate give the first public disclosure of private meetings they have had over a period of six years. The meetings were motivated by John Salvi's twenty minute rampage in which he opened fire in a Planned Parenthood clinic outside of Boston, killing one person and seriously wounding three others, and in a second clinic in Boston directly following the first shooting, killing one person and injuring two others. Massachusetts Governor William Weld and Cardinal Bernard Law, among others, called for talks between prolife and prochoice leaders. The six women who write the article – three prolife and three prochoice – were among those who responded to the call. They report "The goal of the conversations would be to communicate openly with our opponents away from the polarising spotlight of media coverage; to build relationships of mutual respect and understanding; to help de-escalate the rhetoric of the abortion controversy; and, of course, to reduce the risk of future shootings" (Fowler, *et al*, 2001: F1). Ground rules for the meetings included the following: The women agreed to speak for themselves, not their organisations. All would seek to use terms agreeable (or at least tolerable) to all participants. Each agreed to shift focus away from arguing for their cause. These ground rules were important, and many meetings focused on finding terms that were acceptable

or tolerable to the other. The women conclude in the article “Knowing that our ideas would be challenged, but not attacked, we have been able to listen openly and speak candidly” (F1).

All participants stated their beliefs in a way that drew on their experience. The women write “At one session each [woman] told the group why she had devoted so much of her time, energy and talents to the abortion issue. These accounts—all deeply personal—enlightened and moved us” (F1). The women report

In these and all our discussions of differences, we strained to reach those on the other side who could not accept—or at times comprehend—our beliefs. We challenged each other to dig deeply, defining exactly what we believe, why we believe it, and what we still do not understand. (F1)

The women found that their differences on abortion reflected two worldviews that were irreconcilable. But they kept meeting. The women gave two reasons for continuing to meet.

First, because when we face our opponent, we see her dignity and goodness. Embracing this apparent contradiction stretches us spiritually. [...] We’re stretched intellectually, as well. This has been a rare opportunity to engage in sustained, candid conversations about serious moral disagreements. It has made our thinking sharper and our language more precise. (F1)

The women conclude – “Since that first fear-filled meeting, we have experienced a paradox. While learning to treat each other with dignity and respect, we all have become firmer in our views about abortion” (F1). Throughout the course of the six years the women met in private, the women report that

while we struggled over profound issues, we also kept track of personal events in one another’s lives, celebrating good times and sharing sorrows. As our mutual understanding increased, our respect and affection for one another grew. This increased understanding affected how we spoke as leaders of our respective movements. The news media, unaware that we were meeting began noting differences in our public statements. (F1)

That the women spoke of each other differently—their language changed and what they were willing to say about the other—is evidence that learning to treat each other with respect and dignity is not an empty phrase.

The women were witnesses to one another. From the tone of the jointly written article and the specifics disclosed about the meetings, we can say that the women listened to each other with moral humility. Acknowledgment—turning to their own views and understanding of the world—is not negated in that fact that each became firmer in their own views. The aim of this inquiry was not adjudication between different points of view as much as understanding one another in the hope of de-escalating the violence between the different sides. The inquiry taken up was whether or not the two sides could live together – could treat each other with dignity and respect, rather than the “correction” of their view on abortion. In the course of extended conversations with one another, the women became more committed to their own positions regarding abortion. There was not convergence of beliefs about abortion; however, it seems that trust was not betrayed.

Here in this example, we see how the relation of witness, as I’ve characterized it, can function to

- (a) Get claims on the table for the person bearing witness
- (b) Support the interrogation of experience for both sides of the relation
- (c) Establish a broader epistemic community.
- (d) Encourage consideration of the implications of our actions that follow from what we have heard.

Thus, I argue, my conception of witness has a significant contribution to make to the generation of knowledge. If we accept that knowledge or truth of our assertions must be rooted in wide experience and responsive to reason, then we can see that the possibility of knowledge is dependent on our attentiveness to another – a willingness to be present,

rather than turn away.

In bearing witness, a person gives testimony regarding experience that they believe others should take into account. In responding as a witness, we first listen with moral humility and second, acknowledge what is said. Moral humility entails an epistemological task in that we work to understand the testimony from the other's point of view. We feel and understand the other's experience and the significance of that experience for the other. The new understanding gained both by those who listen with moral humility and those who experience it from others can plant the seed of doubt or unease that is the start of inquiry. The inquiry begins in acknowledgment. We may not be involved in inquiry when we listen to testimony, but responding as a witness can entail taking up an inquiry. Whether or not we engage in inquiry is dependent on what we are entrusted with by the person bearing witness. If truth and knowledge can only be established in community – a community of inquirers – then, the obligations of witnessing rest not solely with the person who bears witness, but also with the person who responds as a witness. We should be ready to believe testimony when someone tries to speak in an unfavorable climate. The relation of witness is sometimes necessary for putting claims on the table. It never gets in the way of inquiry and can help with the conditions for continuing inquiry. In the meantime, the relation of witness holds potential for finding ways to live together, to see each other, and for the generation of knowledge less controlled by axes of domination and oppression.

