

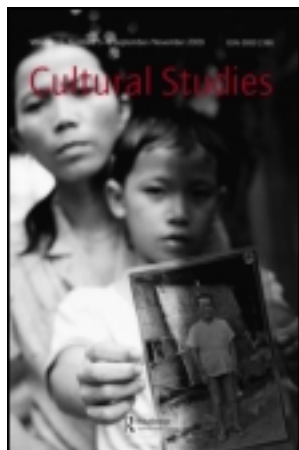
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THE RISKS OF EMPATHY: INTERROGATING MULTICULTURALISM'S GAZE

ABSTRACT

Empathy is widely embraced as a means of educating the social imagination; from John Dewey to Martha Nussbaum, Cornel West to bell hooks, we find empathy advocated as the foundation for democracy and social change. In this article I examine how students' readings of Art Spiegelman's *MAUS*, a comic-book genre depiction of his father's survival of Nazi Germany, produces the Aristotelian version of empathy advocated by Nussbaum. This 'passive empathy', I argue, falls far short of assuring any basis for social change, and reinscribes a 'consumptive' mode of identification with the other. I invoke a 'semiotics of empathy', which emphasizes the power and social hierarchies which complicate the relationship between reader/listener and text/speaker. I argue that educators need to encourage what I shall define as 'testimonial reading' which requires the reader's responsibility.

KEYWORDS

empathy; emotion; testimony; *MAUS*; reading; power

How old is the habit of denial? We keep secrets from ourselves that all along we know. The public was told that Dresden was bombed to destroy strategic railway lines. There were no railway lines in that part of the city. . . .

I do not see my life as separate from history. In my mind my family secrets mingle with the secrets of statesmen and bombers. Nor is my life divided from the lives of others. . . . If I tell all the secrets I know, public and private, perhaps I will begin to see the way the old sometimes see, Monet, recording light and spirit in his paintings, or the way those see who have been trapped by circumstances – a death, a loss, a cataclysm of history.

(Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones*)

Social imagination and its discontents

Upon an ivory hill in central California another fall evening's garish red-hues announced my fourth year of teaching *MAUS*, the comic-book representation of author Art Spiegelman's father, Vladek, narrating his

experience of surviving the Holocaust of the Second World War. Three hundred 18-year-olds – forty-seven of them charged to me – have been assigned this text, preceded by *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan and quickly followed with *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez – the epitome of an introductory multicultural curriculum in the arts and humanities.

To all appearances, I should sleep well as a participant in this introduction to multiculturalism through the arts and literature; I should laud myself for taking up the liberatory potential outlined by forerunners John Dewey and Louise Rosenblatt. At the onset of the Second World War, the same moment that Vladek Spiegelman's story begins, progressive educational philosophers John Dewey and Louise Rosenblatt 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. In 1938 Louise Rosenblatt wrote, '[i]t has been said that if our imaginations functioned actively, nowhere in the world would there be a child who was starving. Our vicarious suffering would force us to do something to alleviate it' (1938: 185). She describes the experience of reading a newspaper in a state of numbness, that all too familiar strategy for absorbing information without feeling it. 'This habit of mind,' she writes, 'has its immediate value, of course, as a form of self-protection. . . . Because of the reluctance of the average mind to make this translation into human terms, the teacher must at times take the responsibility for stimulating it' (ibid.). Social imagination protects us, in this view, from Susan Griffin's above condemnation of the 'habit of denial' that enables an occurrence like the bombing of Dresden. Thus faith is maintained today, for example, by Aristotelian philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who advocates 'poetic justice' in which the student as 'literary judge' comprehends the other through sympathy and fancy as well as rationality as the foundation for dignity, freedom and democracy (1995: 120–1).

Educators, philosophers of emotion and politicians have not abandoned this project of cultivating democracy through particular emotions, of which empathy is the most popular. Across the political and disciplinary spectrum, conservatives and liberals alike advocate variations of empathy as a solution to society's 'ills'. At a recent public lecture, Cornel West insisted that empathy is requisite to social justice.¹ Empathy is taught in legal and medical education under the rubric of 'narrative ethics'; there is now a journal entitled *Literature and Medicine*. Cognitive scientists claim empathy as a genetic attribute, and speculate on a neurological map of ethics (May *et al.*, 1996). Empathy has been popularized recently through the bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence*, further publicized through *Oprah Winfrey*, *Time Magazine* and National Public Radio. Empathy, a primary component of 'emotional intelligence quotient', is a product of genetic inheritance combined with self-control, Aristotelian fashion. This emotional literacy, essentially a behavioural modification programme, is now taught in hundreds of public schools throughout the United States.² Finally, in the last fifteen years of Western 'multiculturalism', empathy is

promoted as a bridge between differences, the affective reason for engaging in democratic dialogue with the other.³

But who and what, I wonder, benefits from the production of empathy? What kinds of fantasy spaces do students come to occupy through the construction of particular types of emotions produced by certain readings?⁴ In what ways does empathy risk decontextualizing particular moral problems?⁵ In short, what is gained by the social imagination and empathy, and is this model possibly doing our social vision more harm than good?

While empathy may inspire action in particular lived contexts – it is largely empathy that motivates us to run to aid a woman screaming next door – I am not convinced that empathy leads to anything close to justice, to any shift in existing power relations. In fact, through modes of easy identification and flattened historical sensibility, the ‘passive empathy’ represented by Nussbaum’s faith in ‘poetic justice’ may simply translate to reading practices that do not radically challenge the reader’s world view.