## CHAPTER 7

### EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATION OF WITNESS AS A RELATION

In this last chapter, I sketch a broad educational framework and place the relation of witness, as I have elaborated it, within this framework. I provide a brief summative comparison of my account of witness with those offered by Simon, Boler, Bloom and Reichert – contemporary theorists who, as we have seen, advocate for students to respond as witnesses. I see education as involving students in ongoing inquiry; an inquiry that is, at times, broadly directed by the question “Who am I?” Such inquiry, I believe, is central to liberatory aims. The relation of witness supports such inquiry. Writing, and writing workshop in particular, is a means by which and a place where students take up this broad existential question. Our response as teachers, the way we listen to and take up student work, can work to support or to thwart their inquiry, or it can be completely tangential to and of little consequence to students in their inquiry. This is also true of students’ responses to one another. I compare the response of a witness to ways of responding to student writing advocated by Carl Anderson, Peter Elbow, and Timothy Lensmire. I conclude the chapter with what I take to be three clear examples of students looking for a witness in a classroom setting. These cases illustrate how responding as a witness can support the more complex and personal critical literacy that I have in mind.

### Liberatory Aims of Education

Students in schools should, I believe, be engaged in inquiry that is broadly directed by the existential question “Who am I in the world?” William Ayers asserts that such inquiry is central in education; that, in fact, all education comes from this question.<sup>32</sup> Without defending this very broad claim of his, we can see that inquiry directed by this existential question is at the heart of taking seriously the experience students bring to school and has the potential to open less-oppressive possibilities in schools and in our lives together. It is my central contention that the relation of witness supports such inquiry.

Before turning to how witness supports inquiry broadly directed by the question “Who am I?” let me draw on two more arguments to elaborate how central such inquiry is to education. Dwight Boyd writes that “Education is one of the main ways we have as humans to define our humanity, to practice our humanity, to maintain our humanity, and to change our humanity. It is how we seek to connect ourselves today to ourselves of the past, and it is how we project ourselves into the future” (1992: 161). Boyd continues “It is through education, at least in part, that human beings work together to realize the visions we have of what sort of creatures we should be as human beings” (161). What sort of creatures we ought to be is not the kind of thing that is figured out once and for all, so one of the challenges is to find a way to keep the question open, for both ourselves as educators and for students. If we accept this, then making more explicit inquiry into who we are makes perfect sense. In this shared inquiry, we engage in discussion about what sort of creatures we should be as humans. It matters how we answer these questions



both for our own humanity and for the humanity of others.

“Who am I?” is, of course, linked to other questions. In an article entitled “Learning, Teaching, and Existential Meaning,” Nel Noddings observes that natural responses to the question “What am I to do?” emerge from answers to the question “Who am I?” and that this latter question is largely ignored in schools. She argues, as educators, we have the responsibility to see that the question “Who am I?” is not ignored. Noddings names succinctly the student's dilemma: “How can I decide what I am to do when I do not know who I am?” (1997: 51) Noting that the best education has often deepened the student’s dilemma by acknowledging the centrality of the question “Who am I?,” Noddings argues that it is especially important to do so today because “increasing numbers of children enter adolescence with no recognizable traditions or coherent life stories to furnish the continuity [needed for learning and even for change]” and “others find nothing in school that connects to the traditions with which they do identify” (55). In Noddings’ view, educators can address both concerns by encouraging students to take up the question “Who am I?”

Recently, Noddings has taken up the question of how critical thinking can help us to understand ourselves better and come to terms with our attitudes toward war (2004: 490). In relation to the war atrocities and what we might call the “reality” of war, Noddings advocates that students consider the question “Am I the sort of person who looks forward toward war? What justifies my attitude? How did I get this way?” (491). I understand these questions to be versions of the question “Who am I?” Noddings continues “To ask the question “Am I this sort of person?” is to invite a study of how we

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<sup>32</sup> William Ayers used this phrasing of the question in his talk at the Philosophy of

are socialized. Indeed, a critical study of how we are socialized may be the single most important function of education” (491). In considering our attitudes toward war, Noddings states that our aim should be to increase self-understanding, not to convert students to a particular view. She asserts that it is one function of critical thinking to get things in the open, connected to feeling and moral commitment. “The alternative to open discussion is a world in which patriotic fervor and hatred arise again and again. In the words with which [Gunter] Grass ends *Crabwalk*: “It doesn’t end. Never will it end.” It is the job of education to make it more likely that such cycles will end.” (494). As stated here, Noddings’ aim sounds very much like the aim of the proposals for ‘witness’ in education offered by Simon and Boler, as well as Bloom and Reichert. So we can see how putting such questions at the heart of education can easily lead into questions related to conditions of oppression and violence, questions that are the concern of critical theorists and other liberatory educators.

Roger Simon proposes the response of a witness within a ‘pedagogy of commemoration’ as a means by which students can rethink the logic that makes justifiable and normal relations of exploitation, dominion, and indifference between groups. In responding as a witness, students claim a complex legacy in a ‘living memory’ that changes who they see themselves to be in relation to those in another group. For Megan Boler, a primary responsibility of the teacher is to teach critical thinking in a way that the Holocaust could never happen again. Such critical thinking rests on the practices of ‘testimonial reading’ and ‘collective witnessing.’ Sandra Bloom and Michael Reichert believe that education has a part in interrupting the cycles of

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Education Society meetings, April 2001.

violence that are engulfing our society. Teachers must step forward as witnesses engaged in social activism; they must make their classrooms safe places for children; and, they should encourage children to see themselves as their brother's keeper. Each of these aims broadly addresses violence in our relations with one another and seeks liberation from or transformation of relations that perpetuate oppression.

Heller's proposal that the women in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco came to the writing group to find witnesses contrasts with Boler's, Simon's, and Bloom and Reichert's proposals for being witnesses in educational contexts. First, Heller is concerned primarily with the person speaking or reading her writing – the woman who has come to find a witness. Finding a witness, Heller asserts, makes it possible for the other social, political, and educational functions of the group to be accomplished. Boler, Simon, Bloom, and Reichert are concerned primarily with the person who hears or who responds as a witness. On their accounts, the response of a witness entails taking a stand against the oppression and violence by understanding differently who one is in relation to others and taking action against the oppression or violence. A second contrast is found in assumptions regarding who gives testimony and who must respond as a witness. Heller describes a site that is, in her words, "far from the centers of power." The women look for witnesses, in Heller's words, to claim the richness of their complex experience. Both Simon and Boler seem to assume that those who respond as witnesses are in a position of relative privilege. Boler assumes that students are part of the obstacles the other faces. Simon, in his extended example of remembering the conquest of the Americas, aims to "change the moral character of the non-indigenous student" (1994: 13). This contrast, I suggest, reflects a similar contrast we find in critical literacy approaches in general, in

that students seem to be positioned on one or the other side of oppression. Neither position, I believe, fully acknowledges the complex relations we have to oppression and power. My conception of witness does not place us on one side or the other of oppression, but bridges the divide by focusing more broadly on why we look for witnesses and what happens when we find a witness. I have argued that we must always be ready to respond as a witness and just what acknowledgement will entail is dependent on the particular situation. The conception of witness that I put forward takes into account both the person who looks for a witness and the person who responds as a witness; two sides of what I have argued can be conceived of as a relation in a strong sense.

### **The Relation of Witness and Liberatory Aims**

In the previous section, I argued that inquiry broadly directed by the question “Who am I in the world?” is vital to education in general, and to liberatory education, in particular. The broad lines of my argument are first, existential inquiry is best answered with ‘situated knowledge’ because situated knowledge does not obscure claims about oppression and privilege and inscribe relations of oppression and privilege in knowledge construction practices (Ford, 1995). Second, the relation of witness can be generative of situated knowledge, and in some cases, may be required for it. Thus, we can say that the relation of witness, as I have conceptualized it, supports liberatory aims of education. In this section, I briefly state how the relation of witness can support inquiry directed by “Who am I in the world?” and summarize how my conception meets the criteria laid out in Chapter 1 for an adequate conception of witness for liberatory aims of education.

We are always involved in some kind of inquiry into who we are in the world, even if below the surface of our awareness, in that we act on our theories of who we are. These theories which may take the form of stories we tell of ourselves or are told to us by others; stories that give meaning to our actions and guide our moral choices. The relation of witness can support conscious, purposeful inquiry into who we are in the world and what this means for how we should live. The relation of witness supports liberatory education in that in looking for the truth and trying to get it right, we can and do – in the process of speaking and listening – create different possibilities, transform our experience, and transform who we are. In that the relation of witness implicitly fosters expressing your beliefs regarding who you see yourself to be in relation to others, it seems very basic to education. Because it can matter not just that we are given uptake, but how – we can say that the relation of witness is vital to this inquiry. The conception of witness that I have laid out recognizes that students may, at times, be looking for a witness.