I see 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. 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. Ideally, multiculturalism widens what counts as theory, history, knowledge and value, rather than enabling modes of empathy that permit the reader’s exoneration from privilege and complicities through the ‘ah-hah’ experience.

Nussbaum admits that no matter how powerful a vision of social justice is gained by the empathetic reader, our habituated numbness is likely to prevent any action. ‘People are often too weak and confused and isolated,’ she says, ‘to carry out radical political changes’ (1996:57). One can only hope then that empathy is not the only viable route to inspiring change. As another colleague succinctly stated, these ‘others’ whose lives we imagine don’t want empathy, they want justice.⁶

The untheorized gap between empathy and acting on another’s behalf highlight my discomfort with the use of *MAUS* in an introductory ‘multicultural’ curriculum. My students’ readings of *MAUS* enabled them to enter ‘imaginatively into the lives of distant others and to have emotions related to that participation’, Nussbaum’s prescription for an ‘ethics of an impartial respect for human dignity’ (1995: xvi). But passive empathy satisfies only the most benign multicultural agenda. *MAUS* could be taught, I recognize, within a curriculum in such a way as to avoid some of the risks of empathy.⁷ Yet introductory multicultural curricula cannot be all things, and most often do not provide detailed histories as backdrop to the literature read. What are the risks of reading a text like *MAUS* in the absence of more complete historical accounts?⁸ What kinds of histories are presented in the name of multiculturalism, and what kind of historical sensibility is associated with these democratic ideals?

In question is not the text itself, but what reading practices are taught,

and how such texts function within educational objectives. I hope to complicate the concept of empathy as a 'basic social emotion' produced through novel-reading. I invoke a 'semiotics of empathy', which emphasizes the power and social hierarchies which complicate the relationship between reader/listener and text/speaker. I argue that educators need to encourage what I shall define as 'testimonial reading'. Testimonial reading involves empathy, but requires the reader's responsibility. Shoshana Felman asks, 'Is the art of *reading* literary texts itself inherently related to the act of *facing horror*? If literature is the alignment between witnesses, what would this alignment mean?' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 2). Such readings are possible potentially not only with testimony, or with novels, but across genres. Ideally, testimonial reading inspires an empathetic response that motivates action: a 'historicized ethics' engaged across genres, that radically shifts our self-reflective understanding of power relations.

The risks of passive empathy

Philosophers do not agree on empathy's role in moral evaluation. Kant, for example, views emotions as far too unreliable a basis for moral action, and held that only a unified and rational moral principle could be the basis of right action. David Hume, on the other hand, saw emotions as central to our moral behaviour. Nussbaum states in passing that her Aristotelian views could be 'accommodated by a Kantianism modified so as to give emotions a . . . cognitive role' (1995: xvi). In a pivotal treatise on altruism (Blum, 1980), a central unresolved question is the extent to which altruistic emotions must include being disposed to take action to improve the other's condition.

Empathy belongs to a class of 'altruistic emotions' which go by different names. Nussbaum draws on Aristotle's 'pity', but switches to 'compassion' to avoid the contemporary connotations of pity that Aristotle doesn't intend. In our common usage, 'pity' indicates a sense of concern, but more negatively a sense that the other is possibly inferiorized by virtue of their 'pitiful' status. Sympathy commonly refers to a sense of concern based not on identical experiences but experiences sufficiently similar to evoke the feeling of 'there but for the grace of God go I'. Empathy is distinct from sympathy on the common sense that I can empathize only if I too have experienced what you are suffering.

Throughout the discussion that follows, a key question remains: what role does *identification with the other* play in definitions of altruistic emotions? Can we know the other's experience? Briefly I suggest that in the definitions above, pity does not require identification; sympathy employs a generalized identification as in 'that could be me' or 'I have experienced something that bears a family resemblance to your suffering'; and empathy implies a full identification. In the cases of sympathy and empathy, the identification between self and other also contains an irreducible difference – a recognition that I am not you, and that empathy is possible only by virtue of this distinction.

I elect to use the term 'empathy' because it is the term most frequently used across the different literatures I detailed in the introduction. However, what I call empathy and Nussbaum calls compassion is probably best understood as our common-sense usage of 'sympathy'. I further distinguish 'passive empathy' to refer to those instances where our concern is directed to a fairly distant other, whom we cannot directly help. Some philosophers have it that in such cases the sufficient expression of concern is to wish the other well. I shall argue that passive empathy is not a sufficient educational practice. 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.

In her latest work, *Poetic Justice* (1995) and in 'Compassion: the basic social emotion', recently published in *Social Philosophy and Policy* (1996), Nussbaum advocates a humanist, democratic vision in which educators successfully enable students to imagine others' lives through novel-reading. The 'others' in her examples are the homosexual man, the African-American man and the working-class man. She summarizes Aristotle's definition of 'pity', which Nussbaum calls 'compassion' and I call 'passive empathy':⁹

[Pity posits] (1) the belief that the suffering is serious rather than trivial; (2) the belief that the suffering was not caused primarily by the person's own culpable actions; and (3) the belief that the pitier's own possibilities are similar to those of the sufferer.

(1996: 31)

The central strategy of Aristotelian pity is a faith in the value of 'putting oneself in the other person's shoes'. By imagining my own similar vulnerabilities I claim 'I know what you are feeling because I fear that could happen to me'. The agent of empathy, then, is a fear for oneself. This signals the first risk of empathy: Aristotle's pity is more a story and projection of myself than an understanding of you. I can hear the defensive cries: But how can we ever really know the other save through a projection of the self? While I share this question, our inability to answer it adequately is not a defence of passive pity. More to the point is to ask, What is gained and/or lost by advocating as a cure for social injustice an empathetic identification that is more about me than you?