Answering the existential question “Who am I?” is a part of Roger Simon’s, Megan Boler’s, and Sandra Bloom and Michael Reichert’s projects. We could say that Simon’s aim is for students to consider who they are in relation to four events of ‘historical trauma’ – the Holocaust, the Middle Passage, the conquest of the Americas, and violence against women. He asks that students answer these questions in ways that lead to less violence; ways that lead to a change in relations of dominion, exploitation, and indifference of one group toward another. The terms of the inquiry are largely set by his identification of the elements of the response of a witness. In Boler’s ‘pedagogy of discomfort,’ students might be said to ask “Who am I in relation to the text I have read, in

relation to what makes me uncomfortable?” In the shared inquiry involved in ‘collective witnessing’ students take up the questions “How have my emotions been shaped by dominant discourses?” and “How am I part of the climate of obstacles that the other faces?” Both questions are more specific variations of the question “Who am I?” And lastly, Bloom and Reichert suggest that we must all ask ourselves “Who am I in relation to violence?” and “Who am I in relation to those who perpetrate violence?” and “What is my responsibility?” The authors propose that we are all responsible for ending the cycles of violence; that we are perpetrators of violence, in a sense, if we do not step forward as witnesses to do something to end it. This inquiry is vital, but in each proposal the conception of witness is reduced to these aims: to seeing violence. Further, the inquiry is largely set by the teacher and does not take into account that students in our classrooms may be looking for witnesses.

I have said that we look for a witness in a climate of indifference and an outright refusal to listen. A witness is someone who hears and attends to apprehensions that we believe others should be attend to. In finding a witness – someone who answers – trust is established or restored and we hear the experience or most pressing perceptions that another believes should be attended to. But, for me, there is an important distinction between inquiry that begins with the student, an inquiry that the student brings with them in a sense, and inquiry that begins with the curriculum. Recognizing that our students may, at times, be looking for witnesses, opens the door to the more personal and more complex critical literacy. It does not exclude questions raised in the curriculum, but more fully recognizes the purposes and needs that students bring with them.

My conception of witness as a relation is in keeping with ordinary usages of the term in that both sides of the relation are engaged in seeing and listening to one another and the world around us. The relation can heighten our awareness of who we understand ourselves to be and our beliefs about what is good and just. My conception of witness as a relation is in keeping with ordinary usages of seeing, hearing and being there in person or telling others what you have seen and heard. I have argued for a broad response that includes oppression and also beauty or joy; whatever it is that another feels is being overlooked. Witness includes this usage in religious traditions and more broadly, in the sense that witness is to see. Our most pressing perceptions will sometimes include taking a stand against oppression, but not always. My conception of witness is not reduced to my aims – though it does support the conditions we need to speak and to examine our experience.

My conception privileges face-to-face encounters. I argued that we sometimes require the presence of another to speak and to build or restore trust. Further, we are nourished and challenged, in face-to-face encounter in ways we can not be in more distant relationships. My conception does not foreclose on seeing the structures of oppression, on the contrary, it is likely that we will see them because of the kind of open inquiry that I've incorporated into witnessing through acknowledgement. The testimony is available to rational work, as are our responses to testimony. Issues of class, race, gender come to the fore as personal experience, the lived experience of these categories. In responding as a witness – the teacher becomes an active instrument in the student's search for meaning.

Students in our classrooms may be looking for witnesses. As Heller observed in the Tenderloin Women's Writing Workshop, the format of writing workshop offer participants a place to bear witness. In schools, it can be one of the rare opportunities for students to say what is on their minds and share their writing with others. It has also been a focus of writing workshop advocates to attend to how we listen to students, a listening that is akin to the kind of attentiveness entailed in the response of one-caring and in the response of a witness.

### **Response in the Teaching of Writing**

I compare three accounts of listening to students in teaching writing – Carl Anderson's, Peter Elbow's, and Timothy Lensmire's – to the response of a witness, as I have elaborated the conception. Each account of listening is akin to what I have said characterizes the response of a witness. My account of witness is distinguished from these other accounts of listening in that my account requires acknowledgement and more readily prompts inquiry.

Carl Anderson specifically discusses meeting with the student one-on-one in a writing conference. He has a somewhat contradictory position on listening to students. On one hand, Anderson cautions teachers against getting sidetracked during conferences and losing sight of why they're conferring – we confer to help the child become a better writer. On the other hand, he considers how we, as teachers, ought to fall in love as if for the first time when we confer with students. Regarding getting sidetracked, Anderson elaborates “Some teachers, for example, get mesmerized by what their students are writing *about*. They end up having long conversations with Demeka about her



Salamander or with Daniel about the summer he spent in Alabama, conversations that do little to help children grow as writers” (2000: 8). In Anderson’s view, this way of listening too easily turns into a therapy session. He is clear: “we need to remember that we are writing teachers, not therapists” (8). About being in love, Anderson notes “To teach writing well—to confer with student writers well—we must be affected by our students and the details of their lives. That is, we need to fall in love with our students for the first time” (189). In Anderson’s view, this listening nurtures a genuine connection that pays off in the success of our conferences.

By truly listening to [our students] as we confer, we let them know that the work they’re doing as writers matters. It’s the way that we listen, more than anything else, that will nudge our students to talk about what they’re trying to do, to use the words they haven’t used before, to look at us with a smile instead of a frown when we kneel down beside them and ask, “How’s it going?” (22)

Anderson wants to foster a particular quality of relation by listening attentively to students. He writes “Think about it. If an acquaintance asks you, “How’s it going?” you probably don’t give a detailed – and honest – answer about what’s going on with you unless you really know and care about and trust the person who’s asking” (191). My concern is that this listening – or genuine relationship – is not all that genuine, because the aim is always to get at better writing, to help the child to grow as a writer. This is problematic in that Anderson never says what he means by ‘good writing.’

The listening that Anderson describes is similar to what I have said characterizes the response of a witness; however, our educational aims are different. I do not want to dismiss Anderson’s caution that we must remember that we are there to help the student become a better writer, but more needs to be said about what it means to be a good writer. Our response to writing, even within writing workshop, has grown narrow and is often

reduced to criteria on a rubric, such as use of descriptive words. Anderson does not advocate the use of such rubrics and yet he does nothing to counter it. Good writing means more than writing that uses descriptive words. Indeed, to my mind, we write as a means of thinking and communicating and potentially acting in the world. Anderson describes listening attentively to the child, but this does not seem to include taking up the content of the writing. The content of the writing is taken up more in Peter Elbow's believing game.

In *Sharing and Responding*, Peter Elbow recommends the “believing and doubting game” as a form of response that zeros in on the content of the writing. In this mode of response, the first step – believing – one simply has to “ask readers to believe everything you have written, and then tell you what they notice as a result of believing” (Elbow and Belanoff, 2000: 37). Elbow further instructs that if they don't believe, they should *pretend* to agree (emphasis in Elbow and Belanoff, 37). What you will get from the response, Elbow advises writers, are more reasons or evidence for what you have written; the response can give you different and better ways for thinking about your topic. The second step is to turn to doubting. Elbow instructs “Now ask readers to pretend that everything you've written is false—to find as many reasons as they can why you are wrong in what you say (or why your story doesn't make sense)” (37). On the surface, the response does not seem to demand much engagement and bears little resemblance to the relation of witness as I have conceptualized it; however, the believing and doubting game is more complex than it sounds here in this version meant for quick use in class.

The believing and doubting game is one way that Elbow advocates a kind of binary thinking that “tries to heighten dichotomies yet maintain the balance and affirm

both sides equally” (Elbow, 2000: 63). Elbow writes “I’ve come to think that this approach to dichotomies honors the complexity of experience and the wandering narrative of events. The approach invites experience to precede logic” (63). Here there is a tradition, Elbow reminds us: “an empirical, inductive, pragmatic tradition that we see in William James and John Dewey” (64). Elbow feels that this epistemological aspect has not been taken up by writing theorists:

We increase our chances of seeing more *complexity* and contradiction in our experience—and find *new* theories or theories that surprise us—if we make an effort to honor and attend to experience as closely as possible and hold off theorizing for a while. This process can even lead us to theories we are *not* predisposed to believe—theories we don’t like. (64)

Elbow’s critics charge that students in his workshops do not seem to be held answerable to each other as intellectuals. To this critique, Elbow responds “I was trying to show the power of a disciplined and methodological uses of believing, listening, affirming, entering in, attending to one’s experience, and trying to share one’s experience with others.” My concern again is that the intent is still to simply get at better writing – without saying more about our purposes in writing.