Pity centrally posits the 'other' as the secondary object of concern, known only because of the reader's fears about her own vulnerabilities. Pity's first and second defining aspects are supporting corollaries to this positioning of self/other: the reader is positioned as judge, evaluating the other's experience as 'serious or trivial', and as 'your fault/not your fault'. The other's serious suffering is 'rewarded' by the reader's pity, if not blamed on the sufferer's own actions.

The identification that occurs through compassion, Nussbaum claims, allows us also to judge what others need in order to flourish. Nussbaum emphasizes that 'pity takes up the onlooker's point of view, informed by *the best judgment* the onlooker can make *about what is really happening to the person* being observed . . . implicit in pity itself is *a conception of human*

flourishing, the best one the pitier is able to form' (1996: 32–3; my emphasis).

Nussbaum indicates that we can 'know the other' through compassion. I have significantly less faith in our capacity to judge what is 'really happening' to others. To judge what 'others need in order to flourish' is an exceptionally complicated proposition not easily assumed in our cultures of difference. Feminist and post-colonial writers, from Fanon and W.E.B. DuBois, to Irigaray and Levinas, have critiqued the self/other relationship assumed in Western and psychoanalytic models of identification. While there is much more to this question than can be pursued here, I wish to point out that the uninterrogated identification assumed by the faith in empathy is founded on a binary of self/other that situates the self/reader unproblematically as judge. This self is not required to identify with the oppressor, and not required to identify her complicity in structures of power relations mirrored by the text. Rather, to the extent that identification occurs in Nussbaum's model, this self feeds on a consumption of the other. To clarify: in popular and philosophical conceptions, empathy requires identification. I take up your perspective, and claim that I can know your experience through mine. By definition, empathy also recognizes our difference – not profoundly, but enough to distinguish that I am not in fact the one suffering at this moment. What is ignored is what has been called the 'psychosis of our time': empathetic identification requires the other's difference in order to consume it as sameness. The irony of identification is that the built-in consumption annihilates the other who is simultaneously required for our very existence. In sum, the social imagination reading model is a binary power relationship of self/other that threatens to consume and annihilate the very differences that permit empathy. Popular and scholarly (particularly in the analytic traditions of philosophy) definitions of empathy seem unwittingly founded on this ironic 'psychosis' of consumptive objectification.¹⁰

The troublesome terrain of identification poses questions about empathy that must be pursued elsewhere. How do critiques of identification complicate Western models of empathy? What might empathy look like, and produce, when it doesn't require identification? What about more difficult cases in which the reader is required to empathize with the oppressor, or with more complicated protagonists? (Here I think of Marleen Gorris's film *A Question of Silence*; and of performances like Anna Deveare Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*, a representation of the Crown Heights conflicts in Brooklyn which permits the viewer to empathize with multiple points of view. Deveare Smith's performance exemplifies the potential for a disturbingly relativized ethics, while highlighting the vast historical and cultural ignorances which cause such moral conflicts.) Finally, the readers Nussbaum speaks of represent a largely homogenous group in terms of class and ethnicity. What would it mean to empathize across other differences; when and why, for example, should inner-city youths read Virginia Woolf or *Wuthering Heights*?¹¹

For the time being I can confirm that the Aristotelian definition of pity can indeed be produced through reading literature, as it was when students

read *MAUS*. Passive empathy produces no action towards justice but situates the powerful Western eye/I as the judging subject, never called upon to cast her gaze at her own reflection.

The risks of reading *MAUS*

Art Spiegelman's *MAUS* engages the social imagination precisely as progressive educators advocate: the reader easily identifies with the other, and easily occupies an emotional space that feels the other's experience. *MAUS* represents an additional effect of empathetic identification. While some students do read *MAUS* as a portrait of father/son dynamics rather than a story centrally about the Second World War, many come to the particularly dangerous conclusion that they have gained new insight into 'history'. The effect of this book on its audiences can be remarkable, literally beyond words: few readers put the book down, once begun; students attest again and again how profoundly the reading affects them; and they state that for the first time they are able to 'identify' with the experience of the Jewish people during the Second World War. The story takes the form of two narratives: Vladek's story of survival during the war, interrupted by present-moment interactions of Vladek, and the author, Art Spiegelman, living out their father-son relationship as Art interviews his father. Spiegelman enables a mixture of detachment and identification through his use of animal caricatures of Nazis, Jews and Polish people. Spiegelman stated in an interview that, in writing this comic-book he had no intention of the work representing history. Rather, this comic – his unique artistic genre, first published as a comic-book series in *RAW* – was his way of coming to terms with his relationship with his father and his mother's suicide.¹²

MAUS is an appropriate representation of the incommensurability of histories and empathy: to read *MAUS* is to walk the border of mesmerizing pleasure, the apotheosis of the pleasure of the text, alongside absolute horror. Empathetic identification is not necessarily with the Holocaust survivor. Pleasure is enabled by the easy identification with Art, the son, through whom we witness the father's story of the Holocaust. One can read through Art's veiled 'survivor's guilt' ('we too were excepted from this fate'), a consequence of the fact that his brother, his parents' first child, was taken by the Nazis. Second, the depiction of characters through animal metaphor allows for pleasurable detachment. Finally, there is no doubt that reading pleasure stems from the unimaginable horror of the Holocaust being well-contained in the genre of comic-book 'frames'.