Timothy Lensmire critiques what he sees to be the “the narrow, technical work imagined for teachers—work that abandons students to the current world, to dominant meanings and values, rather than engages students in deliberation about that world, in criticism and transgression of those meanings and values. Work that might actually help students move with power and responsibility, help them be free” (89). In *Powerful Writing, Responsible Teaching*, Lensmire argues that sharing time in writing workshop should be characterized by deliberation. For Lensmire “deliberation changes what students’ stories are in the classroom community. Instead of mindless direction, students’

stories represent mind-full experiments of how we might live, testable hypotheses of better and worse ways to quickly and slowly wind and unwind our legs, arms, hands, in space and time” (100). Lensmire names three responsibilities the students have in sharing time: The first is to listen carefully to the stories and comments of others. Such listening depends on the assumption by students that their peers have something to say, and that this something might contribute to their understanding of themselves and the world” (100). Lensmire stresses that we want children to attend to what is said, the meanings and values, the direction, expressed by stories, as well as the effectiveness of the text. A second responsibility in deliberation is that we do not move to criticism too quickly, but seek actively to understand the others’ ideas. This is similar to Elbow’s believing game. And the third responsibility is that our students be open to learning, growth, changing their minds (101). Changing your mind means changing your habits, your dispositions to act, think, and feel in certain ways; it means changing your self. The teacher has two additional responsibilities: first, teachers must stand with the underdog by taking sides, and second, the teacher must bring story lines to deliberation that are not necessarily represented in the students’ stories, so as to expand, again, what is available as direction for living (107). This response is the closest to what I have described as the response of a witness. Lensmire explicitly recognizes that writing is a kind of inquiry and that the response might contribute to students’ understanding of themselves and the world. Interestingly, Lensmire does not focus on the quality of relationship formed in listening as much as Anderson does in his account. I move to three clear examples of looking for a witness in the classroom to illustrate how the relation might look in the classroom and, in the last case, what is at stake when a student fails to find a witness.

### Finding A Witness in the Classroom

Students will sometimes be looking for a witness. I have characterized looking for a witness by noting that the testimony is spoken in a climate of indifference or an outright refusal to listen. What we speak of when we bear witness carries a certain force for us. We do not commonly use the term bearing witness lightly. We can not always recognize when someone is looking for a witness nor what may be testimony simply by content. Paula Salvio writes “Testimonial literature documents human suffering and human triumphs; it shows raw historical accounts that have gone unnoticed, that have been fragmented or shattered” (41). In common with Salvio, I argue that it is pertinent to notice that with testimony what is significant is that the account has gone largely unnoticed.

#### Ana and the Lost Princess

Ana’s story *La Princesa Pérdida en la Selva* (The Princess Lost in the Jungle) begins “In a far off place where there are few people there is a beautiful valley that has animals and everything. No one knows this place. It is a hidden valley. But one day in this valley appeared a beautiful and pretty girl with a nature very inviting to the animals. The girl was lost, no one knew where to find her.” In the story, a young princess somehow finds herself on her own in the hidden valley. The king and queen sent men to look for her, but they don’t find her and finally give up looking. The princess grows up with the animals of the forest. Ana chose to read aloud a selection to a group of some two hundred of her peers and teachers at the end of the school year, including the

following portion.

But the girl was growing a little more every day until the day arrived that she governed all of the animals of the forest. She felt happy, content with all that she had and what she saw because the forest was beautiful and so passed the years. She didn't have memories of her parents or of anyone, she had completely forgotten her family.

She felt happy in all the nature that was around her, but one day she asked, "Where did I come from?" She didn't remember how she had arrived in this place. She felt distressed in her jungle and went around worried and a little sad and what more she felt that there was something she was looking for.

As the story continues the princess goes to a village searching for someone who looks like her. Wandering on the streets, dressed in the bear hide, she meets a young man who talks to her until their eyes meet. When they meet eyes, the young man runs away because she has the eyes of a tiger. Soon after, the princess meets a prince who is not afraid of her. With his help, she is able to speak twice to her father, the king (although neither of them knows yet that they are father and daughter). The first time she appears before the king, he fires a barrage of questions at her and the princess flees the town and returns to the forest. The king dreams about the young woman, and in talking to the queen about his dream they both come to believe that the strange visitor is their daughter. The second time, the prince tells the king that the princess can speak when she is not afraid. The king listens this time and recognizes the young woman dressed in a bearskin as his lost daughter. At the end of the story, at the fiesta, the princess asks the prince to speak to the people for her about the forest, her love for the animals.