This year one student commented that the device of representing people as animals – Spiegelman's technique of detachment, dehumanization and understatement – made the story all the more horrific; while another disagreed, saying that these devices are effective because the reader can learn about the Holocaust without guilt.

In a telling description of passive empathy, another student writes:

A person unaccustomed to reading the kind of material presented in novels recounting the Holocaust might be more comfortable reading the

easier flow of the comic-book-style used by Spiegelman. Spiegelman can ensnare readers into his book *MAUS* by sheer curiosity, and once they have begun it would be difficult to stop reading.

. . . By not pulling any punches, he addresses the horrors that occurred without making the reader feel as though she or he has been bombarded by feelings of rage and guilt. Often, the story of the Holocaust is told from a standpoint of such emotional turmoil that factual information is lost. Although *MAUS* is filled with strong images and disturbing occurrences, the reader does not feel that blame and pity is being forced onto himself or herself, but rather that Spiegelman is just 'telling his story'.

This student's primary concern is for the reader's comfort: Spiegelman doesn't 'pull any punches'; his representation does not 'bombard' the reader with 'feelings of rage and guilt'. By 'just telling his story' and through the 'easier flow of the comic-book style', *MAUS* permits the reader not to feel attacked; the 'reader does not feel that blame and pity is being forced onto herself.' This 'comfort' appears to rest in part on her classification of *MAUS* as an 'unemotional' genre. Her account juxtaposes 'just telling [a] story' and 'factual information' on the one hand, with the emotionality of blame, pity, rage and guilt on the other. *MAUS* works effectively because unlike other genres it 'just tells a story', she says, while 'novels recounting the Holocaust' and 'the story of the Holocaust' she classifies as too emotional and cause the reader discomfort. But this brings us directly to a risk of empathy: If this text allows the reader this sense of gripping and relatively 'easy' reading, are we not faced precisely with an abdication of responsibility? The reader does not have to identify with the oppressors. Rather, one identifies with the son who was not present, and with the dehumanized animal metaphors. What does it mean to experience a pleasurable read and be spared the emotions of rage, blame and guilt? In what ways is passive empathy related to the dehumanization strategies used to justify and represent war?

Quite in line with Aristotle's ideal definition of empathy and with the ego's consuming desire for the distinctive other, the use of animal metaphor permitted students to feel relatively undisturbed, while simultaneously permitting them to easily 'imagine the other' – too easily, with little self-reflective engagement. In a twist of Aristotle's shared vulnerabilities model, 'being in the other's shoes' was possible not through identification with power relations, but through a floating animal metaphor that allows heightened detachment rather than intimacy as the basis for empathy. The identification with Art's witnessing of his father functioned both through reversibility ('I could be in your shoes'), and through a mode of passive empathy that not only frees the reader from blame, but in this case allows the voyeuristic pleasure of listening and judging the other from a position of power/safe distance. While in some cases the pleasurable reading of this text may inspire students to pursue study of Jewish history and culture, I am not at all convinced that this potential benefit outweighs the risk of readings that abdicate responsibility.

The readers' desire to occupy a particular space of empathic identification

was challenged in a lecture on *MAUS* delivered to all 300 students that semester.¹³ The philosophy professor stated that the reader is utterly deceived if s/he feels they can imagine the Holocaust from reading *MAUS*. He argued that to learn successfully about the Holocaust required reading stories and statistics until it becomes, precisely, *unimaginable*. Since the primary response of students is a variation of 'after reading *MAUS*, I feel for the first time that I understand the experience of those who survived', his challenge was appropriate. In our discussion some days later, the students expressed an almost unilateral offence at his statement that we could not imagine the Holocaust: they deeply wanted to believe that their identification was sufficient – a version of Rawls' (1972) commitment to 'reversibility' as the abstracted universalization of moral situations.¹⁴

Students' reading of *MAUS* exonerated and redeemed them from the usual sense of guilt and numbing horror that they associate with histories of the Holocaust. Passive empathy does not engage an identification with the deeper implications of being a Holocaust survivor or child of a survivor; or of being excepted by virtue of WASP status; or of identifying with the contemporary climate of anti-Semitism. In some ways the relationship between reader and text is a shifting confessional: passive empathy absolves the reader through the denial of power relations. The confessional relationship relies on a suffering that is not referred beyond the individual to the social.

To summarize my queries, I can entirely agree with Nussbaum's description that literature promotes 'identification and emotional reaction' which 'cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see...things that may be very difficult to confront – and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation' (1995: 6). This palatable permission of pleasure motivates no consequent reflection or action, either about the production of meaning, or about one's complicit responsibility within historical and social conditions. Let off the hook, we are free to move on to the next consumption.

TOWARDS A SEMIOTICS OF EMPATHY

Although used to give the illusion of universalized experience, empathy cannot produce one kind of universal relation between reader and text. Empathy is produced within networks of power relations represented by reader and text, mediated by language, narratives, genres and metaphors. The missing paradigm in theories of emotion across disciplines is an account that shifts emotions from being seen as the property or idiosyncrasy of the individual, towards a collectivist account.¹⁵ Who benefits from the production of empathy in what circumstances? Who should feel empathy for whom? If no change can be measured as a result of the production of empathy, what has been gained other than a 'good brotherly feeling' on the part on the universal reader? As one small contribution to this project I propose 'testimonial reading' as an alternative to passive empathy.

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. Shoshana Felman indicates that the 'imperative of bearing witness . . . is itself somehow a philosophical and ethical correlative of a situation with no cure, and of a radical human condition of exposure and vulnerability' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 5). To share this burden, testimonial reading recognizes the correlative task of reading as a similar exposed vulnerability. Rather than seeing reading as isolated acts of individual response to distant others, testimonial reading emphasizes a collective educational responsibility.