Because Ana is of indigenous descent, an *Indio*, orphaned or separated from her family, she is near the bottom of a class-stratified society. Finding witnesses can be needed to be 'somebody' depending on our situation. Being seen – known as a particular person was also central the women in the Tenderloin Women's Writing

Group. Like the women in the Tenderloin, Ana faced indifference and disdain daily, perhaps directed at them from individuals, but also conveyed to them in multiple ways through the structures of society. In both cases, the message of larger society – the dominant discourse – must be taken into account to understand the significance or need to find a witness – or what is gained from it, in a sense. Ana defied the status assigned to her in surprising ways. Her story and her public reading are one example.

In finding a witness, Ana sees herself as someone whose perceptions will be heard and taken into account, and closely related, being actually heard, having her trust answered. In the terms that Caroline Heller adopts from Paulo Freire, Ana can come to see herself as a thinker and as someone who takes action. Being heard, in turn, changes something in the classroom as an epistemic community. Ana's story is rich, and so our lives become richer in being a witness. As Heller writes about listening to Mary TallMountain's writing, we have the sense that we are invited into a room where the light is good. There is pleasure and delight in Ana's story and we share in it by being witnesses. In Ana's words, we are entrusted with something marvelous and all that she went on imagining. In acknowledgment, the listener might take the story into his or her life, as I have. I have questioned when my actions, questions, or attitude makes it difficult or impossible for others to speak. And I think of her story at the times when I find myself afraid and unable to speak. Ana's story has added much to my thinking about speech and fear and finding 'home.' This is not to detract from the specifics of the princess' situation or Ana's exploration through her story; however, there is an inquiry about speech and fear that many of us take up in different ways or may after listening to Ana's story.

Inquiries are linked in complex ways. Themes of home and voice ran through many of the children's stories. For example, Eduardo wrote a story about a boy named Edwin who made it past the insults of the guard to speak to the mayor about an adequate playing field for his soccer team. We risk limiting our own inquiry and understanding in failing to respond to Ana. If we accept Misak's claim that the quality of our inquiry is dependent on taking into account diverse experience, then we need Ana in the epistemic community. Indeed, if we accept Misak's claim, we should teach with the expectation that all children will become part of a community that engages in inquiry, a broad epistemic community. As literature, the piece takes up the question "Where did I come from?" a version of the question "Who am I?" Ana is, as many writers are, involved in a kind of inquiry broadly directed by the question "Who am I?" Such inquiry is one way we can use writing to shape our lives; however, we cannot do it on our own. We need others.

#### Alison's Account of the Birth of Her Son

In a university class for prospective teachers, Alison was asked to write on any topic that she chose. My intent as a teacher was to focus on the writing process rather than on the particular content of the writing. Alison chose to write about the birth of her first child. She was sixteen when her son was born. Her piece began in a quiet time after the birth, describing how mother, child, and father were resting together in the hospital room. And then hours passed and no one came to visit. The refrain—no one came—is repeated until we, the listeners, gradually realize that the young mother is being shunned by her family and by the nurses on the ward. It's a powerful piece of writing in the way



that this tension builds. In the class discussion after she read the story aloud, Alison explained that she wanted her classmates to hear this story so that they would not judge mothers of the children in their classes. Alison also claims her experience – she tells the class that she is not ashamed, that she loves her son and takes good care of him, and that she finished high school and college on time and was now enrolled in a fifth-year program. Everyone had said that she could not do it, that she had ruined her life. Alison spoke clearly, directly looking around the room at us, and stated that she had not ruined her life. Like Jordan, Alison directs our response, telling us exactly what she wants us to do as listeners.

In *For Crying Outloud: Women's Poverty in the United States* (1996), Robin Robinson opens her chapter with the words “I bear witness to teen motherhood.” I draw on her essay here to illustrate how firmly we base our impression of another on our image of the other or stereotypes, what we believe to be the case, and can refuse to acknowledge that we are wrong. Robinson tells the story of a well-regarded economist telling her that she (that is, her experience as a teen mother using welfare and ancillary services as income support) did not count. She was white, intelligent, attractive. Robinson answered, “Let me see if I have this straight. Your profile of teen mothers, upon which you base your considerable influence on policy at the national level, rests on assumptions that we teen mothers are poor, black, dumb, and ugly?” He did not disagree, even though statistics show the majority of teen mothers in the United States are white. The man refused to see, to listen even when confronted. Robinson names the stigma and betrayal of young mothers. She argues that the young mothers need respect as human beings and

as citizens of the social world in which they live” (115). In regard to a refusal to see,

Robinson notes

Perhaps this social world, the United States in the 1990's, blames teen mothers and holds them in contempt because we are afraid that we created these desperate children, and we don't know what to do about them now. Perhaps we are afraid our children will become them. Perhaps we are afraid because we do not know, as adults, how to make it all better, and that is difficult to admit. We cling to myths rather than seek new truths. (119)

In her reading, Alison challenged her classmates in a way similar to the way Robinson challenged the economist. Her writing was effective – but it was her purpose that she wanted us to attend to. She said exactly what she wanted us to take into account.