As we hear about and witness horrors, what calls for recognition is not 'me' and the possibility of my misfortune, but a recognition of power relations that defines the interaction between reader and text and the conflicts represented within a text. Listening plays a central role in this semiotic understanding of any emotion. For example, in a discussion of the collaborative process through which an emotion like 'bitterness' is named and takes shape, feminist philosopher Sue Cambell (1994) articulates how the 'failure to listen' works alongside the recounting of injury to construct the accusation and thus experience of bitterness. In *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989), Primo Levi's discussion of shame exemplifies a structure of feeling that traces a listening to the residue of history.¹⁶ Levi's question 'Are you ashamed because you are alive in place of another?' demands an account of biography and history. In a similar vein, Roger Simon (1994) asks that we learn to 'listen differently', through an integration of history and biography to establish what he calls 'living memory' which depends in part on structures of feeling 'that determine our relations to that history'.

Minnie Bruce Pratt (1988) argues for such an alternative as she analyses her work integrating her biography with her history as a white Southern woman. 'Sometimes we don't pretend to be the other, but we take something made by the other and use it for our own.' She describes her identification experience listening to Black folk singing, and reflects her major turning point when she realized that

I was using Black people to weep for me, to express my sorrow at my responsibility, and that of my people, for their oppression: and I was mourning because I felt they had something I didn't, a closeness, a hope, that I and my folks had lost because we tried to shut other people out of our hearts and lives.

Finally I understood that I could feel sorrow . . . yet not confuse their sorrow with mine, or use their resistance for mine. . . . I could hear their songs like a trumpet to me: a startling . . . a challenge: but not take them as a replacement for my own work.

(1988: 41)

The challenge to undertake 'our own work' accepts a responsibility founded on the discrepancy of our experiences. There is no need to consume through empathetic identification, or to recognize the words from the

speaker's perspective. Second, there is no need to 'rank oppressions' in such a way that we are pitted against one another to produce guilt rather than empathy. Empathy offers a connection and communication we don't want to lose. It's possible to identify the sense in which we've all been hurt, but to do so without a reductive denial of specificities.

How might we read, not through the 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?

Testimonial reading

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. What, then, distinguishes empathetic from testimonial reading? What might it mean for the reader to 'take action'? I suggest that unlike passive empathy, testimonial reading requires a self-reflective participation: an awareness first of myself as reader, positioned in a relative position of power by virtue of the safe distance of reading. Second, I recognize that reading potentially involves a task. This task is at minimum an active reading practice that involves challenging my own assumptions and world views.

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman analyses the role of testimony in relation to pedagogy to illustrate the crises of meaning and histories that mark education. Co-author Dori Laub outlines the obstacles encountered by testimony's audience. Their analyses suggest the preliminary characteristics of testimonial reading. I draw on two key areas to characterize testimonial reading: our political climate of *crisis*, which requires new representations of 'truth' which are not static and fixed, but allow us to communicate trauma's 'excess'. Second, in response to crisis the reader accepts *responsibility* as a co-producer of 'truth'. This responsibility requires a committed interrogation of the reader's response as she faces the other's experience. To turn away, to refuse to engage, to deny complicity – each of these responses correlates with a passive empathy and risks annihilating the other.

THE CRISIS OF TRUTH

Felman characterizes our historical moment as marked by a 'crisis of truth'. The crisis is material and representational: the historical and social traumas which define our everyday and historical lives, and the crisis of representing these traumas. Testimony responds to the crisis of truth by 'exceeding the facts'. In the legal context, testimony is called for 'when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt and when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 5-6). By definition, testimony challenges legal and historical claims to truth: specifically, testimony challenges the call for 'just the facts, ma'am'.

What the testimony does not offer is . . . a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive *practice*, as opposed to a pure *theory*. To testify – to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one's own speech as material evidence for truth – is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is *action* that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is *impact* that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations.

(1992: 5)

Testimony in this definition does not claim a static 'truth' or fixed 'certainty'. As a dynamic practice and promise (Felman details the sense in which s/he who testifies carries their own unique obligation to speak), testimony contains the energy and life force that cannot be captured as content or conclusion. Testimony's own medium 'is in process', and has no self-transparency.

Testimony is trauma's genre: the excess and the unimaginable attempts its own representation through testimony. As an artistic and literary genre, testimony portrays 'our relation to the traumas of contemporary history . . . composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frame of reference' (1992: 5). To listen to testimony is no simple process of identification. Rather, trauma as excess raises the question: what are the forces that brought about this crisis of truth? How have the speaker and her memories come to represent the 'other'? To excavate the forces that constructed the unspeakable is a painful process for the speaker as well as for the listener, because those forces are about oppression.

How do we shift from an understanding of testimony as face-to-face relation, to understanding testimonial reading as a relationship between text and reader? Felman's extension of testimony to describe the process of teaching helps to define my concept of testimonial reading. Teaching, she ventures,

takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not . . . encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a...critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps *not truly taught*: it has perhaps passed on some facts . . . with which the students . . . can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but that no one could *recognize*, and that no one could therefore truly *learn, read, or put to use*.

(1992: 53)

Testimony can describe, then, not only the face-to-face relation but a genre of communication that requires the reader to 'encounter vulnerability' and the explosiveness of a 'critical and unpredictable dimension'. Our

responsibility in testimonial reading lies in our response to the crises of truth: how to recognize and put to use the information offered by the text.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF LISTENING

Most significant to a critique of passive empathy, testimony calls for the listener's – and analogously the reader's – responsibility, invoked and engaged by virtue of testimony being an 'action' and 'promise', rather than a report, description or chronicle. In Dori Laub's analysis of the relationship between the Holocaust survivor who testifies and the listener, the listener's work is crucial: the absence of a listener, or a listener who turns away or who doubts, can shatter testimony's potential as a courageous act in truth's moment of crisis. As Laub warns, 'the absence of an empathic listener, or more radically the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish...and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story' (1992: 68). The listener plays a tremendous role in the production of truth, and relations of power are thus foregrounded.

Laub describes empathetic identification when she writes that the 'listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event . . . comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread, and conflicts.' Laub's description so far fits with empathy as a form of identification, of recognition that one is as vulnerable as the speaker – and that the listener 'is also a separate human being and will experience hazards and struggles of his own' (1992: 58). Here again we see the irony of empathy: that it is only our separation – I/not I – that permits empathy. But Laub projects this separation as a place of connection as well: '[the listener] nonetheless does not become the victim – he preserves his own separate place, position, and perspective; a battleground for forces raging in himself, to which he has to pay attention if he is to properly carry out his task' (ibid.).

We arrive finally at the key distinction between passive empathy and testimonial reading: in testimonial reading, the reader recognizes herself as a 'battleground for forces raging . . . to which [she] must pay attention . . . to properly carry out [her] task' (1992: 58). '[T]o properly carry out her task', the testimonial reader must attend to herself as much as to the other – not in terms of 'fears for one's own vulnerabilities', but rather in terms of the affective obstacles that prevent the reader's acute attention to the power relations guiding her response and judgements. For example, to experience a surge of irritation at the text allows the reader to examine potential analyses: does she dismiss the text or protagonist on some count, or examine her own safeguarded investment that desires to dismiss the text out of irritation? Might irritation, for example, indicate the reader's desire to avoid confronting the articulated pain?

Expanding this point of responsibility, Laub identifies the 'listening defenses that may interfere with carrying out the task of bearing witness'. These include a 'paralysis' from 'fear of merger with the atrocities being recounted'; 'anger unwittingly directed at the narrator'; 'a sense of total withdrawal and numbness'; and an 'obsession with fact-finding' that shuts

off the human dynamic (1992: 72-3). By allowing these affective obstacles to interfere with testimonial reading, the reader risks 'annihilating the story' (ibid.: 68). The ultimate risk of passive empathy may be the annihilation of the text into an object of easy consumption.

Testimony resonates with poststructuralist crises of truth: testimony denies the reader's desires for certainty; the emphasis on language as practice, as action, replaces coherence and resolution with vulnerability and ambiguity. One of Felman's pedagogical objectives in using testimony was to

make the class feel . . . how the texts that testify do not simply report facts but, in different ways, encounter – and make us encounter – strangeness; how the concept of testimony . . . is in fact quite unfamiliar and estranging, and how, the more we look closely at texts, the more they show us that, unwittingly, we do not even know what testimony is and that, in any case, it is not simply what we thought we knew it was.

(1992: 7)

The notion of testimony as an attempt to represent, as Felman says, 'events in excess of our frame of reference' refers back to the idea that such histories as the Holocaust must retain an unimaginable status. This abiding definition of testimony as a discursive process in defiance of closure underscored my discomfort with the risks of reading *MAUS* in isolation from a fuller historicization of surrounding events. My students' readings of *MAUS* seemed to defy the definition of testimony at each turn. Passive empathy did not engage them in an encounter with strangeness, with the uncanny; did not throw into question what they felt they knew. The readers experienced an untroubled identification that did not create estrangement or unfamiliarity. Rather, passive empathy allowed them familiarity, 'insight' and 'clear imagination' of historical occurrences – and finally, a cathartic, innocent, and I would argue voyeuristic sense of closure.

A minimum testimonial reading will call on us to analyse the historical genealogy of emotional consciousness as part of the structure that forms and accounts for the other's testimony. Testimonial reading leaves for the reader 'no hiding place intact. As one comes to know the survivor, one really comes to know oneself' (Felman and Laub, 1992: 72). Testimony calls for empathy as necessary to the comprehension of trauma, and necessary to extend cognition to its limits through historical consciousness. Through testimonial reading, then, one may recognize that I may imagine/feel the speaker's anguish (as my own). However, I also recognize that I cannot know the other (by virtue of historical difference, and/or through recognition that one speaker cannot embody and represent the six million unquantifiable traumas of this historical epoch). Testimonial reading recognizes its own limits, obstacles, ignorances and zones of numbness, and in so doing offers an ally to truth's representational crisis.

To experience rage and shame on Bigger Thomas's behalf is not sufficient; nor is it sufficient to see racism as a 'stain' and 'infection' that prevents a common humanity (Nussbaum, 1995: 96). Recognizing my position as 'judge' granted through the reading privilege, I must learn to question the

genealogy of any particular emotional response: my scorn, my evaluation of others' behaviour as good or bad, my irritation – each provides a site for interrogation of how the text challenges my investments in familiar cultural values. As I examine the history of a particular emotion, I can identify the taken-for-granted social values and structures of my own historical moment which mirror those encountered by the protagonist. 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.