Another student in the class wrote to me about the reading.

By having the group share we were able to get to know each other in ways that we had not already been given a chance. I feel that sometimes education is not always just learning information but learning about others and where they come from and why they react in a certain manner. We are an eclectic group and it helps to see a different side to people. I would like to thank you for giving us this experience together. It was powerful. I do not look at some of the people in the class in the same manner.

The last sentence is key.

#### Huy Tran and Soldiers on Veterans Day

The third and last example, I want to give here - In *Children Who See Too Much*, Betsy McAlister Groves tells of an interaction between a teacher and a student in a second-grade classroom. In observance of Veterans Day, the class was asked to write letters or draw pictures to soldiers to thank them for keeping our country safe. Groves explains that the teacher emphasized the important role of military and stressed that soldiers were unrecognized and unappreciated by most people, especially in peacetime. As might be expected, most of the drawings were similar. Groves writes

One picture stood out, however. Huy Tran, a Vietnamese child, drew a picture of soldiers killing people. It was a jumbled and chaotic picture, with red blood on each person. He talked about the picture in a dispassionate tone, simply stating that it was about soldiers who fought in a war. A closer look at the picture showed a dismembered body in the lower corner. The teacher made no comment to the class. (2002: 91-92)

The teacher later expressed her irritation at the drawing, dismissing it as another example of Huy Tran's failure to follow directions. She described him as an "odd child" who didn't seem to want to learn in school. In discussing the example, Groves notes "We wondered if Huy Tran's picture was an accurate reflection of his reality concerning soldiers and war. We also worried that his perspective was not validated by his teacher, who saw his picture only as an act of disobedience" (92). Groves reflects that Huy Tran's teacher missed a unique opportunity to learn about his life. She could have asked him to talk about his picture or about his experiences with soldiers or war. She could also have asked about his family (92). I believe the child might also have had the opportunity to learn about his life. And in telling it, claimed his experience, as this seems be at least part of what Huy Tran is after. Huy Tran lost the opportunity to pursue inquiry, to sort out the differences in his perceptions and those of his classmates.

From my perspective, what happened is a clear example of a child looking for a witness and the teacher turning away. If on the other hand, the teacher had responded as a witness, she would first ask the child about the drawing and second, question her own assumptions about soldiers and keeping our country safe, and about Huy Tran as a disobedient child. Huy Tran's questions and her own might have lead to a shared inquiry in the classroom. The class might have included literature that portrays a flight from Vietnam through a child's eyes, along with other books that portray the pain of war in a language accessible to second graders. The class might also have read

collections of children's drawings and poems of their experience in war. Discussion around these books and Huy Tran's drawing would inevitable include some of the ambiguities of war. The student is clearly bearing witness – challenging the dominant discourse. But the teacher is unable to respond as a witness. And so, Huy Tran cannot claim his experience and challenge or complicate the teacher's message or lesson. And the teacher continues to see Huy Tran has a disobedient and odd child. Further, the understanding of all the children is compromised in this situation, and students miss an opportunity to develop the skills and experience of listening to experience that is different from their own.

Notice that in neither Alison's nor Huy Tran's case was the testimony quite expected. Indeed, I am not sure that we can assign testimony that will have the force that it does when driven by the purposes or needs of the person bearing witness. As teachers, what we can do is to create the space and be ready to respond. I propose that we should work to create spaces for testimony in schools and support students in shaping their own testimony. We, as teachers, cannot respond as a witness if students are not permitted the space to bear witness. To support testimony, particularly testimony that addresses what is not being taken note of or adds depth to our lives together, requires the support of teachers and the structure of the classroom as a whole. In the best case scenarios, the testimony will be sparked by and will spark inquiry. Inquiries will include those that students bring with them and those that are initiated as part of the curriculum. This means that the curriculum must allow for genuine inquiry. Being witnesses has to do with what we need from one another – the response allows the refinement of writing, but has more to do with figuring out what it is we do believe.

In looking for the truth, trying to get it right – examining who we are in the world and who we ought to be -- we can and do, just in the process of listening, create different possibilities, transform our experience, and transform who we are. In that the relation of witness supports expressing our beliefs about who we take ourselves to be in relation to others, invites acknowledgement of those perceptions, and further, supports inquiry into the significance of what is said, the relation of witness is fundamental to any education that has liberatory aims.

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