Nussbaum focuses solely on the novel; Felman addresses literature, and Laub addresses the actual testimony of Holocaust survivors. I intend testimonial reading to be applicable across genres.¹⁷ Empathy, argues Nussbaum, is a product of the 'disturbing power' of 'good' novels, an effect less common with histories or social sciences (1995: 5). This may reflect a symptom of our cultural numbness more than a genre distinction. Nussbaum's quick distinctions between genres reflects traditional disciplinary axioms: 'history simply records what in fact occurred, whether or not it represents a general possibility for human lives. Literature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves' (1995: 5). In fact, historiographers have long debated history's ability to help us compare who we were and who we want to be.

As the nearly quintessential postmodern genre – comic-book, literature, history, testimonial, biography – *MAUS* represents an excellent example of the empathies produced not only through novels but through increasingly cross-disciplinary genres. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse what testimonial reading will look like across different genres. But since texts are historically situated in power relationships, all texts can potentially be read testimonially. To enquire about these reading tasks, we might ask, what crisis of truth does this text speak to, and what mass of contradictions and struggles do I become as a result?

While 'face-to-face' testimony and listening might seem another order from reading, in our fragmented, globalized and technological culture communication becomes increasingly indirect in terms of face-to-face interaction. Schooling itself continues to take form as 'distance' education. Intimate relations are begun and borne out through electronic communications. We may come to redefine 'face-to-face', as we also redefine the genres and forms of testimony. To reconceptualize the task of reading, as text replaces human speech, provides an ethical groundwork for post-modern interaction.

The promises of testimonial reading

Let me conclude with a hopeful example in which a student seemed to move from a decontextualized, empathetic reading of *MAUS* to a testimonial reading. Her first essay expresses a classic example of social imagination at work:

Spiegelman uses mice and cats to assign Jews and Germans specific charac-

teristics that we usually attribute to these animals. . . . For example, if we imagine a town of mice, running everywhere with nowhere to go, always cautious and afraid, scampering to hide, it gives us a clear picture of what it must have been like for the Jews to be attacked by the Germans.

We had a lengthy and careful discussion about this troubling reading of *MAUS* – a conversation in which I took risks, and pushed her to think deeply about her relationship to the text, to her own audience, and to her experience. In the following excerpt of her revised essay she seems not only to locate herself, but to consider this text in the broadest sense of history and responsibility. ‘I used to look at history with a sense of guilt,’ she begins, and lists Native American and African-American history and white supremacy, ‘and I hated to think that I might be distantly related to some of these [oppressors].

‘This way of thinking led me to reject some aspects of history. I felt that I should not dwell on the past I rid myself of any sense of responsibility for what these people had done to other races. . . .’ She then recounts a turning point in high school after viewing *Farewell to Manzanar*, a documentary about the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. The issue was not guilt, she realizes: ‘it was more a question of discovering how things like concentration camps were started, and how it was that people came to think along these lines. It was a matter of examining their mistakes and our own mistakes so that we could move on. . . . [Spiegelman]. . . . wants us to find an alternative to guilt.’ Strikingly different from her earlier notion that by imagining the Holocaust as a cat-and-mouse chase we understand history, one of her revised conclusions states: ‘The collective guilt that overpowers many of us should not be the reason for examining the Holocaust. We need to explore the origin of the cruelty of it.’

‘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 responsibility of this task. To excavate the structures of feeling that mediate testimonial reading is, in a sense, a labour of love. This work represents the obligation of witnessing truth’s crisis, and accepting a responsibility to carry out the ethical relations implicit in languages that exceed the facts. In a sense, the reader is called upon to meet the text with her own testimony, rather than using the other as a catalyst or a substitute for oneself.

The call for testimonial reading is situated within a greater need for new conceptions of the relation of emotions and power. As we develop alternatives to privatized and naturalized models of emotion, I offer two concepts of the analysis of emotion and power relations: ‘economies of mind’, which refers to emotion and affect as models of currency in social relations; and as an alternative to theories of depth unconscious, I suggest we consider emotions as ‘inscribed habits of inattention’.

In a historical epoch of saturated communications, there is every temptation to turn our backs, to maintain the habit of denial, and to keep secrets from ourselves through the numb consumption of another’s suffering,

grateful for distances that seem to confirm our safety. Yet, at best, this illusion of safety and distance in which most live is precarious. Audre Lorde reminds us that our silence shall not protect us, nor does passive empathy protect the other from the forces of cataclysmic history that are made of each of our actions and choices. Aristotle also claimed that virtue is a matter of habit: we choose our ignorances, just as we choose our challenges.

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Notes

- 1 Dr West, author of *Race Matters* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1993), delivered this inaugural W.E.B. DuBois Lecture and Film Series sponsored by the Ebony Museum in Oakland, 14 January 1994.
- 2 In 'Emotional quotient: the taming of the alien', I argue that contemporary constructions of empathy, and the new curricula of 'emotional literacy', represent metaphorical and ideological shifts which may reflect capitalism's changed conceptions for human resource capital within globalization. (Conference paper delivered at Narrative and Metaphor Across the Disciplines, University of Auckland, New Zealand, 10 July 1995.)
- 3 The social relations and democratic ideals embedded in articulations of 'multiculturalism' are by no means uniform, given its diverse appropriations. For historical treatments, see McCarthy (1990); McCarthy and Crichlow (1993). For a valuable collection of essays examining the radical practices of education (from W.E.B. DuBois, to John Dewey, to bell hooks), see Perry and Fraser (1993); also Gloria Hull *et al.* (1982). Toni Morrison (1992) offers a stunning analysis of racialized identities mapped through the literary imagination.
- 4 From a conversation with Karen Jones in 1992.
- 5 From a conversation with Michael Katz in 1993.
- 6 A comment made by Ron Glass at the California Association of Philosophers of Education, Stanford University, May 1993.
- 7 In response to this article's critique of the risks of empathy with *MAUS*, Roger Simon offered an important counterexample regarding the use of *MAUS* in a course he teaches, in which he states 'at least half my class' undertook 'the refusal of the possibility of an empathetic reading. This was generated as a self-conscious moral response by the reader/viewers and was a stance taken in regards to *MAUS*, the film version of *Schindler's List*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and a visit to the Toronto AIDS memorial . . . this is a big improvement on any simple assumption of an empathetic identification and this refusal did lead to interesting discussions of the problematics of voyeurism and the possibilities and obligations of "ethical tourism" (helped along I might add by students reading the original version of your paper)' (correspondence, 28 July 1994). In defence of the course which I taught, each year our reading of *MAUS* was supplemented by speakers – one year Art Spiegelman himself, which strongly contextualized the work as 'art' and 'his own story' rather than as a history;

another year, a Holocaust survivor testified; at other times, scholars of Holocaust literature and/or history addressed the students.

- 8 I am grateful for comments from Hayden White in response to this article about what would count as the 'histories' that complicated a reading of *MAUS*. See also, for example, Barzun (1950); White (1978).
- 9 Aristotle's philosophical portrait represents, of course, one among several; his model is frequently referenced in addition by feminist philosophers, and in popular texts. My rationale for selecting Aristotle is that the risks I see present in his definition represent what are in fact real risks we encounter in political solidarity work and learning to think about differences.
- 10 In a chapter entitled 'Ethnology, affect, and intensities: the prediscursive zone of infant feeling', of my forthcoming book (1997), I explore contemporary psychoanalytic theorizing of affect and social relations. As Theresa Brennan describes in *History After Lacan*, 'the ego can only make the world over in its own image by reducing the lively heterogeneity of living nature and diverse cultural orders to a gray mirror of sameness' (1993: 4). (See also Fuss (1995) who details the illusions built into the processes of identification; Robert Young (1990) who details the political violence wrought through imperialism as a kind of consumption through reduction of differences.) For further refigurings of the ethical relation, see, for example, Emmanuel Levinas (1989), and Irigaray (1977) in the continental. On Irigaray and education see Martin (1997); on Deleuze and education, see Leach and Boler (1997).
- 11 See, for example, 'Tim Rollins and the Kids of Survival' in Paley (1995), a different interpretation of classic literature used by a project in the South Bronx which might be called 'transgressive' and reappropriative readings.
- 12 For example, in contrast to Vladek's understated narrative of the war, the centrefold of *MAUS* is an inlaid cartoon depicting Art Spiegelman's highly emotional experience of his mother's suicide, his guilt, and the tension between Art and his father and the father's regulation of Art's emotional response, all of which puts into relief the deep structures of shame that accompany surviving a suicide or genocide. The presence of history and erasure is evidenced throughout the father/son relationship. The book ends, for example, with Art calling his father a 'murderer', because Vladek confesses that he burned all the journals Art's mother had kept before, during and following her survival of the concentration camps. For further reading on comic-books in relation to history, and commentary on *MAUS*, see Hirsch (1992-3), and Witsek (1987). See also Simon (1994); Zuckerman (1988), and Appelfeld (1993).
- 13 A lecture to the Porter Core Course students delivered by Professor Robert Goff, November 1993, University of California, Santa Cruz.
- 14 I have reviewed related questions of ethics, community and imagination in relation to reading and political communities in Boler (1995).
- 15 My larger project, *Feeling Power: The Fate of Emotions in Education* (forthcoming), traces the disciplinary discourses of emotion as a map of power relations. Feminist analyses of emotion provide the most consistent political analyses of emotion (as opposed to what I call the three dominant paradigms of emotion). The other three dominant discourses of emotion I have identified as the rational, pathological and romantic). See Sandra Bartky's invaluable political study of shame (1990). On anger, see especially Peter Lyman (1981); Scheman (1977/1983), and Spelman (1989). For a pioneering critique of emotions conceived in relation to the individual, see Scheman (1996). In philosophy, two essays on bitterness suggest promising routes towards a politicized philosophical

- theory of emotions: McFall (1991) and Campbell (1994); on trust, see Jones (1996). For interdisciplinary feminist and media studies, two issues of *Discourse* (1990–1) and (1992–3); and especially the work of Woodward in both issues. See also Grossberg (1992) for discussions of affect and agency within cultural studies. In feminist ethnography, see Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990). Martin (1997) details Levinas's influence on Irigaray, with particular attention to the ethical face-to-face relation which outlines an alternative to the objectification of the other. She quotes John Wild, who suggests that revolutionary potential of Levinas's 'face-to-face' ethical relation is that it is a "third" way between individualism and collectivism' (p. 30).
- 16 Raymond Williams (1961, 1977) introduced the term 'structures of feeling' to describe the least understood aspect of cultural transmission of ideology. In a paper, 'Affecting assemblages', presented at Deleuze: A Symposium (6 December 1996), The University of Western Australia, Perth, I suggest the model 'Economies of mind', to refer to emotion and affect as modes of currency in social relations; and I challenge psychoanalytic models to consider emotions inscribed 'habits of inattention' as an alternative to theories of depth unconscious. On gossip and flight as chizomatic pedagogies, see Leach and Boler (1997).
- 17 For an interesting discussion of 'bearing witness' in relation to popular culture, in this case an *Oprah* episode on incest survivors called 'Scared Silent', see Champagne (1994–5).

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